The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

An exploration of female early adolescent self-presentation and social comparisons, when engaging with social networking sites.

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Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Applied Educational Psychology

May 2021

Word Count: 39,820

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Acronym Glossary

AEP	Association of Educational Psychologists
BPS	British Psychological Society
EP	Educational Psychologist
FOMO	Fear of missing out
GT	Grounded Theory
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer / Questioning
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RQ	Research Question
RSPH	Royal Society for Public Health
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
SNS	Social Networking Sites
TA	Thematic Analysis
TAPUPAS	Transferability, Accessibility, Propriety, Utility, Purposivity, Accuracy and Specificity
WoE	Weight of Evidence

Abstract

Background

The use of social networking sites (SNS), including Instagram and Snapchat, is an integral aspect of adolescent life (Throuvala et al., 2019). Existing research has explored the possible impact of using SNS, which is described as a 'double-edged sword' (Keles et al., 2020) due to its benefits and potential risks for adolescents. However, a significant proportion of research concerns a sample of older adolescents, this is despite findings that suggest children as young as eight years are accessing SNS every day (Children's Commissioner, 2018).

Alongside being frequent, devoted users of SNS (Shankleman et al., 2021) adolescence is also a formative developmental period for identity (Erikson, 1968). One's identity is socially embedded (Davis, 2011) and individuals gain an insight into their performance through comparing themselves to others, which can be facilitated by SNS (Vogel et al., 2014).

Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the development of self and social comparisons made on SNS, due to possible associations between SNS and this aspect of development. Furthermore, research utilising an early adolescent sample is required, to acknowledge the increased use of SNS, within this demographic.

Method

The sample comprised of six females aged between 12 and 13 years, who all attend the same school. Semi-structured interviews were completed to explore views and experiences. The research was positioned within a social constructionist paradigm (Burr, 2015) and data analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019a).

Findings

Results suggest an individual's self-presentation online is a performance, where a selective or restricted self is shared. The presentation of self is underpinned by the perception of the audience, which is of great importance to adolescents. Participants spend time hypothesising possible audience views and adapt their performance accordingly, to ensure it will be accepted.

Feedback can also strengthen an individual's self and participants engage in a number of actions to protect themselves online. This is in relation to online risk, alongside the protection of self from negative feedback.

The sample was found to engage in a range of social comparisons against others, which can provoke a variety of emotional responses and possibly influence the development of identity, such as through individuals engaging in identity exploration.

Acknowledgements

Introduction and Positionality

Outline of research

This research looks to explore the experiences and perspectives of an early adolescent sample, in relation to their presentation of self and the possible social comparisons made online. A greater understanding of an adolescent's experiences with social media and social networking sites (SNS), including Instagram and Snapchat is necessary, due to such platforms being described as an indispensable aspect of adolescent life (Throuvala et al., 2019).

The research will start with an overview of the existing literature into the field, in order to provide a context for the ever-changing technological landscape. This is alongside completing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) which centres upon social comparisons made on SNS and a possible influence on an individual's identity development. Within Chapter 3, the methodology will be outlined including the philosophical standpoint, which subsequently guides the selected methodological approach. A detailed account of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) will also be presented to ensure transparency and enhance the validity of the research. This is before providing an overview of the findings in Chapter 4, which are then positioned within the wider theoretical field in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 also entails a critical evaluation of the research, alongside the implications of findings for both future research and professionals supporting children and young people.

Statement of positionality

Although there is a growing amount of research that relates to the use of social media for young people, a large proportion of this research, including Keles et al. (2020) and the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH, 2017), concerns an older adolescent sample. However, the age of individuals regularly engaging with SNS is getting increasingly younger (Children's Commissioner, 2018). It is therefore imperative to gain an awareness of SNS experiences within this population and understand how such sites may influence an individual's life, in order to then support young people accordingly in their development.

A factor underpinning the rationale for this research originates from my personal interest in the subject area of social media and SNS. Prior to gaining a place on the Doctorate of Applied Educational Psychology I worked within a mainstream secondary setting,where part of my role was a Learning Mentor, which comprised of pastorally supporting pupils. Frequently, the issues which arose often related to social media and interactions which had taken place outside of school. Furthermore, it regularly concerned the younger year groups, including those in year 7 and 8, which

highlights the need to possibly explore in a greater depth, the social media use with a younger population.

It is also important to identify my own views and beliefs which may influence the research process. I adopt the view that SNS can, at times, have a positive influence for individuals who use it and therefore I do not engage with the 'moral panic' towards the possible negative impact of SNS for all young people, as outlined by Gray (2018).

As part of completing this research journey, it was identified an individual may have multiple selves that require managing. This is something that will be discussed in greater depth within Chapter 5, alongside being introduced within the literature review in Chapter 1. The Reflexive TA approach that was utilised as a method of data analysis, enabled myself, the researcher, to reflect upon the multiple self-presentations that I may also perform. This includes perhaps the differing selves I display throughout the completion of this research, such as when presenting as a friendly and approachable individual during the interviews.

I also position myself as an individual situated within 'Big Q' research, which involves the adoption of theoretical assumptions that are in line with a qualitative research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kidder & Fine, 1987). However, within one of the research questions (RQ) addressed which focussed upon possible social comparisons made within the sample, the analysis can be seen to take a more deductive approach. This was through the use of a theoretical framework (Smith, 2000), when generating themes across the data set. Such an approach may fall into the 'small q' domain, due to its deductive nature and application of theory to the data (Kidder & Fine, 1987). I found this slight deviation difficult due to my social constructionist views (Burr, 2015), which also align with 'Big Q' research. However, I found myself being frequently drawn to the topic of social comparisons and Smith's (2000) theoretical framework, which had been discovered through initial scoping reviews of the literature. Therefore, in light of this reflexivity, I felt it was important to include within the analysis.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

1.1. Introduction to chapter

This literature review will provide context to the research, where firstly definitions of social media and social networking sites (SNS) will be provided. This is alongside considering the current landscape of SNS use and possible implications for adolescents, through their engagement with digital platforms. A focus will also be taken relating to core aspects of adolescent development, including social relations and formation of one's self, which will be applied to an online context.

1.2. Social networking sites overview

1.2.1. Defining social networking sites

The terms social media and social networking sites are often used interchangeably within research and wider society, however, such terms do not equate to the same platforms (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Social media can be outlined as a web-based service which enables the creation and sharing of online content, alongside the ability to connect with others, both verbally and visually (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2018; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Social media may therefore involve engaging with blogs, virtual gaming or video sharing sites (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Engaging with social media can also include the use of social networking sites (SNS) (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2018; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), which focus on interacting with other SNS users (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017). SNS allow individuals to create a profile within a bounded system, which generates a list of connections. Such lists can then be viewed by others within the system, which in turn develops into a network (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Oberst et al., 2016). SNS can therefore be seen to be described as existing within social media (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Researchers highlight the challenge of defining such concepts, due to the continuously evolving digital landscape (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Frith (2017), further echoes the blurring of lines between forms of digital media, with some research merging 'internet use' and 'social media use'. This research will focus upon the use of SNS which includes Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat. However, it is important to highlight the literature presented here includes the exploration of social media more generally.

1.2.2. Current context

SNS use can be seen to be an integral aspect of everyday life (Throuvala et al., 2019). In January 2021 more than 7.8 billion of the world's population were identified as internet users, with a further 4.2 billion being active on social media (Kemp, 2021).

Within the UK, individuals aged between 16 and 64 years are estimated to spend 1 hour 42 minutes on social media each day (We Are Social, 2020), further highlighting the significant role that platforms have on society (RSPH, 2017). Social media engagement was found to be relatively stable across the four nations of the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2021a).

There would appear to be a generational disparity relating to SNS use (RSPH, 2017); as 91% of those aged between 16 and 24 years use the internet to access social media. This is in comparison to 51% of 55 to 64-year-olds, highlighting the disparity between generations in relation to social media usage, within the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2016).

However, there is a growing proportion of children and younger adolescents who also regularly engage with social media, with 87% of UK adolescents aged between 12 and 15 years having a social media profile (Ofcom, 2021a).

1.2.3. Children and adolescent SNS use

Adolescents are considered to be the most devoted users of social media (Shankleman et al., 2021; Schønning et al., 2020), with those aged 12 to 15 years spending approximately 2.5 hours each weekday online (Ahn, 2011; Ofcom, 2017). UK adolescents are described as 'extensive users' of social media, with 94.8% of 15-year-olds engaging with social media both before and after school (Frith, 2017, PISA, 2016).

The minimum age to create an SNS account is 13 years, however, research highlights many younger children also access such platforms (Ofcom, 2017, The Lancet, 2018), with three in four children aged 10 to 12 years having their own account (Children's Commissioner, 2018). In addition, more than 40% of British children reported using social media prior to reaching the age requirement (Ofcom, 2021a). Within a sample of English schools, children as young as 8 were found to use SNS, with girls in year 4 accessing such sites multiple times a day (Children's Commissioner, 2018).

Adolescents report primarily using online technologies for social means, to access social support and interact with a more diverse group of individuals (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b; Barker, 2009). Further common motivations include talking to others and sharing content (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Gray,

2018). Engagement with SNS is seen to be an integral part of British adolescent life and the growing up experience (Frith, 2017; Throuvala et al., 2019).

This embracing of social media by adolescents may be associated with being 'digital natives' (Presnky, 2001:1), among the first to have grown up surrounded by communication technologies and social media (Ahn, 2011; Best et al., 2014). Increases in social media use may be associated with a significant growth in children and young people having their own smartphones (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017). This enables adolescents to have constant access to SNS and connect to others, irrespective of time and space (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), with 93% of British adolescents aged between 12 and 15 years owning a mobile phone (Ofcom, 2021a). In addition, a survey of over 1,000 American teenagers found 60% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 years reported going online every day, with 24% adding they were 'almost constantly' online (Anderson & Jiang 2018a:13). It is also important to highlight 71% of teenagers use more than one social networking site, including Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, thus highlighting the diversification of their SNS use (Lenhart. 2015, Ofcom, 2020).

Research by Ofcom (2021a) explored media use for British individuals aged between 8 and 15 years, in relation to their financial vulnerability, which is a calculated measure considering family income and household size. Those assessed as being in a more financially vulnerable position were just as likely to access social media sites as those deemed to be the least financially vulnerable. Therefore, the rate of children engaging with at least one social media activity does not appear to be affected by family financial status.

There appears to be a degree of generational differences over the choice of SNS platforms individuals utilise. For adults, Facebook is the preferred SNS, however, adolescents present a different profile of engagement (Ofcom, 2020), with the video streaming service YouTube being the most popular platform (85%), followed by Instagram (72%) and Snapchat (69%). Such statistics were gathered from a sample of US teenagers aged 13 to 17 years, where only 51% use Facebook (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). However, the digital landscape is continuously evolving, with TikTok becoming the fastest-growing application, with 1.5 billion active users worldwide, who mostly comprise of children and adolescents (Weimann & Masri, 2020). Therefore, TikTok is now the SNS platform where British children and adolescents spend a significant amount of their time (Ofcom, 2021b).

Gray (2018) highlighted both male and female British adolescents aged 12 to 16 years were evenly matched on the proportion who access SNS; 95% and 98% respectively. However, females were found to engage more frequently with platforms, with 82% reporting to use it several times a day

(Gray 2018). Moreover, females were more likely to use SNS to comment on other's content and share their own pictures, as opposed to males, who were more likely to use SNS for games (Frith, 2017; Gray, 2018).

1.2.4. COVID19 pandemic

As a result of physical distancing measures implemented in light of COVID19, there has been a significant reduction in opportunities for adolescents to interact with others in a face to face context, outside of their household (Orben et al., 2020). It may be that digital forms of social interacting may have become even more valuable to this demographic, in order to maintain peer relations and reduce possible negative consequences of physical distancing (Orben et al., 2020).

This global context should therefore be acknowledged and may have further implications for adolescent SNS use. During the pandemic, engagement with online platforms has become an even greater part of children and adolescent's lives, not only to connect with peers but also to explore interests and entertain themselves whist staying at home (Ofcom, 2021b).

1.3. Impact of SNS

Due to the growing amount of time adolescents spend on SNS (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017), existing research has explored the possible effects of accessing such sites for this demographic (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). The possible positive and negative implications of engaging with SNS will now be presented.

1.3.1. Negative impact of SNS

As adolescence is deemed to be a period of significant developmental change (Sawyer et al., 2018), Gray (2018) suggests a 'moral panic' has developed, relating to the negative impact of SNS for young people (Gray, 2018). Such potential negative implications are now explored in relation to a number of topic areas.

1.3.1.1. Emotional wellbeing:

Public concern particularly relates to the possible association of SNS use with the rising prevalence of mental health difficulties for children and young people (Keles et al., 2020; RSPH, 2019). The World Health Organisation (2017) estimates between 10 and 20% of all children and adolescents

worldwide experience mental health problems, with one in four presenting with evidence of 'mental ill health' in the UK (Young Minds, 2019:2).

Previous research has explored the link between SNS and a range of psychological needs including depressive symptoms, with research by McCrae et al. (2017), Kelly et al.(2018) and Best et al. (2014) all highlighting the relationship between adolescent social media use and depressive symptoms. However, Keles et al. (2020) highlight a more complex and multifactorial understanding of SNS use and adolescent mental health, where a number of contradictory findings are presented within their systematic review. For example, the review reports that Banjanin et al. (2015, as cited in Keles et al., 2020: 87) found there to be no relationship between frequency of SNS use and depressed mood. Whereas, Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015), in addition to Tsitsika et al. (2014) found associations between increased social media use and psychological distress, which includes levels of depression and anxiety. Tsitsika et al. (2014) found this to be the case for younger adolescents aged 14 and 15 years across Europe, which they hypothesise may be linked to this demographic's less developed skills relating to managing challenging social interactions online.

In relation to feelings of anxiety, British adolescents aged between 14 and 24 years highlighted four out of the five most used SNS increased their feelings of anxiety. These platforms were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat, with the one site reportedly not increasing anxiety being YouTube (RSPH, 2017). Woods and Scott (2016) also highlighted an association between SNS use and increased levels of anxiety, which can be experienced through operating multiple social media accounts simultaneously (Becker et al., 2013). Such feelings of anxiety can also be linked to the worries and fears many adolescents reportedly experience when posting online, due to possibly being judged and having their actions scrutinised by others (Shankleman et al., 2021).

Certain features of SNS may facilitate passive SNS use. Passive SNS use comprises of browsing platforms without any direct involvement, such as posting or commenting. An example of a feature that may encourage passive SNS use is the non-reciprocal following of profiles, which entails an individual following an account on SNS which does not follow them in return, for example when following a celebrity (Burnell et al., 2020; Lup et al., 2015). This passive SNS use may then heighten an individual's susceptibility to negative consequences, impacting upon their wellbeing (Lup et al., 2015).

However, due to the vast majority of studies adopting a cross-sectional design, such relationships between wellbeing and social media use can only be described as correlational rather than directional (Keles et al., 2020; Marino et al., 2018). Therefore, it cannot be determined if social media causes psychological distress, or whether those already presenting with such psychological

needs are more likely to engage with SNS (Keles et al., 2020; Seabrook et al., 2016). Furthermore, many of the studies (Keles et al., 2020) are based upon self-report measures which may involve participants displaying a positive representation of self in the data they provide, perhaps through under-reporting their time on SNS, through social desirability bias.

1.3.1.2. Self-perception

Alongside possible risks to wellbeing, SNS engagement can also impact upon the beliefs an individual may hold about themselves (Hattie, 2014). For example, within a British sample of over 1,000 young people aged between 11 and 25 years, 38% reported social media negatively impacted how they felt about themselves, compared to 23% who reported a positive impact. This was exacerbated for girls, with 46% stating social media negatively affects their self-esteem (The Children's Society & Young Minds, 2018; RSPH, 2019).

This perception of self may also involve body image, where research utilising a sample of female British university students with a mean age of 20 years, found that participants reported feeling a greater dissatisfaction with their face, hair and/or skin, after engaging with Facebook, rather than a magazine (Fardouly et al., 2015). Such a focus on body image can be further magnified through the use of online filters and an abundance of idealised beauty images (Frith, 2017).

1.3.1.3. Offline risks

Social media may promote dangerous behaviours, such as through 'glamorising' methods of suicide and normalising self-harm (Daine et al., 2013). SNS may also facilitate the development of groups promoting negative behaviours such as pro-anorexia (Bell, 2007; Daine et al., 2013). Furthermore, unsuitable material accessed by adolescents, may also have a triggering effect (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2018).

Heavier SNS use (more than two hours each day), was found to be associated with lower academic scores or extracurricular activities. This was particularly for European adolescents aged 14 and 15 years, as time spent on SNS may displace studying time. In contrast, this was not the case for an older adolescent sample, aged 16 and 17 years, who may have improved online self-regulation skills (Tsitsika et al., 2014).

A young person's sleep has also been found to be impacted by SNS use, which may subsequently contribute to their overall mental health (Keles et al., 2020; RSPH, 2017). Over 20% of adolescents aged 12 to 15 years, reported waking in the night to check SNS (Power et al., 2017). SNS use was also

found to be significantly associated with an adolescent's sleep quality, which is associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression, although directionality cannot be determined (Alfano et al., 2009; Woods & Scott, 2016).

In addition, SNS may facilitate a possible 'online disinhibition effect' where individuals are more likely to share personal information, thus putting themselves at increased risk (Frith, 2017; Suler, 2004). This may involve young people engaging in 'sexting', which is the creation, sharing or forwarding of sexually suggestive images (Lenhart, 2009). Although less common, the subsequent wider sharing of such images is likely to significantly impact the wellbeing of those involved (Firth, 2017; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

1.3.1.4. Negative peer experiences

Shankleman et al. (2021) highlighted social media can negatively impact an individual's social relations and provides examples of arguments and criticisms arising from SNS. A report by the RSPH (2017), highlighted 70% of young people, experienced cyberbullying, with a quarter being worried they may experience abuse online (Ditch the Label, 2019). Cyberbullying can be defined as any kind of bullying behaviour, that is wilful and repeated and occurs through electronic devices (Frith, 2017; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Compared to traditional bullying, individuals can be targeted at a much higher frequency, due to the constant access of digital technology and ability to share a single incident multiple times (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2018; Firth, 2017; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Further research identifies gender differences in relation to online harassment and cyberbullying, with 40% of 14-year-old girls experiencing it, compared to 25% of boys. Such results were found within a sample of over 10,000 British adolescents, all aged 14 years as part of the UK Millennium Cohort longitudinal study (Kelly et al., 2018). Cyberbullying can take place on any SNS and has a significant impact on those involved, such as severe isolation or even suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). These negative social experiences may be associated with the anonymity, disinhibition and impulsivity interacting on SNS can facilitate, compared to offline interactions (Shankleman et al., 2021).

1.3.1.5. Further negative risks

A small proportion of SNS users may engage with such platforms excessively or compulsively (Andreassen et al., 2017), and therefore individuals may experience addiction to SNS. This addiction can be associated with a 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) (Fuster et al., 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017;

RSPH, 2019; Yin et al., 2019). FOMO can be outlined as a worry that others may be having rewarding experiences, that an individual is not present for, which arises alongside a continual desire to stay connected to others (Fuster et al., 2017). It may be associated with greater engagement of SNS, alongside lower mood and wellbeing (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Research conducted by Boer et al. (2020) involved gathering data from over 150,000 adolescents, with a mean age of 13.5 years, spanning across 29 counties. Findings indicated an association between social media addiction, lower mental wellbeing and perceived social support, thus further highlighting the possible negative implications of SNS engagement, particularly from excess use.

Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al. (2019), suggests negative effects associated with SNS may be linked to frequent opportunities for individuals to engage in social comparisons against others. Such social comparisons will be explored in greater detail in Section 1.6.

1.3.2. Positive impact of SNS

Although there are a number of potential risks for individuals, Elmquist and McLaughlin (2017: 6) highlight a possible 'silver lining' of accessing social media, where benefits may outweigh possible risks (Gray, 2018). Such possible benefits will now be explored.

1.3.2.1. Knowledge, support and skills

SNS can include the provision of support links, chat facilities and help sites, which may 'pop up' when certain search terms are used, such as those relating to suicide (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017). An adolescent can also utilise social media to access health information, receive signposting to appropriate support or discover networks for those with similar needs (Frith, 2017; RSPH, 2019, 2017; Russell & Hunter, 2015). This may subsequently widen access to support services for young people, who reportedly have found it more challenging to access traditional services (Davies, 2014; RSPH, 2017).

Social media may be a source of knowledge for young people, such as by gaining information relating to political movements or contrasting cultures on Instagram, whilst also developing new skills perhaps through watching YouTube tutorials (RSPH, 2019; Shankleman et al., 2021). Digital technology may also be a helpful learning resource to support homework, in addition to facilitating collaborations for school projects with peers (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; RSPH, 2019).

1.3.2.2. Social relations

SNS may support the development of social skills, including the ability to take the perspective of others, which is valuable for an individual's development within a multi-cultural society. This may be through connecting with others from a diverse background, which can also support the development of respect, tolerance and increased discourses relating to global topics (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Tynes, 2007).

SNS can also remove physical barriers to social interactions, which may lead to adolescents feeling more comfortable to discuss their emotions and gain emotional support (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson 2011; RSPH, 2019). This support may be represented through receiving a positive affirmation, such as a comment from a peer (Shankleman et al., 2021). This connection is a key aspect of SNS use, with nearly 70% of British teenagers reporting they received support on SNS when experiencing adversity (RSPH, 2017).

Furthermore, through the removal of distance, adolescents may also be more able to connect with those with similar interests and build new friendship groups, which may be "especially important for children who fail to find their tribe at school" (RSPH, 2019: 15; Shankleman et al., 2021). The building of a 'community', made up of up of likeminded individuals through the joining of groups or following of 'pages' may build a sense of togetherness and affiliation, despite the geographical distance (Larson et al., 2002; RSPH, 2017). Online platforms can enable adolescents to maintain relationships in the 'real world', including through keeping connected to those who may not live near to the adolescent (RSPH, 2017, 2019). SNS may also reduce feelings of social isolation, perhaps through the constant accessibility of platforms and subsequent ease of finding someone to talk to (Best et al., 2014; RSPH, 2019; Russell & Hunter, 2015).

1.3.2.3. Identity

Through the personalisation of profiles, joining of interest groups, and sharing of posts, adolescents can express who they are and develop their identity (Frith, 2017; Lilley et al., 2014; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; RSPH, 2017, 2019). Shankleman et al.'s (2021) metanalysis also highlighted a number of studies where adolescents stated SNS enable them to present their self with a level of authenticity, that is facilitated through the varying methods an individual can use to express themselves online.

Although considered to be a benefit, providing an individual with a platform to express their identity may also lead to risks, such as possibly receiving negative feedback. Concepts of identity and self-presentation will be discussed further within Section 1.5.

1.3.3. Summary of SNS impact

As a result, social media could be seen as a 'double-edged sword' (Keles et al., 2020), comprising of benefits and possible risks for adolescents. A number of possible implications have been identified, however, existing research reports differing views regarding the extent of such effects.

Within Best et al.'s (2014) systematic review focussing on SNS use and wellbeing, the majority of the 43 papers which were included reported either a mixed or no effect of SNS on adolescent wellbeing. Therefore, the negative impact may not be as severe as the 'moral panic' suggests (Gray, 2018). Perhaps the specific SNS activity individuals engage in, such as talking to strangers and potentially being exposed to harmful content, contributes to SNS having a positive or negative impact on wellbeing (Best et al., 2014).

Odgers and Jenson (2020) highlight previous research exploring the possible impact of digital technologies on wellbeing has been largely correlational and cross-sectional. Therefore, similarly to Best et al. (2014) results have been mixed in terms of directionality, with small associations. Thus, causal conclusions cannot be confirmed and a precautionary approach to findings should be taken (Odgers & Jenson, 2020; RSHP, 2019). Therefore, it cannot be stated an adolescent will develop an entirely positive or negative relationship with SNS, as the possible impact is greatly dependent on individual factors, including economic status and level of offline support (Khan et al., 2016; Odgers & Jenson, 2020; Orben et al., 2020; RSPH, 2019).

In addition, further caution should also be taken when considering the research outlining the possible positive and negative implications of SNS use, as a number of the sources used are published by charities. This is as opposed to being presented within a peer reviewed journal. This was the case for research published by the RSPH (2017, 2019), Lilley et al. (2014), which was commissioned by the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) and Frith (2017), which was published by the Education Policy Institute. Therefore, it is possible such research may not have gone through a thorough review process, and findings may reflect potential biases held by these organisations.

1.4. Adolescent development

1.4.1. Defining adolescence

Adolescence is the period of rapid development spanning between child and adulthood, identified as a critical time for an individual's emotional development and transition of social roles (Ahn, 2011; RSPH, 2017; Sawyer et al., 2018).

Erikson (1968) initially stated the process takes place between 12 and 18 years. However, Sawyer et al. (2018) extended this to the years of 10 to 24 to reflect societal changes relating to the onset of adulthood, such as the completion of further education and subsequent employment. Therefore, the beginning of adolescence is defined biologically by the onset of puberty, whereas the end is often defined socially, through achieving relative self-sufficiency (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

A degree of caution should be taken with discontinuous stage theories such as Erikson's (1968), which unlike Sawyer et al.'s (2018) definition does not recognise the dynamic interaction between an individual and their environment, in relation to development (Pelaez et al., 2008). Furthermore, the defining of adolescence through age should also be seen as an approximation, as age is an indicator of the passage of time, rather than a way to highlight the processes underpinning development (Gewirtz, 1969, in Pelaez et al. 2008: 504, Pelaez et al., 2008).

During adolescence, tremendous change takes place with regards to an individual's biological, psychological and social needs, alongside the development of new skills, roles and responsibilities (Christie & Viner, 2005; Reich et al., 2012). In order to fulfil these emerging needs, adolescents may use virtual platforms (Beyens et al., 2016; Christie & Viner, 2005; Erikson, 1959, 1963; Keles et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2012). As a result, it is especially important to further explore adolescent SNS experiences during this 'vulnerable' period of development (RSPH, 2017: 7).

1.4.2. Adolescence and social development

Adolescence is theorised to be a particularly sensitive period for social processing, where individuals become more aware of social interaction complexities (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Orben et al., 2020; Sherman et al., 2016). Furthermore, peers also become increasingly important, as they support individuals to cope with developmental challenges (Reich et al., 2012; Tsitsika et al., 2014).

The increasing significance of a peer group is coupled with a reduction in the importance of parental relations (Antheunis et al., 2016; Beyens et al., 2016; Crockett et al., 1984). This subsequently leads adolescents to spend a greater proportion of time with their peers, compared to children (Lam et al., 2014).

During adolescence, peer approval is important (Foulkes et al., 2018) and therefore, adolescents have a heightened level of 'social sensitivity' with their peers (Bell, 2019; Somerville, 2013), which comprises of the attention, emotion and salience individuals place on social standings and evaluations. Somerville (2013) presents neurological evidence, suggesting adolescents respond with heightened emotional intensity and attunement to information that involves being evaluated by peers. Therefore, many adolescents appear to assess their self-worth on the feedback they receive online, including through positive comments and 'likes' from others, to increase their level of fulfilment (Shankleman et al., 2021).

1.4.3. Adolescence, SNS and social interactions

As a large proportion of adolescent interactions and communication takes place online, SNS can be seen as a significant developmental context for adolescents, particularly in relation to forming social relations (Tsitsika et al., 2014). Adolescents may engage with SNS platforms to fulfil social developmental needs, including the need to belong, gain affiliation and develop stable relationships with others. This is alongside a possible need for social approval, which may involve thinking or acting in a certain way to try to increase their popularity (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Santor et al., 2000).

One approach to explaining the possible impact of SNS on an individual's social relations may be through the stimulation hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). This hypothesis suggests interacting online will foster adolescent wellbeing through strengthening an adolescent's existing social relations. In addition, adolescents generally find it easier to self-disclose personal information online, rather than through face to face interactions, which will further contribute to relationship closeness (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Evidence for the stimulation hypothesis was found by Valkenburg and Peter (2007), and Davis (2012, 2013). A further explanation associated with the stimulation hypothesis is the notion that the 'rich get richer' (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014), which suggests online interactions primarily benefit those deemed 'socially successful'. This is through having further opportunities to connect, which enriches existing relationships (Khan et al., 2016: 941).

Another hypothesis relating to SNS and social relations is the Social Compensation Theory (McKenna et al., 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), which proposes those adolescents who find face to face interactions uncomfortable, may benefit from online communication. This is due to digital technology providing a relatively low risk opportunity to form a social network through the provision

of space to practice and rehearse social skills, prior to in person communication (Campbell et al., 2006; Khan et al., 2016; Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

Over the course of the COVID19 pandemic, British children and adolescents reported a shift in their social relations on SNS, where maintaining their friendships was harder and friends who an individual only knew in an online context were more common (Ofcom, 2021b).

1.5. Aspects of self
1.5.1. Self-concept

Self-concept can be outlined as the knowledge and beliefs an individual holds about themselves and comprises of a set of ideas relating to 'who they think they are' as a person (Hattie, 2014; Oyserman, 2001; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Self-concept can be formed through an individual's experiences, including reinforcement from the environment or significant others (Shavelson et al., 1976), and thus can be seen to adopt a social constructionist standpoint. Shavelson et al. (1976) add self-concept is not an entity within a person, but rather an individual's perceptions of how they see themselves, which can then inform behaviour. However, it is important to recognise conceptualisations of self-concept are often imprecise and differ between studies (Shavelson et al., 1976).

Shavelson et al. (1976) propose an individual's self-concept is organised, hierarchical and multifaceted. They add that an individual's general self-concept can be split into the domains of academic and non-academic self-concept, which can then be further broken down into specific aspects. For example, academic self-concept may relate to particular academic subjects and for non-academic self-concept further areas may comprise of physical or social self-concept. An individual's social self-concept entails an individual's perception of their social competence, particularly regarding their interactions with others. Such beliefs stem from an individual assessing their behaviour within a particular social context (Byrne & Shavelson, 1996).

Some researchers use the terms of self-concept and self-esteem interchangeably, however self-esteem can be seen to be an aspect of an individual's self-concept (Manning, 2007). Rogers (1959) outlines that self-concept comprises of three elements; self-image, which is an individual's perceptions of how they see themselves, self-esteem, the value you place on yourself, and finally ideal self, what you aspire to be.

More specifically, self-esteem comprises of an individual's evaluation towards themselves, which may be a positive or negative perception. Self-esteem can be at a broad, global level, which

comprises of the views one has towards their self as a totality. Self-esteem can also be a specific area of one's self-concept (Maltese et al., 2012; Rosenberg et al., 1995; Vogel et al., 2014). Furthermore, self-esteem is conceptualised as both a largely stable trait, which develops over time, alongside also being a fluid state that may fluctuate and respond to differing contexts (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991).

A number of theorists provide differing approaches to the conceptualisation of the self, examples of which will now be outlined:

1.5.1.1. Self as a performance

Goffman (1955, 1978, 1990) theorises an individual's presentation of self by making comparisons to a theatrical performance, where individuals 'perform' a desirable image. The notions of 'front stage' and 'back stage' are utilised to convey this performance and as individuals are aware of the watching audience, they therefore emit a certain performance of self they wish to present. This is through following social conventions, in order to avoid 'losing face' (Goffman, 1955, 1990). An individual's presentation of self will be different when in private or 'backstage', due to the lack of audience.

However, Goffman (1990) himself questions the use of this theatrical analogy, stating interactions occurring within a theatre are contrived and unlike reality, nothing real happens to the actors performing. Despite this, the conceptualisation is useful to understand the notion that an individual can be made up of multiple selves.

1.5.1.2. Johari Window

Another theoretical framework also highlighting a range of selves and subsequent level of awareness an individual has towards each of them is through the psychoanalytic approach of the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1961). The model identifies four perspectives, comprising of:

- **The Open Area**: information known to the individual about themselves, as well as being known by others,

- **The Blind Area**: what is unknown by the individual, but known by others,

- **The Hidden Area**: what the individual knows about themselves, but others do not,

- **The Unknown Area**: unknown to both the individual and others around them.

Therefore, it is possible an individual may present aspects of their self to others but withhold parts from the audience's view. This may bear resemblance to self as a performance, as outlined by Goffman (1978), but also that within one's self there are subconscious aspects, unknown to us.

1.5.1.3. The Looking Glass Self

Another perspective of one's self may include the notion of the 'Looking Glass Self', proposed by Cooley (1902). This is where an individual's sense of self is dependent on how they believe others perceive them, as though they are checking their self-presentation in a mirror (Jones, 2015).

Firstly, individuals imagine themselves as others see them, through reflecting upon their social performance. Then, through the theory of mind individuals imagine what others think of them, as a result of their presentations, before then finally experiencing an affective response to this judgement (Cooley, 1902). Such reaction is linked to the imagined evaluation others may have towards an individual and may be positive, such as pride, or negative, including feelings of embarrassment.

However, Mead (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) criticised the approach's focus and emphasis on the imagination within an individual's social life, which may appear as solipsistic, where an individual cannot be sure of anything outside of their own mind.

1.5.1.4. Further conceptualisations of self

James (1890) outlined an individual's self was developed through the recognition a person received from others and that a person has as many different formulations of their self as people see. In addition, one's self can also be considered through a positioning theory lens, where individuals may adopt a position within an interaction, which is more fluid and dynamic, as opposed to a fixed social role (Davies & Harré, 1990; McVee et al., 2018). During such interactions, individuals may bring their subjective, lived experiences to the narrative within the interaction and have control to position themselves in a variety of ways. This may include positioning themselves within the conversational discourse as possibly being powerful or powerless, confident or apologetic and so on (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991; McVee et al., 2018).

Such conceptualisations all focus upon the social interactions involved with the individual and therefore the development of one's self-concept can be seen to be closely linked to how an individual is perceived by others and levels of social acceptance (Eccles et al., 1996), something which is particularly valued by adolescents (Manning, 2007). The self can be seen to be developed

through human relationships and social processes, where knowledge is located within relationships with others, as opposed to within the individual themselves (Gergen, 2011).

1.5.2. The development of identity

The concepts of identity and self are often used interchangeably, however, there can be seen to be disagreement between how these terms are conceptualised (Drenten, 2012). Identity can be seen to be dependent upon social relations and symbolic representations, which comprise of characteristics, memberships to social groups and varying roles an individual may adopt (Oyserman et al., 2012). A person's identity in which they present to others may depend on the context and subsequently can be validated through culturally shared meanings (Drenten, 2012). For example, an adolescent may display different parts of their identity when interacting with parents or peers.

An individual's identities then make up one's self-concept, which is what we think of when we think of ourselves (Oyserman et al., 2012). Different presentations of an individual's identity can be seen to be varying facets of their self-concept, which then form the overall self (Oyserman et al., 2012). Drenten (2012) adds an individual's 'self' exists regardless of any contextual external cues.

However, there is debate surrounding whether identity develops through engaging with varying social and cultural contexts, or if perhaps identity develops within an individual (Schwartz, 2001). A number of theorists (Cooley,1902; Davis, 2011; Goffman,1959; Mead, 1934) present identity as being socially embedded and a product of social interactions. This may include interactions between individuals, groups, cultures and surrounding social contexts alongside, an individual's own internal dialogue (Davis, 2011; Schachter, 2005).

Erikson (1968) added an individual's identity does not exist until recognised by others, further emphasising the social reliance during identity development (Davies, 2011). Therefore, identity may also be seen through a social constructionist perspective, where identity does not simply develop within the individual but through relationships with others and societal positions (Erikson, 1968, Davies, 2011). Such interactions and the wider social structures lead to an individual embodying a number of different roles as part of their social identity, which they therefore have to manage in relation to the perceptions held by others of what is deemed to be socially acceptable behaviour (Marks & O'Mahoney, 2014).

Furthermore, Erikson (1968) also outlined the importance of identity formation as being the primary developmental task during adolescence. An individual works towards achieving a 'sense of inner identity', which involves developing a continuity between how the individual was during their

childhood and how they hope to be in the future (Erikson, 1968: 87). This will support the individual to achieve identity synthesis, comprising of continuity across an individual's multiple roles and varying contexts. If not achieved, the adolescent may experience identity confusion (Davis, 2013).

However, Davis (2013) suggests such a level of coherence across identities may no longer be a defining feature of adolescent identity development, due to many individuals adopting different roles across multiple contexts. Through advances in technology and the ability to make connections across varying online platforms, identity can be seen to be increasingly multi-faceted and fluid, where individuals may quickly move between social contexts, possibly adopting a contrasting role for each (Davis, 2011).

1.5.2.1. Identity and SNS

Therefore, as SNS can facilitate an individual to change between differing social contexts and adapt their identity accordingly, such sites can therefore support adolescents in their identity exploration (Davis, 2013). Moreover, whilst engaging with SNS adolescents can join communities that may reflect aspects of their identity they wish to explore further, or perhaps use SNS to learn about new ideas and views held by others. Therefore, SNS can be seen to support, deepen or possibly broaden an adolescent's identity (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014).

Furthermore, SNS may also support an adolescent's identity development through its facilitation of self-disclosure, which is the sharing of information to others. This leads an adolescent to make decisions relating to their self-presentation, which can be defined as a dynamic, ongoing process of selectively creating an image which the individual wishes to portray to others (Gray, 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). Such self-presentation can take place on a variety of platforms and may comprise of creating posts to express who they are (Manago et al., 2008; Pempek et al., 2009; Yang, & Bradford Brown, 2016).

Adolescents also receive feedback from others in response to their self-disclosures that can be seen in the form of 'likes' on a post. Such feedback, which may be positive or negative, will then further contribute to an adolescent's identity development, as individuals will amend their self-presentation in accordance to the reactions of others (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). This enables adolescents to rehearse their identities and once validated by others, can over time, become a more secure part of their identity (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The self-disclosing of information to others may also support the development of close, supportive friendships, through reciprocity (Gray, 2018).

Adolescent self-presentation is supported on SNS through asynchronization, where adolescents can edit, plan and reflect on their posts prior to posting, which optimises their self-presentation and the self they wish to portray (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Walther, 2007). Furthermore, SNS also supports an adolescent's self-presentation, due to the level of accessibility such platforms provide, where individuals can present themselves to a wide variety of people more efficiently than in offline interactions (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

The RSPH (2017) explored the perceptions of British adolescents regarding how five varying SNS may facilitate their ability to define who they think they are. It was reported each of the five platforms supported self-expression and self-identity to a certain extent, with Instagram and YouTube being identified as facilitating these factors to the greatest extent. However, adolescents may censor their behaviour online through considering what can be shared with others, in order to ensure their popularity with the audience (Shankleman et al., 2021).

Canadian adolescents with a reportedly high self-concept also reported increased levels of online socialisation and offline peer support. This was in contrast to those with a low self-concept, where an individual does not think positively of themselves, who also had high levels of time spent communicating online, however with little offline social support (Khan et al., 2016). Therefore, online communication may hold benefits for an adolescent's self-concept, as long as they also have offline peer support, thus providing further support for the earlier outlined 'rich get richer' hypothesis (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Such a finding also suggests, the poor may also become poorer, as interacting with peers through SNS may be detrimental to levels of self-esteem for those adolescents where SNS is their only form of social interaction (Khan et al., 2016).

It is proposed adolescents develop an offline and online identity, depending on the context the individual finds themselves in (Davis, 2011). These identities may be closely intertwined, such as the necessity for the audience to have prior knowledge of an adolescent's offline context in order to engage with their online identity (Boyd, 2011, as cited in Davis, 2011:636). For example, adolescents may create SNS posts which only certain peers from their offline environment may understand and therefore their online identity, depends, to an extent, upon their offline identity.

However, it is important to highlight, although possibly closely connected, the online self may not be an exact replication of an individual's offline presentation (Davis, 2011). This may be due to a perceived sense of increased anonymity online. Although complete anonymity is not provided on SNS, an individual may feel more liberated from possible constraints they face when interacting in person and therefore perhaps are more likely to engage in greater levels of identity expression online (Bargh et al., 2002; Davis, 2011).

Fullwood et al. (2016) explored the consistency of online and offline presentations of identities with a sample of 148 British adolescents. Younger adolescents in particular, aged 13 to 16 years, were more likely to have larger inconsistencies between their online and offline self-presentation, whereas older peers reported a greater identity consistency across multiple contexts. Inconsistencies between self-presentations may also be associated with additional factors, as Fullwood et al. (2016) added adolescents with fewer Facebook friends and a greater proportion of their time spent on SNS were more likely to present multiple presentations of themselves online.

Reich et al. (2012) found great overlap between an individual's online and offline networks, with adolescents largely using SNS platforms to connect with those from an offline context. This finding was present within a sample of over 250 American teenagers with a mean age of 16 years and provides further evidence of possible similarities between online and offline identities. However, it is imperative to acknowledge how language may have constructed the two notions of offline and online as separate and distinct, almost 'worlds apart', such as through terminology including 'real' and 'virtual' (Leander & Mckim, 2003: 212). When rather, as Davis (2011) suggests, such spaces are closely connected and interlinked.

1.5.3. Researcher's stance on self

Within this research, I initially adopted the stance that an individual's self and subsequent developed identity is formed solely through interactions the individual has with others and the world around them, as suggested through a social constructionist lens. However, Burr and Dick (2017) highlight the positioning of theories relating to one's identity within this perspective can be problematic, as exploring the concept of 'sense of self' can insinuate the notion of essentialism, due to implying one's self is an entity. Essentialism suggests events and behaviours result from fixed qualities residing within an individual, described as 'essences' (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Oyserman et al. (2012: 14) suggest individuals have a 'stable essence' to their self which reflects who they are. Such stability of self has been found in children, with adults also describing themselves with stable traits and actions. This therefore outlines an individual's self comprises of both stable and fluid aspects (Oyserman et al., 2012).

However, such essentialism can also be seen as reductionist thinking (Burr, 2015), and therefore, my view of the theorising of self is not entirely within an essentialist viewpoint. I acknowledge an individual's self appears to have a degree of stability across multiple situations. Thus, due to acknowledging this stability, I also do not adopt a pure relativist stance which closely aligns with social constructionism. Therefore, I position my view of self within the middle of the continuum

between essentialism and relativism, where an individual's self can display stability, however, is still affected by the social context and an individual's interactions.

In addition, a further critique of adopting the view of self that is entirely social constructionist, focusing purely upon relational processes, may also remove an individual's agency from the development of self (Gergen, 2011).

1.6. Social comparisons

The process of comparing one's self to others provides the individual with a wealth of self-knowledge, which is crucial for the development of identity (Noon & Meier, 2019).

Alongside utilising SNS to access social support and connect with peers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a), Vogel et al. (2014) highlight individuals may also use SNS to engage in a number of social comparative functions which may fulfil a human's fundamental desire to compare themselves to others. Such comparisons may be conscious or unconscious and can link to identity formation, through the process of evaluating one's self (Festinger, 1954).

1.6.1. Types of social comparisons

Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparisons suggests everyone has a drive to evaluate themselves, to gain an insight into their own opinions and abilities. This is done by comparing ourselves to those we perceive to be similar. Such comparisons tend to be 'upward', where an individual compares themselves against someone perceived to be superior and 'downward', against an individual perceived to be inferior (Smith, 2000; Vogel et al., 2014). Festinger (1954) also outlined an individual may change their behaviour or opinions to move closer to the point of comparison.

There is a wide range of possible emotional reactions as a result of social comparisons (Smith, 2000). Lockwood and Kunda (1997) state comparisons are more likely to evoke an emotion if the comparison is against someone similar or relates to a highly valued goal.

As shown in Appendix A, Smith (2000) outlines the emotional responses to a social comparison can fall into one of four types:

- Upward assimilative

- Upward contrastive

- Downward assimilative

- Downward contrastive

Assimilative comparisons involve prompting the individual to focus on being more like the comparison target, whereas, contrastive comparisons leads the individual to focus on the difference between the target and themselves (Meier & Schäfer, 2018).

1.6.1.1. Upward comparisons

An upward comparison may prompt a contrastive response including resentment or envy, due to the focus of the comparison being on the self. This will then lead to a sense of inferiority which the individual attributes internally to themselves and may not feel they can control or change. As a result, the difference between themselves and the comparison will remain (Smith, 2000).

Alternatively, an upward comparison may lead to an assimilative response and more positive emotions, despite comparing to those perceived to be superior. Such emotions may include admiration or inspiration, as due to comparing against someone similar an individual may feel they could also achieve this and reduce the discrepancy between themselves and others (Festinger, 1954; Smith, 2000). This leads to a higher level of perceived control where individuals feel motivated to change, rather than feeling hopeless (Major et al., 1991, as cited in Smith, 2000: 184).

1.6.1.2. Downward comparisons

Contrastive responses can arise when engaging in a downward social comparison against someone an individual perceives themselves to be better than. The subsequent evaluation and focus on self can lead to an emotion such as pride or scorn, through the distancing of one's self to the comparative individual. Furthermore, within this reaction the individual has a high sense of control to avoid becoming like the individual (Major et al., 1991; Smith, 2000).

Downward comparisons can also lead to assimilative reactions, where individuals may experience a sense of impending similarity in fate, with a low level of control to avoid the situation, such as through a feeling of worry (Major et al., 1991; Smith, 2000). Due to comparing to someone similar, as in line with Festinger (1954), the possibility of experiencing a similar outcome may feel greater.

Individuals make comparisons to others in order to evaluate themselves. Such comparisons prompt emotions which heavily contribute towards self-evaluations. However, such emotions are also influenced by factors including how much we like the individual we are comparing against and also a perception of if the difference, that is identified through a comparison, is deserved (Smith, 2000).

Although Smith (2000) begins to highlight the range of emotions associated with social comparisons, the framework may be considered deterministic. Emotional reactions can be seen as subjective and idiographic for each individual and therefore cannot be categorised into such discrete groups. There may be a wider range of factors underpinning an emotional response, such as an individual's social context or personality traits. For example, possibly receiving bad news earlier that day or levels of individual resilience may also impact upon an individual's response to a social comparison.

Furthermore, Smith's (2000) framework, may not capture the full range of possible emotions experienced. For example, previous work by Meier and Schäfer (2018) has focused more specifically on the differing types of envy that result from social comparisons and how these can lead to varying responses, including motivation and inspiration. This is not something acknowledged within Smith's (2000) model.

Despite possible limitations, the framework may still be useful for guiding our understanding of the impact of adolescent social comparisons. Application of Smith's (2000) work to an online world may also be useful, given the framework was developed prior to SNS's rise in popularity.

1.6.2. SNS use and social comparisons

SNS provide an abundance of opportunities for adolescents to compare themselves to others on a daily basis. Due to the self-presentation adolescents engage in online, where only their most desirable characteristics are presented, comparisons that an individual makes against others are often in an upwards direction (Vogel et al., 2014). The time spent over such self-presentation is not possible during face-to-face interactions and thus individuals on SNS may be making a comparison between their offline life to the idealised, carefully constructed online selves of others. Such comparisons may impact upon an individual's wellbeing and own self-perception.

An American study by Vogel et al. (2014) utilised an undergraduate sample and looked at the possible difference between making comparisons against 'social' and 'personal content'. The research found comparisons were made against another person's 'social content', which relates to the number of likes or comments a post received, had a larger impact on an individual's state self-esteem, which can be seen to be fluid and responsive to daily events (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). This was as opposed to comparisons against the 'personal content' of an SNS post, which comprises of what the post content entailed. Self-esteem was also found to decrease immediately after exposure to a post where an upwards comparison is made. Such results highlight the value placed on

feedback which contributes towards an individual's sense of self. This is alongside the need to fulfil social needs, including feelings of belongingness and building of social capital (Leary et al., 1995; Vogel et al., 2014). Vogel et al. (2014) also found participant's trait self-esteem, which is predominately stable and develops over time (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), was lower for those who had the greatest level of SNS engagement. This was mediated by the increased exposure to upward social comparisons made on SNS platforms, thus, further highlighting the possible negative impact of upward comparisons.

However, Vogel et al.'s (2014) study explored an individual's comparisons in relation to 'healthy behaviours', which may not be an important factor to the individual taking part and therefore the participant may not be affected by such comparisons. Furthermore, SNS use was quantified through frequency, however other factors, such as passive SNS use (Burnell et al., 2020) is found to correlate with increased social comparisons (Burnell et al., 2020; Verduyn et al., 2017) and also the number of connections on SNS may also present as important considerations when assessing SNS use (Anderson et al., 2012). In addition, Vogel et al.'s (2014) work also focussed on the use of Facebook, which does not represent the preferred platforms of choice for adolescents (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b).

Noon and Meier (2019) utilised a British adolescent sample comprising of 266 participants, with an average age of 15 years, to highlight social comparisons made on SNS can lead to positive motivational outcomes, such as inspiration. In addition, the identity of those an individual compares themselves to also contributes to the impact of the social comparison. For example, the number of strangers a young person reported as having within their online social network was found to significantly mediate depressive symptoms, through the number of social comparisons made (Lup et al., 2015). Therefore, such findings suggest if a young person utilises SNS to keep in touch with familiar contacts, they are less at risk of negative consequences as the following of strangers can trigger negative social comparisons.

1.7. Summary of chapter

SNS are an integral part of an adolescents' life, as this demographic spends a significant proportion of their time online (Odgers & Jenson, 2020; Throuvala, 2019; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Previous research explored the possible impact of adolescent SNS use, highlighting both positive and negative implications. It is particularly important to explore the use of SNS with an adolescent population, not only due to their high engagement with SNS but also as a result of adolescence being a crucial period

of development for the formation of social relations (Antheunis et al., 2016) and identity (Erikson, 1968), both of which can be supported through SNS.

The development of one's self-concept, which may comprise of an individual's multiple identities (Oyserman et al., 2012), is also formed during adolescence. Whilst engaging with SNS this may lead to the formation of an 'online' and 'offline' identity through self-presentation and engaging in the self as a performance (Goffman, 1978; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016).

The forming of one's self can be seen to be socially embedded (Davis, 2011) and relies upon feedback provided by others (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014), in order to gain an accurate evaluation of one's self. This can be achieved through engaging in social comparisons against others, which SNS provide an abundance of opportunities for (Vogel et al., 2014). Such comparisons can be made in a number of directions and evoke a range of emotional reactions (Smith, 2000; Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb., 2018), which may be seen to be negative, such as feelings of envy, or positive, including motivation (Noon & Meier, 2019). Chapter 2 will now explore social comparisons made online, in relation to an adolescent's identity development.

Chapter 2 Systematic Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to chapter

Conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) is an approach to explore areas of uncertainty within existing literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). SLRs use systematic methods to reduce potential bias and thus provide a more reliable insight into a specific area (Cochrane Library, 2020). Through this explicit process empirical evidence is identified, critically appraised and synthesised, in order to answer a specific RQ (Jahan et al., 2016; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The stages of an SLR involve formulating a review question, developing an inclusion and exclusion criteria for studies to be considered against, completing a search and assessing the research quality (Gough, 2007).

An overview of the existing literature within the field has been presented in Chapter 1, regarding adolescent SNS use and how such platforms facilitate social comparisons. This SLR looks to build upon this concept and explore the possible relationship between social comparisons that are made on SNS and adolescent identity development. As a result, the following review question has been developed to guide the SLR:

- *What does the research say about the possible influence social comparisons that are made on SNS, have on an adolescent's identity development?*

Within this chapter, findings from the SLR will be presented, before then outlining the rationale for this study and developed RQs.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were developed and subsequently applied to the papers identified through the systematic search, to ensure suitability and relevance to the review question (Gough, 2007). Such criteria can be found in Table 2.1.

It was necessary to expand upon elements of the criteria, in order to maximise applicable results. For example, adopting Sawyer et al.'s (2018) broader conceptualisation of adolescence, which includes individuals between the ages of 10 and 24 years, due to the delayed onset of adulthood within society. This was deemed necessary to ensure the identification of relevant studies.

Finally, no limits were outlined relating to the type of publication and therefore could possibly include 'grey literature', if appropriate. This once again was to maximise the number of relevant results found.

Table 2.1. A table to show the inclusion and exclusion criteria used as part of the SLR.

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Participants	• Samples that only utilise adolescents, aged up to 24 years. • Undergraduate university students. • Any identified gender or ethnicity, providing this is not the focus.	• Adult samples. • Postgraduate or mature university students, aged above 24 years. • Papers focusing on a participant subgroup, such as a specific sexuality.	• To focus the search on *adolescent* identity formation.
Research Focus	• Relationship between SNS social comparisons and identity formation. • Focus on SNS use for social interactions.	• Focus on general internet use or activities that involve engaging with social media, rather than SNS, such as gaming. • Papers focusing on problematic outcomes, such as internet addiction.	• To focus the search on related concepts.
Accessibility	• Reported in English, due to lack of translation resources. • Any country of origin. • Paper can be accessed.	• Not reported in English. • Paper cannot be accessed.	• To ensure results can be evaluated and synthesised.
Research Design	• Variety of designs, to allow a range of possibly relevant information. • The collection of primary empirical data.	• Research has not collected empirical data, such as a book chapter.	• Ensures originality of findings.

2.3. Search strategy

A systematic search of the literature was completed in July 2020. The databases used were Scopus, PsychInfo and Web of Science, in order to gather papers relating to psychology and social sciences.

Original search terms of "social comparison*", "social network*" and "adolescen*" were expanded through the inclusion of synonyms. Search terms were developed by referring back to existing literature and considering the terminology used. Many search terms were truncated to ensure a wider variety of possibly viable articles.

Furthermore, an additional search term relating to identity development was also included to align results more closely to the intended field, as a significant proportion of results from initial searches related to body image through social comparisons.

A table of full search terms used can be found in Appendix B. All search terms must appear within the article's title, abstract or keywords, to ensure relevance. No search terms were excluded.

2.4. Screening process results

Database searches led to the identification of 912 papers, however, following the removal of duplications, this was reduced to 616 papers. I then screened these papers at either a title, abstract or full text level, using the inclusion criteria outlined in Table 2.1. The flowchart documenting this process can be found in Appendix C.

Many papers were removed when screened at a title or abstract level due to a number of reasons including sample characteristics or a research focus that differed from the review question. For example, a large number of papers were excluded due to focusing upon the development of gender identity in relation to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer / Questioning (LGBTQ) community. The development of one's gender identity, which comprises of an individual perceiving themselves as male, female or perhaps neither gender, can be considered to be an element of an individual's identity (Yavuz, 2016). However, a focus on this particular aspect of identity was deemed to be too specific for this exploratory research with this age group.

This left 20 papers that were considered at a full text level. During this process 14 papers were excluded, with justifications outlined within Appendix D.

2.5. Data extraction

Following the screening process, six articles remained (Appendix E) and these papers subsequently underwent a quality appraisal and process of data extraction. Table 2.2 provides a brief descriptive outline of these papers, with a more detailed table located in Appendix F. Data extraction involved identifying key findings, data analysis and recruitment methods.

Table 2.2. A table summarising key features of the identified studies, as part of the SLR.

Paper	Sample	Focus	Data Collection	Key Findings
Charoensukmongkol (2018)	• N=250 • 13-19 years • Thai Study	• Intensity of social media use and social comparisons. • Ingroup competition within friendship groups.	• Quantitative survey. • Measures include: intensity of social media use scale, social comparisons, envy and in group competition.	• Measure of social media intensity was positively and significantly related to social comparisons and envy. • Social comparisons and envy were also positively and significantly associated. • Interaction effects between peer ingroup competition, significantly associated with envy and social comparisons.
Noon (2020)	• N=177 • 13-18 years • British High School	• Social comparisons of opinion and ability on Instagram. • Associations with three identity processing styles.	• Quantitative survey. • Measures include social comparisons and identity dimensions.	• Ability comparisons positively correlated to identity commitment and in-depth exploration. • Opinion comparisons positively relate to in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment. • Females are significantly more likely to engage in social comparisons of ability.
Thomas et al. (2017)	• N=25 first year undergraduates. • 18-22 years • British and international students. • Two UK universities	• Use of social media during the transition to university, in relation to social comparisons and building a community.	• Qualitative • Participants develop Pinterest boards, documenting social media use. • Semi-structured interviews relating to 'digital scrapbook'.	• Importance of self-presentation leads to the editing of own posts. Pressure to 'live up' to profile in real life. • Selective sharing of identity online and impression management. • Cannot share 'true' feelings online. Upward comparisons to others, then feel the need to post 'happy' posts.

Throuvala et al. (2019)	• N=42 • 12-16 years • Three UK High Schools	• Investigate uses and motivations of adolescent SNS use.	• Qualitative • Six focus groups.	• 'social comparison and validation' identified as one of six key themes. • The need to promote favourable self, and fear of how others perceive them. • Need for popularity, underpinned by content enhancement and expectation of endorsement, through likes.
Yang, Holden and Carter (2018)	• N=219 College 'Freshmen' • Mean age 18.29 years • American study	• How opinion and ability social comparisons on SNS relate to three different identity processing styles.	• Two quantitative surveys, three months apart. • Measures include social media comparison, identity processing styles, global self-esteem, identity clarity.	• Comparisons of ability significantly predicted lower identity clarity, three months later, through a diffuse avoidant identity processing (p=0.39). • Lower identity clarity, individuals are more confused about who they are and leads to more ability comparisons.
Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb (2018)	• N=219 College 'Freshmen' • Mean age 18.29 years • American study	• Considers ability and opinion social comparisons, in relation to two introspective processes; rumination and reflection.	• Two quantitative surveys, three months apart. • Measures include social media comparison, identity distress and reflection/ rumination.	• Ability comparisons had a positive, significant association to rumination, which significantly predicted higher identity distress three months later. • Opinion comparisons had a positive and significant association with reflection.

2.6. Quality appraisal of studies

Following data extraction, a method of quality assurance was utilised to evaluate the extent the identified evidence contributes towards answering the review question. In order to do this systematically with a greater level of objectivity, the Weight of Evidence Framework was used (Gough, 2007).

2.6.1. Weight of Evidence

Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework evaluates a paper's methodological features, alongside its relevance to the current SLR. There are four aspects of the WoE framework model, which are outlined in Table 2.3 below (Gough, 2007).

Table 2.3. A table outlining Gough's (2007) WoE Framework, prior to use within the SLR.

WoE	Measure	Detail
WoE A	Quality of methodology	A generic judgement of the paper's methodological quality. This is non-specific to the review, and relates to the study's coherence and integrity, in its own terms.
WoE B	Appropriateness of methodology	The appropriateness of the methodology and analysis, in accordance with the identified review question. How fit for purpose of the review is that form of evidence?
WoE C	Appropriateness of evidence	The appropriateness and relevance of the evidence presented within a paper, in relation to the current review question.
WoE D	Combined assessment	Overall assessment, combining the judgements made for WoE A, B and C.

Within this model, Gough (2007) also draws upon the work of Pawson et al., (2003) who highlights seven additional elements which should be considered when evaluating research quality, through the acronym TAPUPAS. TAPUPAS stands for transferability, accessibility, propriety, utility,

purposivity, accuracy and specificity. Gough (2007) applies these seven elements to his WoE framework, as shown in Table 2.4 and such elements are also considered within my own evaluation of the papers.

Table 2.4. A table outlining the overlapping nature of Gough's (2007) WoE and Pawson et al.'s (2003) TAPUPAS dimensions. Taken from Gough (2007: 11).

WoE (Gough, 2007)	TAPUPAS (Pawson et al., 2003)	
WoE A	Transparency	Clarity of research purpose and open to scrutiny.
	Accuracy	Accurate and well-grounded research.
	Accessibility	Understandable and intelligible reporting.
	Specificity	Method specific quality.
WoE B	Purposivity	Fit for purpose method.
WoE C	Utility	Provides relevant answers and fit for use.
	Propriety	Legal and ethical research considerations.

Through the use of the WoE (Gough, 2007) and TAPUPAS (Pawson et al., 2003) frameworks, criteria were developed to appraise the quality of the identified papers in relation to the review question. The criteria can be found in Appendix G.

Each of the six selected papers were critically appraised against the criteria and were deemed as scoring either 'low', 'medium' or 'high' within each of the WoE factors. A summary outlining each paper's scores within this framework can be found in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5. A table outlining the Weight of Evidence ratings for each of the identified studies.

Study	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Charoensukmongkol (2018)	Medium	Low	Medium	**Medium**
Noon (2020)	High	Low	High	**Medium**
Thomas et al. (2017)	Medium	High	Low	**Medium**
Throuvala et al. (2019)	High	High / Medium	Medium	**Medium**
Yang, Holden and Carter (2018)	High	Low	Low / Medium	**Medium**
Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb (2018)	High	Low	Low / Medium	**Medium**

2.7. Results

The selected studies will now be compared with key methodological features being considered. The notions of validity and reliability will be addressed throughout.

Findings of the studies were then synthesised in order to explore the review question of the possible association between SNS social comparisons and adolescent self-presentation.

A textual narrative synthesis (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009) was selected as the approach to summarise findings from the identified papers (Popay et al., 2006). Due to the selected papers comprising of a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research, a narrative synthesis was deemed to be more appropriate than a meta-analysis, which is suitable for quantitative research, or a meta ethnography, an approach used for synthesising qualitative papers (Cochrane Consumers & Communication Review Group, 2013).

Furthermore, a narrative synthesis also enables findings to be synthesised according to their study design and thus within this SLR, findings are synthesised depending on if the research adopts a quantitative or qualitative design (Cochrane Consumers & Communication Review Group, 2013). In addition, narrative syntheses also acknowledge and consider the measures and context the

research is gathered within and similarities and differences relating to these factors are presented below (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009; Cochrane Consumers & Communication Review Group, 2013). In addition, within a narrative synthesis findings can also be synthesised according to their outcome and this can be seen within Section 2.7.2.2, where results are grouped according to the type of social comparison being made (Cochrane Consumers & Communication Review Group, 2013).

However, upon reflection, although a narrative synthesis supported the identification of a number of similarities and differences between the identified papers, for example when considering the measures used, a contrasting synthesis approach, such as a thematic synthesis, may also have been appropriate. A thematic synthesis may have further highlighted themes and commonalities across the papers to a greater extent (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

2.7.1. Synthesis of methodologies

Firstly, all identified papers are published within peer-reviewed journals and thus have undergone a process of critical appraisal, prior to publication. A number of further strengths and critiques shall now be discussed.

2.7.1.1. Sample and context

A number of the papers (Thomas et al., 2017; Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018; Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb., 2018) utilise a sample comprising of university students. This was part of the inclusion criteria to ensure the identification of relevant studies. According to Sawyer et al.'s (2018) definition, the developmental stage of 'adolescence' continues until the age of 24 years. However, it could be argued identity formation experienced during university is in stark contrast to that of an adolescent attending school. Such different challenges relating to older adolescent identity formation is outlined by Thomas et al. (2017) who highlight the opportunity for identity change when transitioning into higher education. Furthermore, Arnett (2000) also highlights older adolescents may engage in different purposes of identity formation and experience different pressures, such as those relating to career decisions and romantic relationships, which a younger adolescent may not face. Nevertheless, although such results may not be generalisable to younger adolescents, findings can provide an indication of certain aspects of social comparisons that are made on SNS.

In order to reflect the worldwide nature of SNS use, there was not an exclusion criterion relating to the research's country of origin. Three papers (Noon, 2020; Thomas et al., 2017; Throuvala et al., 2019) used participants attending British educational settings, where results can be more closely

applied to the intended sample. Charoensukmongkol's (2018) research is conducted in Thailand and although displays a level of ecological validity through being conducted within a real-life setting, there is the possibility adolescents from a contrasting culture may display different motivations of social media. This is in addition to using a greater variety of SNS including LINE, a platform not used within the UK. Therefore, caution may be required to apply such findings to UK adolescents.

Each paper provided a detailed insight into participant demographics, which therefore strengthened WoE A scores. This included details regarding ethnicity (Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018), age and socio-economic status (Throuvala et al., 2019). Many studies also clearly outlined their purpose and data gathering methods (Noon, 2020), which enables studies to be replicated through clear signposting of the materials used.

All studies have a degree of relevance, due to being published since 2017. This may entail how findings are perhaps more reflective of the current digital landscape, although this is continuously evolving. Noon (2020) focuses explicitly on social comparisons made on Instagram, which reflects statistics suggesting Instagram is one of the most popular SNS for adolescents (Gray, 2018).

2.7.1.2. Measures

All four quantitative studies used Cronbach's Alpha to assess internal consistency for the scales being utilised (Charoensukmongkol, 2018; Noon, 2020; Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018; Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018). Each Cronbach's Alpha score fell above α =.71 (Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018) and therefore suggest the items within each scale had a shared covariance and were likely to measure the same underlying concepts. However, caution should be taken when interpreting such figures, which can increase simply due to an increased number of items, to give the impression of an enhanced level of construct validity (Cortina, 1993). Noon (2020) also reported the measures used had high cross cultural and convergent validity when gauging identity dimensions. However, further questions may be raised regarding Noon's attempts to measure 'global identity', through focusing on two aspects; academic identity and friendships.

However, within Charoensukmongkol's (2018) research, with the exception of one measure, the author developed their own measures for concepts including social comparisons and levels of ingroup competition, which may have lower levels of validity compared to established scales.

Furthermore, within two of the papers (Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018; Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb, 2018) surveys comprised of a number of Likert Scales, which utilised different numerical structures and varying language. These included a scale spanning from one to four, to measure self-

esteem, using the term 'strongly agree', and a scale spanning from one to five, using the term 'very well', to measure social media comparisons. This may be confusing for participants and subsequently impact upon the validity and scores provided. In addition, Noon (2020) stated 33% of collected data could not be used, due to missing values. Such a result may cast an element of doubt across the remaining data, as perhaps participants did not understand the questions.

A further consideration of validity for both Yang, Holden and Carter (2018) and Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb, (2018) is how the samples consisted of individuals who use social media more than once a week. It is therefore possible utilising a sample with potentially such little use of social media would not provide an accurate insight into how social comparisons may impact identity development. These studies did not further explore the extent participants accessed such sites and therefore participants may not reflect the tendencies of the adolescent demographic who access SNS on a more frequent basis (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a).

Finally, each quantitative study utilises self-report measures which increases the risk of participants engaging in social desirability and displaying demand characteristics, which can impact validity. Across all studies, participants require a high level of introspection to consider identity development, which some participants may find challenging.

2.7.1.3. Design

Both the Yang, Holden and Carter (2018) and Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb (2018) studies involve a temporal aspect. Through collecting data from samples at two time points, across a three-month period, this may provide a more accurate insight into an individual's identity, as opposed to gathering a 'snapshot'. However, this design aspect may lead to the possibility of a greater level of confounding variables. For example, an event may have occurred between the time points, either online or offline, which possibly impacts upon identity development or level of identity distress (Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018).

Furthermore, some theorists may conceptualise the self as being changeable and fluid (Davis, 2011) and therefore cannot be categorised into a series of identity styles as proposed by Yang, Holden and Carter (2018). However, as the research does provide an insight into the potential relationships between social comparisons and identity, results may still be used tentatively.

2.7.1.4. Qualitative quality appraisal

When considering qualitative papers (Thomas et al., 2017; Throuvala et al., 2019), it is important to consider the trustworthiness of the research through the evaluative criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Both Thomas et al. (2017) and Throuvala et al. (2019) outline the process used to complete Thematic Analysis (TA), in addition to also engaging in steps to enhance inter-rater reliability. This was through multiple researchers coding the data and discussing developed codes, both of which enhance the level of dependability and the likelihood findings can be replicated.

Throuvala et al. (2019) utilises a sample size of 42 adolescents, which may increase the chances of reaching a point of saturation within the data and may therefore support the study's transferability. However, the use of focus groups may lead to participants not feeling they can provide their views and all voices may not be heard (Cohen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the work of Thomas et al. (2017) could be seen to have increased credibility and confidence that the perspectives captured are accurate and true. This was through the use of a prolonged period of data collection, where participants created a 'digital scrapbook' of their SNS engagement which was further discussed within an interview, thus providing participants with increased opportunities to ensure their perspective is shared.

2.7.2. Synthesis of findings

Although varied in their approaches, the selected studies highlight there may be a relationship between an adolescent's SNS social comparisons and self-presentation. Results go on to indicate this relationship may have positive and negative implications. Findings are presented below and synthesised into quantitative and qualitative conclusions.

2.7.2.1. Qualitative findings

Both papers which adopted a qualitative approach to data analysis (Thomas et al., 2017; Throuvala et al., 2019) highlight the notion of selective self-presentation. Thomas et al. (2017), outline participants experience a 'need' to create a desirable identity and will edit posts to achieve this. Participants also acknowledged many others also do this and social media posts can often be misleading. However, this need for a positive and selective self-presentation can subsequently lead to a feeling of pressure to emulate their social media image in reality.

This pressure combines with a fear held by adolescents over how others may perceive them (Throuvala et al., 2019) which can be linked to the importance of feedback and perceptions of others

during adolescent identity formation (Jones, 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). This construction of a positive self online can also be associated with a need for validation from peers, which may signal their popularity through signs of endorsement such as 'likes' or comments on a post, as highlighted by British adolescents within Throuvala et al.'s (2019) research.

Participants in Thomas et al.'s (2017) sample also associate such pressure with not being able to share their true feelings online. Through reported upward comparisons against peers who portray a positive self-presentation and 'look happy' online (Thomas et al., 2017: 549), adolescents describe a cycle where they also feel pressure to post something portraying them as happy. Therefore, an individual's developing identity may be selectively presented, in order to present an identity that meets the expectations of others and gain subsequent validation (Marks & O'Mahoney, 2014).

However, Thomas et al. (2017) utilises a university aged sample, where an individual's 'adjusted self' may be particularly pertinent at a point of significant transition, such as when commencing higher education (Goffman, 1959).

2.7.2.2. Quantitative findings

Three of the four quantitative studies distinguished between two types of social comparisons; ability comparisons and opinion comparisons (Noon, 2020; Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018; Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018). Social comparisons of ability can be described as making comparisons between achievements and performances and are typically done through an upward or downward comparison (Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018). They are seen to be highly judgemental and competitive (Park & Baek, 2018). Whereas, social comparisons of opinion comprise of comparing an individual's beliefs and preferences to those held by others (Noon, 2020). It is an approach to regulate an individual's behaviour and values, ensuring they are in line with the social norms and others are seen as role models, rather than competitors (Noon, 2020; Park & Baek, 2018).

Within the sample of British teenagers, Noon (2020) reported similar levels of opinion (M =2.18, SD =0.88) and ability (M =2.21, SD =0.88) comparisons whilst engaging with Instagram. However, these may have subsequently different relationships with the development of identity and therefore findings from these studies will be synthesised in relation to this distinction.

2.7.2.2.1. Ability comparisons

Yang, Holden and Carter (2018), explored social comparisons with a number of identity processing styles and can provide explanations for how an individual may use information and experiences to

form their identity. This was alongside identity clarity, which is the extent an individual adopts multiple identities into a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968; Harter, 2012; Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018).

Findings highlighted by Yang, Holden and Carter (2018) suggest engaging in comparisons of ability, significantly predicted a lower level of identity clarity, through an identity processing style labelled as 'diffuse avoidant'. This reportedly involves an individual distancing themselves from any information, decisions and conflicts relating to their identity, such as avoiding feedback and diverting away from making life decisions (Berzonsky et al., 2013; Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018). Results highlighted an indirect path from making ability social comparisons at time one, to having a lower level of identity clarity at time two, which was three months later, through a diffuse avoidant style of identity. This relationship was found to be significant (p=0.39). Therefore, those young people who engage in more ability comparisons on SNS, tend to use the diffuse avoidant style of identity to a greater extent, which then predicts a lower level of identity clarity, where an individual is more confused about who they are. The authors propose this style of identity processing may be a coping mechanism to protect from any possible negative emotional reactions through ability comparisons, such as those suggested by Smith (2000), including envy.

Noon (2020) also explored ability comparisons and highlighted such comparisons were positively associated with identity commitment and in-depth identity exploration. Identity commitment involves the choices an individual makes about certain aspects of their identity and their confidence within each of these, whereas identity exploration comprises of the conscious reflection an individual has about the choices previously made and the process of seeking further information (Noon, 2020).

Therefore, in contrast to Yang, Holden and Carter's (2018) findings Noon (2020) suggests rather than reducing self-certainty and increasing self-doubt, social comparisons of ability may lead adolescents to reflect upon their own abilities and perhaps lead to in-depth exploration. This exploration and reflection can then support individuals in committing to a particular self-presentation (Noon, 2020). However, this exploration could alternatively be linked to the concept of reduced identity clarity, as suggested by Yang, Holden and Carter (2018). Thus, the less invested a young person is in their identity, the less at risk they are of experiencing negative psycho-emotional outcomes, which may arise as a result of engaging in upward comparisons to others (Noon, 2020).

However, further research by Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb, (2018) found a significantly positive association between ability comparisons and rumination. Rumination can be outlined as experiencing possible threats to self and can involve repetitive and anxious thoughts about

themselves (Treynor et al., 2003). This relationship, went on to predict a higher level of identity distress. Identity distress is defined by the authors as a severe subjective distress, relating to an individual facing difficulties when trying to reconcile aspects of their self into a coherent and acceptable presentation (American Psychiatric Association 1980, cited in Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018: 93). Therefore, such findings imply those who frequently compare their abilities with others on social media, appear to also be at a higher risk of experiencing a greater level of identity distress, due to their engagement in rumination and 'brooding' about their thoughts and feelings (Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018). However, it is important to once again highlight how such a study utilised a sample of young people who had recently transitioned into university, which may possibly contribute to the level of identity distress faced.

2.7.2.2.2. Opinion comparisons

Yang, Holden and Carter (2018) suggest engaging in opinion comparisons does not predict an individual's identity processing style. Furthermore, Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb (2018) highlighted a significant, positive association between a young person making opinion comparisons and engaging in the introspective process of identity reflection. This was presented within the paper as a stark contrast to rumination. Reflection can be seen to be motivated by curiosity of the self, associated with personal growth. It may also reduce identity distress, through supporting a better understanding of one's self and distressing experiences (Harrington & Loffredo, 2011; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999; Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018).

In addition, Noon (2020) also found significant, positive associations between opinion comparisons on Instagram for adolescents and both in-depth identity exploration (p=.046) and a reconsideration of commitment (p=.002), which involved comparing current identity commitments to alternatives. Such identity processes may bear similarities with the process of reflection, highlighted within Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb (2018) and the greater exploration and consideration of one's identity.

2.7.2.2.3. Further quantitative findings

Charoensukmongkol (2018) emphasises the importance of social factors which may also impact upon the relationship between making social comparisons on SNS and identity development. This was highlighted through focussing on a teenager's social environment, as those who experienced increased levels of peer ingroup competitiveness were then more likely to engage in social comparisons, particularly if they use social media intensely. Although the generalisability of these

results may face cultural barriers, the research highlights the importance of an individual's wider social context.

2.8. Summary of SLR

The identified studies provided an insight into the possible relationship between social comparisons made on SNS and an adolescent's identity. This was alongside highlighting further variations into the types of social comparisons made. Many of the studies suggest an association between engaging in ability social comparisons and a greater level of identity exploration, perhaps through lack of identity clarity (Yang, Holden & Carter, 2018) and in-depth exploration (Noon, 2020).

There appears to be contrasting narratives, regarding if this potential impact upon an adolescent's identity is positive and enables individuals to explore their identity, which then may inform later commitments (Noon, 2020) or a possible negative impact, through comparisons leading to greater levels of rumination and a subsequent experiencing of identity distress (Yang, Holden, Carter & Webb, 2018).

This identity exploration is also whilst feeling pressure to create a 'successful' post which receives validation from others. Adolescents appear to carefully construct their self-presentation to peers and subsequently attempt to fulfil this identity in real life (Thomas et al., 2017; Throuvala et al., 2019).

Therefore, social comparisons can be detrimental or supportive to an adolescent's development of identity and self-presentation. This may depend on a number of factors including the type of comparisons being made, the process of introspection the young person engages in, or possible social factors (Charoensukmongkol, 2018).

2.9. Rationale and research question

The review of the literature within Chapters 1 and 2 generated a number of possible RQs which are valuable to investigate. However, within this research the selected lines of enquiry focus upon an individual's self-presentation online, alongside exploring the social comparisons adolescents engage in. With SNS being an essential aspect of life for adolescents (Throuvala et al., 2019), it is necessary to further examine their experiences on SNS and contribute to the existing field of possible implications of SNS use. A particular focus on the development of self is required, due to adolescence also being a pivotal time for identity development (Erikson, 1968).

There is significantly less research that focuses upon younger adolescent SNS use, with the majority of research exploring the relationship older adolescents or emerging adults have with SNS platforms. With children as young as 8 years regularly accessing SNS each day (Children's Commissioner, 2018) it is important to gain a greater clarity of SNS use with a younger demographic, in order to then provide appropriate support, if necessary.

Furthermore, the majority of research is quantitatively based, particularly in relation to SNS social comparisons and thus, the collection of richer data would also be valuable to gain a deeper understanding of the field from those who experience it.

Girls have been identified as accessing SNS more frequently than their male counterparts (Gray, 2018), in addition to being more likely to engage in social comparisons online (Noon, 2020), and therefore, have been selected as the focus of this research, in order to further explore their social comparisons and self-presentations whilst engaging with SNS.

The developed RQs are:

- What can be understood about the perceptions held by female early adolescents regarding their self-presentation online, through their experiences of SNS use?

- What are the types of social comparisons made by girls, when using SNS and does this influence their identity and self-presentation?

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1. Introduction to chapter

This research is seeking to explore SNS use in relation to identity and social comparisons, from the perspective of early adolescents. This will be done through the completion of interviews with a sample aged 12 and 13 years, who all identify as female. A process of Reflexive TA will be used to analyse the data.

This chapter will look to outline the methodological approach, including the philosophical standpoint in which the research is situated. This is before then justifying the use of Reflexive TA, alongside explaining why alternative approaches were discounted.

A timeline documenting the research process is included within Appendix H.

3.2. Philosophical standpoint

3.2.1. Paradigm

A paradigm can be seen to be a view of the world, how we understand it and an individual's place within this. Each paradigm is associated with a number of assumptions which then informs many decisions regarding the research, including its epistemological and ontological stance (Cohen et al., 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2015).

This study is situated within a qualitative research paradigm, which seeks to understand meaning from rich data that is generated within a particular context (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative research largely involves the exploration, description and interpretation of the personal and social experiences of those who are participating (Smith, 2015). A key element of the paradigm is the notion of there being multiple realities, with multiple interpretations of meaning (Cohen et al., 2018). Qualitative research also examines social processes within the context they occur (Carter & Little, 2007; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007) and recognises knowledge and reality as being socially situated (Cohen et al., 2018; Sandelowski, 2001; Willig, 2008).

Within the overarching conceptual framework of qualitative research, a social constructionist approach will be adopted for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Burr, 2015). This is where each individual actively constructs their own views of the world, through interacting with others within their social context (Cohen et al., 2018). As a result, each individual constructs their representation of the world differently (Fox, 2003), however no particular way of understanding the world is closer to the truth (Burr, 2015). Consequently the same phenomenon, such as SNS use, can be described in

a variety of ways (Willig, 2008). Due to the social nature of SNS use, social constructionism was deemed appropriate to further explore the experiences, views and understanding of early adolescents when engaging with SNS.

Within social constructionism, an individual's understanding of the world is dependent upon the history and culture it is developed within and this can change over time (Burr, 2015). Such understandings can therefore be seen to be products or artefacts of that particular context and the social structures which may also exist. These artefacts are developed through social interactions (Gergen, 2004; Burr, 2015).

However, as interactions are influenced by the wider context and cultures are constantly evolving, definitive answers regarding human and social phenomena cannot be identified, due to the continuously changing context (Burr, 2015). Therefore, the knowledge gathered only reflects the context it is gathered in.

Due to the adoption of a social constructionist approach within a qualitative paradigm, assumptions associated with a positivist paradigm can be questioned (Burr, 2015). Individuals adopting a positivist paradigm believe there is a single 'real' world (Ashworth, 2015) and aims to generate objective knowledge, which is a direct reflection of the situation, and exists independently from the researcher (Fox, 2003; Willig, 2008). Furthermore, the paradigm also assumes context is not of importance and looks to establish causal relationships within the world (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

3.2.2. Ontology

Ontology relates to the nature of reality and a consideration of "how things really are?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 108). Within a social constructionist approach the ontology entails there are multiple realities, which are socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2015).

In order to reflect this a relativist ontology will be adopted, which states there are multiple constructed realities, as opposed to a single truth (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). A relative ontology also highlights what is 'true' differs across time and context (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which can closely link to social constructionism and the notion an individual's understanding is dependent on the context and history it is generated within (Burr, 2015).

Therefore, within a relativist ontology the reality identified within this research is one particular perspective and reality can be seen to be subjective, differing between individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As reality is seen to be individually constructed, Scotland (2012) outlines there are as many realities as there are people.

3.2.3. Epistemology

Epistemology relates to the theory and nature of knowledge where different epistemological standpoints provide differing views on what can be classed as 'knowledge' (Sewell, 2016; Willig, 2008). For those positioned within a constructionist approach, it is believed knowledge is constructed socially, as part of an interactive, reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participant (Mertens, 2015).

Due to the researcher's active involvement in the development of their own knowledge, combined with the nature of Reflexive TA, an interpretivist epistemology can be taken. An interpretivist epistemology recognises an individual's constructs and experiences are gathered and understood through the interaction between researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As a result of being involved in the development of knowledge, my preconceptions and assumptions may influence the research process. Therefore, knowledge cannot be seen as 'value free' due to being based on an element of subjectivity (Edge & Richards, 1998; Scotland, 2012; Walsham, 1995).

Knowledge is created through an interaction between an individual and their world. Subsequently, in order to understand this knowledge the perspective of those individuals who participate within that world must be gathered (Cohen et al., 2018; Scotland, 2012). Qualitative research often studies a smaller number of naturally occurring cases which enables the exploration of multiple realities and gains an insight into participant perspectives, which is a key element of interpretivism (Scotland, 2012).

3.3. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

TA can be seen as a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns, known as themes, within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 78). Although now acknowledged as a method in its own right, Braun and Clarke (2020b) outline TA refers to a cluster of approaches, with each iteration being underpinned by differing paradigm assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). Different approaches to TA can be seen along a continuum, comprising of coding reliability approaches at one end, which entails the use of a codebook to inform the coding process (Terry et al., 2013), and Reflexive TA at the other end of the continuum (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). This research will adopt a Reflexive TA approach.

A popular approach to TA is Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process. However, this method has since evolved and the authors reconceptualise it as 'Reflexive TA' in order to capture how this

approach differs from other forms of TA, such as those using a codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). Reflexive TA highlights the centrality of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity throughout the process, alongside the researcher taking a pivotal role in the development of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). Researcher subjectivity can be seen as a resource for developing knowledge, rather than a threat (Burr & Dick, 2017; Gough & Madill, 2012). Furthermore, Reflexive TA emphasises the importance of context to the developed meaning within the research and reflexive engagement with the theory, data and subsequent interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019a; 2020b). All of which are crucial aspects of a qualitative paradigm and social constructionist approach.

Such an approach has been described by Kidder and Fine (1987) as 'Big Q' qualitative research, where qualitative methods are conducted within a qualitative paradigm, as outlined in Section 3.2. This is in contrast with 'small q' qualitative approaches, which use qualitative methods within a more positivist paradigm (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Terry et al., 2013). Iterations of TA, including coding reliability approaches, can be seen to implicitly situate TA within a more positivist paradigm and 'small q' approach. This is due to such approaches aiming for reliability and accuracy within the codes, alongside the generation of replicable knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2020a; Braun et al., 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Reflexive TA will therefore be used within this research due to its alignment with the paradigm and epistemology outlined in Section 3.2. Reflexive TA involves the deep immersion into the data, alongside an active reflection throughout (Braun & Clarke, 2019a) and can be seen to be "fully qualitative research", that is qualitative in both its technique and values (Braun & Clarke, 2020a: 3). Such an approach closely aligns with my personal research values, that a process of continuously thinking and reflecting is of more value than reaching a point where there is nothing else to discover (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). This therefore also compliments the philosophical stance adopted within this research that there is not a single reality or truth.

It is therefore important to note TA is not completed within a theoretical vacuum and Braun and Clarke (2020b) highlight the importance of making the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of the approach to TA explicit, in order to enhance the cohesion and quality within the research (Braun & Clarke, 2020b; Holloway & Todres, 2003).

The steps taken as part of the Reflexive TA method will be outlined in Section 3.9.

3.4. Alternative methods considered
Prior to selecting Reflexive TA, a number of alternative methods were considered and will now be summarised.

Constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2006) is an approach that also aligns with the philosophical standpoint presented. GT involves inductively deriving a theory that arises from the data, as opposed to testing predetermined hypotheses (Parker & Myrick, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method was considered a possibility due to its ability to explain a phenomenon from within the context of those experiencing it (Birks & Mills, 2015) and looks to provide an overarching theory, which would be useful to apply to early adolescent SNS use (Mills et al., 2006). However, a key aspect of GT is to approach the topic without any preconceived theoretical frameworks, which may impact on the development of an emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006). Due to prior engagement with the literature, I felt I had a considerable theoretical understanding within the field. Moreover, with the focus specifically exploring self-presentation and identity, in relation to social comparisons made on SNS, this could be perhaps seen to be too specific for the breadth of GT.

Although both constructivist GT and the selected approach of Reflexive TA utilise a coding process to analyse the data, there are a number of further distinctions between the approaches. This includes how GT adopts a theoretical sampling approach, where data is analysed alongside data collection (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This is in addition to GT looking for actions within the data, as opposed to themes (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, GT involves a process of making constant comparisons throughout the analysis, where comparisons are continuously made between the emerging codes and categories to develop the descriptions of each concept (Holton, 2010). This process assists in reaching theoretical saturation; however, such saturation is not the purpose of this research. Therefore, constructivist GT was not deemed an appropriate analysis to use.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was also considered as a potential method, which focuses upon describing the lived and personal experiences of those within a particular phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2020a; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). IPA takes an idiographic focus, which entails centring on the unique details of each participant and goes deep into each participant's transcript before looking to develop themes across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). Within IPA, a focus can be taken towards the specific language used, including particular attention to the use of metaphors and pronouns, to reflect feelings and meaning (Smith et al., 2009). This consideration of language can be seen to bear some similarities with a Discourse Analysis approach (Willig, 2015). However, such a focus is not necessary in order to fulfil the purpose of this research.

3.5. Rationale for Reflexive TA

Reflexive TA was selected due to its compatibility with the research's theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, Reflexive TA also fits with the aim of the research to explore patterns and differences

within the perceptions gathered from participants towards a certain topic, which in the case of this research, centres around SNS use, social comparisons and self-presentation (Braun et al., 2016).

It was particularly challenging to assess which approach would be most appropriate between TA or IPA, due to similarities in aspects of their approach. However, Reflexive TA was ultimately selected as this research does not solely focus on individual narratives, which IPA facilitates. But rather looks to explore individuals' perspectives across the data set, whilst also acknowledging the wider socio-cultural context an individual's experiences of SNS use are situated within (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). Furthermore, as the developed RQs are not idiographic or based around language, Reflexive TA is a suitable approach over the use of IPA (Clarke et al., 2015).

3.6. Recruitment

The first step of the recruitment process was to seek agreement from a school to possibly take part in the research. Initial interest was gained through outlining the study during a planning meeting with suitable schools, as part of my role within the Local Authority as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (EP). During this meeting with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) a brief verbal summary of the research was presented and if schools expressed an interest, more detailed information sheets were circulated (Appendix I). Additionally, emails were sent to a number of potential schools within the Local Authority containing information relating to the study. A suitable school was deemed to be a mainstream setting that provided education to girls in year 8, aged between 12 and 13 years.

A number of measures were put in place to ensure my role as a Trainee EP and practitioner within the Local Authority remained distinct from my role as a researcher. This was through ensuring any possible participants had not previously, or were not currently involved with the Educational Psychology Service. It was also expressed to schools prior to agreeing to take part, that the research was separate from the work from the Educational Psychology Service within their school. This was in order to ensure the avoidance of a conflict of interest.

Initial attempts to recruit schools led to a number of further enquiries, however, due to extraneous factors including school capacity as a result of the ongoing COVID19 pandemic, several schools expressed they were unable to take part. The next stage of the recruitment process, which entailed sampling participants, took place within one school which expressed an interest in partaking.

When using Reflexive TA sampling procedures are not prescribed, as the analytic approach can be applied to differing methods (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Within this study, purposive sampling was

initially used to ensure participants were closely linked to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015), that is female early adolescents. It was decided a sample would be gathered from those currently in year 8 within a mainstream school. Within this year group, pupils will be aged between 12 and 13 years which Erikson (1968) outlines to be the start of adolescence, alongside being a key point of identity formation. Furthermore, it was important to explore SNS experiences for younger adolescence due to their high engagement levels, but the majority of research focuses upon an older adolescent demographic.

Students who identify as female were also selected, where gender identity can be seen to refer to an individual's sense of whether they identify as male, female, both or neither (Yavuz, 2016). The selection of females within the sample was following research completed by Gray (2018), that females attending secondary school were more likely to use SNS to share or comment on photos and updates of either theirs or others' posts. This was in contrast to boys who were found to engage in more playing of games. This 'self-disclosing' of information may impact upon an individual's identity and will be valuable to explore further. Furthermore, it was important to interview adolescents themselves. This was in order to enable adolescents to provide their voice towards interpretations of their own experiences of what occurs in their lives, rather than relying on adult interpretations (Eder & Fingerson, 2001).

Within this broader sample of female early adolescents, a process of 'opportunity sampling' was then utilised, where the opportunity to take part in the research was offered to all year 8 pupils who identify as female within the school setting. This was to reduce the level of possible bias in purposively selecting particular pupils to take part. Although by seeking volunteers, participants who wish to take part may present with a particular view towards SNS and those with negative experiences may not volunteer to discuss their views further.

The opportunity to take part was offered to all year 8 girls during an assembly, where I spoke to the whole year group. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, this was through virtual means and it was hoped providing information verbally may have been a more engaging format than an information sheet. The assembly comprised of summarising the study, its rationale and what it would entail for participants. This was in addition to touching on the concept of confidentiality and the value of participant views. During the assembly, there was the opportunity to raise questions and if interested, individuals received a parental consent letter and information sheet (Appendix J and K). Completed parental consent letters were returned to school and these individuals formed the sample of the study.

3.6.1. Sample size in qualitative research

Many qualitative studies aim to achieve 'data saturation', where no new information is drawn from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019b; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within qualitative research recommendations of sample sizes between 6 and 16 interviews have been outlined to provide a level of data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2019b; Guest et al., 2006). However, there is debate centring around data saturation and how the creation of a theory may not be useful to apply to all qualitative approaches (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

The notion of 'no new information' arising from the data can be seen to align itself with more positivist principles and a realist stance (Braun & Clarke, 2019b; Sim et al., 2018) therefore, positivists believe there is a single truth to discover (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Whereas, this research takes a social constructionist and relativist viewpoint and thus there can always be new and evolving theoretical insights for as long as data is gathered and analysed. This is due to the interpretation required to generate meaning from data and therefore there can always be the potential for new understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019b; Low, 2019; Mason, 2010). Furthermore, as each participant is unique, data can never truly reach saturation, instead there is a continuous stream of new things to explore (Wray et al., 2007). The epistemological stance guides the approach to sample size and therefore, achieving data saturation is not the aim of this study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

In addition, although theoretical saturation may lead to generalisation (Boddy, 2016), within this study a greater focus will be on the depth of participant's thoughts and views. As a result, findings will not be generalisable to the wider population such as all adolescents, but instead will provide an insight into the experiences of that particular group.

Furthermore, a small sample within qualitative research is required which enables full immersion within the data, alongside a meaningful and timely analysis (Boddy, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, the sample size was also restricted by the time and resources available (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Within this research it was provisionally outlined to gather data from a sample of 8 to 10 participants, to gain greater depth into the topic. However, due to the time scales of the doctoral thesis process alongside other factors such as school capacity whilst managing the COVID19 pandemic, a more pragmatic approach to sampling was required.

This led to a final sample size of six participants, in addition to a further participant taking part in a pilot interview (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). This aligns with Braun et al. (2016) who outline the completion of six interviews is the minimum sample for TA.

3.6.2. Sample characteristics

Within a constructionist paradigm, it is imperative to provide information relating to participants' background and the context in which they are being studied (Mertens, 2015). However, it was also important to ensure participant confidentiality remains and the contextual information provided does not enable the identification of those taking part.

Parental consent was gathered from seven participants and interviews were completed with all. However, the first interview conducted formed a Pilot interview and this data was not included within the final data set. Therefore, the final sample comprised of six girls all attending year 8 within a mainstream middle school, located within the Midlands. All participants were aged between 12 and 13 years. Five of these girls were White British, however, the ethnicity of one participant will not be disclosed in order to prevent identification.

The school is located within a semi-rural village where most pupils are considered to be from White British backgrounds. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils within the school supported by Pupil Premium, in addition to those presenting with special educational needs, are both deemed to be below the national average. This is as reported within the school's latest Ofsted report.

Working with a year 8 sample was also selected as it was hypothesised students would be more settled into their school setting. This was as opposed to those in year 7 where a recent transition into secondary school may have potentially impacted upon participants' experiences of SNS. This is in addition to identity formation being a period of possibly greater importance, due to this transition. However, as a result of participants being gathered from a Middle School the sample therefore had not recently experienced this significant transition.

Participants were also using SNS on a 'frequent basis', this was outlined by Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) as spending at least two hours a day on SNS. This was assessed through a self-report basis and stated to participants, during the recruitment process.

It could be suggested the sample may be homogenous to a certain extent, as those taking part will be similarly aged, all identify as female and engage in SNS use. Furthermore, by attending the same school participants will have a degree of shared experiences, due to experiencing the same systemic factors within the school.

3.7. Data collection

3.7.1. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, due to their ability to explore concepts to a greater depth, as opposed to methods such as questionnaires (Cohen et al., 2018). Interviews are described as an interchange of views to enable participants to talk about their perspectives (Kvale, 2007) and provide rich responses, in their own words (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Within this research a semi-structured approach to interviewing was selected, which involves the use of a preprepared interview guide. This guide comprised of a number of open-ended questions, where participants can raise what is important to them. This is in contrast with a more standardised interview approach, which was not selected due to the limited responses it elicits (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews can be seen to closely align with the philosophical standpoint adopted within the research, where I as the researcher play an active role, co-constructing meaning with participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is however important to recognise the information gathered within these interviews are experiences and meaning captured at that particular time and can be seen to be "moments in shifting life contexts" (Braun & Clarke, 2021: 27). This therefore can once again be related to the social constructionism paradigm the research is situated within (Burr, 2015).

Interviews were completed on an individual basis, as opposed to the use of focus groups. Group interviews can be seen to have a number of advantages, including the reduction in potential power dynamics, as pupils can outnumber the adult researcher, alongside focus groups possibly producing more accurate accounts, as participants are led to defend their statements in front of peers (Eder & Fingerson, 2001). In addition, focus groups can perhaps be less intimidating for adolescents, as experiences can be shared with others (Cohen et al., 2018). However, group interviews can also limit the sharing of personal information. This may be due to participants feeling exposed or vulnerable if discussing sensitive topics in front of peers (Adams, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018). Eder and Fingerson (2001) further highlight the value of individual interviews with adolescents for sensitive matters, as individuals may provide differing answers when in a group and participants within Eder and Fingerson's (2001) research were found to value the opportunity to speak on a one-to-one basis.

Therefore, it was felt discussions of feelings associated with SNS use, alongside identity and self-presentation should be treated sensitively and thus better explored within individual interviews. However, the lack of anonymity within individual interviews may be off-putting for some

adolescents to share personal information with an unfamiliar researcher. Attempts to reduce this could be seen through efforts to build rapport.

3.7.2. Development of interview guide

An interview guide is a script that structures the course of the interview to a certain extent (Kvale, 2007). An initial version of the interview schedule used during the pilot interview can be found in Appendix L. Following the completion of this pilot with a similarly aged pupil, the guide was subsequently amended and the final version can be found in Appendix M. The schedule comprises of a series of open-ended questions to enable participants' views to surface (Mertens, 2015). Further discussions regarding schedule amendments are outlined within Section 3.7.5.

Probes were used to encourage participants to elaborate their responses and gain justifications for their answers (Adams, 2015). Probes may include confirmatory probes, such as ensuring the interviewer understands the information provided by the participant, which was especially helpful in determining SNS terminology and also expansive probes which involved seeking further details from participants (Priede et al., 2014). Probes may also be less intrusive, such as pausing to encourage the participant to expand their response or making an 'mm' sound to display close attention (Cohen et al., 2018).

A series of prompts were also utilised and included asking for specific examples, clarification of details, or perhaps exploring a particular area in more depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Such clarification questioning can contribute to a level of member checking, to ensure an accurate understanding of the participant's perspective was gained (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The sequencing of questioning was important to consider within the interview guide. Early questions could be seen to be less probing, such as a discussion of the SNS platforms participants use, before then progressing onto potentially more personal questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Starting with general questions will contribute to rapport building and putting the participant at ease within the interview context.

Gaining a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the field from the literature review was useful to inform a number of interview questions (Kvale, 2007). For example, question 4 of the interview schedule (Appendix M) centres around the possible feelings an adolescent may experience when seeing another person's post on SNS, which can be linked to research and theories relating to social comparisons, such as Festinger (1954) and Smith (2000).

3.7.3. Interviewing adolescents

A number of additional considerations are required when interviewing adolescents. This involves the use of appropriate, clear language and using a familiar location for the interview (Morrison, 2013), which was a familiar school office. It is also important to consider my positionality as a researcher and the possible power dynamics this may elicit, which may then lead to participants providing answers which they perceive to be socially desirable. This could be reduced through the building of rapport and reminding participants within the interview brief that there were no 'correct answers'. This is in addition to also emphasising to participants the value in their perspectives alongside my own personal interest in learning about their views and experiences (Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Solberg, 2014).

Adams (2015) outlines one hour can be seen to be a maximum time for a semi-structured interview to take place, to reduce fatigue for those involved. However, this was in relation to interviewing an adult sample and therefore, further consideration should be taken to the participant's age and focus levels. Within this research, each interview lasted between 22 and 32 minutes, however, had the interviews exceeded 35 minutes participants would have been provided with a short break before recommencing the interview.

3.7.4. Implications of the COVID19 pandemic

Due to the COVID19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing rules I was unable to gather qualitative data through traditional face to face approaches and instead data collection was achieved through virtual means and the use of Microsoft Teams (Lobe et al., 2020). Microsoft Teams was selected due to being a familiar platform for both myself and the school setting. This was in addition to its use within the Local Authority, where the Local Authority's IT department promoted the security of the platform, compared with alternative video conferencing tools such as Zoom (Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP), 2020). Furthermore, internet quality was sufficient in order to support the completion of the interviews and did not appear to impact the discussion (Lobe et al., 2020).

It was initially intended interviews would take place in person where rapport could be quickly developed, alongside possibly being able to have a greater awareness of participant nonverbal cues. Such cues, including body language are essential aspects of developing rapport and trust (AEP, 2020) and this is more challenging to consider when interviewing online. Furthermore, it could be argued a richer insight into a participant's responses can be derived through a live interview scenario, where facial and bodily expressions accompany verbal responses (Kvale, 2007) and this may be an aspect

that is partly impaired when interviewed over virtual means. However, had the interviews taken place in person, personal protective equipment (PPE) including a face covering would have been worn, which may also have significantly impacted upon the interview dynamics.

Collecting information through 'face to face' means has been outlined as the 'gold standard' to complete interviews, with virtual approaches seen to be a 'poor' substitute (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Novick, 2008). However virtual interviews, held over videoconferencing platforms, can be seen to be an alternative when in person interviews cannot take place (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Lobe et al., 2020; McCoyd & Schwaber Kerson, 2006).

Through completing the interviews virtually, my control over the environmental setting was decreased, however through liaising with the school staff an appropriate private space was found (Lobe et al., 2020).

3.7.5. Pilot and subsequent amendments

The initial interview guide (Appendix L) was piloted with an individual taken from the intended sample, in order to further refine the questions and ensure appropriate data is generated (Adams, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2015). This pilot study had the potential of being used within the final data set however, due to the significant amendments made to the interview guide as a result of the pilot, this data was not included for reasons of comparability between participants.

Upon reflecting on the pilot, a number of changes were made (Appendix M) including condensing overlapping questions and increasing the clarity of the language used (Adams, 2015). Furthermore, additional changes included writing the questions on PowerPoint slides which can then be shared with participants during the interview (Appendix N). This was to support participant understanding and reduce possible anxiety, as individuals can easily refer back to the question. A number of visual cues were also included within the interview slides, such as a selection of possible SNS platforms, which participants may engage with. This was alongside an illustration of a range of facial expressions, to support the participant's thinking. No language was included within this illustration, to support interpretation.

It could be argued, the amended interview schedule, adopted a 'standardised open-ended interview' format (Patton, 2015), due to the use of the slides which ensured the exact wording and sequencing of questions were predetermined beforehand. As a result, participants answered the same questions and therefore leads to great comparability between responses (Patton, 2015). However, elements of a semi-structured interview are also still present as a number of follow up prompts and probes were

utilised, which therefore leads to differing explorations tailored to each individual participant (Cohen et al., 2018).

Following the changes to the interview guide, the newly developed questions were trialled and discussed with a colleague, prior to use within the sample.

3.8. Procedure

At the start of each interview, participants were briefed on the research topic, purpose and what it would entail, alongside having another opportunity to ask questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This was through the sharing of the Child Information Sheet (Appendix O), which also covered the concepts of confidentiality and the participant's right to stop the interview at any point. Confidentiality was important to highlight, as this may evoke more candid responses (Adams, 2015). Participants also completed an online 'Active Participation Form' to further confirm their agreement to take part (Appendix P). This was then followed by a rapport building exercise.

The opening few minutes of an interview can be seen to be pivotal, as interviewees must feel comfortable to discuss their feelings with someone unknown, in order to ensure rich data and thus, the development of rapport should be a priority (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kvale, 2007). Building rapport is also imperative to reduce potential power dynamics within the interview scenario, as Braun and Clarke (2013) highlight the possibility of a typically hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Within this interview rapport was developed through the use of a sentence starter activity (Appendix Q), which comprised of a variety of topics not related to the research topic, to elicit general conversation. These conversation starters can be seen to start a comfortable discussion and put participants at ease within the situation (Adams, 2015).

After the rapport building activity, participants were then shown a definition of SNS, which was referred to as 'social media' to aid participant understanding (Appendix Q). Participants then confirmed they were happy to start the interview and were notified the audio recording would commence (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The audio recording was necessary to capture the detail of responses (Mertens, 2015), two approaches were used simultaneously to audio record the interview; using a Dictaphone and the computer audio recording software 'Audacity'. This is a computer programme which can record audio and therefore provided a 'back-up' version of the audio files in addition to the Dictaphone. Participants and parents understood and agreed to this audio recording. By recording the interviews, it was possible to adopt a more engaged role within the interview by asking follow up questions, as opposed to focusing on ensuring accurate written notes were captured (Adams, 2015).

Putting participants at ease continued throughout the interview through attentive listening and an unconditional positive regard for what the participant shares (Kvale, 2007; Wilkins, 2000). This was in addition to considering my vocal tone, in order to adopt a conversational approach which would further place the participant at ease, alongside a calm, non-reactive demeanour (Adams, 2015).

It was important to close the interview by providing the participant with the opportunity to add any further information or ask questions (Kvale, 2007). This was then followed by reminding participants of their right to withdraw, alongside sharing the debrief document, which included the signposting to follow up support, if necessary (Appendix R).

Following the completion of the interviews, audio recordings were subsequently transcribed. Although transcriptions enable subsequent analysis, when converting verbal information to written formats there is inevitably a certain degree of loss relating to the detail in the original audio, as the audio is decontextualised from the social, dynamic form (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018). Immediately following the transcription, the data underwent a 'cleaning up' process where hesitations and immediate repetitions of words within the participant's speech were removed (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 251).

3.9. Data analysis

As noted earlier, Reflexive TA was selected as the method and therefore data analysis will be completed in accordance with the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). However, the labels of each stage are taken from Braun and Clarke (2020b) to reflect the most recent reconceptualisation of the approach. These steps will now be presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. A table summarising the six steps of Reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87, 2020b: 4).

	Stage	Description of Process
1	Data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes	Transcription of data, reading through transcripts multiple times and noting down initial ideas.
2	Systemic data coding	Coding features of the data using a systematic approach across the entire data set.
3	Generating initial themes from coded and collated data	Collating codes into possible themes and gathering relevant data for each potential theme.
4	Developing and reviewing themes	Check to ensure themes work in relation to coded extracts of transcripts and the entire data set. The generation of a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5	Refining, defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells. Generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6	Writing the report	Entails the selection of vivid extract examples and relating the analysis to the RQs and literature.

Despite the stages appearing in a linear process, Braun and Clarke (2020b) emphasise the risk of the process being prescriptive. The method should adopt an iterative process with a continuous level of reflection, which includes an awareness of the conscious choices being made, alongside a moving backwards and forwards throughout the phases of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2017).

Each stage of analysis will now be discussed in relation to this research.

3.9.1. TA Stage 1

A process of data familiarisation was firstly completed, which involved reading the transcripts multiple times, in addition to listening to the accompanying audio recordings. This was in order to gain a full immersion of the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

A series of questions outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013: 205) were utilised during this process, including considering how the participant is making sense of their experiences and why this may be. This was alongside noting down my initial feelings and reactions to the data which contributes to the reflexivity, a necessary aspect of the analysis process.

An example of notes made during this familiarisation stage can be found in Appendix S.

3.9.2. TA Stage 2

A coded extract of a transcript can be found in Appendix T and differing types of codes were utilised to explore meaning from the data at both a semantic and latent level. Semantic coding identifies the overt meaning explicitly stated in the data (Clarke et al., 2015) whereas, latent coding involves exploring the more implicit and underlying meaning expressed by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2020b).

For example, within the transcript included in Appendix T, when asked about the consideration taken prior to posting online, participant Freya (1.70) stated, *"I was just thinking about, would they like it. Not me, it doesn't matter if I like it, it's what they like".* Such a quote was coded semantically, with the code 'significant value placed on audience perception', which directly reflects the meaning within the data, as Freya places the views of the audience above her own. A latent code was also applied to this extract which comprised of the code 'seeking acceptance from audience'. This seeking of acceptance can be inferred from the quote through Freya considering what the audience will like, so that her post is perceived positively and subsequently accepted by peers.

It was imperative to engage with multiple cycles of coding, to reflect the possible changing nature of codes to best capture meaning and support the generation of latent codes (Clarke et al., 2015). Coding was completed systematically across the entire data set, giving each section of the transcript an equal focus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also recorded my own reflexive thoughts, which arose during this process and these were noted directly next to the codes, as part of the continuous process of questioning the data and assumptions I may make (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). This included my emotional responses, such as a feeling of sadness regarding the extent Freya dismisses her own views, due to the value placed on the views held by others.

The detailed coding process using both semantic and latent codes led to an extremely large number of generated codes. Although Clarke et al. (2015) state there is no limit on the number of developed codes, a significant collapsing procedure took place, where similar codes were re-coded using a broader, more encompassing term (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This was completed both within and across transcripts, leading to a degree of consistency across the data set, in the use of codes that capture the same meaning. Examples of collapsed codes are presented in Appendix U. The computerised coding programme of NVivo 12 was utilised to assist in the collapsing of similar codes, where codes with overlapping meanings could be grouped.

Interrater coding was not completed within this research, due to Reflexive TA's emphasis on my own level of engagement towards data analysis on an individual basis, rather than achieving a consensus between coders (Braun & Clarke, 2019a).

The remaining codes were reviewed against the transcripts to ensure codes reflected the original meaning. Such a process highlights the ongoing and iterative nature of the analysis, which was necessary prior to moving onto Stage 3 of Reflexive TA.

A single, overarching TA was completed for both RQs simultaneously. This was as opposed to analysing the data in relation to the first RQ, before then re-coding the data for the second RQ. This approach to the analysis was chosen, due to the overlapping nature and closely associated topics.

3.9.3. TA Stage 3

Stage 3 involves developing themes from codes that represents a pattern of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2020a). Each theme and subtheme consist of a core concept that underpins the codes which contribute to a particular theme (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

In order to generate initial themes each individual code was recorded on a series of post-it notes, which were continuously moved and grouped to identify patterns of meaning across the data set. Themes were rearranged to reduce the degree of overlap between each meaning and an example of this stage is presented within Appendix V.

It is important to note the slight change within Stage 3 of the Reflexive TA approach, compared to Braun and Clarke's (2006) original paper. This stage was originally outlined as "searching for themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 89), however is now referred to as "generating initial themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2020b: 16). This is in order to emphasise themes are actively constructed by myself, the researcher, as opposed to passively emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019a).

This active role in the generation of meaning and knowledge can be associated with the interpretivist epistemology the research is situated within. This active construction of knowledge is a subjective interpretation of the data and interpretation is a key aspect of the TA approach. Within the analysis interpretation can be seen through the latent coding of data and generation of themes, alongside further interpretation within Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis (Braun & Clarke, 2020b). My active role within the analysis can also be seen through the theoretical and disciplinary knowledge I bring, which also contributed to the development of themes (Clarke et al., 2015)

The data can also be explored at an inductive or deductive level, inductive exploration relates to an analysis where themes strongly relate to the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereas, a deductive approach provides a lens for data analysis and interpretation through a theoretical, "top down" approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006:83; 2020b; Clarke et al., 2015). Within Reflective TA, decisions regarding the coding at a sematic or latent level and adopting an inductive or deductive approach do not have to be dichotomous and provide a greater level of understanding into the field (Braun & Clarke, 2019a, 2020b; Braun et al., 2016; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Therefore, the codes utilised are at both a semantic and latent level, alongside exploring meaning both inductively and deductively.

A deductive stance is adopted for RQ2, which explores the type of social comparisons made by participants when on SNS and the possible influence on their self-presentation. Smith's (2000) theoretical framework, which categorises differing types of comparisons and was first outlined in Chapter 1 was applied to the analysis in order to organise and generate meaning from the data.

During this stage, data was also collated where excerpts corresponding to possible themes were gathered. This table can be found in Appendix W (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.9.4. TA Stage 4

Further cycles of reorganising the hierarchy of themes and subthemes continued throughout Stage 4. This was followed by reviewing the generated themes both within and across the entire data set, which involved returning to the original transcripts to ensure extracts align with themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013).

Within this stage, two thematic maps representing the overall conceptualisation of the data patterns and links between the themes for each RQ were developed and can be found in Section 4.2 and 4.3 (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.9.5. TA Stage 5

It was imperative to ensure each theme adopted a central organising concept which underpins the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Such concepts were important to capture when naming each theme and subtheme to ensure titles were explanatory, as opposed to simply describing a particular feature of the data. This was the case for Theme 2, 'The importance of audience perception for early adolescents'. This theme was initially labelled 'audience perception' which perhaps is simply describing the feature of the data, as opposed to explaining the theme in relation to the RQ. The names of themes underwent a series of cycles of reviews and changes to ensure the developed names were accurate to the meaning.

3.9.6. TA Stage 6

The final stage outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) relates to the writing of the research findings. Results are presented within Chapter 4, before being applied to the current context and existing literature within Chapter 5.

3.10. Ethical considerations

A number of considerations are made within this study, in accordance with ethical research codes published by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2002, 2014, 2018), AEP (2020) and Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC) (2016). The ethics application for this research can be found in Appendix X and approval was gained from the University of Nottingham in July 2020 (Appendix Y).

3.10.1. Consent

Multiple forms of consent were gathered throughout the research process. Parental consent was firstly gained through the returning of signed parental consent forms (Appendix K). This was then followed up with a telephone call to parents, in order to introduce myself and provide an opportunity for questions.

Written consent was also gathered from those individuals who had returned parental consent forms. This was collected by the SENCO, as participants may possibly feel less pressure to provide their consent without the presence of myself, the researcher (Appendix Z). Further consent was also gained from individuals through their completion of an 'Active Participation' form, immediately before starting the interview. This was to ensure participants understood the interview would be audio recorded and they could stop the interview at any time.

Consent can be seen to be informed through the information provided during the recruitment process and the information sheet which accompanied the parental consent form. This was in addition to sharing the Child Information Sheet (Appendix O), prior to commencing the interview. Participants also had multiple opportunities to ask questions.

3.10.2. Risk to participants

Due to the potential sensitivity of the topics being discussed, participants may feel a level of unease upon completing the interview due to sharing their personal experiences. This sharing may have potentially provoked an emotional response (Kvale, 2007), as such interpretive research can be seen to be more open ended and intimate than scientific research (Scotland, 2012). In order to account for this the debrief process included signposting to possible support services (Appendix R). Furthermore, it was also arranged with the school that the SENCO would 'check in' with each participant during the week immediately following their interview. This informal chat was to ensure participants still felt happy about taking part, if any other questions had arisen, or further support was required.

It was important to ensure participants felt able to share their feelings within the interview and therefore, confidentiality and anonymity of responses was assured. However, participants were also made aware if they were to disclose information that may put themselves or others at risk this would be passed onto the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead, alongside following safeguarding procedures within the Local Authority Educational Psychology Service.

The ethical responsibility researchers possess was also highlighted in relation to protecting the anonymity of participants and therefore, certain quotes or extracts taken from transcripts may have been edited, to protect the identity of participants (Scotland, 2012).

Furthermore, during the interview participants were provided with the visual symbol of a 'pause button' which they could hold up during the interview if they felt they needed a break, or perhaps did not want to continue with the interview.

3.10.3. Virtual interview ethical considerations

Due to interviews taking place over a virtual platform, it was imperative to have an enhanced awareness of possible associated ethical considerations.

Parents were informed interviews would likely be taking place through virtual means within the Parent Information Sheet, prior to completing the consent form (AEP, 2020). Interviews were also

completed away from my own household to ensure confidentiality (AEP, 2020). Furthermore, as in line with the AEP's guidance on working virtually with children and young people, regular feedback was sought from the participants to check they felt happy to continue (AEP, 2020).

3.11. Quality evaluation of research

Many of the common criticisms regarding the use of qualitative research relate to the subjective nature of the results, alongside how findings cannot be generalised to wider settings (Cope, 2014). However, such concepts of generalisability and objectivity are unattainable for qualitative research (Yardley, 2015, 2017), which recognises knowledge is significantly shaped by the researcher's cultural and subjective perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Yardley, 2000). Furthermore, studies situated within a positivist stance seek to attain levels of validity, reliability and replicability of findings. However, this can also be seen to be inappropriate within a qualitative paradigm, as the research is offering one interpretation into a phenomenon, of which there can be many constructions of meaning (Kvale, 2007; Yardley, 2000).

Although validity is often associated with quantitative research, Yardley (2015) suggests validity should also be achieved within a qualitative study, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. This is also to ensure the research shows what it is claiming to (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and highlights the generation of valuable findings (Yardley, 2015). A series of principles developed by Yardley (2000, 2017) were adhered to within this study, to ensure validity within qualitative research. These principles were chosen due to their open and flexible nature (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and ability to be applied to different qualitative research methods.

Yardley's (2000, 2017) four principles comprise of:

- Sensitivity to context

- Commitment and rigour

- Transparency and coherence

- Impact and importance

Sensitivity towards context is provided through the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, outlined in Chapter 1, which contextualises this research. Such literature enables the development of RQs which address a gap in the understanding of a topic (Yardley, 2015). Sensitivity was also shown towards the socio-cultural context for those participating, through considering the possible

power dynamics within the interview setting and use of open-ended questions to encourage participants to raise topics that are important to them (Yardley, 2015).

Within this research, commitment and rigour can be seen through methodological competence and depth of analysis. The checklist developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), outlining the 15 points necessary to ensure a high-quality Reflexive TA was adhered to (Appendix AA). This was in order to ensure commitment to the selected method and analysis. Rigour can be seen through the completion of a pilot interview, which was used to assess the suitability of the interview guide (Clarke et al., 2015).

Coherence and transparency relate to if the research makes sense as a consistent whole, through the clarity of the presented argument. This can be enhanced by ensuring the methodology and analysis is suitable for the RQ (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Yardley, 2000). Transparency is another valuable aspect where justifications underpinning decisions are clearly communicated. Within this research, transparency can be seen through providing sufficient detail of the selected method, as outlined in Section 3.9. Furthermore, the analysis's accompanying paper trail, where the journey of analysing data and generating themes can be observed, is located in Appendix W (Yardley, 2015).

Impact and importance are outlined as the final core principle for assessing validity within qualitative research (Yardley, 2015) and "can only be assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the application it was intended for, and the community for whom the results were deemed relevant" (Yardley, 2000: 223). Within this research, wider implications of findings and the practical impact for certain groups will be outlined within the Discussion in Chapter 5.

Many quantitative studies aim for generalisability in their results, however, to generalise findings to a wider population makes the assumption of a universal knowledge that can be applied to all and there is a single truth. This therefore, does not align with a social constructionist paradigm, where knowledge is socially contextualised. As a result, findings taken from interviews can be seen to be possibly transferred to other relevant and similar situations, rather than generalised more widely (Kvale, 2007). In order to support this transferability, descriptions of the sample and context are provided within Section 3.6.2. This is to enable the audience to assess if findings can be transferred to other similar cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The quality of the research will be revisited within Section 5.6, in relation to the overall evaluation of the study.

As discussed in Section 3.9.2, the data analysis comprised of coding the data and transcripts at both a semantic and latent level. However, the use and categorisation of such codes could also be subject to interpretation, as to what is considered to be a latent or semantic code. This may therefore

impact upon the overall trustworthiness of the data analysis and the degree of confidence in the data and interpretation (Connelly, 2016). However, the level of transparency presented within this research, including Appendix W, which comprises of a full account of the codes used within the analysis, is provided to reduce the possible impact of this as the audience can see the analytical decisions being made.

3.12. Summary of chapter

The research is positioned within a qualitative paradigm that also draws upon social constructionist theory. This philosophical standpoint goes on to guide the research approach and selected method of Reflexive TA. Details regarding the analysis process are outlined to enhance transparency, alongside information relating to the sample, to inform the audience about the context within which the research occurred. The research's validity was also discussed, to ensure generated results are trustworthy and valuable (Yardley, 2015). The research findings will now be presented.

Chapter 4   Results

4.1. Introduction to chapter

Within this chapter the themes and corresponding subthemes generated through the Reflexive TA process are presented. Such themes highlight patterns that arise across the data set and therefore represent something that is psychologically or socially meaningful and subthemes capture a specific aspect of the central theme (Braun & Clarke, 2013:223).

Findings for RQ1 are firstly presented, before then outlining the results relating to the second RQ. An overview of these themes can be seen in Table 4.1 and 4.2.

A more detailed account which outlines each of the codes that form the themes and subthemes, alongside accompanying data extracts can be found in Appendix W. This is to ensure transparency within the process of analysis and subsequently enhance the research's validity (Yardley, 2017).

To ensure anonymity, all participants have been given pseudonyms, these comprise of; Freya, Ava, Chloe, Mia, Ruby and Ella. Themes are illustrated through the use of data excerpts taken from interview transcripts. Excepts are presented in italics and include the participant and section number of the transcript the quote originates from. In addition, within a number of the quotes, speech that is not deemed relevant to the code has been omitted and signalled through the use of '[…]'.

Generated themes are representative of the data gathered, with each of the subthemes being present in at least 4 of the transcripts. However, the majority of subthemes are present in 5 or 6 transcripts.

4.2. Research question 1

The first RQ is presented below. Three themes were developed with a total of 10 subthemes, as outlined in Table 4.1.

- What can be understood about the perceptions held by female early adolescents regarding their self-presentation online, through their experiences of SNS use?

Table 4.1. A table outlining the generated Themes and Subthemes which address RQ1.

Theme Name	Subtheme
1. Online self is a performance to the audience.	a. Self-presentation may differ, according to the audience.
	b. There is a caution with the extent of self that is shared.
	c. Sharing an enhanced version of themselves to others.
	d. SNS enables identity exploration.
2. The importance of audience perception for early adolescents.	a. Predicting the audience's perception.
	b. The need to fit in and conform to social expectations.
	c. Positive feedback from audience strengthens and reinforces aspects of self.
	d. Negative feedback from audience reduces frequency of self-presentation.
3. Actions to protect an individual's presentation of self online.	a. Protection from online risk.
	b. Protection of own self-concept.

In addition to Table 4.1, which outlines the generated themes and subthemes for RQ1, a thematic map was also developed. This map is presented in Figure 4.1 and highlights the associations between the themes and subthemes. Within the thematic map, themes are represented in blue boxes, with each of the corresponding subthemes surrounding within the orange boxes. In addition, solid blue lines highlight the links between themes, whereas the blue dotted lines display the links between subthemes.

Figure 4.1. A thematic map outlining Themes and Subthemes for RQ1.

D. SNS enables identity exploration.

C. Sharing an enhanced version of themselves to others.

B. The need to fit in and conform to social expectations.

A. Predicting the audience's perception.

B. There is a caution with the extent of self that is shared.

1. Online self is a performance to the audience.

2. The importance of audience perception for early adolescents.

C. Positive feedback from audience strengthens and reinforces aspects of self.

A. Self-presentation may differ, according to the audience.

3. Actions to protect an individual's self online.

D. Negative feedback from audience reduces frequency of self-presentation.

A. Protection from online risk.

B. Protection of own self-concept.

4.2.1. Theme 1: Online self is a performance to the audience

The first overall theme captures the notion that the self, in this case, presented by the early adolescents can be seen to be a performance where perhaps only certain aspects are shared. Those interviewed appeared to be acutely aware of the self they present to the audience and how this performance may differ from the individual's 'real' self, as highlighted by Ruby:

> *Like sometimes you may just act completely different to what you actually are, like sometimes you may be sad, but you'll be happy for the video (Ruby, 5.102)*

This quote outlines how an individual may perceive their online self as a performance, which can involve masking their emotions, or perhaps not sharing an accurate self-presentation online. This theme will be explored further within the 4 subthemes.

4.2.1.1. Theme 1, Subtheme A: Self-presentation may differ, according to the audience

When on SNS, individuals may be selective in the presentation of self they perform to others and this selectivity can be seen to be dependent on the audience who may be viewing their performance. Participants appeared to present a more accurate or 'real' self to a select audience, when online. This may be through the sharing of particular interests which the individual may not want the wider audience to see, or perhaps through reduced editing of their self-presentation prior to posting, as highlighted by Ella:

> *When I'm messaging my closest friends, I don't really care how I look when I send them a picture, I don't use a filter, and I don't really like take time into how I look when I'm messaging them […] if they're not that close and we just share the odd like message, I feel like I am a little bit different on social media, and I try and make sure that I look a certain way and make sure I've got a filter and stuff like that (Ella, 6.99)*

Ella's extract appears to outline how a more restricted performance of self is perhaps shown to those with who she is not as familiar with. It could be suggested those who are close to the individual are possibly more accepting of the unfiltered self being presented and therefore requires a lesser degree of consideration.

Although, Ella added thought is still required even when presenting herself to those she is close to. This therefore suggests Ella may be reluctant to show a completely 'true' self online. When asked the degree of thought behind her posts shared with close friends, Ella stated:

> *Erm, not as much because they're people that I'm close to, and not just like everyone, but I still do a little bit, yeah (Ella, 6.43)*

In addition, the performance emitted by an individual may also differ if the presentation of self is to the wider public. As explained by Mia below, for those individuals who post on a 'public' account, this entails your self-presentation being shown to a much larger, unfamiliar audience.

> *Public is where people who maybe you don't follow can see your post, […] like people*
> *everywhere can just see your videos because if they don't follow you, they can still see it*
> *(Mia, 4.46)*

This may therefore contribute to a more restricted self on these profiles, due to the unknown audience and possible far-reaching nature an individual's performance of self can have. As a result, the individual may also engage in further actions to protect their identity from internet risks, as outlined in greater detail within Theme 3, Subtheme A. This association is also displayed in Figure 4.1. The notion of sharing a more restricted presentation of self to those who are unknown was also reported by Ruby:

> *They don't want random people on the Internet to actually know about them, in a way, like*
> *know who they are, properly, in a way (Ruby, 5.90)*

Furthermore, in order to manage one's presentation of self to differing audiences, individuals can make use of multiple accounts within the same SNS platform. Ava and Mia, both had multiple accounts within the same platform and this can be seen to perhaps display a particular interest. Multiple accounts therefore, enable individuals to perform different aspects of their identity to different audiences.

> *Well, my main account, which is about all of my friends and family and the other one, is just*
> *photography work, art work and yeah (Ava, 2.17).*

> *Well, I have like 2 accounts on TikTok, one where I post my face and one isn't (Mia, 4.68)*

4.2.1.2. Theme 1, Subtheme B: There is a caution with the extent of self that is shared

Participants also appeared to speak about a degree of caution and thought in the extent of the performance that is shared with others, which therefore further emphasises the selective presentation online. This consideration appears to also reflect an apparent need for individuals to be in control of exactly the performance being emitted to the audience. This need is exemplified by Ruby below, where a post is removed to ensure the level of self-disclosure is not too great.

> *If I feel as though I have posted something that is too personal to myself, I will take it down,*
> *because I'll feel comfortable posting it and I'll come back like 5 minutes later and think, hang*

on I shouldn't have posted this, because it's too personal [...] like sometimes when you maybe are upset and you post a video about it, and then like, after a bit you feel, hang on why did I post this, because like I'm crying and I shouldn't have posted it in a way (Ruby, 5.125-5.127)

Like maybe if you do something really stupid, I don't know, just like I'm there messing around and being like really weird and then you look at it, you think it's funny, but then you look at it 5 minutes later when you've posted it and you're just kind of like, actually no, I don't want to keep this up, because I look really weird, and you take it down (Ruby, 5.135)

This thought underpinning the self being shared can be linked to the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1961), and the caution relating to what individuals place in the 'open' area, for all to see, compared to what remains in the 'hidden' area, known to the individual, but not the audience.

Furthermore, an individual may not share their full self with others, in order to ensure acceptance. This was highlighted by Mia, who outlines individuals may not share their emotions online:

Maybe because they don't want to share their emotions, or like maybe they think if they don't show themselves, because they might be disappointed in themselves (Mia, 4.60)

4.2.1.3. Theme 1, Subtheme C: Sharing an enhanced version of themself to others

Participants frequently spoke of ways to ensure the self they perform to the audience is an enhanced version of themselves. This was often through the use of picture editing tools and filters provided on the SNS platform, which were applied to a post prior to sharing online. The focus of editing was primarily to enhance an individual's own appearance, or alternatively to make their post more noticeable to others. Making their post noticeable was the aim for some participants, as an increased amount of feedback or views on a post was seen to be an indication of status and subsequent audience acceptance. The following quotes from Ava, Chloe and Ruby further highlight the desire to present an enhanced performance of self to others, when asked why they edit their posts before sharing:

I guess either to make myself look prettier, or to you know, just stuff like that (Ava, 2.41)

Just to make it like look a bit nicer and more interesting (Chloe, 3.76)

When like I present myself on social media, sometimes I'll just be myself, and sometimes I will actually try and like, not be different but [...] I'll try and look a bit better (Ruby, 5.86)

Appearance appeared to be the focus of editing, due to a desire by participants to enhance how they looked online.

Displaying an enhanced self may also include presenting an image of one's self that is either skilled or interesting. Presenting an interesting image of self may be through posting images with friends or on a day out, which can give the impression to the audience that the individual engages in interesting things. Presenting a skilled presentation of self may be through displaying photography or gaming skills as part of their posts, as shown by Mia:

> *Well, because I do photography, I've done that on Instagram and I also like theme parks like Alton Towers and I did some slow mos, so I'm just doing some nice photography stuff and things that I'm kind of proud of I'm doing, and posting it on there (Mia, 4.34)*

However, many are aware the presentation of self they perform differs from their offline self, as highlighted by Ella:

> *When I present myself on social media it's not really me because I try and like make sure that I look kind of almost perfect and in real life I don't always look like that (Ella, 6.89).*

4.2.1.4. Theme 1, Subtheme D: SNS enables identity exploration

Individuals are able to explore their identity whilst engaging with SNS, which can then also form part of the performance of self which participants choose to present to others. A consistent theme across many participants was the use of SNS to learn or develop skills. Different filters and photo editing can also support an individual's self-expression, through the use of varying editing tools to support different 'looks' an individual can adopt.

Furthermore, SNS enable participants to try out new things and enhance their skills, as outlined by Mia and Chloe:

> *On TikTok, people post like very different things, and you can try different things […] and they can inspire people to find out their hobbies and see what they enjoy (Chloe, 3.8)*

> *Normally when I go on like Instagram, because I like photography stuff on there, it pops up with some photography stuff and it kind of makes me want to try stuff out like that (Mia, 4.50)*

Therefore, participants perceive the use of SNS to support their identity exploration, which can then also form part of their self-presentation online.

However, Mia also highlighted she did not enjoy platforms which include posts that are seemingly 'random' and perhaps not related to her interests. This therefore may suggest how not all individuals

use SNS for identity exploration purposes and perhaps are more associated with the confirmation of one's identity and existing interests, rather than trying new things.

> *Pinterest, I did have it but I didn't really find it very interesting, you just like scroll through things and have a look at posts, most of them are quite random (Mia, 4.6)*

4.2.2. Theme 2: The importance of audience perception for early adolescents

The focus of the second theme is to highlight and explore the possible factor of audience perception, in relation to early adolescent self-presentation on SNS platforms and how the views of others can impact upon identity development.

4.2.2.1. Theme 2, Subtheme A: Predicting the audience's perception

A significant focus for participants relates to how the audience will perceive their self-presentation being shared online. For some participants they report a constant, ongoing judgement from the audience towards their presentation of self.

> *I was just thinking about, would they like it, would they like it. Not me, it doesn't matter if I like it, it's what they like (Freya 1.70).*

> *I'm like a person who cares what people think (Chloe, 3.102)*

> *I just feel like people, even if they don't comment stuff, I just feel that when they're looking at it, they might comment just to themselves, but not necessarily comment on the post, but just say it to themselves, like that I don't look right and they might look at something and be like why has she posted that (Ella, 6.91)*

Although interestingly, Mia stated she feels the audience do not judge her posts and therefore may possibly be more secure in her own identity.

> *I don't really get like judged much […] I look through the comments and I'm fine because I know it's my opinion and people have opinions (Mia, 4.50)*

Due to the value placed on audience perception, many of the participants reported spending time prior to posting hypothesising how the audience may view their self-presentation. This consideration of an audience's possible perception also continues even after posting online. Therefore, an individual is seemingly continuously thinking about how the audience may perceive their self-presentation. This hypothesising can be seen in the following data extracts:

I just think about what people would think about the post, like if they think it's nice, or a bit weird, or something (Chloe, 3.88)

Sometimes when I post something, I'll kind of like rethink it and be like what if people judge me for it in a way, so sometimes I end up deleting some videos that I posted (Ruby, 5.96)

Yes, sometimes if you're a bit too odd on it, like I'm a bit too odd on a video I'll take it down, because I feel like people may think that I'm just a really weird kind of person (Ruby, 5.133)

As a result, participants reported a fear of audience perception, as expressed by Ruby:

Sometimes it makes me feel a little bit sad […] or I'm scared, I'm a little bit worried that people aren't going to like it, or they're going to judge you for it (Ruby, 5.100)

Furthermore, it was also outlined participants may be consciously aware of how they interact on SNS. This may include monitoring the number of times they post and comment or perhaps asking permission before sharing a post which also includes peers. Such actions can be seen as attempts to not upset others and therefore, avoid a possible negative perception. In the excerpt below Chloe explains 'spamming', which is something she avoids in order to not annoy others:

It's just a feeling that if I post a lot, then I'll be like spamming or something […] like posting a bunch of pictures and always commenting on like people's pages […] so people will probably get annoyed with you (Chloe, 3.108 – 3.112)

This also highlights online self-presentation is not limited to the presentation of identity through posts, but rather can be seen to be more encompassing and can include SNS presence as a whole.

As part of the process of hypothesising audience perceptions, this leads to participants taking the time prior to sharing, to review their post and self-presentation. This is to ensure the individual's self-presentation will be received well and viewed positively by the audience.

Oh yeah, sometimes I do add like a filter and colours, and then I do like look back at it to see if it's alright to post and stuff (Chloe, 3.74)

So, I do take quite a lot of time […] to make sure everything looks alright, and the background looks alright (Ella, 6.53)

4.2.2.2. Theme 2, Subtheme B: The need to fit in and conform to social expectations

Seeking acceptance from the audience is a core aspect of this subtheme, where many participants, including Freya below, are wanting to be perceived positively by the audience.

I just thought, like if they like it then they'll accept me, if you get what I mean (Freya, 1.74)

Participants spoke of a pressure to emit a certain presentation online, in order to fit in with peers. This pressure can relate to looking a certain way, alongside the type of posts an individual engages with, as shown by the following extracts:

Sometimes it makes me feel like I need to do more of what they're doing, […] like if they're doing POVs, like a 'point of view', of like a story that they're telling, or something, like on TikTok, I feel like I should do that as well (Ava, 2.65)

When you just look and there's just celebrities and then people my age then look like them, […] it just puts a lot of pressure on a certain way and how you have to look (Ella, 6.19)

So there's quite a lot of trends on TikTok that you can do, like dancing ones and some challenges in a way and I just post stuff from like the trends on it (Mia, 4.20)

Mia highlights her engagement with 'trends' on SNS, which are perhaps important to engage with to fit in with peers and can feel separated from others, if not conforming with trends. It can also be tiring to continuously maintain the self-presentation required online, as exemplified by Ella:

I try to make everything look perfect, and it just got a little bit tiring when I wanted to post but I needed to make sure the background was nice, my hair was looking nice, and my outfit […] so that's probably why I don't post as much on TikTok (Ella, 6.83)

It's just a lot of pressure to look a certain way with all the followers, so sometimes I just can't really be bothered to take loads of pictures and decide which one looks nice and which ones don't (Ella. 6.14)

This need to be accepted by peers links to the importance of having social support during adolescence. Therefore, participants may try to fit in in order to ensure their self-presentation is accepted by the audience and subsequently gain a social network, which can support the individual. Peer acceptance is outlined by Freya:

It means like letting me in and being their friend and stuff, and I feel like if I post the wrong thing, I'm not going to be their friend anymore (Freya, 1.76)

4.2.2.3. Theme 2, Subtheme C: Positive feedback from audience strengthens and reinforces aspects of self

A consistent narrative across the data related to positive feedback reinforcing the presentation of self being shared online. Audience feedback may be through leaving comments or 'likes', and

participants report such feedback evokes positive feelings, due to their presentation being accepted by others. This subsequently leads to individuals wanting to present this particular self again and can be seen to therefore strengthen this self-presentation, as highlighted by Chloe and Mia:

> *It just tells you that people enjoy what you're posting […] it will just make you feel really good, and make you want to post more of that, whatever you've posted (Chloe, 3.114)*

> *Well, if it's good and like on my photography […] it makes me want to do it more, when I get good feedback from it (Mia, 4.44)*

This positive feedback often leads to an increase in the frequency of an individual posting online, possibly as they feel more comfortable sharing that aspect of their self, or perhaps to seek further positive feedback which subsequently makes an individual feel better about themselves and enhance their level of self-esteem. This may be a feeling they are seeking to experience again through posting more often. Positive feedback can also evoke a range of positive emotions from an individual, including feeling happy or calm. This is perhaps due to feedback which can indicate acceptance from the audience, as outlined by Freya:

> *On Instagram […] I normally just get positive comments, so that makes me feel a little bit better about myself (Ella, 6.51)*

> *When someone gives me feedback, saying 'oh this is great' and stuff, it makes me feel calm again, that there is actually someone that likes it (Freya, 1.100)*

This enhanced level of self-esteem, as a result of feedback received, may then further strengthen aspects of an individual's self-presentation. This may be due to feeling more confident in presenting that particular presentation of self to others, as participants know it is more likely to be received positively by the audience.

Positive feedback may also involve the audience engaging in an upward comparison against the participant, as exemplified in Ava's quote below. Such feedback is likely to then further strengthen the photography aspect of Ava's identity, as others admire the skills Ava presents with.

> *Well, with my photography work, they say all my photos are good, and they really like them and they wish that they could do it as good as me (Ava, 2.53)*

Just as positive feedback from the audience can strengthen aspects of an individual's identity, alongside increasing the frequency of posts on SNS, negative feedback can lead to upset and a reduction in future posts of online self-presentation. Many participants reported they had not directly experienced negative feedback on SNS, although a small number had and were able to share their experiences.

> *If you have like bad feedback [...] I would feel like I shouldn't post anymore (Chloe, 3.98)*

> *It did make me feel quite upset and quite, just like angry as well, a little bit (Ella, 6.65)*

This subtheme also includes the notion of participants wanting to avoid the possibility of negative feedback and how this may be of greater importance than receiving positive feedback. This can therefore link to the fear of possible negative judgement, as outlined within Theme 2, Subtheme A.

> *On TikTok, I don't really get that many comments because I try and make everything so no one can comment on anything, so I don't really get any comments on that (Ella, 6.51)*

In addition, Freya spoke of the anger and annoyance she felt towards herself, perhaps at her misjudgement that she felt a post was acceptable to share with the audience.

> *If it's like quite bad feedback, which I have had in the past, it just makes me feel really annoyed with myself that I put it up (Freya, 1.88)*

> *Because when I kept thinking, 'should I post it, or not', it just makes me feel annoyed and angry at myself that I did eventually post it (Freya, 1.94)*

Therefore, such negative feedback can possibly impact on an individual's self-perception through perhaps not having the confidence to share one's self with others. This is alongside also possibly having a negative perception of self, as a result of the feedback received.

4.2.3. Theme 3: Actions to protect an individual's self online

This theme aims to capture those actions, highlighted by individuals, which support the protection of their own self-presentation when engaging with SNS platforms. These actions can be further grouped according to the nature of the actions, as outlined within the following two subthemes.

Many of the adolescents participating displayed a certain level of awareness regarding online safety and the possible risks they may be exposed to when engaging with SNS. Such risks can involve the disclosure of personal, identifying information, alongside 'fake' accounts, as highlighted by Ava:

> *Well, sometimes [….] you can't see their face, so they could be acting like they're like a 9-year-old child, when it could be like a 45-year-old man (Ava 2.69)*

Participants outlined a number of actions they engage with to reduce these possible risks. This may involve ensuring a participant's identity cannot be identified, such as through their name or school, alongside also sharing this advice with peers.

> *You don't put your username as your name, so like you just put a random name (Chloe 3.46)*

> *Um, well when I'm on it, I don't post things really about me, but some of my friends do and I tell them not to, and they post maybe their uniform on there sometimes. But I do say to them to blur it out. Because I get quite cautious, because we've been learning, all my life at school, we've learned a lot about cyber bullying and people finding out too much information about you, so I'm quite cautious (Mia 4.79)*

Such caution can be seen to be associated with Theme 1, Subtheme B, and the restrictions on the self being performed online to others, as also highlighted in Figure 4.1.

4.2.3.2. Theme 3, Subtheme B: Protection of own self-concept

An individual may also engage in several actions, to protect their own self-concept. Some participants spoke of using the captions which accompany a post on SNS, perhaps in order to 'save face' and protect their own feelings of self-worth, as illustrated by the following two extracts:

> *I posted my opinion on something and I said it was an opinion and people were saying it's wrong and then I just kept on saying it was my opinion (Mia 4.48)*

> *Because I had a caption saying, 'this post isn't as good, as it would be, but it doesn't really matter, I'm posting it' (Freya 1.92)*

Perhaps by stating a post is just an opinion or that a post is not at an 'acceptable' standard, this then distances the individual from their post and perhaps protects their self-presentation from any potential negative feedback from the audience. A further example of an individual protecting their self-presentation can be seen through gaining feedback on a post, from a trusted peer, prior to posting online, in order to ensure acceptability and avoid the risk of negative feedback.

Furthermore, some participants make a conscious effort to not engage with certain SNS platforms, as an additional way of protecting their self-concept and level of self-esteem. This is due to having an awareness of the upward comparisons the individual makes on such sites and subsequent negative feelings associated with these comparisons. This was the case for Ella:

> *Instagram, I don't really go on it that much, just because I see loads of people looking like how I want to look […] I just feel like I just want to look like them, so I don't want to see it, because I know that I won't look like them (Ella 6.77-6.81)*

A further approach Ella utilises in order to minimise the impact of upward comparisons is to think of rationalising thoughts when seeing another's post, particularly when comparing oneself against a celebrity's post:

> *I say to myself they look really nice, and I want to look like them when I'm older, but then at the same time, in the back of my head I know that it's highly edited (Ella 6.72).*

Such an approach would further protect an individual's self-esteem and how they perceive themselves.

4.2.4. RQ1 summary of results

Findings suggest the self presented online by female early adolescents is a performance to others, which may involve presenting an enhanced, or perhaps selective version of their self on SNS. The selectivity in what is shared may differ according to the audience and a selective self may also be displayed in order to enhance the individual's chance of gaining acceptance from the audience. This acceptance from peers appears to be of great importance to participants, and will subsequently impact the self they perform online. Many participants will hypothesise the possible perceptions an audience may have towards their presentation and adapt their performance accordingly.

Additionally, feedback from the audience further contributes to the presentation of self, as positive feedback can be seen to strengthen aspects of an individual's identity. This may be through feedback reinforcing certain aspects of self, leading to the individual feeling more confident to continue to present that particular presentation of self.

Participants also appeared to highlight a number of actions they engage in online, perhaps as an approach to protect their self-presentation. This in part, can be linked to the level of privacy perhaps required online, due to safety concerns, but also includes actions to protect their own self-concept from possible negative feedback.

4.3. Research question 2

The second RQ is presented below. One theme was developed which comprises of four subthemes, which are outlined in Table 4.2.

- What are the types of social comparisons made by girls, when using SNS and does this influence their identity and self-presentation?

Table 4.2. A table outlining the generated Themes and Subthemes which address RQ2.

Theme Name	Subtheme
1. **A range of social comparisons are made during SNS use.**	a. Upward assimilative comparisons
	b. Upward contrastive comparisons
	c. Downward assimilative comparisons
	d. Downward contrastive comparisons

It is important to recognise although the overall theme of comparisons is representative across the data set, each individual subtheme may only arise in a small number of transcripts. Therefore, such subthemes can be seen to provide an initial insight into the possible comparisons made by early adolescents on SNS and are valuable to answer the proposed RQ, as opposed to being fully representative of the entire data set. Braun and Clarke (2013) highlight although the frequency of codes can be seen to be an important factor to consider, there is value in focusing on what has greater meaning towards the RQ.

Within this RQ, a more deductive approach was taken where the theoretical framework devised by Smith (2000) relating to social comparisons was utilised, in order to provide meaning to the comparisons being made.

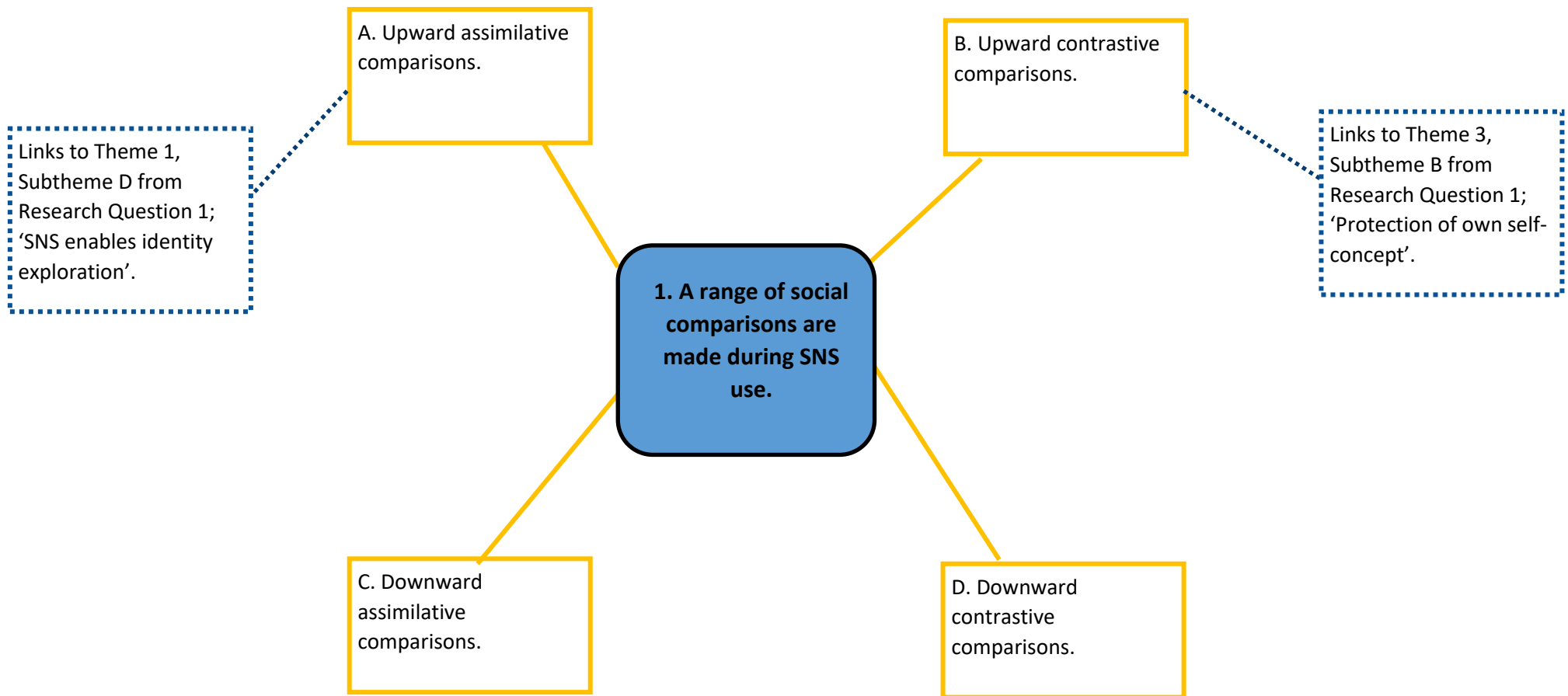Table 4.2 is also presented as a thematic map in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2. A thematic map outlining Themes and Subthemes for RQ2.

4.3.1. Theme 1: A range of social comparisons are made during SNS use

Although this theme captures the variety in the comparisons being made online, one participant Chloe, highlighted she felt she does not engage with comparing herself to others on SNS:

> *It really depends what they posted, if they've like posted a picture of themselves, it would be like giving me inspiration or how they look, and stuff like that, but nothing like comparing and stuff (Chloe, 3.129)*

However, what is interesting is that within this quote, Chloe appears to make an upward assimilative comparison, which provokes inspiration. Therefore, it is possible Chloe does make comparisons online, but perhaps she is not consciously aware of this.

4.3.1.1. Theme 1, Subtheme A: Upward Assimilative comparisons

Many participants interviewed reported engaging in upward comparisons. Upward assimilative comparisons can lead to a prompting of inspiration within the individual, alongside a desire and motivation to move closer to the point of comparison and perhaps better their skills (Smith, 2000).

> *I just feel that on there, there's a lot of good stuff and I've started doing stuff from TikTok, like drawing and trying to draw better and trying to do more (Mia, 4.12)*

Mia also highlights comparisons can prompt a mixture of feelings at the same time. In the quote below, Mia appears to make an upward comparison to an individual she perceives to be a better drawer than her. This can be seen to be assimilative, as she continuously tries to enhance her skills to be more like the individual she is comparing against. She also reports feelings of happiness and perhaps admiration, towards another's level of competency.

> *Like with the drawing one, I do try it, sometimes I don't succeed, but I keep trying, but when I see it, it makes me in a way not happy but happy at the same time. Like happy because it's really good and not happy because I don't get how you can do it, because it's really good, like sometimes I get confused (Mia, 4.52)*

However, this quote also makes reference to upward contrastive comparisons which Mia appears to experience at the same time.

4.3.1.2. Theme 1, Subtheme B: Upward contrastive comparisons

Upward contrastive comparisons initiate a negative emotive response within an individual, due to perceiving the discrepancy between self and the point of comparison as being unchangeable (Smith,

2000). Participants speak of upward comparisons making them feel insecure, upset and less confident. Many of these upward contrastive comparisons appear to be focussed around physical appearance, particularly against those who are older than the participants. In the extracts below, participants highlight the observed difference cannot be reduced or closed.

> *Sometimes it just makes you feel a bit insecure about yourself, because there's people on there who are like really pretty and stuff, and you're just kind of like, why don't I look like that in a way? (Ruby, 5.48)*

> *You just feel a little bit like you're not good as them and you won't and you can't be in a way (Ruby, 5.56)*

Furthermore, as highlighted in Theme 1, Subtheme A, upward comparisons can perhaps be deemed to be contrastive and assimilative at the same time, as Mia also highlights despite admiring another's competency when making an upward comparison, Mia also feels this is unobtainable.

> *Like with the drawing one, I do try it, sometimes I don't succeed, but I keep trying, but when I see it, it makes me in a way not happy but happy at the same time. Like happy because it's really good and not happy because I don't get how you can do it, because it's really good, like sometimes I get confused and yeah (Mia, 4.52)*

Upward comparisons against those who the individual perceives to be similar to them, such as a close friend, or a similarly aged peer, appears to have a greater impact on the individual and their self-perception.

> *Well, when I see another person's posts, if they look really nice and they're my age and I don't look like them because they've got like nice make up, nice clothes, and they just look older, then that does make me feel a little bit insecure almost, because I want to look like them since they are the same age as me, why can't I look like them? (Ella, 6.69)*

> *Then some people, just my closest friends, I feel like a bit jealous because they also look a lot older and nicer than I do on most of mine (Ella, 6.73)*

Within Theme 3, Subtheme B, for RQ1, Ella (6.72) was seen to use rationalising thoughts when comparing herself to a celebrity. However, such thoughts may not be effective for comparisons against peers and therefore may be more impactful.

4.3.1.3. Theme 1, Subtheme C: Downward assimilative comparisons

A small number of downward assimilative comparisons were reportedly made where such comparisons evoked feelings of empathy and pity from the participants, towards those the individual is comparing themselves against, as outlined by Mia:

> *Sometimes people post [...] news that had happened and that's quite upsetting or something, like maybe a plane crash, car crash [...] I get bad feelings, like sad feelings, like it makes me think, imagine being them people and I normally think that when bad things happen [...] if you were there, it would be horrible (Mia, 4.48)*

However, such empathy can also be limited as Ruby is aware others may be presenting a self which may not be accurate:

> *Sometimes when I see videos of people crying, I do feel bad for them but [...] sometimes people post about them being sad and I know in a way some people do that because it's their way of feeling better, but sometimes [...] it looks a bit forced, in a way, like sometimes people pretend to be sad on social media for views (Ruby, 5.104)*

4.3.1.4. Theme 1, Subtheme D: Downward contrastive comparisons

Within this subtheme, a downward contrastive comparison is made by Ruby, who appears to be critical and look down on others on SNS.

> *Sometimes the post just annoys you for different reasons, like maybe they're too enthusiastic, or they're just a bit like annoying (Ruby, 5.52)*

It is possible such downward comparisons support the development of identity, through highlighting to Ruby the presentation of self which she perhaps does not want to present online.

4.3.2. RQ2 summary of results

Such results provide an initial insight into the variety of comparisons early adolescents can experience when engaging with SNS. A mixture of upward and downward comparisons which may consist of a contrastive or assimilative reaction were evident, alongside a range of emotional responses. The data also highlighted multiple types of comparisons could be made at the same time.

Such comparisons may possibly influence an individual's online self-presentation as individuals can feel less confident about sharing their self online, as a result of upward contrastive comparisons.

Upward assimilative comparisons may also impact on one's identity, as an individual may seek to better their skills to move closer to the point of comparison.

Downward comparisons are made less frequently, however, may possibly impact upon an individual's self-presentation, as a reference is provided to the individual of the self they do not want their self-presentation to be like.

4.4. Placing the research within a COVID19 context

Within a qualitative research paradigm and a social constructionist approach, the meaning and knowledge generated only reflects the context it is gathered within (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Burr, 2015). It is therefore imperative to position the findings within the context of the COVID19 pandemic. The possible impact of the pandemic did not arise as a pattern across the data set and therefore was not generated as a theme or subtheme.

However, within the data there is evidence of SNS enabling individuals to maintain their friendships, when these cannot take place in person due to COVID19 restrictions. The interviews were completed in November and December 2020, during which time, the school was open to all, although with significant limitations on the extent pupils could mix within school. This was exemplified below by Freya who interacts with her friend on SNS:

> Freya: Because, my best friend, we talk a lot on there, […] it just makes me feel a lot happier, because I can actually like talk to her.
>
> Researcher: Okay, yeah and is this one of the friends that isn't at school?
>
> Freya: No, she is at school, but because of Covid and stuff, I can't really talk to her that much (Freya, 1.104-1.106)

This therefore can confirm the view of Orben et al. (2020) that interacting on SNS has potentially gained greater importance over the course of the pandemic in order to maintain relations with peers. This may also be associated with the stimulation hypothesis, presented by Valkenburg and Peter (2007), within Chapter 1, where interacting with peers online can strengthen existing social relations. In the case of this research, this is through being a replacement for in person connections. As such findings suggest that SNS can be used to maintain relationships with close friends who the individual cannot see in person, participants may feel less pressure to perform an enhanced self to these peers, as suggested in Theme 1, Subtheme A.

4.5. Analysis of reflexivity

Due to the use of Reflexive TA, a continuous level of active reflection throughout the analysis process is imperative (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). During the stages of data familiarisation and coding I recorded my reactions and feelings onto the transcripts, as shown within Appendix T. A brief summary of a selection of the reflexive comments made are presented below, which are important to acknowledge in order to be aware of how such opinions and feelings can contribute to the explored concept (Cohen et al., 2018; McLeod, 2001).

Reactions were captured towards certain phrases used by participants that seemed particularly powerful. Such as Ruby using the phrase "*I don't want to keep this up*" (Ruby, 5.135), which felt pertinent in relation to the online self being a performance. This was in addition to Freya stating "*it doesn't matter if I like it*" (Freya, 1.70), emphasising her focus on audience perception. This evoked a feeling of possible sadness upon hearing such quotes when combined with the notion of participants feeling insecure. However, this then also led me to reflect upon my own experiences of early adolescence and the possible pressure to fit in and gain social acceptance from peers, which I also experienced.

A further area of reflexivity concerned the interview process, as at times when analysing the data, I felt upon reflection that certain points would have benefited from further exploration during the interview. For example, Mia stated when online that she will post videos that correspond to the trends. It would have been beneficial to gain additional data from Mia relating to why she might join in with trends online rather than leaving it to interpretation within the analysis and the application of latent codes. However, this point was included within a longer passage of Mia's speech within the interview and therefore, follow up probes were used to explore a different aspect of Mia's response. Thus, joining in with trends was largely considered during the analysis process, rather than during the interview.

4.6. Summary of chapter

Within this chapter, themes and subthemes generated from the data which relate to both RQ1 and RQ2 are presented and exemplified through excepts taken from transcripts. This is alongside then further acknowledging the context the research was completed in as a result of the COVID19 pandemic. Furthermore, a degree of reflexivity was also outlined in relation to the analytic process.

Findings will now be discussed further, whilst referencing existing theories and literature.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1. Introduction to chapter

The aim of the present research is to explore the perceptions female early adolescents hold in relation to their presentation of self online, alongside gaining an insight into the possible social comparisons made, whilst engaging with SNS.

This chapter looks to consider the research findings, outlined in Chapter 4, within the current context. The first RQ will be discussed, prior to addressing RQ2. This is before evaluating the quality of the research and highlighting the study's implications, both for future research and the wider professional field.

5.2. Research question 1

- What can be understood about the perceptions held by female early adolescents regarding their self-presentation online, through their experiences of SNS use?

A number of key ideas relating to RQ1 and what can be understood about early adolescent self-presentation online will now be presented, which involves the application of existing literature and making links across the themes.

5.2.1. The selective self is underpinned by audience perception

There appears to be a close link between Themes 1 and 2, where the self early adolescents perform online may be primarily underpinned by the perception of the audience. Individuals perform a selective presentation of self when engaging with SNS which is often an enhanced version, as outlined within Theme 1, Subtheme C. Such a narrative can closely align with the work of Goffman (1955, 1978, 1990) who first presents the idea of individuals performing a carefully constructed, desirable image to the audience watching. This 'desirable' image may be one that will be positively perceived by the audience and thus audience perception underpins the self being performed.

A pattern across the data set relates to the value participants place on audience opinions which often comprised of participants considering how others may perceive their self-presentation. This was as though they were checking their self in a mirror (Jones, 2015), as outlined within the Looking Glass Self theory (Cooley, 1902) and illustrated from quotes within Theme 2, Subtheme A. Therefore, despite Cooley's theory being developed in 1902, the Looking Glass Self still has great relevance to

the presentation of self within an ever-changing digital landscape. Adolescents look to hypothesise how their presentation will be received by the audience and seek positive perceptions from their peers.

However, the Looking Glass Self may not recognise the autonomy and agency an individual has in developing their self-presentation. Rather the theory presents individuals as passive, who only rely upon how they may be seen by others (Downey, 2015; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Although the Looking Glass Self can be applied to the present-day context, this research also highlights the agency an individual has in the presentation of their self. This is seen through participants managing multiple aspects of self being performed to others, as outlined within Theme 1, Subtheme A.

Furthermore, the Looking Glass Self also states individuals experience an affective reaction from making such hypotheses (Cooley, 1902). Within this research, this can be seen through participants reporting they may feel fearful or anxious of the audience's views, as shown within Theme 2, Subtheme A. This therefore, confirms the findings of Throuvala et al. (2019) and Shankleman et al. (2021), presented within Chapter 1 and 2. Such feelings may be associated with the importance adolescents place on being viewed positively by their peers and perhaps may be why the RSPH (2017) discovered adolescents reported four out of five popular SNS raised feelings of anxiety. Therefore, adolescents may amend their online self-presentation, or perhaps perform a restricted self to ensure they are accepted and fit in with the socially constructed societal expectations. Goffman (1990) stated one's performance of self involves following social conventions, which within this research can be applied to the social norms within a particular context that an individual feels pressure to conform to. McDonald and Crandall (2015: 147) outline a social norm as "an expectation about appropriate behaviour in a group context" and therefore individuals may perform a selective self in order to meet the audience expectations within that social context.

The significant value participants placed on the views of others, captured within Theme 2, Subtheme A, can also relate to the increased 'social sensitivity' adolescents have, as outlined by Somerville (2013) within Chapter 1. This sensitivity involves experiencing a heightened level of emotional intensity to information relating to evaluations from peers, alongside paying greater attention to social standings. The importance of audience perception can also be associated with the value of social relationships during adolescence (Antheunis et al., 2016, Beyens et al., 2016). Where perhaps individuals present a certain presentation of self to ensure they are accepted and subsequently have support from their peers to navigate the developmental challenges faced during adolescence (Reich et al., 2012; Tsitsika et al., 2014), as outlined within Theme 2, Subtheme B.

Such social acceptance from peers can also link to the psychological need of relatedness, outlined by Ryan and Deci (2020) as part of their self-determination theory. The need for relatedness involves the necessity of having relationships and a sense of belonging with others and is outlined as one of three basic psychological needs, innate within everyone, not just adolescents. This need to belong may subsequently lead individuals to perform a selective self online, in order to increase the likelihood of a positive evaluation by peers, which may then subsequently lead to feelings of acceptance and a sense of belonging for the individual (Odgers & Jenson, 2020). This further emphasises the notion that audience perception underpins the selective self being portrayed online, which may involve individual's censoring their behaviour on SNS to gain popularity from peers (Shankleman et al., 2021), as exemplified in Theme 1, Subtheme B.

5.2.2. The management of multiple self-presentations

Another key aspect to understand relating to early adolescent online self-presentation is that although many participants within this research spoke of performing an enhanced self to the audience, this presentation may not be seen by all. Within Theme 1, Subtheme A, participants highlight they may display a less enhanced, or perhaps more accurate version of themselves to certain audiences. This is in particular to those who are close to the individual and possibly less likely to judge the presented self. This finding further highlights how audience perception informs the extent of self being shared online as individuals may present differing self-presentations, as a result of the socially constructed context they find themselves in. Adolescents can use technology to rapidly adjust their presentation accordingly (Davis, 2011) and such a finding confirms the work of Drenten (2012) and Marks and O'Mahoney (2014), as outlined within Chapter 1, who suggests an individual has a number of aspects of their self to manage, each relating to a different role within a contrasting social context. Such contexts may include differing audiences, each perhaps with varying expectations of what is acceptable. Therefore, the true self and authenticity Shankleman et al. (2021) reports that adolescents can present online only appears to be towards certain, selected audiences, within this sample.

This management of selves can also be seen through the degree of thought and caution an individual exhibits when performing a particular presentation of self online and is facilitated by the asynchronised nature of SNS (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This caution may involve considering what can be placed in the 'open area', as outlined within the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1961), or the degree an individual shares their true emotions online. The work of Thomas et al. (2017) highlighted undergraduate students felt unable to share true emotions within their self-presentation, which was

also highlighted within Theme 1, Subtheme B, with an early adolescent sample. This may possibly be for fear of audience perception thus further emphasising the significant influence audience perception has on the self being performed online. Although the development of one's self can be seen to be relational and formed through interactions with others (Davis, 2011), the management of the self that individuals display also highlights that they also have a level of agency, where they make decisions regarding the extent their self is performed to and shared with others.

5.2.3. Adolescent focus on appearance

As previously stated by Goffman (1955), a performance of self involves displaying a 'desirable' presentation to others. A pattern generated across the data was an apparent focus on physical appearance which included the use of photo editing tools, as suggested within Theme 1, Subtheme C. This emphasis on physical appearance may be associated with the significant increase in body dissatisfaction found to be experienced by girls during early adolescence (Bearman et al., 2006). Furthermore, Fardouly et al. (2015) previously reported in Chapter 1, that increased appearance dissatisfaction was experienced when engaging with SNS, as opposed to magazines. Therefore, participants within this research may focus on enhancing their appearance online, possibly due to feeling unhappy with their looks, alongside presenting a desirable self to others. This may be perhaps to conform to the beauty standards constructed within society. In addition, this focus on physical appearance could also be due to one's appearance being the aspect of self-presentation immediately seen by others and participants focus on enhancing this, to ensure positive perceptions from others.

Such findings can also link to the report published by Ofcom (2021b) which involved British children and adolescents aged between 8 and 18 years, where almost all individuals reported experiencing pressure to look 'good' online. Like the sample used within this doctoral research, Ofcom's (2021b) sample also reported regular use of filters and editing apps to enhance their appearance. Physical appearance was a central aspect of the identity individuals presented online. However, increased caution should be taken with such findings, as Ofcom's (2021b) research is not published within an academic or peer reviewed journal, which may subsequently impact upon the trustworthiness of the results.

5.2.4. The impact of feedback

Audiences can provide an indication of their views towards a participant's post online; through the feedback they provide. Positive feedback can be seen to be a signal of possible acceptance and

validation from the audience, such as through signs of endorsement including 'likes' or comments (Throuvala et al., 2019).

The findings outlined in Theme 2, Subtheme C and D suggest the feedback an individual receives plays a role in the self being performed. This can be associated with previous research, where an individual will amend their self-presentation in light of feedback (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014; Valkenburg et al., 2006; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). Within this current sample, positive feedback may strengthen aspects of an individual's self (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), perhaps as adolescents feel more confident displaying this presentation to others, as it has previously been positively received and therefore an individual will perform this self more often.

The positive feedback an individual receives can be linked to the work of James (1890) and the belief an individual's self is developed through recognition from others. Such a notion can also contribute to the narrative that audience perception, perhaps expressed through feedback, impacts upon the self that the individual chooses to perform. Positive feedback may also prompt positive feelings from the individual, which may be linked to a sense of acceptance and belonging, which SNS can foster (Best et al., 2014). Individuals may therefore post more frequently in an attempt to feel these positive feelings once more and gain further validation from peers, which Throuvala et al. (2019) highlighted is something adolescents require.

An individual's self can also be affected by negative feedback with participants expressing they would reduce the frequency of their posts. Furthermore, some participants expressed anger towards themselves at their own misjudgement of how the audience may receive their self-presentation.

5.2.5. Actions to protect self-presentation online

One aspect of the findings which can be seen to extend the existing literature within the field relates to Theme 3 and the actions participants engage in, in order to protect their online self-presentation. This may be possibly in an attempt to retain an element of privacy and protect themselves from online risks, as outlined in Theme 3, Subtheme A. However, actions may also relate to individuals protecting their self-concept perhaps from a possibly negative audience perception, as conceptualised in Theme 3, Subtheme B. Both subthemes can closely link to Goffman's (1955, 1990) theory of performance management and individuals controlling the self being displayed to others.

Frith (2017) reported SNS can lead to an 'online disinhibition effect', where individuals are increasingly likely to share more personal information online than in an offline setting. However, this research may challenge this view with participants engaging in actions online to protect their

personal information. This included the blurring of school uniform or withholding of their full name. Such awareness of risk may be a result of the increased teaching at school regarding internet safety. These actions to protect one's identity can closely link to the performance of a selective presentation of self online, particularly from an unknown audience.

Within Theme 3, Subtheme B, participants displayed actions to protect their self-concept, such as through the use of rationalising thoughts when comparing against a celebrity. In addition, participants may also accompany their post with a protective caption against possible negative feedback from the audience. This may include stating a post is an individual's opinion rather than fact, or how a presentation of self may not be to an acceptable standard. Such actions may bear some resemblance to self-handicapping strategies put in place prior to an individual experiencing success or failure, in order to manage the perception of others, regarding the cause of the performance outcome (Midgley et al., 1996). When applied to this current research, the performance is the individual's presentation of self online, which can perhaps be perceived successfully or negatively. Participants may therefore proactively provide reasons to explain why their post may not be successful. Within such instances where one's performance may not be successful a self-handicapping strategy can create a reason to attribute to the unsuccessful nature of the post (McCrea & Flamm, 2012). Such behaviours are often explored in relation to competency, such as academic or sporting performance (Chen et al., 2018, Schwinger et al., 2014). However, the concept can also be applied to self performance and the protection of one's self-concept from a possible negative audience perception. Self-handicapping strategies can be seen to be anticipatory and require forethought (McCrea & Flamm, 2012), which perhaps can link to the consideration an individual exhibits when choosing a particular self to perform. However, such actions may be subconscious and automatic for an individual and possibly embedded into a participant's thought process.

Although participants may reduce their post frequency perhaps over a fear of audience perception, only one participant within Theme 3, Subtheme B reduced their time spent on SNS. Therefore, it appears adolescents still feel a need to engage with SNS perhaps more passively, rather than posting. This may be in order to keep in the know and due to experiencing a level of FOMO, which leads to a continuous desire to stay connected to others (Fuster et al., 2017). This further emphasises SNS as an indispensable aspect of adolescent life (Throuvala et al., 2019).

5.2.6. RQ1 summary of discussion

Therefore, there is a number of aspects we can understand about the perceptions early adolescents have regarding their self-presentation online when engaging with SNS. This includes online self - presentation being a performance, where adolescents often display a selective or restricted presentation of self to others (Goffman, 1955, 1978, 1990). This may be to ensure the self presented is perceived positively by the audience, which consequently can lead to peer acceptance, belonging and social support. Participants may therefore present the best possible version of themselves online, which they feel will be more likely to be accepted. This may be through joining in with trends and enhancing their appearance.

Consequently, audience perception appears to underpin the self being presented online, therefore highlighting the significant link between Theme 1 and Theme 2. Many participants reported taking time to hypothesise how their presentation would be perceived by others, which emphasises the ongoing relevance of the Looking Glass Self Theory (Cooley, 1902).

The online feedback an individual receives on their self-presentation can also impact upon the self being performed, including positive feedback which can reinforce aspects of an individual's self. Finally, it can be understood early adolescents often engage in a number of protective actions on SNS, as outlined in Theme 3. Such actions entail protecting themselves from online risks or perhaps protecting their self from possible negative feedback. This is in order to perhaps minimise the subsequent impact on an individual's level of acceptance from their peers.

5.3. Research question 2

- What are the types of social comparisons made by girls, when using SNS and does this influence their identity and self-presentation?

During the analysis process and generation of themes and subthemes, it appeared upward comparisons made online presented as a more prominent pattern across the data set, than downward comparisons. This may be underpinned by individuals comparing their unedited self against other's enhanced presentations of self, as suggested earlier by Vogel et al. (2014).

Within Chapter 1, research conducted by Lup et al. (2015) suggested it was the following of strangers on SNS which triggered negative social comparisons for an individual. However, the present research challenges such findings, where participants within Theme 1, Subtheme B, report making negative comparisons against familiar others. In addition, Smith (2000) also outlined a comparison can be influenced by the individual's feelings towards the person being compared

against, adding it may be harder to feel envy towards someone the individual likes. However, this can also be seen to be challenged, as in the case of Ella (6.73), who reported feeling jealous towards her close friends and therefore highlights the idiographic nature of the emotions and comparisons an adolescent may make.

Furthermore, the findings also suggest comparisons against those who are similar to the participant can prompt a negative impact on the individual's feelings of self. This subsequently corresponds to Festinger (1954) alongside Lockwood and Kunda (1997), who both highlight comparisons are made and emotive responses prompted when comparing against someone perceived to be similar. However, the present research shows early adolescents also make comparisons against those who are not perceived to be similar, such as celebrities.

Within the analysis, social comparisons were categorised into four areas in relation to Smith's (2000) framework. The use of this theory provides an insight into some of the comparisons made, however, such categories can also be seen to be limiting and deterministic and does not allow for occasions which may prompt an upward contrastive and upward assimilative comparison simultaneously. The variety of social comparisons made online is therefore an area that could be explored further, as will be outlined within Section 5.7, Implications for Research.

Research by Noon (2020), Yang, Holden and Carter (2018) and Yang, Holden, Carter and Webb, (2018), all differentiated between opinion and ability comparisons. Within this research, there is possibly a mixture of ability and opinion comparisons being made by the sample. Ability comparisons may arise when participants compare their own skills, to that of others, such as within Theme 1, Subtheme A. Whereas, the making of opinion comparisons is outlined to be a way an individual regulates their behaviour, ensuring it is in line with social norms (Noon, 2020; Park & Baek, 2018). This perhaps could be seen through participants looking to others to ensure their presentation of self 'fits in' and will be accepted by the audience, thus making links to Themes 1 and 2 from RQ1.

A number of additional links between the first and second RQs can also be made, which addresses the possible influence such comparisons may have on an individual's self-presentation. Such links are also represented within the thematic map, Figure 4.2. For example, upward contrastive comparisons outlined in Theme 1, Subtheme B of RQ2 can be associated with Theme 3, Subtheme B, taken from RQ1, where participants may engage in actions to protect their self-concept as a result of the social comparisons being made on SNS. This may be through the use of rationalising one's thoughts when comparing against others, alongside reducing the time spent on SNS, due to the comparisons made and associated feelings. A further link can also be made between the upward assimilative social comparisons within Theme 1, Subtheme A of RQ2 and Theme 1, Subtheme D, from RQ1, which

involves identity exploration. Participants may engage with such exploration as a result of feeling inspired to develop one's self after making upward assimilative comparisons. This may involve discovering new skills, or perhaps exploring their self-presentation through style and appearance.

In addition, further possible implications of making social comparisons on an individual's self-presentation may also involve the insecurity participants experience as a result of engaging in upward contrastive comparisons. This may then possibly impact upon the extent and frequency that an individual shares online, as a result of their reportedly reduced confidence.

The social comparisons made on SNS can also link to the feedback an audience may provide, as outlined in RQ1, Theme 2, Subtheme C and D. It can be hypothesised there is perhaps a cycle of comparisons which are continuously being made, where individuals compare themselves against others, however these others then also engage in making their own comparisons against the participants. Within this recursive process, comparisons made by others may result in the giving of feedback to the participant.

5.3.1. RQ2 summary of discussion

The findings, therefore, suggest a range of comparisons can be made by female early adolescents when engaging with SNS. Comparisons are being made in both an upward and downward direction, alongside being contrastive and assimilative, where emotional responses included jealousy, empathy and inspiration. Upward comparisons may be associated with the enhanced presentation of self others may also display online.

However, the comparisons being made appear to show a greater degree of complexity than perhaps the Smith (2000) framework allows, as an individual can make multiple comparisons simultaneously. This topic may benefit from further exploration, as will be outlined further within Section 5.7.

5.4. Researcher reflexivity

A continuous level of reflexivity is imperative within qualitative research, in order to recognise my own values and experiences, which may then go on to contribute to the construction of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

My own personal experiences of using SNS are likely to have influenced the analysis and interpretation of data. I have experience with a range of SNS platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter and I was 16 years old when I began to regularly interact with such

platforms, which is therefore, older than this research sample. At this time, SNS was primarily to connect with peers and friends, as opposed to 'following' celebrities and the more diverse range of uses for SNS seen today. Despite these differences, I can recall being presented with a wealth of idealised portrayals of my peers and their lives on SNS. As a consequence, I also felt pressure to only present a selective self that involved the positive aspects of myself online. This therefore can be seen to mirror the participants, as I too would only post things that I thought would be perceived positively by my peers.

Furthermore, throughout my time engaging with SNS, I have posted extremely infrequently and therefore reflect that as an adolescent, it was perhaps preferable to not post at all on SNS, rather than being concerned a post may not be 'successful' online. This may therefore echo the notion of fear relating to audience perception generated from the data. Feelings of peer acceptance and belonging were instead gained from in person interactions with friends. However, it is important to recognise social media was not used as widely within society, as it is today. Such views and prior experiences may have impacted upon this particular interpretation being made within the research findings.

Alongside personal experiences, it was also imperative to reflect upon my own social position, and possible influence on the research process (Berger, 2015). I identify as female and am aged in my late twenties. Therefore, due to this position, it is possible participants may have felt more at ease discussing their experiences of SNS, as they may perceive me to also have experience with SNS platforms (Berger, 2015). However, due to the difference in age and the ever-changing technological landscape, my experiences of SNS do not completely align with the platforms the sample engage with. For example, many of the participants spoke of their experiences on TikTok, which is a platform extremely popular with children and adolescents (Weimann & Masri, 2020), however is not one I have direct experience of. Such differences highlight the continuously evolving nature of social media and may also lead to a disparity regarding the understanding of a particular platform. Although best efforts were made to gain a rich, detailed understanding of participant's experiences and perspectives, it is possible my own experience of SNS and subsequent understanding of these platforms may act as a point of reference when interpreting data, which may differ slightly from the participants', as not all SNS are homogenous.

I enjoyed the opportunity to interview each participant, despite these being conducted virtually. Upon reflection, participants presented as open to sharing their experiences, and all appeared keen to discuss their views regarding the topic. This, therefore, highlights how young people have many opinions on topics which play a central role in their lives. The views included wider issues relating to

SNS use, such as how platforms should take a greater responsibility towards the removal of negative material. Further analyses of the data will illuminate more of these views, which perhaps have a greater scope than the RQs explored within this thesis.

As a result of this analysis, a personal future consideration relates to developing a greater awareness of the self that I myself may emit to others online, and how accurate this is to my offline identity.

5.5. Limitations of study

The study provides a greater understanding of an under researched area of the field, however, there are also a number of methodological limitations which are important to recognise.

Due to the COVID19 pandemic interviews were completed online and although virtual interviews are seen as an acceptable alternative (Lobe et al., 2020), completing the interviews in person may have yielded differing data. Despite attempts to develop rapport with participants, meeting in person could further build relations and put participants at ease during the unfamiliar interview situation. As a result, participants may then have provided a greater level of self-disclosure within the interview. Furthermore, individuals may also limit the amount they share within the interview, due to being informed during the briefing procedure that anything shared which may put either themselves or others at risk, would be passed onto the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead. In addition, virtual interviews also limited the degree of nonverbal cues which could be observed and this may have further added to the richness of the data, alongside possibly providing an indication the participant felt uncomfortable during the process of data collection.

When interviewed, participants appeared to be able to reflect on their SNS experiences. However, one participant highlighted she would have found the interview easier if she had access to her phone to support her answers. Perhaps this may have assisted all participants, in order to find specific anecdotes or act as a prompt for certain feelings SNS can provoke. This, in turn, may have led to richer data and perhaps could be achieved through the use of a 'digital scrapbook', as utilised by Thomas et al. (2017) within the SLR in Chapter 2. Furthermore, reflecting on previous experiences may be influenced by reporting bias from the participant, where accounts of an incident may have distorted over time (Shankleman et al., 2021).

At times, participants recalled examples from gaming or messaging sites, such as WhatsApp, Facetime or Discord. However, such sites can be categorised as social media, rather than SNS, in accordance with the definitions distinguishing the concepts in Section 1.2.1. Prior to the interview commencing, SNS were defined to participants however, perhaps this explanation would have

benefited from also listing those sites which SNS does not include, in order to further enhance understanding. It is therefore unknown what applications individuals were referring to within their interviews unless mentioned explicitly. Consequently, it is possible anecdotes may be drawing on participants' experiences of social media generally, rather than specifically SNS.

In addition, within the participant recruitment criteria, individuals should use SNS for at least 2 hours each day, as defined by Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) as engaging with SNS on a 'frequent' basis. This criterion was shared with participants throughout the recruitment process, including during the assembly and on the information sheets provided. However, a specific measure of the exact time spent using SNS was not gathered from participants. The collection of this information may have been useful to ensure participants use SNS at least on a frequent basis. Furthermore, by gathering specific information regarding the length of time participants spend on SNS, this may highlight different experiences of self-presentation online and comparisons made between frequent and excessive users. This could possibly be explored further in future research.

The final sample size of six adhered to the minimum level required for TA (Braun et al., 2016), as the study was not seeking data saturation or to generalise results more widely, but rather aimed to promote the insight into the perspectives of the adolescents taking part. However, had the sample size been increased this would have possibly enabled the identification of further patterns within the data set, particularly in relation to the social comparisons being made by early adolescents.

The data generated regarding social comparisons could not be applied to a proportion of the literature outlined within the SLR presented in Chapter 2, which included the differing types of identity and comparisons being made. This is due to the broad explorative basis of RQ2, which therefore did not directly explore such explicit topics within the interview. This was in addition to also considering the length of the interview schedule, given the age of participants.

As outlined within Section 3.9. a single, overarching TA was completed for both RQs simultaneously, in order to capture the overlapping nature the two RQs addressed and explored. However, upon reflection, I feel completing two separate analyses may have led to a greater depth of analysis and interpretation of the data, particularly in relation to RQ2. Therefore, perhaps had the analysis been completed again, I as the researcher would have completed separate reflexive TAs for both RQs, in order to focus the codes more specifically to each RQ.

Despite participants being able to discuss their SNS experiences, many participants appeared to find it more challenging to reflect on experiences in relation to self-presentation and identity. This may be due to the abstract nature of self-concept and the level of introspection required. Therefore,

some participants' narratives appeared more focused on physical appearance, as opposed to other aspects of their identity. As a result, participants may have benefited from additional support, prior to the interview to understand the concept of self-presentation and self-concept. In addition, a small number of participants stated they did not engage in social comparisons, but then went on to provide examples of comparisons they make. As Festinger (1954) highlights comparisons can be both conscious and subconscious, this raises the possibility there may be further comparisons participants make which they are not aware of and subsequently are not discussed during the interview.

A degree of member checking (Braun & Clarke, 2013) took place within the interviews, this was through clarification questioning in order to ensure I gained an accurate understanding of the participant's perspective. However, additional member checking following data analysis and interpretation was not deemed to be appropriate (Cope, 2014). This was partly as I felt it would not be ethical to revisit the data with participants, as the topic could be seen to cover a sensitive area which speaks about personal experiences and insecurities. Furthermore, participants will now be in a different position within time and context and therefore may interpret and provide differing meanings to those presented during the interview. As a result, Braun and Clarke (2021) question the coherence of member checking as a validation tool within interpretive qualitative research. All those involved in the study will be provided with a summary of the findings.

Time constraints for the completion of the research is a further limitation. Braun and Clarke (2021:34) highlight the possible losses of "fast qualitative research" upon the interpretive possibility and emphasise the necessity to give the data and analysis time 'to breathe', in order to enable interpretations to develop over time. Braun et al. (2016) also emphasise the iterative nature of TA and within this analysis, stages of the process were frequently returned to and reflected upon. However, due to the time constraints of doctoral research, the analysis was only able 'to breathe' to a certain extent and the need to complete the analysis in an efficient manner may also have impacted upon the depth of interpretation.

As outlined within Chapter 3, images were utilised during the interview to act as a visual prompt for certain questions and this was alongside providing a written version of each question for participants. Such measures were utilised to support understanding, as having the question to refer to may ease participant uncertainty. Although I perceived these supports to be helpful, they may also have limited the interview process due to the reduction in flexibility of the question order.

This research claims to explore aspects regarding an individual's identity, however, as I only met with participants during one-off interviews, it cannot be claimed to be an accurate insight into each participant's identity. Therefore, an ethnographic approach to research may have yielded more

accurate results. Ethnographic research entails being immersed in the participant's natural setting, in order to understand the beliefs and behaviours of those being studied (Mertens, 2015; Robson & McCartan, 2017) and thus may have been a useful tool to explore this topic.

5.6. Quality evaluation of research revisited

Due to the interpretative nature of the research, findings cannot be seen to be bias free. However, Braun and Clarke (2020b) emphasise the avoidance of such bias is illogical within Reflexive TA, as the meaning generated is contextual and the subjective nature of my interpretation is a resource for producing such knowledge.

As previously outlined in Section 3.11, a number of considerations were made in order to enhance the validity of the research and to ensure the generation of valuable qualitative findings (Yardley, 2015). This was through displaying a degree of sensitivity to the context of the research, alongside showing commitment and rigour to the method of analysis. Commitment to Reflexive TA is through the continued use of the TA quality checklist, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, Appendix AA) where each of the steps were adhered to including checking themes against the original data and ensuring I was positioned as an 'active researcher' throughout the process.

The coherence and transparency of the research is enhanced through the inclusion of data and the outlining of methodological decisions within the analysis. Data can be found in Appendix W and enables the reader to assess the methodological journey underpinning the interpretation of the data (Yardley, 2017). In addition, the continuous level of reflexivity displayed throughout the analysis also increases the transparency and supports research credibility (Cope, 2014).

The impact and importance are also key elements of qualitative research validity (Yardley, 2015). This research may have a level of theoretical impact, due to its contribution in increasing the understanding within the field. Implications for both research and professionals can be found in Section 5.7, 5.8 and 5.9.

However, validity could have been increased further through the use of triangulation and a combining of the findings with multiple sources (Yardley, 2015). This would have increased the insight into early adolescent SNS use and may have involved possibly gaining information from parents and teachers, regarding their views on early adolescent SNS use.

5.7. Implications for research

The findings of this study highlight a number of areas which would benefit from further exploration, in order to gain a greater, more encompassing understanding of early adolescent SNS use. This research highlighted the possible use of protective actions which an early adolescent may display online, to protect their self-concept. It would be beneficial to investigate these further within the context of SNS, as opposed to a sporting or academic capacity and may subsequently highlight a wider scope of actions an individual may take part in.

Furthermore, as previously outlined, the review of the literature generated a number of areas of enquiry within the field. This research focussed on online self-presentation and social comparisons, however further analyses of the data may address questions including the possible influence of SNS on social relations, alongside if individual's feel their online presentation differs to how they present themselves offline. Such topics would be valuable to explore due to their possible links to the self-presentation an adolescent selects to perform online.

This research provides an initial insight into the type of comparisons an adolescent may make on SNS. The analysis utilised Smith's (2000) framework to categorise comparisons into contrastive and assimilative comparisons, which can be made in either an upward or downward direction. However, as outlined within Section 1.6.1.3, the use of such a framework may not capture the full extent of possible emotions experienced and can limit the complexity of comparisons through the use of such categorisations. Nor does the framework account for differing comparisons based upon ability or opinions and therefore, there remains a significant degree of scope within this area that can be further researched. With comparisons being a key aspect of self-evaluation and identity development (Noon & Meier, 2019), coupled with SNS facilitating the making of social comparisons (Vogel et al., 2014) and early adolescents regularly engaging with such platforms (Shankleman et al., 2021), a greater insight into the comparisons being made by this group would be valuable. This is in order to understand what adolescents are experiencing and support them accordingly. Further qualitative analysis within this area would also be beneficial to gain a detailed understanding, as a large proportion of previous research centres on quantitative findings.

Research by the Children's Commissioner (2018) highlights the age of children accessing SNS is getting increasingly younger, with girls aged eight and nine years accessing SNS multiple times a day. It is therefore imperative to further explore how this population engage with these platforms and how they may impact upon development. This research should be conducted in an ethical and sensitive way, bearing in mind such a group of pre-adolescents will be under the age limit for an SNS account.

5.8. Implications for school staff

The research highlights a number of implications for school staff including the necessity of continuing to provide teaching to children and young people, relating to their online presence and safe engagement with SNS. All participants presented an awareness of possible online risks which is reassuring, given their levels of use with such platforms. This teaching within schools should continue to ensure children and young people are equipped with the tools to protect themselves online. Consideration could be taken regarding the age such teaching may start, alongside the possible inclusion of ensuring young people develop an awareness the self others present online may not be accurate. This in turn, may reduce possible negative implications from a contrastive comparison, as individuals may develop the "critical understanding" skills that are deemed to be a central aspect of media literacy skills for children and young people when engaging online (Ofcom, 2021a:29).

In addition, as a number of participants spoke of anxiety when using SNS, particularly in relation to audience perception, it may also be beneficial for school staff to ensure children and young people have the skills to manage any feelings of anxiety independently, so they can regulate how they are feeling outside of school.

Such implications may largely be for secondary school staff, however, those within a primary setting will also require a growing awareness and understanding of the implications and experiences of SNS use, as many children in primary schools are now also engaging with a number of SNS platforms (Children's Commissioner, 2018).

5.9. Implications for Educational Psychologists

Implications for EP practice can also be identified, which includes when working with a child or young person at an individual level. As EPs often work with vulnerable individuals, it is imperative to also consider an individual's online presence within casework and this can be considered as part of exploring the individual's context. A child or young person's SNS use may possibly be an influencing factor within the case the EP is involved with, due to being a potentially significant aspect of an individual's life and may therefore inform a possible working hypothesis for an EP. This consideration could possibly include raising SNS use with key adults who surround the individual, or the young person themselves if deemed relevant and appropriate. Such a consideration of an individual's online context could also be necessary to include within a statutory assessment of need, as part of

the Education Health and Care process. This is in order to fully explore an individual's situation and may be particularly relevant for those presenting with possible social, emotional and mental health needs.

Further implications involve an EP working at a strategic level, which can include supporting schools to ensure social media and SNS use is recognised within a setting's antibullying policy. Moreover, as the making of social comparisons on SNS can prompt negative feelings towards one's self, it may be necessary for EPs to support schools in adapting their mental health and wellbeing provision at a whole school level, to also consider SNS use and the possible negative implications from engaging with such platforms and the making of certain social comparisons.

In addition, EPs should also take on the role of disseminating findings to others who support children and young people. As SNS use is a significant aspect of an adolescent's life it is imperative all working with this population have an understanding of their possible experiences and implications of using SNS, including on one's self-presentation. This may therefore comprise of EPs delivering training not only to school staff but also to wider professionals also involved in working with children and young people, including within Social Care or the Virtual School.

Parents reportedly speak to their children regarding SNS and online safety (Ofcom, 2021a), however, it would also be beneficial for parents to gain an understanding of the potential implications of engaging with SNS on self-presentation and identity development. This should be done through EPs providing training or workshops to parents, in order to share this information.

5.10. Conclusion

This research looked to explore the experiences of a small group of female early adolescents when engaging with SNS. This was particularly in relation to an individual's self-presentation online and possible social comparisons made. The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated participants to share their views and experiences and thus provided a rich insight into the topic. Data was interpreted through the use of Reflexive TA.

Findings suggest an early adolescent's self-presentation on SNS is a performance to others, through displaying a selective or restricted self. The self that is performed, appears to be underpinned by the hypothesised perception the audience may have, as individuals spend time considering how their presentation will be received by others. Adolescents will therefore perform a particular presentation of self perhaps through conforming to trends, to enhance the likelihood of their self-presentation being accepted by peers. This acceptance may then subsequently lead to the gaining of social

support from peers, which is of great importance to adolescents. As a result, individuals have to manage the differing selves they present online, which may change according to the social context. Participants also outlined the pressure they experience to present a particular version of their self, which aligns with the audience's expectations.

The findings also highlight a number of actions an individual may engage with online to protect themselves. This includes attempts to protect their identity from online risks, but also to protect their self-concept from the possibility of receiving negative feedback from the audience.

Furthermore, an insight is also gained into the range of comparisons an individual may make towards others when engaging on SNS. This includes how comparisons were made in both an upward and downward direction and were both contrastive and assimilative. Furthermore, the comparisons made can prompt a range of emotive responses from an individual, including empathy and feelings of insecurity. Such comparisons may also impact upon an individual's self-presentation and identity development, perhaps through the promotion of identity exploration as a result of upward assimilative comparisons. However, further research exploring social comparisons would be beneficial, in order to gain a greater understanding of the complexity underpinning such comparisons.

This research can contribute to the existing field relating to early adolescent SNS use. This is alongside providing all professionals who work with children and young people an increased awareness of how an individual's experiences on SNS may influence their self-concept and identity, of which adolescence is a pivotal period of development. This greater understanding can ensure professionals then support this population accordingly, through considering the possible implications of an adolescent's online context.

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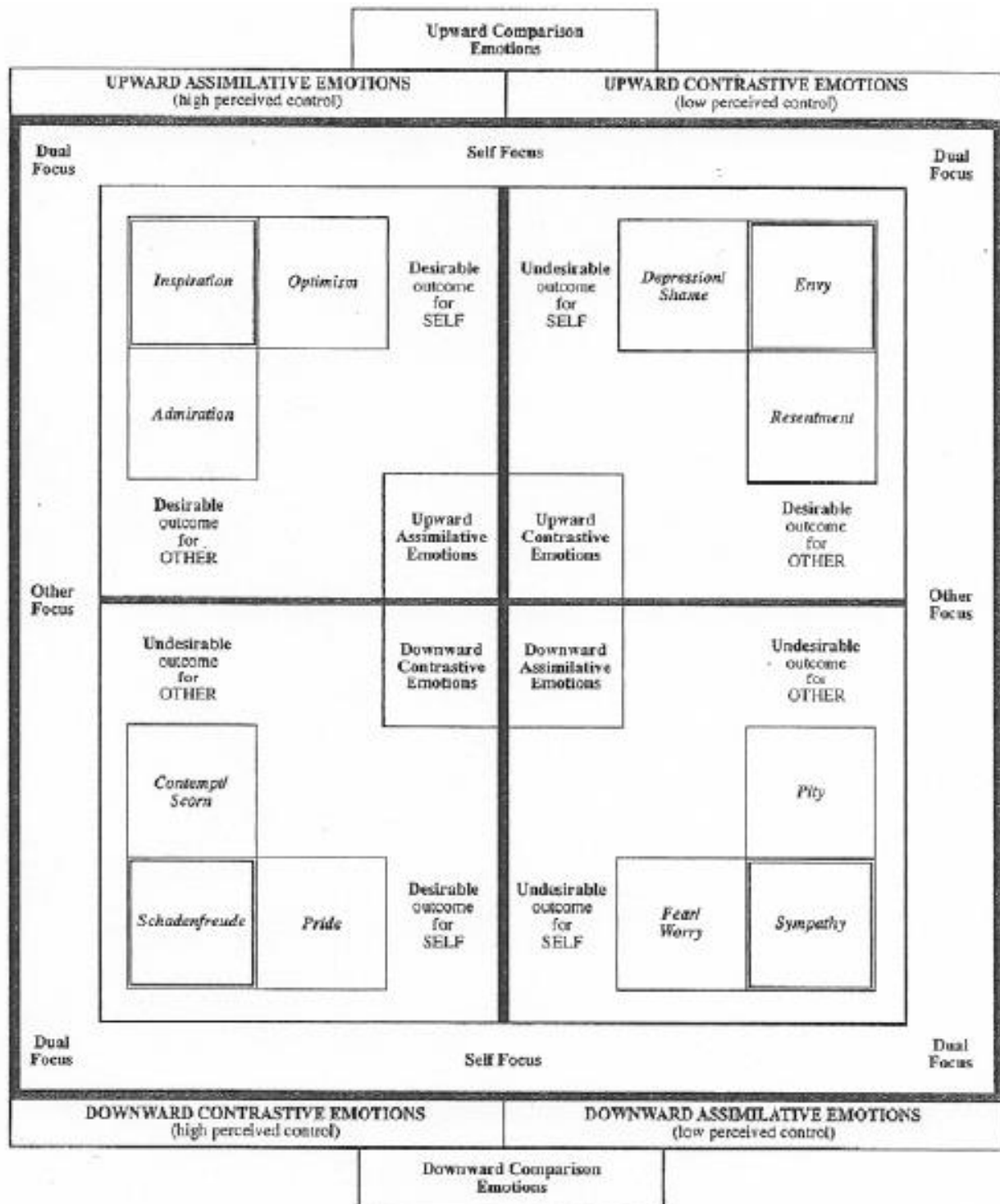
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Appendices

Appendix A: Social comparison-based emotions

Smith, R. H. (2000). Assimilative and contrastive emotional reactions to upward and downward social comparisons. In *Handbook of social comparison* (pp. 173-200). Springer, Boston, MA.
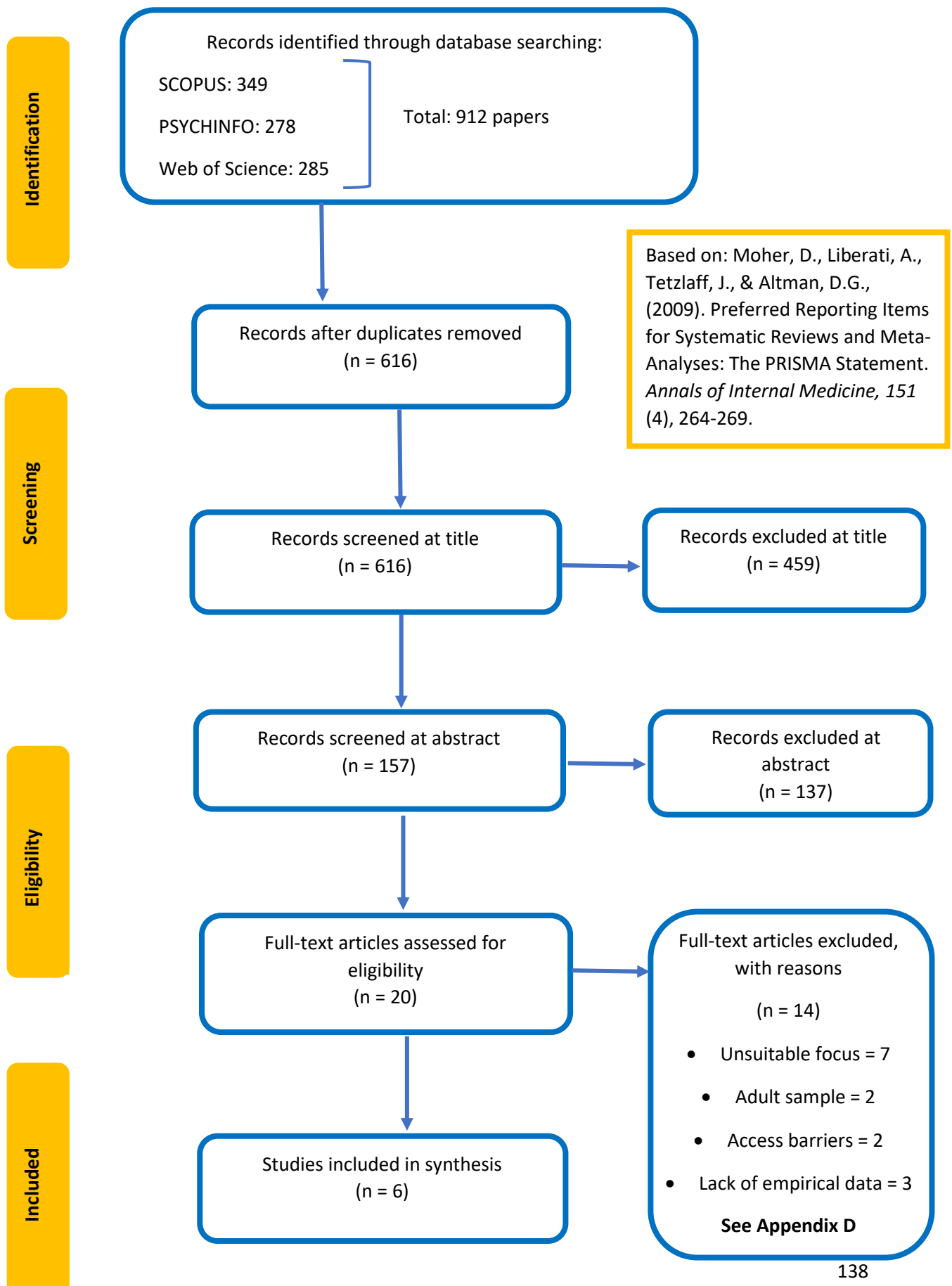
Appendix B: SLR search terms

A table outlining the search terms used during the systematic search procedure.

Concept	Search Terms
Social Comparison	("social comparison*" **OR** "compar*")
	AND
Adolescent	("adolescen*" **OR** "teen*" **OR** "Young people" **OR** child* **OR** pupil* **OR** youth*)
	AND
Social Networking Site	("social network*" **OR** "social media" **OR** "online social network*" **OR** "digital media" **OR** "facebook" **OR** "instagram" **OR** "snapchat" **OR** "online communicat*" **OR** "online")
	AND
Identity	(identit* **OR** "self-presentation" **OR** "presentation of self")

- Such search terms were used whilst completing searches on three databases, these were Scopus, Web of Science and PsychInfo.

- Search terms were set to appear within the paper's title, abstract or keywords.

- No exclusion search terms were utilised.

Appendix C: PRISMA flow chart outlining database search

Identification

Records identified through database searching:

SCOPUS: 349

PSYCHINFO: 278

Web of Science: 285

Total: 912 papers

Based on: Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., & Altman, D.G., (2009). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine, 151* (4), 264-269.

Screening

Records after duplicates removed
(n = 616)

Records screened at title
(n = 616)

Records excluded at title
(n = 459)

Eligibility

Records screened at abstract
(n = 157)

Records excluded at abstract
(n = 137)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility
(n = 20)

Full-text articles excluded, with reasons

(n = 14)

- Unsuitable focus = 7
- Adult sample = 2
- Access barriers = 2
- Lack of empirical data = 3

See Appendix D

Included

Studies included in synthesis
(n = 6)

Appendix D: Table of excluded studies

A table outlining the studies which were excluded at a full text level, during the SLR.

Article Screened at Full Text	Database Sourced	Reason for exclusion
Drenten, J. (2012), "Snapshots of the Self: Exploring the Role of Online Mobile Photo Sharing in Identity Development among Adolescent Girls," in Angeline G. Close (Ed.), *Online Consumer Behavior: Theory and Research in Social Media, Advertising, and E-Tail*, New York, NY: Routledge, 3-34.	PsychInfo	Book chapter.
Fox, J., & Vendemia, M. A. (2016). Selective self-presentation and social comparison through photographs on social networking sites. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(10), 593-600.	Scopus	Focus on body image and appearance.
Jang, J. Y., Han, K., Lee, D., Jia, H., & Shih, P. C. (2016, July). Teens engage more with fewer photos: temporal and comparative analysis on behaviors in Instagram. In *Proceedings of the 27th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media* (pp. 71-81).	Web of Science	Not focussed on the impact of social comparisons within the demographic.
Kisfalusi, D., Janky, B., & Takács, K. (2019). Double standards or social identity? The role of gender and ethnicity in ability perceptions in the classroom. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 39(5), 745-780.	Web of Science	Not focused on social media use or social comparisons.
Lohnes, S. C. (2008). Being Net Gen: Exploring the role of technology in college students' social identity enactment on campus (Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University).	PsychInfo	Relevance due to year? Focus on impact of technology, rather than social comparisons.
Manago, A. M., Graham, M. B., Greenfield, P. M., & Salimkhan, G. (2008). Self-presentation and gender on MySpace. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29(6), 446-458.	Web of Science	Focus on general identity, rather than in relation to social comparisons. Relevance due to year?

Mann, R. E. B. (2020). The Effects of Social Media Use and Self-esteem on Possible Selves Throughout Adolescence (Doctoral dissertation, Fordham University).	PsychInfo	Cannot access full text.
Michinov, N., Michinov, E., & Toczek-Capelle, M. C. (2004). Social identity, group processes, and performance in synchronous computer-mediated communication. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice,* 8(1), 27.	Scopus	Focus on group processes, rather than social comparisons. Relevance due to year?
Nisar, T. M., Prabhakar, G., Ilavarasan, P. V., & Baabdullah, A. M. (2019). Facebook usage and mental health: An empirical study of role of non-directional social comparisons in the UK. *International Journal of Information Management*, 48, 53-62.	Web of Science	Use of an older aged sample (20-29 years), with no focus on identity.
Ozimek, P., & Bierhoff, H. W. (2016). Facebook use depending on age: The influence of social comparisons. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 61, 271-279.	Web of Science	Use of sample aged 16 – 56 years.
Papot, V., & Haza, M. (2016). The Adolescent's "trash" Images on Social Media: Suffering or Pubertary Rite of Passage? *Adolescence*, 34(4), 843-852.	PsychInfo	Cannot access full text, and written in French.
Pera, A. (2018). Psychopathological processes involved in social comparison, depression, and envy on Facebook. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 22.	Web of Science	No empirical data collected, more of a review.
Steers, M. L. N. (2016). 'It's complicated': Facebook's relationship with the need to belong and depression. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 9, 22-26.	Web of Science	Review of existing research, no empirical data gathered.
Yang, C. C., Carter, M. D., Webb, J. J., & Holden, S. M. (2019). Developmentally salient psychosocial characteristics, rumination, and compulsive social media use during the transition to college. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 1-10.	Scopus	Focus on problematic SNS use.

Appendix E: Included papers

A table documenting the final studies included within the SLR.

Selected Paper	Database Sourced
Charoensukmongkol, P. (2018). The impact of social media on social comparison and envy in teenagers: The moderating role of the parent comparing children and in-group competition among friends. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*(1), 69-79.	Web of Science
Noon, E. J. (2020). Compare and despair or compare and explore? Instagram social comparisons of ability and opinion predict adolescent identity development. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *14*(2).	Scopus
Thomas, L., Briggs, P., Hart, A., & Kerrigan, F. (2017). Understanding social media and identity work in young people transitioning to university. *Computers in Human Behavior, 76,* 541-553.	Scopus
Throuvala, M. A., Griffiths, M. D., Rennoldson, M., & Kuss, D. J. (2019). Motivational processes and dysfunctional mechanisms of social media use among adolescents: A qualitative focus group study. *Computers in Human Behavior, 93*, 164-175.	Web of Science
Yang, C. C., Holden, S. M., & Carter, M. D. (2018). Social media social comparison of ability (but not opinion) predicts lower identity clarity: Identity processing style as a mediator. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*(10), 2114-2128.	Scopus
Yang, C. C., Holden, S. M., Carter, M. D., & Webb, J. J. (2018). Social media social comparison and identity distress at the college transition: A dual-path model. *Journal of Adolescence, 69,* 92-102.	Scopus

Appendix F: Complete data extraction

A table including the data extraction from studies, as part of the SLR process.

Paper	Type of paper	Sample and country	Focus and aims	Data collection	Data analysis	Key findings
Charoensukmongkol (2018)	- Peer reviewed journal - Cross sectional study	- N=250 teenagers, through snowball sampling. 13-19 years (mean age of 16.28 years) 50.4% male - Thai Study	- Aims to explore relationship between social media use intensity and a teenager's tendency to engage in social comparisons and envy. - Also, degree of focus on extent to which parents compare the accomplishments of the teenagers taking part, as well as in group competition within friendship groups.	- Self-report survey, not clear if paper or online. - Included measures: intensity of social media use scale, social comparisons, envy and in group competition, through Likert Scale measures. Such measures were created by the author through the use of existing literature.	- Quantitative - Partial least squares regression - Correlations	- Measure of social media intensity was positively and significantly related to both social comparison and envy. - Social comparisons and envy were also positively, significantly associated. - Interaction effects between in group competition within friendship group, significantly associated with both envy and social comparisons. Author links to social rank theory. - Parent comparisons significantly associated with envy, but not social comparisons.
Noon (2020)	- Peer reviewed journal - Cross sectional study	- N=177 adolescents 13-18 years (mean age of 15.45 years) 54.8% female 79.5% White British - One British High School	Exploring the relationship between comparisons to others of ability and opinion on Instagram and three identity processes: commitment, in depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment.	- Self-report paper survey - Included measures: social comparison behaviour and identity dimensions, relating to education and friendships.	- Quantitative - Pearson's correlations - Multivariate multiple regression analysis	- The sample was found to make similar levels of ability and opinion comparisons. - Ability comparisons positively correlated to identity commitment and in-depth exploration. - Opinion comparisons positively relate to in-depth exploration and reconsideration of commitment. - Females were significantly more likely than males to engage in social comparisons of ability, in addition to in-depth exploration and commitment.

Thomas et al. (2017)	• Peer reviewed journal	• N=25 first year undergraduates. • Broad use of social media platforms, regularly. • Aged 18-22 years • 6 male, 19 females • 13 British students. • 12 International students, including Hong Kong, and Italy. • Two UK universities	• Exploring the use of social media during a young person's transition into university, in relation to both social comparisons to others and the building of a community. • Utilises a three-stage model for transition; affirmation, assimilation, integration.	• Participants develop Pinterest boards, posting relevant information documenting their social media use, over a six-week period, whilst starting university. • Semi-structured interviews relating to a participant's 'digital scrapbook'.	• Qualitative • Thematically analysed interviews	• Importance of self-presentation and making yourself look good, leads to editing of own posts. • Adjusted self in terms of transition, and then have pressure to 'live up' to image and profile in real life. • Selective sharing of identity online and impression management (Goffman). • Feel as though cannot share 'true' feelings online. Make upward comparisons to others, then feel pressure to post 'happy' posts, negative cycle.
Throuvala et al. (2019)	• Peer reviewed journal	• N=42 adolescents • 12-16 years (mean 13.5 years) • 48% female • 63% White, 22% Black and East Asian 15% • Diverse range of socio-economic communities. • Three UK High Schools	• To investigate the uses, values and motivations that are ascribed to SNS use by adolescents.	• Six focus groups, with a number of topics guided by the researcher.	• Qualitative • Thematic analysis of focus groups, following of Braun and Clarke's steps (2006). • Use of inter-rater reliability checks	• 'social comparison and validation' arose as one of six key themes, and deemed to be a key motivation of SNS use. • The need to promote favourable presentation of self, and fear of how others perceive them. • Need for popularity, underpinned by content enhancement and expectation for endorsement and validation, through comments and likes.
Yang, Holden & Carter (2018)	• Peer reviewed journal • Short term longitudinal survey study	• N=219 College 'Freshmen' • Mean age of 18.29 years (S.D = .75) • 74% female	• Want to explore how two types of social comparisons (opinion and ability) on social media relate to three different identity processing styles	• Volunteer sample of online survey across two different time points, in autumn and spring term. • Measures included, a scale quantifying	• Quantitative • Correlation • Testing of developed statistical model.	• Comparisons of ability were found to significantly predict a lower level of identity clarity, through its association with a high chance of possessing a diffuse avoidant style of identity.

		• 41% White, 38% Black • Must use social media at least once a week. • American study	(informational, normative and diffuse avoidant). • Also, if this in turn then also impacts upon a young person's global self-esteem and identity clarity.	social media comparisons, identity processing styles, global self-esteem and identity clarity.		• Diffuse avoidant identity styles also then predict a lower level of global self-esteem; however, this was not significant (p=.064). • Found a significant indirect path from ability comparisons at time one to identity clarity at time two, via a diffuse avoidant identity style (p=0.39). However, opposite was not significant, leads to bidirectional association. • Participants who engage in more ability comparisons, use the diffuse avoidant style of identity more, which predicts lower identity clarity. This is where they are more confused about who they are and therefore lead to more comparisons of ability.
Yang et al. (2018)	• Peer reviewed journal • Short term longitudinal survey study	• N=219 College 'Freshmen' • Mean age of 18.29 years (S.D = .75) • 74% female • 41% White, 38% Black • Must use social media at least once a week. • American study	• Considers two types of social comparisons (ability and opinion), in relation to two introspective processes, lined to identity; rumination and reflection. • Also, part focus on level of identity distress in relation to these factors	• Online survey completed twice across two different time points, in autumn and spring term, with 3.6 months between the completion of the survey. • Measures included, a scale quantifying social media comparison, identity distress survey and reflection / rumination survey.	• Quantitative • Correlation • Regression • Confirmatory factor analysis	• Ability comparisons at time one had a positive, significant association to rumination at time one, which significantly predicted higher identity distress at time two. • Opinion comparisons at time one had a positive, significant association with reflection at time one, however, this did not predict identity distress. • Therefore, those who engage in more comparisons of ability on social media, are at higher risk of experiencing identity distress, due to their subsequent engagement in rumination.

Appendix G: Weight of Evidence Criteria

A table outlining the Weight of Evidence Criteria used to quality appraise identified studies.

Weight of Evidence A	*High*	• Peer reviewed journal article. • Clear purpose outlined and transparent participant recruitment and selection methods. • Participants greater than n = 1. • Clarity over methods, so study can be replicated. • Highly accessible, communicated results, clear data analysis and drawing of conclusions. • Reference to ethical considerations
	Medium	• Purpose outlined, or partially clear. • Participants n = 1. • Degree of detail and clarity, relating to recruitment and data collection. • Participant characteristics partially defined.
	Low	• Grey literature, such as theses or unpublished research. • Few details reported to study's sample or methodology, little transparency and study could not be replicated in the future. • Not specified about methods of data collection, analysis, or recruitment and participant sample and characteristics are poorly defined. • No purpose outlined, or unclear. • Inaccessible, in relation to coherence of text.
Weight of Evidence B	*High*	• Qualitative methods of data collection, to provide a rich, detailed insight. • To explore the possible link between social comparisons and adolescent presentation of self on SNS platforms.
	Medium	• Mixed methods. • Some inclusion of rich data exploring concepts.
	Low	• Quantitative methods of data collection.
Weight of Evidence C	*High*	• Early adolescent sample (12- 16 years). • Focus on social comparisons made on SNS and possible impact on identity formation, as the primary focus and purpose of research.

		• Relevant to current forms of SNS use, such as conducted within the last 10 years and involves the use of 'current' SNS.
	Medium	• Adolescent sample (10 – 24 years) • Focus on the use of SNS, however, perhaps uses platforms no longer regularly utilised or relevant to the current digital age (such as Myspace). • Focus on social comparisons, however perhaps not the primary focus in relation to the development of identity.
	Low	• Young person sample, such as those within a university setting, and no longer attending a compulsory education setting. • Research focuses on either social comparisons OR identity formations on SNS platforms, rather than the possible relationships between.

- Framework adopted from Gough (2007) and Pawson et al. (2003).

- Pawson et al.'s (2003) TAPUPAS criteria, highlights seven further elements which are necessary to consider when evaluating research quality. The acronym of TAPUPAS represents these seven elements, outlined below:

  - T – Transparency

  - A – Accuracy

  - P – Purposivity

  - U – Utility

  - P – Propriety

  - A – Accessibility

  - S – Specificity

- Weight of Evidence D is an overall assessment of each study's quality and relevance, developed through combining the judgements made for the Weight of Evidence A, B and C.

Appendix H: Timeline of research

A table listing the approximate timings of when the research project was completed.

Date	Research Stage
May 2020	Submission of Ethics Application
July 2020	Receiving of Ethics Approval
July 2020	Initial Literature Review
September – November 2020	Recruitment in Possible Schools
November 2020	Gathering of Parental Consent
November 2020	Completion of Pilot Interview
November - December 2020	Completion of Interviews
January 2021	Transcriptions of Interviews
February - April 2021	Data Analysis
March - May 2021	Write up Research

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School of Psychology

Information Sheet: Schools

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An exploration of female early adolescent self-presentation and social comparisons, when engaging with social networking sites.

Researcher: Beth Thompson – [beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk or beth.thompson@XXX.gov.uk]

Research Supervisor: Dr. Victoria Lewis – [lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]

Placement Supervisor: XXXXX

My name is Beth Thompson and I am currently in my third and final year of training to become an Educational Psychologist, on placement at XXX Educational Psychology Service, supervised by Dr XXX. As part of my doctoral training, I will be conducting a research project to explore the potential influence using social media may have on early adolescent social relations and self-perception.

I would like to invite your school to take part in this research.

Before you decide whether you would like to take part, please read the information below outlining the nature and purpose of the research and what it would entail for your school.

What is the purpose of the study?

The use of social networking sites, such as Instagram and Facebook have become an important part of adolescent life. The purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of the potential influence that using social media and social networking sites may have on an adolescent's social relationships. This explorative study also looks to explore the social comparisons young people may make when using such sites, alongside how this may influence their self-perception, including their social self-concept.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. If you choose to take part you are free to withdraw at any point before, during or up to two weeks after the study.

What would the research entail for your staff and pupils?

If you choose to take part in the research, an initial meeting and conversation will firstly be held with key staff members, who will be involved with the completion of the research within the school, such as the SENCO, or Head of Year. This will involve discussing with the researcher in greater depth, answering any questions and considering the logistics of completing the research within the school setting, such as an appropriate time for this to take place.

The research will involve myself the researcher conducting interviews with 8 pupils, who are all students within year 8 and identity as female. These will be semi-structured in nature, comprising of a number of predetermined questions, with opportunities for those taking part to talk about their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Each participant will engage in one interview, which will be completed on an individual basis, and are likely to last between 30 and 60 minutes.

All pupils in year 8 will be informed of the study, perhaps during an assembly, and those interested in taking part could express their interest to a member of staff. Participants should identify as female, be a frequent user of social media, accessing the websites for more than 2 hours each day and also not present with a need which would provide a barrier during the interview process; such as by perhaps having expressive language needs or high levels of anxiety. Furthermore, it is not appropriate for those individuals currently under Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services or Educational Psychology Services to take part.

Participants interested in taking part, must return a parental consent form. Myself the researcher would then get in touch with parents and provide more information relating to the research, alongside confirming informed consent for their child to take part.

It is important to highlight how the purpose of the research is to collect the views and experiences of those adolescents taking part, there are no 'correct' answers. All interviews will be audio recorded and the data gathered will be qualitatively analysed.

School staff may also be involved in the 'follow up check in' with pupils, that comprise of a quick conversation with the pupils who have participated, within the week following the interview. This is a precautionary measure to ensure the child has no unanswered questions and can be signposted to additional support, if necessary.

Will the research be confidential?

All data collected will be anonymised to ensure confidentiality and pseudonyms will be used for the write up. In addition, further details of specific examples discussed during the interviews may also be omitted from the write up, in order to remove the risk of identification.

Prior to starting the interview, participants will be informed of what 'confidentiality' means, to ensure their understanding that if they were to share something which would put either themselves or others at risk, this would have to be passed onto the necessary staff within school. The school's Designated Safeguarding Lead would be informed, and the school's safeguarding procedure adhered to. Such information would also be passed onto my Research and Placement Supervisor, in order to follow the safeguarding policies within the Educational Psychology Service.

All data collected will be used for research purposes only and audio recordings will be destroyed after the completion of the research. Information will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act, including electronic data being stored on a password protected device.

What will happen to the results?

Following the analysis of the data gathered, a summary of findings will be sent to your school, and I can be available to discuss these in greater detail. The study will be written up as part of my doctoral thesis in Applied Educational Psychology, and results may be used in published research journals in the future. Your school and participants will not be identifiable in any of these documents.

It is hoped the research will provide a detailed insight into social media use for early adolescents, whilst also supporting our understanding of the potential effects for those who utilise the platforms. This will then go onto inform how adolescents can be supported effectively within school, due to having a potentially greater understanding of their social context.

COVID-19 Contingency Arrangements:

It is hoped the research can still be completed, through interviewing participants in person **during the Autumn Term**, whilst adhering to social distancing measures. However, data could also be gathered through virtual means, such as initial meetings being conducted through email and telephone correspondence and interviews with participants competed over Microsoft Teams.

It is hoped that you feel partaking in this research would be of value to your school and an enjoyable experience for those students selected.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask. We can also be contacted after your participation at the addresses outlined below.
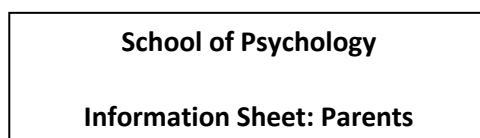
Best wishes,

Beth Thompson

Trainee Educational Psychologist

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

Researcher: Beth Thompson – [beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk or beth.thompson@XXX.gov.uk]

Research Supervisor: Dr. Victoria Lewis – [lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]

School of Psychology
Information Sheet: Parents

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

An exploration of female early adolescent self-presentation and social comparisons, when engaging with social networking sites.

Researcher: Beth Thompson – [beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk]

Supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis – [lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]

My name is Beth Thompson and I am currently in my third and final year of training to become an Educational Psychologist, on placement with the XXX Educational Psychology Service. As part of my doctoral training, I will be conducting a research project to explore the potential impact of using social media on early adolescent social relations and self-perception and your child has expressed an interest to take part.

Before you decide if you wish your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

The use of social networking sites, such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat have become an important part of adolescent life. This research will explore the possible influence of using these websites regularly on an adolescent's self-concept, which is the views towards how we see ourselves. The research also aims to investigate social comparisons being made whilst accessing such sites and how this may impact upon identity development and interactions with peers.

If you allow your child to participate, they will take part in an informal interview about their experiences of using social networking sites, and how such sites make them feel. This is to gain an understanding of the potential effect and to collect the views of those adolescents taking part. It is important to note there are no 'correct' answers.

Interviews will be completed in school, on an individual basis. It is estimated that each interview will last between 30 and 60 minutes and are likely to be completed through virtual means, such as over Microsoft Teams, rather than the researcher visiting the school to conduct the interviews in person.

Your child's participation is completely voluntary, and if you agree for your child to take part, their consent will also be gathered, before the interview. You are free to withdraw your child at any point before or during the study, in addition to up to 1 month after taking part. After this point, interviews will have been transcribed, analysed and combined with the other data gathered. As a result, an individual's data cannot be removed, however will be anonymised.

All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only, however may be shared with necessary school staff in line with safeguarding procedures. Data will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

If you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch using my email address at the top of the page. We can also be contacted after your child's participation at the above address. **Once you have provided your initial consent, a follow up phone call will be made, where you will be able to discuss the project further with the researcher, and raise any other queries you may have.**

Please sign and complete the accompanying parental consent form and return to XXX at school, as soon as possible.

Thank you.

B. Thompson

Beth Thompson

Trainee Educational Psychologist

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

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix K: Parental consent form

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<tr><td>School of Psychology

Parental Consent Form</td><td>The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA</td></tr>
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An exploration of female early adolescent self-presentation and social comparisons, when engaging with social networking sites.

Researcher: Beth Thompson – [beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk]

Supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis – [lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]

Please answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?   YES/NO

- Do you understand you are free to withdraw your child from the study, at any time before, during, or up to 1 month after completing the study?   YES/NO

- I give permission for my child's data from this study to be shared with other researchers, provided that anonymity is completely protected.   YES/NO

- Do you agree to be contacted via telephone, prior to your child's interview, as an opportunity to raise questions with the researcher?   YES/NO

- Do you agree for your child to take part in the study?   YES/NO

Signature of the Parent / Carer:

Name of Parent / Carer: (block capitals)

Contact Telephone Number:

Name of Child: (block capitals)

School:

Date:

Please complete and return to XXX, as soon as possible.

To be completed by the researcher:

I have explained the study to the parent/carer of the above participant and they agreed their child can take part:

Signature of researcher: Date:

Many aspects of the original interview process remained unchanged from the schedule outlined in Appendix L. This included the rapport activities, and procedure of briefing and collection of active participation.

Interview

*Now I'm going to ask you a series of questions about how you use social networking sites and how it may make you feel. I'm going to start the audio recording now, are you happy to continue? **wait for response** Remember to only talk about things you feel comfortable sharing, and there are no wrong or right answers.*

Don't forget you can pause the interview at any point by showing the pause button in front of you, raising your hand or just asking to pause.

1. Can you tell me about the social networking sites you use?
   - What do you do on them?
   - How do you go on these sites, on what devices?
   - Do you have a favourite social networking site and why?
   - Are there any social networking sites you don't like?
   - How often would you say you went on social networking sites?
   - How do you use social media? Do you post and interact with others, or mainly just look at other people's posts?
     - Is there a reason for that?
   - Who do you interact with on social media (close friends etc...)? Is there anyone you wouldn't interact with in person?
   - Has Covid affected how you use social media?
2. Can you tell me about the types of things you post on social media?
   - Prompt → such as pictures, updates, videos etc….
   - Why do you post those?
   - Can you tell me about what you think and feel before you post something?
   - Do you spend time thinking about and editing a post, before sharing?
     - Why and how?
   - Can you tell me about what is okay to share online and is there anything that you wouldn't want to post or share?
     - Why wouldn't you post that?

3. What happens after you put up a post?

- Do you ever get any 'feedback' from something you have posted?
  - What is this like? How?
  - How does it make you feel?
  - Does the feedback you receive ever change how you think about yourself, how you act or behave?
  - Is it important to get feedback from others on your posts? Why?
- How do you know if a post is 'good'?
- How does this 'feedback' compare to being in the real world, not on social media, such as talking to face to face?
  - How does this make you feel?

4. How does going on social media make you feel?

- Why?
- Does going on SNS ever leave you with a positive / negative feeling?
  - Can you tell me more about that?

5. What do you think about other posts you've seen, when you're on a SNS?

- Can you tell me more about how you feel when you see another person's post?
  - What is it about another person's post which makes you feel like that? → such as the content or amount of feedback they have?
  - Is there anything in another person's post which you focus on? Such as their image, number of likes and comments, their views and opinions?
- Does seeing another person's post ever make you feel differently about yourself?
  - If so, how? Such as a positive or negative feeling?
  - What is it about the post which makes you feel like that?
  - Does this differ depending on who's post it is?
- Does seeing another person's post ever make you do anything differently, such as how you behave or think?
  - Why is this?
  - Is this change when you are online, or offline?

6. Would you say your profiles on social media reflect who you are?
- Prompt → so if I saw your profile, would I get a good idea of what you're like and who you are?
- How much do you share online?
- Do you think people behave differently online than offline?
  - How and why?

- o Do you think you're different offline and in person to when you are on social media?
  - o Can you tell me why?
  - o Are the posts you see online 'real life'?
7. Do you think going on social media impacts on friendships and interacting with others?

    - If so, how?

    - Positive or negative impact? Quality or quantity?

8. Is there anything else you would like to add, or ask me?

First, share screen and show information sheet, read out to participant. Ask any questions?

Send link in Teams chat for online Active Participation Form. Ask participant to complete.

Then read out script below.

Introduction, to be read out prior to starting the interview:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the study, you should now have had an opportunity to read through the information sheet and complete the active participation form.

All that will happen in the research is that I will ask you a few questions about social media, such as how you use it and how it makes you feel.

It is important to say how there are no right or wrong answers and that I am just interested in any views you have. Try and say as much as can for each question.

With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded using a Dictaphone, however, you are able to stop the interview at any point, such as by either saying you would like to stop or perhaps by holding up the 'pause' button you have printed on the table in front of you. You could also raise your hand.

This interview will not ask you any questions about cyberbullying or abuse online. It is really important you only talk about things you feel comfortable sharing and you do not feel pressured to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Anything you do share and talk about will be confidential, which means no one will know the views that you have shared are yours. However, if you talk about something that is worrying or perhaps puts you or others in dangers, then this will be passed onto XXX within school, as well as my supervisor, in order to keep you safe.

So just before we start, are you still happy to continue with the interview? Wait for response. And do you have any other questions you would like to ask about the research or interview?

First Activity

In order to build rapport with the participant, prior to discussing social media, first engage in a period of 'problem free talk'. Such questions will not be recorded and analysed.
Make use of sharing the screen. Introduce sentence starter activity.

- Engage in a couple of sentence starters, relating to interests etc…., taken from Karen Triesman Treasure Deck resources. Such as "if I could click my fingers and travel to any place, I would go to….

- Continue to share screen, and show participants a slide outlining 'social networking sites'. Read out definition of what is meant by this term, in order to ensure a shared understanding.

Interview

Now I'm going to ask you a series of questions about how you use social media. I'm going to start the audio recording now, are you happy to continue? **wait for response** Remember to only talk about things you feel comfortable sharing, and there are no wrong or right answers.
Don't forget you can pause the interview at any point by showing the pause button in front of you, raising your hand or just asking to pause.

1. **Can you tell me about the social media sites you use, and what you do on them?**

   - **Sites you like and dislike?**

2. **What do you post when you go on social media and how much time do you spend thinking about and editing your post before?**

3. **How does getting feedback on your posts, make you feel?**

   - **Is getting feedback important?**

4. **How does going on social media make you feel about yourself?**

   - **Both generally when you are on social media and when you see other people's posts?**

5. **How you present yourself on social media, is that really you?**

   - **How you see other people on social media, is that really them?**

6. **Do you think there is a difference between how you act with your friends online, to when you are with them offline?**

7. **Is there anything else you would like to add, or ask me?**

Visual supports used for questions 1 and 4, as shown below. All other questions were presented, in the same written format as question 6.

6. Do you think there is a difference between how you act with your friends online, to when you are with them offline?

Appendix O: Child information sheet

School of Psychology Information Sheet: Young Person	The University of **Nottingham** UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

An exploration of female early adolescent self-presentation and social comparisons, when engaging with social networking sites.

Researcher: Beth Thompson – [beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk]

Supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis – [lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]

This is an invitation for you to take part in research that's all about social media and the effect going on social networking websites has on teenagers and how it may make them feel.

It is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what you will be asked to do, before you agree to take part.

Lots of children and young people use social media every day, for lots of different reasons, including talking to friends and posting pictures. This research is interested in the effect of using these websites on a child's self-perception. This is how someone thinks and feels about themselves. The research is also interested in what you think of other people's posts, compared to your own.

To get this information we will have a chat about how you use social media and websites such as Snapchat and Instagram, as well as how they make you feel. There are no right or wrong answers, we are just interested in your views. The chat will probably last between 30 and 60 minutes.

It's entirely up to you if you are happy or not to take part and can stop at any point, if you change your mind. Anything we talk about will be confidential, meaning no one will know that the views are yours. However, if you share information that is worrying or puts you or others in danger, this will be passed onto XXXX in school. It is however important that you only talk about things that you are happy to share and you do not feel pressured to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

Any questions? 😊

Created through Qualtrics and completed by the young person virtually.

Social Media Research Project

Exploring the impact of social network site use on early adolescent social relations and self-perception

Active Participation Form

Thank you for volunteering to talk about your views and experiences of using social media.

Please answer all of the questions below, as well as including your signature, at the bottom of the page.
All questions should be answered independently.

When you're finished, please press the 'Submit' button at the bottom of the page.

Thank you, 😊

Beth Thompson

Researcher: Beth Thompson – beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis – lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk
The University of Nottingham

Q1. I have read the Information Sheet.

Q2. I have been able to ask questions about the project and these have all been answered.

[dropdown ▾]

Q3.
I understand that my interview with the researcher will be audio recorded, but anything I say will be confidential, unless it puts either myself or others in danger.

[dropdown ▾]

Q4.
I know that I can stop the interview at any point or withdraw after, up to one month later, and my information will not be used.
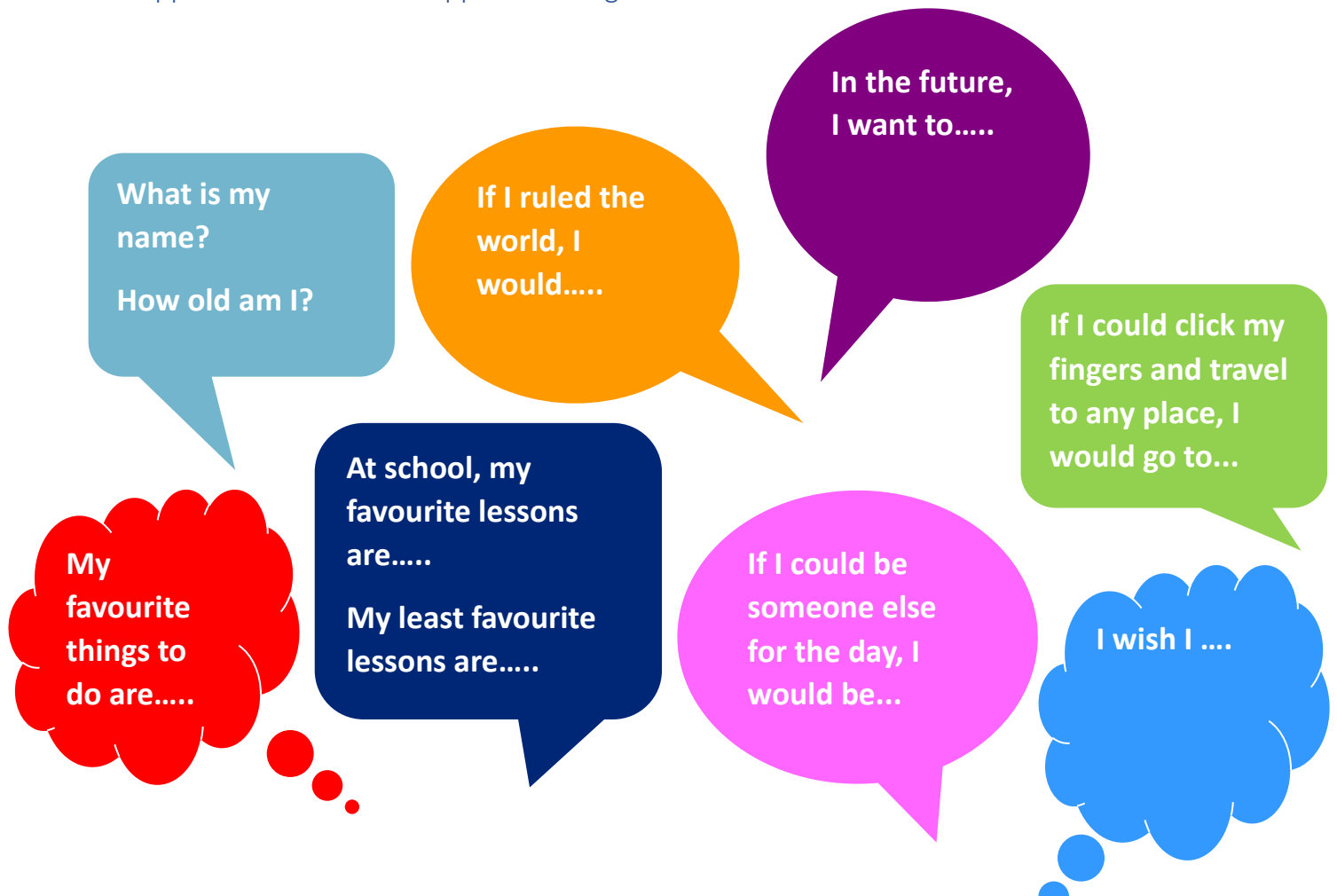
[dropdown ▾]

Q5. **Please complete:**

Name

[ ]

School

[ ]

Q6.
"I agree to take part in the study."

SIGN HERE
clear

Submit

What is my name?

How old am I?

If I ruled the world, I would…..

In the future, I want to…..

If I could click my fingers and travel to any place, I would go to…

My favourite things to do are…..

At school, my favourite lessons are…..

My least favourite lessons are…..

If I could be someone else for the day, I would be…

I wish I ….

Social Networking Sites

- Websites and apps that enable you to create and share content (RSPH 2019).

- Communicate and interact with others on the app (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017).

- Where you can create your own profile and see a list of 'followers' or connections (Ellison & Boyd, 2013).

- We can also call these sites, **social media**.

Dear Participant,

Thank you so much for taking part in this research. The information you have given during this interview, will help us to understand social media more, and how it may make teenagers who use it feel, so adults can support them better.

This interview will now be combined with the information from other participants and written up, into a long report to try and help everyone when they use social media. When this information is written up, all names will be removed, so no one reading it will know what you have said.

If, for any reason, you don't want your information to be included as part of the study, please contact me at the address below. The information you have given me will be kept safe in a locked filing cabinet, and will be destroyed after 7 years.

If taking part in the interview has affected your mental health and how you feel, please contact one of the services below, and they will be able to help:

Childline	**0800 1111** (Free 24-hour helpline)
	https://www.childline.org.uk/
	Includes message boards and 1-2-1 counsellor chats online.
Koothe	https://www.kooth.com/index.html
	Online counsellors and support, Monday to Friday 12pm – 10 pm, Saturday to Sunday 6pm – 10pm.
Young Minds	https://youngminds.org.uk/
	Click on the 'How can we help you?' box.
	Free text service for urgent help, 24 hours. Text YM to **85258.**
Samaritans	**116 123** (free 24-hour helpline)
	www.samaritans.org.uk

The Mix   https://www.themix.org.uk/

0808 808 4994 (13:00 – 23:00, free helpline)

Online chat service and information on further support.

You can also talk to and access support from XXX within school.

If you have any more questions about the interviews or the research that you didn't have chance to ask, please get in touch, by emailing me at the address below.

It was great working with you and thank you again!

Yours sincerely,

Beth Thompson 😊

Trainee Educational Psychologist

beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix S: Sample of data familiarisation

Below is an example of the notes made onto the transcripts, during the data familiarisation stage. This extract is taken from Ruby, Participant 5.

Researcher: Okay, so it's just like a really short video to music, I'm guessing?

Yes.

Researcher: Yeah okay, erm yes, so do you ever get any sort of feedback on the things from Snapchat or anything?

if not getting feedback for posts, why else might ● be posting? → self expression — show others who she is? - self disclosure?

Erm, not really no.

Researcher: No okay. So how does going on social media make you feel about yourself, and this is a bit of a two-part question. So generally, how you feel about yourself when you're on social media and then also more specifically, how you feel about yourself when you see other people's posts, okay?

- aware of audience + feels comfortable sharing herself on platform

Normally on social media I just feel quite like (safe) in a way, because I know that there's not many people who look at my account who tend to be horrible about it and stuff like that, and sometimes when I see other people's posts, sometimes it just makes you a little bit 'mmm' about yourself, because they're like really like pretty or something, and then you'll just like a bit like 'oh'.

social comparison to others - impact on sense of self

Researcher: Okay yeah, and how does that make you feel?

Sometimes it just makes you feel a bit (insecure) about yourself, because there's people on there who are like really pretty and stuff, and you're just kind of like, why don't I look like that in a way?

is this comparison seen to be attainable? can ● get closer to this aspiration

Researcher: Mhm, okay yeah. Are there any other sort of feelings that you get, when you see other people's posts?

Like sometimes they make me laugh, sometimes they're just a bit annoying, and you're just a bit like 'eurghh' in a way, sometimes they just make you happy in a way, and sometimes people try and lift up your spirits and stuff.

- a range of emotional responses / reactions

Researcher: Yeah, okay, you sort of described someone as, you sort of said, sometimes people are just a bit 'eughh', what do you mean by that?

Sometimes the post just annoys you for different reasons, like maybe they're too enthusiastic, or they're just a bit like annoying.

- critical of others → comparison to these ~~attitudes~~? down-words?

Researcher: Okay mhm, and then does that make you feel anything about how you see yourself, or how you view yourself?

Not really.

Researcher: Okay. Yes, so you've mentioned about feeling quite insecure about image, {yeah} sometimes when you see other people's posts, can you tell me anything else, can you tell me more about that?

It's just that sometimes you won't feel very confident about yourself, and then you'll see someone who's on TikTok, who everyone thinks is gorgeous and stuff, and you just feel a little bit like you're not good as them and you won't and you can't be in a way. ✳

→ very definite that it is unobtainable / cant do anything to get closer to this individual? - how does this impact on self? negatively?

Researcher: Mhm, okay yeah, and does that change how you act or anything?

Erm. not really no. → *BUT doesnt change what she does, just thoughts & views of herself?*

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	Participant 1: Freya	Semantic Code	Latent Code	Reflexivity
1.65	**Researcher:** Okay and yeah, what makes you think, should I put it up or should I not?			
1.66	**FREYA:** Erm it just like, it's the audience, like most of my friends, there's no point putting it up, if they're going to see it and it's just like, it's not my thing.	• Consideration about posting or not centres on audience and who will see the post. • No point sharing online self, if audience knows offline self.	• Focus on audience. • Concept of audience, links to the notions that presenting one's self is like performing on a stage?	•
1.67	**Researcher:** Okay, but you used to spend quite a lot of time thinking about it?			
1.68	**FREYA:** Yeah.	•	•	•
1.69	**Researcher:** Yeah, and what did you think about then?			
1.70	**FREYA:** I was just thinking about, would they like it, would they like it. Not me, it doesn't matter if I like it, it's what they like.	• Frequency of posting depends on audience perceptions. • Significant value placed on audience perception.	• Looking glass self – hypothesising audience perception of self. • Seeking acceptance from audience.	• I felt shocked and saddened when Freya stated 'it doesn't matter if I like it….', due to her complete focus on other people's views. I wonder if there is pressure to conform / change identity, in order to stay in line with audience expectations?
1.71	**Researcher:** Okay.			
1.72	**FREYA:** But now I'm like, if I like it, then it doesn't matter about them, if I like it, I'm posting it.	• Now will post what she likes, less focus on the views of the audience.	• Greater security in self-presentation, now slightly older.	• I feel it is a significant change in mind set from

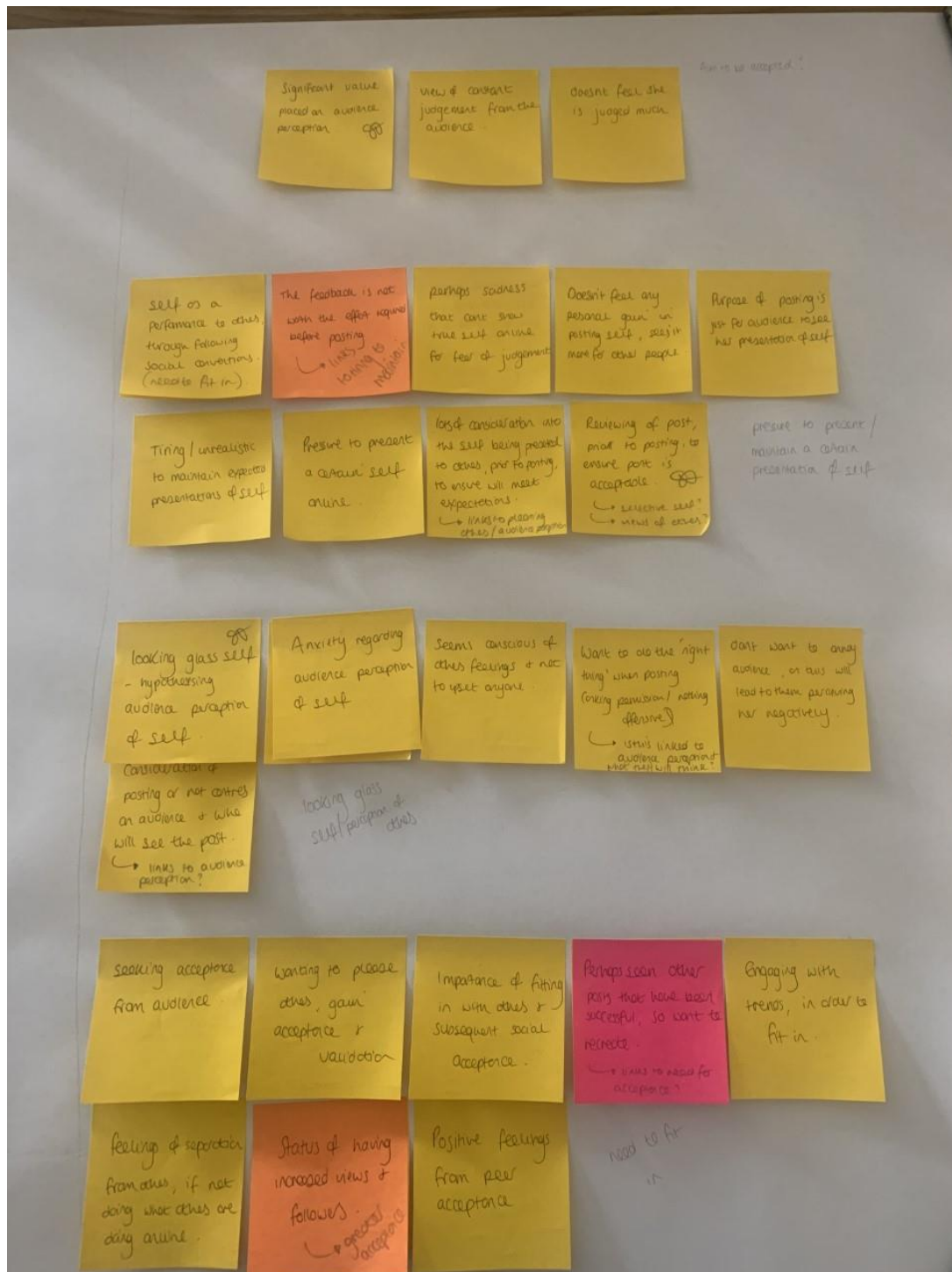|				Freya's views in year 7, a few months ago? • Now in year 8, top of middle school, perhaps more confident?
			• As got older, less value placed on views of others.	
1.73	**Researcher:** Yeah, yeah, okay, why was it so important I guess, for them to like it?			
1.74	**FREYA:** Erm, I just thought, like if they like it then they'll accept me, if you get what I mean.	• Seeking acceptance from audience.	• Significant value placed on audience perception.	•
1.75	**Researcher:** Okay, mhm, yeah and what do you mean by accepting you?			
1.76	**FREYA:** It means like letting me in and being their friend and stuff, and I feel like if I post the wrong thing, I'm not going to be their friend anymore.	• Seeking acceptance from audience. • Anxiety over posting.	• Importance of social support in adolescence.	•
1.77	**Researcher:** Okay, yeah, and how did that make you feel?			
1.78	**FREYA:** It made me feel really nervous of posting something, so that's why I don't really that much anymore.	• Reduces or avoids posting to reduce anxiety.	• Nervous of posting the wrong self-presentation and not meeting expectations of peers. • Actions to protect self.	•

A table which provides an example of the collapsing and reviewing of codes with similar meanings.

Initial Codes	Collapsed Code
• 5.96: Looking glass self - Hypothesising what audience may think of post. • 1.64: Looking glass self, perhaps considering what others may think of post before sharing. • 3.88: Looking glass self, where hypothesising what the audience may think. • 1.70: Looking glass self and trying to hypothesise what audience will think of post. • 5.100: Looking glass self, trying to think how others perceive her. • 5.133: Looking glass self, hypothesising what others are thinking and how they are perceived. • 6.37: Looking glass self, trying to pre-empt how audience perceives her. • 3.90: Consideration of what audience will think. • 3.88: Consideration of how the audience may perceive a post, prior to sharing.	Looking glass self – hypothesising audience perception of self.
• 1.64: Consideration of whether to post or not. • 5.22: Consideration over post content to ensure it's appropriate and follows platform rules • 6.35: Lots of thought before posting, to make sure everything looks 'alright'. • 6.53: Consideration of post, to reduce chance of negative feedback. • Thought behind appearance to ensure looks 'alright'. • 3.74: Reviewing post, prior to posting, to ensure it's acceptable. • 3.92: Important to ensure the post is not offensive.	Reviewing of post, prior to posting, to ensure post is acceptable.
• 2.96: Awareness of internet risks. • 2.98: Personal experience of internet risk. • 3.46: Some awareness of internet safety and privacy. • 4.79: Learnt about internet safety throughout school life. • 5.171: Aware of internet safety.	Awareness of internet risks.

Appendix V: Theme generation

Below is an image to represent the generation of themes, during the data analysis process. Each code was recorded onto a post-it note, which were then grouped and moved around according to their meaning. This was an ongoing, iterative process, where codes were moved between possible themes. The image below displays an extract of codes.

Appendix W: Full table of themes.

A table displaying the full list of themes and subthemes generated during the analysis, addressing research question 1, with examples from the data.

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Semantic / Latent	Data Extract
1. **Online self is a performance to the audience.**	Online self is a performance to the audience.	Online self is a performance.	Latent	• 5.90: I don't know, I guess some people act more confident because they don't really want people to like know about, like they don't want random people on the Internet to actually know about them, in a way, like know who they are, properly, in a way.
		Use of and engagement with SNS, but then not wanting to share more widely.	Semantic	• 3.180: Yeah, but I don't really post dancing, I like to see how people do it and then I'll learn the dance and stuff.
		Acutely aware of self-presentation being emitted to others.	Latent	• 6.53: I just make sure that my background's like completely blank and you can't see anything but a white wall, just like a wall. And then I always make sure that like my hair looks okay, and that what I'm wearing is looks alright as well.
		Awareness that online presentation may be very different to 'real' self.	Semantic	• 5.102: Like sometimes you may just act completely different to what you actually are, like sometimes you may be sad but you'll be happy for the video, but I don't do that quite often, because normally, when I'm sad I don't really like post about it on social media.
	A. Self-presentation may differ, according to the audience.	A more accurate and 'real' self is only shared with select audience online.	Latent	• 6.99: Erm, certain friends maybe, but not like my closest friends, because when I'm messaging my closest friends, I don't really care how I look when I send them a picture, I don't use a filter, and I don't really like take time into how I look when I'm messaging them, so I feel like I act the same online with those.
		A more restricted presentation of self, if public.	Semantic	• 4.71: so, I post things that are weird and funny and then on my other one, I don't post my face
		Self-presentation depends on audience.	Latent	• 4.68: well, I have like 2 accounts on TikTok, one where I post my face and one isn't, the one where I do, that's pretty much me, like weird and stuff I do like weird memes and…
		Protection of self and identity from unfamiliar people online.	Semantic	• 5.92: I don't know, I guess some people just don't really want random strangers knowing everything about them.
		Short period editing posts of self on personal profile.	Semantic	• 2.13: Okay, I usually spend, well editing them, I spend about 2 minutes, not long really, erm but my photography work probably about 20 to 30 minutes, making them as best as I can, and fiddling around with different filters that I can use.
		Inconsistent presentation of self online.	Semantic	• 5.96: Like sometimes I'll just be really silly on social media, and won't care what people think of the video, but sometimes when I post something, I'll kind of like rethink it and be like what if people judge me for it in a way, so sometimes I end up deleting some videos that I posted.
		Enhanced self-presentation, only for certain occasions and context.	Semantic	• 5.86: When like I present myself on social media, sometimes I'll just be myself, and sometimes I will actually try and like, not be different but be like sometimes I'll try and look a bit better in a way.
		Greater consideration and effort into self-presentation, to those not as close, possibly more likely to judge.	Latent	• 6.99: Erm, certain friends maybe, but not like my closest friends, because when I'm messaging my closest friends, I don't really care how I look when I send them a picture, I don't use a filter, and I don't really like take time into how I look when I'm messaging them, so I feel like I act the same online with those. If they're not that close and we just share the odd like message, I feel like I am a little bit different on social media, and I try and make sure that I look a certain way and make sure I've got a filter and stuff like that,

				but then when I see them at school I can't have a filter, so I act different and I'm not like perfect all the time at school.
		Still a degree of thought in posts for selective audiences.	Semantic	• 6.43: Erm, not as much because the people that I'm close to, and not just like everyone, but I still do a little bit yeah.
		If public, then your posts may be shown to a much larger audience, including people you don't know or don't follow you.	Semantic	• 4.46: Public is where people who maybe you don't follow can see your post, and when you first go on TikTok, it sends you to this page where videos pop up, and there's this following page or for you page. The following page is people who follow you and you follow them and that following is if you're private, you can go on following and on the for you page you can also go on your private but the for you page, if you're private you can't get on the for you page {okay} and that is, like people everywhere can just see your videos because if they don't follow you they can still see it {mhm}, so if you're public it will pop up on the for you page sometimes, not always, on private only people that follow you and you follow them can see it.
		Varying levels of effort in the self being presented	Semantic	• 5.86: When like I present myself on social media, sometimes I'll just be myself, and sometimes I will actually try and like, not be different but be like sometimes I'll try and look a bit better in a way.
		Different aspects of identity presented on different accounts.	Latent	• 2.17: Erm, well my main account, which is about all of my friends and family and the other one, is just photography work, art work and yeah.
		Multiple accounts within a platform	Semantic	• 4.68: well, I have like 2 accounts on TikTok, one where I post my face and one isn't, the one where I do, that's pretty much me, like weird and stuff I do like weird memes and…
		Joint account with peer with shared interest	Semantic	• 4.50: my friend does photography too and she posts and we kind of in a way work together, kind of thing and I think we do have an account where we're both on the same and we do different photography stuff and that makes me happy because we're both probably in the same stage of being in the good section
		Multiple accounts with differing presentations of self, however one which shows face, is more private, so feel happier sharing more of self.	Semantic	• 4.71: so, I post things that are weird and funny and then on my other one, I don't post my face but I post things about me, in a way, like what I normally do. I have a cat and my cat means a lot to me, and I post my cat on there sometimes, and I post sometimes what I'm watching or playing and what I normally do and maybe what inspires me.
		Not all posts are edited, prior to being shared.	Semantic	• 2.28: Erm, TikTok, I don't really edit on there, because there's nothing really to edit. Snapchat is already edited for you, because it has all the filters on there.
B.	There is a caution with the extent of self that is shared.	Caution in what is shared online.	Semantic	• 2.102: Erm, it made me feel a bit worried, if they try to locate where I was, and how old I am and try and get information from me {mhm}, just in case they messaged me on like TikTok, or something like that, yeah.
		Conscious of sharing too much personal information online.	Semantic	• 4.44: I do think if anything's going to give away anything about myself, like my school, I would never - I always check before that, because I always check if my school uniform is on there because on TikTok you can either have a private or public account and mine is on public, so everybody can see it and private is if somebody follows you and you follow them back, they can see your videos.
		The need to be in control of presentation of self and the only share certain aspects of self online.	Latent	• 5.135: Like maybe if you do something really stupid, I don't know, just like I'm there messing around and being like really weird and then you look at it, you think it's funny, but then you look at it 5 minutes later when you've posted it and you're just kind of like, actually no, I don't want to keep this up, because I look really weird, and you take it down.
		Johari window and caution over what individuals place in the 'open area' for all to know.	Latent	• 5.90: I don't know, I guess some people act more confident because they don't really want people to like know about, like they don't want random people on the Internet to actually know about them, in a way, like know who they are, properly, in a way.
		Feelings of regret about posting something personal.	Latent	• 5.125: Sometimes you may take down things that you've posted and you feel that, well I do this, you feel as though I have posted something that is too personal to myself, I will take it down, because I'll feel

					comfortable posting it and I'll come back like 5 minutes later and think, hang on I shouldn't have posted this, because it's too personal.
		Caution online, due to possible risk.	Semantic	•	2.100: Um I just ignored it and unfollowed them {mhm}, just in case it was an older person.
		May regret sharing that particular presentation of self.	Semantic	•	5.96: Like sometimes I'll just be really silly on social media, and won't care what people think of the video, but sometimes when I post something, I'll kind of like rethink it and be like what if people judge me for it in a way, so sometimes I end up deleting some videos that I posted.
		Removal of post, due to level of self disclosure.	Semantic	•	5.125: Sometimes you may take down things that you've posted and you feel that, well I do this, you feel as though I have posted something that is too personal to myself, I will take it down, because I'll feel comfortable posting it and I'll come back like 5 minutes later and think, hang on I shouldn't have posted this, because it's too personal.
		Emit a selective self-presentation of self, to ensure acceptance.	Latent	•	5.133: Yes, sometimes if you're a bit too odd on it, like I'm a bit too odd on a video I'll take it down, because I feel like people may think that I'm just a really weird kind of person.
		Perhaps remove a post in an attempt to regain control of self-presentation.	Latent	•	1.46: Because, after most people have seen it, it's just going to be on there, and I feel like it's not going to really do much after then, it's just on there, doing nothing.
		Thought into self-presentation and the image being portrayed.	Semantic	•	5.116: Maybe like, well let's say I'm taking a photo then maybe I'll put on like a decent outfit and try and make myself look better, in a way. Some people put on a filter to make their skin look better, if they don't like their skin, and that kind of stuff.
	C. Sharing an enhanced version of themselves to others.	Editing images prior to posting.	Semantic	•	4.40: I only do it when, on this other app, I forgot what it's called but it's an editing app where you can add videos and then you can put like writing on and do different fonts can appear on it, it's kind of like PowerPoint with animations and transitions.
		Wanting to emit an enhanced online self-presentation.	Latent	•	5.120: Erm, they just kind of like, they maybe make the background look better, or sometimes they do make your skin look a bit better.
		Use of filters and editing to enhance self-presentation.	Semantic	•	2.41: Erm, I guess either to make myself look prettier, or to you know, just stuff like that.
		Edit posts to attract attention and make more noticeable.	Semantic	•	2.43: I guess for family photos as well, like to put different edits on them, make it look more stand out, for it to stand out a bit more.
		Awareness of presenting an enhanced self-presentation online.	Semantic	•	6.89: Erm, when I present myself on social media it's not really me because I try and like make sure that I look kind of almost perfect and in real life I don't always look like that, and other times I don't really wear makeup that much like a lot of people, a lot of the time, I'm just in tracksuit bottoms and stuff, like tracksuit, so yeah, I don't really look like how I look on my social media all the time, sometimes I do if it's like an occasion or something, but no not really.
		Aiming to present a 'perfect' self online.	Semantic	•	6.83: Erm, just because I try to make everything look perfect, and it just got a little bit tiring when I wanted to post but I needed to make sure the background was nice, my hair was looking nice, and my outfit, so it just got a little bit tiring, so that's probably why I don't post as much on TikTok.
		Importance of enhancing appearance to others.	Latent	•	6.47: Like some filters maybe just don't suit certain people, so like my friend might have a favourite filter, but then when I use it makes me look like worse, {okay} if that makes sense.
		Presenting a skilled aspect of self to others.	Latent	•	4.34: Well, because I do photography, I've done that on Instagram and I also like theme parks like Alton Towers and I did some slow mo's, so I'm just doing some nice photography stuff and things that I'm kind of proud of I'm doing, and posting it on there.
		Presenting an interesting presentation of self to others.	Latent	•	2.11: Well, not Snapchat because you can't really post things on there, but I send them to my friends. Erm, TikTok, I post my myself dancing, talking, like on lip syncing. Erm, Instagram I also post pictures on there of me and my family together, like if we've gone on a day out, or something like that.
				•	3.76: Just to make it like look a bit nicer and more interesting.

	D.	SNS enables identity exploration.	Different self-expressions through editing and filters.	Semantic	• 2.37: I sometimes use a different like variety of them, like different ones.
			Exploration of identity through trying new things, may find something really enjoy doing.	Semantic	• 4.12: well I just feel that on there, there's a lot of good stuff and I've started doing stuff from TikTok, like drawing and trying to draw better and trying to do more and I've done some cake stuff, like cake recipes from TikTok and I've learnt new dances on there, I'm not very good at the dancing but I've learnt new dances and I think pretty much all my family has it, they don't really post on it but they know it and go on it, so like we can do dances together on it and it's quite fun to do that.
			Use of SNS to explore identity and try out new things, including style.	Semantic	• 3.174: it's like you'll have a whole bunch of inspiration from other people, like styles, like the aesthetic, like a style of clothing, you just like, you would be more creative, if you find some more stuff online on social media.
			Use of SNS for inspiration and ideas.	Semantic	• 3.174: it's like you'll have a whole bunch of inspiration from other people, like styles, like the aesthetic, like a style of clothing, you just like, you would be more creative, if you find some more stuff online on social media.
			Development and learning of skills.	Semantic	• 3.10: People like do dances and stuff, and some people um may start doing that and find out that they really enjoy it and they'll like it.
			Want other posts on the platforms to reflect interests and their current identity. Perhaps more confirmation of identity, rather than exploration?	Latent	• 4.6: I don't have any other ones, I've heard of most of them. Pinterest I did have it but I didn't really find it very interesting, you just like scroll through things and have a look at posts, most of them are quite random.
2.	The importance of audience perception for early adolescents.	A. Predicting the audience's perception.	Looking glass self – hypothesising audience perception of self.	Latent	• 3.88: Erm, I just think about what people would think about the post, like if they think it's nice, or a bit weird, or something.
			Significant value placed on audience perception.	Semantic	• 1.70: I was just thinking about, would they like it, would they like it. Not me, it doesn't matter if I like it, it's what they like.
			View of constant judgement from the audience.	Semantic	• 6.37: Erm, I don't really know, I just feel like people just might be looking at everything, and to maybe like comment about something, so I just need to make sure that everything's away and it's just kind of like a blank background, so there's nothing for anyone to comment about.
			Continue to think about post, even after posting online.	Semantic	• 5.125: Sometimes you may take down things that you've posted and you feel that, well I do this, you feel as though I have posted something that is too personal to myself, I will take it down, because I'll feel comfortable posting it and I'll come back like 5 minutes later and think, hang on I shouldn't have posted this, because it's too personal.
			Frequency of posting depends on audience perceptions.	Semantic	• 3.98: Well, good feedback would be like you have more courage to like post more, because people like enjoy what you post. If you have like bad feedback, then you just, I would feel like I shouldn't post anymore.
			Don't want to annoy audience, as this will lead to them perceiving her negatively.	Latent	• 3.108: Well, I don't really enjoy posting as well, but um, I don't know cos it's just a feeling that if I post a lot, then I'll be like spamming or something.
			Lots of consideration into the self being presented to others, prior to posting, to ensure will meet expectation.	Latent	• 6.35: So, I do take quite a lot of time to make them and to make sure everything looks alright, and the background looks alright, but I do post more on TikTok, then I do on Instagram.
			Reviewing of post, prior to posting, to ensure post is acceptable.	Semantic	• 3.74: Oh yeah, sometimes I do add like a filter and colours, and then I do like look back at it to see if it's alright to post and stuff.
			Seems conscious of others feelings and not to upset anyone.	Latent	• 3.92: So, like nothing offensive or like anything that could possibly offend someone, and that erm, also how asking permission to ask friends and stuff {yeah}, like that stuff.

		Anxiety regarding audience perception of self.	Semantic	• 5.100: Sometimes it makes me feel a little bit sad, because maybe I put effort into the video and then I don't like it, or I'm scared, I'm a little bit worried that people aren't going to like it, or they're going to judge you for it.
		Fear of negative feedback from audience.	Semantic	• 6.39: Erm, I don't really know to be honest, I just feel like seeing people my age posting on TikTok, but maybe getting a bit more followers than me, and then if they don't post anything with a blank background, then I go in the comments and people are quite mean to them and I just don't want that to happen to me.
		Doesn't feel she is judged much.	Semantic	• 4.50: well, I'm fine with that, I don't really get like judged much, so like when I'm on it and I look through the comments and I'm fine because I know it's my opinion and people have opinions, so yeah.
	B. The need to fit in and conform to social expectations.	Seeking acceptance from audience	Semantic / Latent	• 1.74: Erm, I just thought, like if they like it then they'll accept me, if you get what I mean.
		Wanting to please others, gain acceptance and validation.	Latent	• 5.100: Sometimes it makes me feel a little bit sad, because maybe I put effort into the video and then I don't like it, or I'm scared, I'm a little bit worried that people aren't going to like it, or they're going to judge you for it.
		Importance of fitting in with others and subsequent social acceptance.	Latent	• 2.70: Erm, because every video I see on my 'for you' page, or something, or my following pages, or stories, because I like listening and reading stories {mhm} on my phone, or my laptop, or something like that. So, I feel like I need to do that as well.
		Engaging with trends in order to fit in.	Latent	• 4.20: When I'm on like TikTok, if I post something I just do random stuff like the trends that are happening, like sometimes there's this one where you have to say your voice, like your actual voice and not edit your voice {mhm} and put it on and then yeah, so there's quite a lot of trends on TikTok that you can do, like dancing ones and some challenges in a way and I just post stuff from like the trends on it.
		Importance of social support in adolescence.	Latent	• 1.76: It means like letting me in and being their friend and stuff, and I feel like if I post the wrong thing, I'm not going to be their friend anymore.
		Perhaps seen other post that have been successful so want to recreate.	Latent	• 3.143: Erm, well if I like see a picture of some people with their friends, you may want to go meet up with your friends and take those pictures, and post on social media and stuff.
		Positive feelings from peer acceptance.	Semantic	• 3.114: It just tells you that people enjoy what you're posting, and you like to, it will just make you feel really good, and make you want to post more of that, whatever you've posted.
		Feelings of separation from others, if not doing what others are doing online.	Semantic	• 2.67: Erm, it makes me feel a bit left out, a bit.
		Self as a performance to others, through following of social conventions.	Latent	• 2.65: Erm, sometimes it makes me feel happy, like if I'm talking to someone, if I'm by myself, that's what it makes me feel like sometimes. Er, sometimes it makes me feel like I need to do more of what they're doing, because if they're like doing, like if they're like doing POVs, like a 'point of view', of like a story that they're telling, or something, like on TikTok, I feel like I should do that as well.
		Status of having increased views and followers.	Latent	• 2.86: To make more views on their posts, or something.
		Tiring / unrealistic to maintain expected presentations of self.	Semantic	• 6.83: Erm, just because I try to make everything look perfect, and it just got a little bit tiring when I wanted to post but I needed to make sure the background was nice, my hair was looking nice, and my outfit, so it just got a little bit tiring, so that's probably why I don't post as much on TikTok.
		Pressure to present a certain self.	Semantic	• 6.14: Just because I think, it's just a lot of pressure to look a certain way with all the followers so sometimes I just can't really be bothered to take loads of pictures and decide which one looks nice and which ones don't.
	C. Positive feedback from audience, strengthens	Positive feedback increases the frequency of posting.	Semantic	• 3.114: It just tells you that people enjoy what you're posting, and you like to, it will just make you feel really good, and make you want to post more of that, whatever you've posted.

				Feedback provides reassurance and reinforcement of self-presentation.	Latent	• 1.100: Because when I actually post it, I feel like I start getting anxious, thinking do they like it or not, and then when someone gives me feedback, saying 'oh this is great' and stuff, it makes me feel calm again, that there is actually someone that likes it. • 2.57: Erm, makes me feel like I want to do it more, and more often than what I do, because I usually do it about three times a week.
and reinforces aspects of self.				Reassurance when others agree with her opinion in the post.	Latent	• 4.48: I posted my opinion on something and I said it was an opinion and people were saying it's wrong and then I just kept on saying it was my opinion, but then my cousin said that it was her opinion a lot, so yeah.
				Positive feedback strengthens aspects of identity.	Latent	• 4.44: well, if it's good and like on my photography I feel like and I'm going to try and keep posting because it makes me want to do it more, when I get good feedback from it.
				Peers comparing themselves to the participant.	Semantic	• 2.53: Well, with my photography work, they say all my photos are good, and they really like them and they wish that they could do it as good as me.
				Positive feedback leads to increased confidence with appearance.	Semantic	• 2.47: It makes me feel good about myself sometimes, and makes myself, it makes me feel more confident, with how I look.
				Positive feedback enhances self-esteem.	Semantic	• 6.51: on Instagram I don't really get any negative comments, I normally just get positive comments, so that makes me feel a little bit better about myself.
				Positive feedback leads to positive feelings, due to acceptance from audience.	Semantic / Latent	• 5.32: It makes me feel like sometimes it makes you feel like happy because sometimes people enjoy what you're posting, it makes them laugh or something. • 5.36: Erm, sometimes like people sometimes people will like say that my stuff is quite good and sometimes people will like laugh at it and stuff and that sometimes makes you feel quite happy, because people like what you're posting.
		D.	Negative feedback from audience reduces frequency of self-presentation.	Negative feedback leads to upset.	Semantic	• 6.65: It did make me feel quite upset and quite, just like angry as well a little bit, because they used to be my closest friend and they still thought it was okay, even though you weren't my friend anymore, they still thought it was okay like to say something negative.
				Bad feedback leads to annoyance with self that post was deemed acceptable to share.	Semantic	• 1.88: Well, it depends what feedback it is, if it's like quite bad feedback, which I have had in the past, it just makes me feel really annoyed with myself that I put it up. But if I get good feedback, it makes me feel really happy.
				Anger about putting self in a vulnerable position and exposing to negative feedback.	Latent	• 1.94: Because when I kept thinking, 'should I post it, or not', it just makes me feel annoyed and angry at myself that I did eventually post it.
				The avoidance of negative feedback is perhaps of greater importance to the individual, than receiving positive feedback.	Latent	• 6.51: On TikTok, I don't really get that many comments because I try and make everything so no one can comment on anything, so I don't really get any comments on that, but on Instagram I don't really get any negative comments, I normally just get positive comments, so that makes me feel a little bit better about myself.
				Negative feedback reduces number of future posts.	Semantic	• 3.98: If you have like bad feedback, then you just, I would feel like I shouldn't post anymore.
				May remove post, due to worries of judgement.	Semantic	• 5.96: Like sometimes I'll just be really silly on social media, and won't care what people think of the video, but sometimes when I post something, I'll kind of like rethink it and be like what if people judge me for it in a way, so sometimes I end up deleting some videos that I posted.
3. Actions in order to protect an	A.	Protection from online risk.		Awareness of internet risk.	Semantic	• 2.96: Well, sometimes on the POVs, stories and stuff, you can't see their face, so they could be acting like they're like a 9-year-old child, when it could be like a 45-year-old man.

individual's presentation of self online.			Actions to avoid risk.	Latent	• 4.44: I do think if anything's going to give away anything about myself, like my school, I would never - I always check before that, because I always check if my school uniform is on there because on TikTok you can either have a private or public account and mine is on public, so everybody can see it and private is if somebody follows you and you follow them back, they can see your videos.
			Removal of name to protect identity.	Semantic	• 3.46: You don't put your username as your name, so like you just put a random name, you don't have to do your name you just, but um you don't really use Snapchat or Instagram because it'll be like exposing your identity and stuff.
			Provides internet safety advice to peers about the extent they share about themselves.	Semantic	• 4.79: Um, well when I'm on it, I don't post things really about me, but some of my friends do and I tell them not to, and they post maybe their uniform on there sometimes. But I do say to them to blur it out. Because I get quite cautious, because we've been learning, all my life at school, we've learned a lot about cyber bullying and people finding out too much information about you, so I'm quite cautious and stuff
			Some level of privacy settings.	Semantic	• 3.70: Erm, cos I had social media for like a while, and I um don't really look at who follows me, but my accounts on private and stuff.
			Awareness of audience, due to private account.	Semantic	• 6.35: Yeah, I don't make as many as I used to, my accounts on private, so most of them are like people I know, or are close to, or just know of, but I've met them before.
	B.	Protection of own self-concept.	Actions to protect self.	Latent	• 1.92: So, well my best friend, which is a year older than me, her friend, was commenting on my posts, because I had a caption saying, 'this post isn't as good, as it would be, but it doesn't really matter I'm posting it', and they commented on it saying, 'well I know it's bad, so why do you post it', so I deleted it straight after, and it just started happening again, so I just blocked them, and said to my friend, 'can you tell them to stop doing it'.
			Seeks honest opinion from trusted others, before posting.	Semantic	• 6.33: Erm, I just kind of go and ask my sister, who's a bit older, so she will just tell me the truth, and my friend and then if they say that I look nice, I just put it up because they're like the people that are the most important and if they think I look nice then that's okay.
			Learning from other people's experiences to reduce possible negative feedback.	Latent	• 6.39: I just feel like seeing people my age posting on TikTok, but maybe getting a bit more followers than me, and then if they don't post anything with a blank background, then I go in the comments and people are quite mean to them and I just don't want that to happen to me.
			Avoids certain platforms, due to the comparisons made to posts and subsequent associated feelings.	Latent	• 6.77: Instagram, I don't really go on it that much, just because I see loads of people looking like how I want to look.
			Reduction in the frequency of self-presentation, due to upward comparisons.	Latent	• 6.21: Erm, it does sometimes make me a bit upset, but then I just don't really think about it that much unless it's like I'm scrolling through and all of them are just like pictures of people I want to look like. Instagram, I don't go on it as much, because of that reason and that's why I don't post as much.
			Possible posting with friends, to reduce focus being on just her.	Latent	• 3.64 – 3.66: Erm, cos I don't really like, there's nothing to post, so like, I don't really like posting myself, so I just like, I don't know how to explain, it's just like, really nice to post pictures with your friends. I don't know to be honest, it's just, I don't feel comfortable with it, like to see who's going to see it and stuff.
			Protects sense of self and identity, by stating 'it's just my opinion', in case others disagree.	Latent	• 4.48: I posted my opinion on something and I said it was an opinion and people were saying it's wrong and then I just kept on saying it was my opinion, but then my cousin said that it was her opinion a lot, so yeah. (look for following sentence?)
			Reduces or avoids posting to reduce anxiety.	Semantic	• 1.78: It made me feel really nervous of posting something, so that's why I don't really that much anymore.
			Upward comparisons to celebrities but rationalising in head that it may not be real.	Latent	• 6.71: Erm, I still feel like they, and I say to myself they look really nice, and I want to look like them when I'm older, but then at the same time, in the back of my head I know that it's highly edited.

			Semantic / Latent	Data Extract
		Removal of post, due to negative feedback.	Semantic	• 1.92: So, well my best friend, which is a year older than me, her friend, was commenting on my posts, because I had a caption saying, 'this post isn't as good, as it would be, but it doesn't really matter I'm posting it', and they commented on it saying, 'well I know it's bad, so why do you post it', so I deleted it straight after, and it just started happening again, so I just blocked them, and said to my friend, 'can you tell them to stop doing it'.
		Actions to avoid negative feedback.	Semantic	• 6.37: Erm, I don't really know, I just feel like people just might be looking at everything, and to maybe like comment about something, so I just need to make sure that everything's away and it's just kind of like a blank background, so there's nothing for anyone to comment about.

Research Question 2

A table displaying the full list of themes and subthemes generated during the analysis, addressing research question 2, with examples from the data.

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Semantic / Latent	Data Extract
1. A range of social comparisons are made during SNS use.	A range of social comparisons are made during SNS use.	Participant doesn't feel they compare themselves to others' posts.	Semantic	• 3.129: Erm, well it really depends what they posted, if they've like posted a picture of themselves, it would be like giving me inspiration or how they look, and stuff like, that but nothing like comparing and stuff, but like um, like yeah.
	A. Upward assimilative comparisons.	Upward assimilative comparisons made on SNS, which prompts a desire to try and move closer to the comparison.	Semantic / Latent	• 4.12: well I just feel that on there, there's a lot of good stuff and I've started doing stuff from TikTok, like drawing and trying to draw better and trying to do more and I've done some cake stuff, like cake recipes from TikTok and I've learnt new dances on there, I'm not very good at the dancing but I've learnt new dances and I think pretty much all my family has it, they don't really post on it but they know it and go on it, so like we can do dances together on it and it's quite fun to do that.
		Feelings of happiness for other people's competence and admiration.	Semantic	• 4.52: um, well when like if there's videos or something, sometimes it makes me feel happy, sad and sometimes maybe, sometimes talented and sometimes not. Like with the drawing one, I do try it, sometimes I don't succeed, but I keep trying, but when I see it, it makes me in a way not happy but happy at the same time. Like happy because it's really good and not happy because I don't get how you can do it, because it's really good, like sometimes I get confused and yeah.
		Other people's posts and presentations of self, leads to inspiration.	Semantic	• 3.143: Erm, well if I like see a picture of some people with their friends, you may want to go meet up with your friends and take those pictures, and post on social media and stuff.
		Comparisons can prompt a mixture of feelings (Can be both assimilative and contrastive)	Semantic / Latent	• 4.52: um, well when like if there's videos or something, sometimes it makes me feel happy, sad and sometimes maybe, sometimes talented and sometimes not. Like with the drawing one, I do try it, sometimes I don't succeed, but I keep trying, but when I see it, it makes me in a way not happy but happy at the same time. Like happy because it's really good and not happy because I don't get how you can do it, because it's really good, like sometimes I get confused and yeah.
	B. Upward contrastive comparisons.	SNS prompts upward contrastive social comparisons.	Semantic / Latent	• 5.46: Normally on social media I just feel quite like safe in a way, because I know that there's not many people who look at my account who tend to be horrible about it and stuff like that, and sometimes when I see other people's posts, sometimes it just makes you a little bit 'mmm' about yourself, because they're like really like pretty or something, and then you'll just like a bit like 'oh'.
		Feelings of jealousy when upward comparisons are made against close friends.	Semantic	• 6.73: Erm, when it's some, like some people I just kind of make me feel a little bit insecure because I want to look like them, and how they look, but then some people, just my closest friends, I feel like a bit jealous

				because they also look a lot older and nicer than I do on most of mine, but I always just know that I've seen my closest friends when they don't look like that, at the same time.
		Upward comparisons based on appearance, prompt negative feelings of self.	Semantic	• 5.78: So, like maybe someone's wearing a really cool outfit, and like you'll be wearing something really bland and you'll be like 'oh I wish I could dress like them in a way'. • 6.75: So, it still makes me feel a little bit like sad, because I want to look like all these people.
		Greater impact of comparisons against someone of the same age.	Latent	• 6.69: Well, when I see another person's posts, if they look really nice and they're my age and I don't look like them because they've got like nice make up, nice clothes, and they just look older, then that does make me feel a little bit insecure almost, because I want to look like them since they are the same age as me, why can't I look like them?
		Upward comparisons to those who are older.	Semantic / Latent	• 5.74: Like sometimes the people who make you insecure are older than you, and sometimes you think that maybe when you're older, you can <u>try</u> and look like that if you want to.
		Perhaps doesn't make direct comparisons to celebrities' posts, as a celebrity is not similar to the participant.	Latent	• 3.129: Erm, well it really depends what they posted, if they've like posted a picture of themselves, it would be like giving me inspiration or how they look, and stuff like, that but nothing like comparing and stuff, but like um, like yeah.
		Feelings of jealousy when upward comparisons are made against close friends.	Semantic	• 6.73: Erm, when it's some, like some people I just kind of make me feel a little bit insecure because I want to look like them, and how they look, but then some people, just my closest friends, I feel like a bit jealous because they also look a lot older and nicer than I do on most of mine, but I always just know that I've seen my closest friends when they don't look like that, at the same time.
		Comparisons can prompt a mixture of feelings (Can be both assimilative and contrastive)	Semantic / Latent	• 4.52: um, well when like if there's videos or something, sometimes it makes me feel happy, sad and sometimes maybe, sometimes talented and sometimes not. Like with the drawing one, I do try it, sometimes I don't succeed, but I keep trying, but when I see it, it makes me in a way not happy but happy at the same time. Like happy because it's really good and not happy because I don't get how you can do it, because it's really good, like sometimes I get confused and yeah.
	C. Downward assimilative comparisons.	Downward assimilative comparisons, coming from a place of pity.	Semantic / Latent	• 4.48: Sometimes people post bad ones, like about, maybe like news that had happened and that's quite upsetting or something, like maybe a plane crash, car crash, or deaths that have happened. So, there's different feelings I get from different posts, like the ones I just said that obviously I get bad feelings, like sad feelings, like it makes me think, like imagine being them people and I normally think that when bad things happen, like imagine being them people, if you were there it would be horrible.
		Downward comparisons lead to feelings of empathy.	Semantic	• 5.104: I don't know, just sometimes when I see videos of people crying, I do feel bad for them but sometimes it just kind of makes me feel like maybe, I don't know, it's just that sometimes people post about them being sad and I know in a way some people do that because it's their way of feeling better, but sometimes it's just a little bit, I don't know, I see it as sometimes it looks a bit forced, in a way, like sometimes people pretend to be sad on social media for views, and sometimes people are actually sad, but sometimes people think they are faking it.
	D. Downward contrastive comparisons.	Downward contrastive social comparisons, critical of others	Semantic / Latent	• 5.52: Sometimes the post just annoys you for different reasons, like maybe they're too enthusiastic, or they're just a bit like annoying.
		Possible use of downward comparisons to support the identity of person participant doesn't want to be.	Latent	• 5.52: Sometimes the post just annoys you for different reasons, like maybe they're too enthusiastic, or they're just a bit like annoying

Ethics Approval Submission Form

Name of Applicant: Emily Beth Thompson

Are you an undergraduate, postgraduate or staff?   PGT

E-mail address: beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk

Date of submission: 26.5.2020

Applicants home school / department: School of Psychology

Title of project: Exploring the influence social network site use has on early adolescent social relations and self-perception

Is this a re-submission? **NO**

If YES give the reference number of the original submission: -

Will this study involve brain stimulation (TMS or tDCS)?   **NO**

Does the study include repetitive forms of TMS (rTMS)?   **NO**

Will this study involve brain scanning (fMRI or MEG)?   **NO**

This section to be completed by the supervisor or principal investigator:

Name: Dr Victoria Lewis

E-mail address: lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisors home school / department: School of Psychology

Please confirm that this application has your approval   **YES**

Have you read the application to check that is accurate and complete?

                                                                                                 YES

Has a similar study been approved by the Committee?   **NO**

If YES give the reference number and submission date. This will speed the review process. Also state how this application differs.

Are all your ethical concerns identified in the application? **YES**

Declaration by Principal Investigator or Supervisor:

"I have read the Ethical Risks Checklist and confirm that no items other than those listed in this submission are relevant to this research." **YES**

V Lewis

Signature:

Date: 26.5.2020

(submission from the supervisors University of Nottingham email address is to be used as well as a scanned electronic signature)

This section to be completed by the applicant

A. **Rationale for the Research:** Very briefly state the background and purpose of the proposed research (max = 300 words).

The use of social networking sites (SNS), including Facebook and Instagram, is a key method of communication within society, particularly for young people. However, the age of children and young people engaging in such sites is getting increasingly younger, with children as young as eight accessing SNS (Children's Commissioner report, 'Life in Likes', 2018).

This proposed research looks to explore the influence SNS use may have on adolescent's social self-concept and identity, particularly in relation to their social relations, and social comparisons whilst interacting through SNS.

A sample comprising of eight, year 8 students, who identify as female*, will be used, as previous research has explored SNS use and self-esteem with an older demographic. This sample will be utilised, as this is outlined by Erikson (1968) to be the start of adolescence, and a key point of identity formation. Furthermore, this age group will be more settled into their school setting, as opposed to year 7s, where the recent transition may potentially confound information shared.

This research will also gather rich, qualitative data, to gain an insight into the potential effect of SNS from the perspective of those young people who regularly access them. Such data will be in contrast to the existing, largely quantitative data, when exploring adolescent SNS and self-perception. This data may then potentially inform policies and practice.

Key stakeholders within the research, are those participating, the Local Authority where the research will be completed, in addition to key members of staff at the selected school, such

as the Head Teacher. Further stakeholders may also include the University of Nottingham and Educational Psychologists from my placement Service.

At this stage, the proposed research has been discussed with my Placement Supervisor, regarding its feasibility, and Research Supervisor, to further consider the study's theoretical principles.

B. **Procedure** Give a complete description of the procedure (max = 1000 words). For web-based studies also provide the URL of the study and the URL of the software used (e.g., BOS, Qualtrics).
   - The proposed procedure outlines the data collection process intended for when schools reopen. A contingency plan, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic can also be found below, in blue.
   - Firstly, a potential school will be identified, through discussions with my Placement Supervisor and this school will then be approached to take part in the research. A meeting with key members of staff, including the Headteacher and/or SENCO will take place, in order to provide information relating to the research's purpose and procedure.
   - Purposive sampling, in collaboration with school staff will take place, in order to identify those adolescents who may be suitable to take part in the research. The research aims to collect data from eight participants.
   - Pupils from Year 8 will be selected to take part, as according to Erikson (1968), 12 years old signals the start of adolescence. Pupils in year 8 will be aged 12 and 13, and are part of a demographic who frequently use SNS. Furthermore, the decision to select year 8s, as opposed to year 7, is that year 8s will be more likely to be settled within their secondary school setting, and their experiences may be less clouded and confounded by the recent transition into high school. The sample will comprise of individuals who identify as female*.
   - Female* students will be selected following research completed by Gray (2018), that females* attending secondary school, were more likely to use SNS to share or comment on photos and updates of either theirs or other's posts. This 'self-disclosing' of information may influence an individual's identity, experiences of social relations and their self-concept, and therefore will be valuable to explore further.
   - * Asterix denotes gender identity as referring to person's sense of if they are male, female, both or neither. As outlined within: Yavuz, C. (2016). Gender variance and educational psychology: implications for practice. Educational Psychology in Practice, 32(4), 395-409.
   - In collaboration with the staff member, who has a good understanding of that year group, such as the SENCO or Pastoral Head of Year, potential participants will be selected purposively. These female* students will be in year 8 and use SNS on a regular basis. They will also not present with needs which may impact upon their ability to take part within the interview process, such as having anxiety or expressive language needs. Those individuals currently involved with Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, will also be excluded from the study.
   - Once selected, parents and carers will be sent information sheets and consent forms to consider if they provide permission for their child to take part. If so, these will then be completed and returned.
   - Data will be gathered through one-off semi-structured interviews, approximately lasting between 30 and 60 minutes.
   - The proposed interview schedule, which can be found at the end of this document, will be piloted with an individual from the intended sample. This will be a pupil from the selected school and data collected may go on to be included within the analysis.

- Prior to taking part in the interview, each participant will be briefed and informed about the research, including their right to withdraw at any point and to only disclose information they feel comfortable sharing. Additional verbal consent will be gained from the young person themselves, prior to commencing the interview, and they will also be provided with an information sheet which outlines the research, alongside an 'active participation form', to further confirm their agreement to take part.
- An enhanced debrief will take place after the interview, which includes signposting to support and a reminder of their right to withdraw. Interviews will end on a positive, before the participant leaves, such as by playing a short game. The debrief will also comprise of a reminder to school staff, to be aware of the potential effect taking part in the interview may have had, through the discussion of an individual's personal memories. A follow up 'check in', within one week of completing the interview will take place, either by the researcher, or by an identified member of staff, where they will ask participants if they have any further questions, anything they wish to raise relating to how they feel and remind them of the signposting to support services.
- Interviews will take place on a one-to-one basis, in a private, appropriate space within school. This is unless the proposed contingency plan is utilised, outlined below, where interviews will take place over virtual means, still on a one-to-one basis.
- The developed interview schedule comprises of a number of guiding questions, alongside probes to gain a greater level of detail.
- Furthermore, interviews will take place during a related lesson, where possible, such as PSCHE or Form Time, to minimise disruption for participants. Those taking part will also have a designated period of time immediately following the interview, to regulate and collect their thoughts, prior to returning to lessons.
- Interviews will be audio recorded, through the use of a Dictaphone, before being transcribed. A process, of coding will be used as part of the selected analysis approaches, thematic and content analysis.

Research Proposal Contingency Plan - COVID 19 Pandemic:

It is hoped the data collection element of the proposed research study will still commence within schools, upon their reopening and comprise of face-to-face interviews with those young people selected to participate. However, given the current context and indefinite school closures, an alternative method of data collection is outlined below, which may be necessary to implement if schools remain closed.

- Despite the closures, it is hoped the recruitment of participants could continue to be through liaising with key school staff, albeit now via phone or email correspondence. Key staff members will be asked to consider those suitable to partake and then be required to get in touch with parents or carers to ask permission for their contact details to be shared with myself, the researcher.
- If parents or carers agree for me to contact them, then I can provide a greater level of detail through discussion with the parents or carers about the study's purpose and design, this is to ensure parental consent is fully informed. Information and consent sheets could then also be sent to parents or carers for them to sign and return either via the post or electronically.
- Interviews with the young people would take place remotely, through either a video platform, such as Skype or telephone call. These interviews would still be audio recorded, through using a Dictaphone and stored securely, as previously stated, thus preserving data security. Furthermore, in order to continue to ensure the anonymity of respondents,

- interviews will be coded through a numbering or pseudonym process. It should also be reiterated to those participating and their parents or carers that although videos will be audio recorded, no video images will be recorded.
- After gaining consent, it would be beneficial, to meet with both the young person and their parents or carers virtually, and this initial meeting would take place one week before the interview. This would involve ensuring all the technology was working and could also be an opportunity to build rapport. During this meeting, which could take place one week prior to the interview, participants can hear about the study, ask any questions they may have and complete the Active Participation form. Also, within this meeting, conversations relating to confidentiality will also be raised, alongside informing the interview will be audio recorded. It will also be mentioned that no other recordings of the interview, from any party should be made. The interview schedule could also be shared with the young person, during this meeting, in order to reduce any potential anxiety.
- Further confirmation of the individual's active participation will also be gained verbally, immediately prior to starting the interview, one week after the initial introductory meeting.
- Through the potential use of virtual means to complete the interviews, a number of additional ethical considerations may need to be acknowledged. Completing the interview via video, such as Skype or Microsoft Teams, would be preferable to audio telephone calls, in order to ensure participant's body language can still be monitored, which may signal they feel uncomfortable and would like the interview to end. Phone calls may still be used however, in order to avoid excluding those potential participants who may not have access to a video calling device. In such situations, a greater number of verbal prompts, such as 'are you happy to continue' may be required, in the absence of body language and visual cues.
- It is also imperative that many of the ethical and protective measures outlined within the original proposal are still maintained, when data is collected remotely. This may include ensuring signposting still takes place at the end of the interview, and also parents and carers are made aware that those participating may require a period of time and space immediately following the interview. Further ethical considerations are outlined in the checklist below.
- A further aspect to consider with this proposed contingency plan is the proximity of parents and carers during the completion of the interviews. In order to maintain the validity of the information collected, parents or carers should not be present, during the interview and this will be discussed during the initial meeting, one week prior to the interview. Furthermore, despite taking place within the home, interviews should ideally be conducted within a quiet space, where participants will not be disturbed.
- An enhanced debrief will also take place, if interviews are delivered through virtual means, and involve a 'closing conversation' with parents at the end of the interview. This will remind parents of the potential effect of taking part in the interview, alongside also highlighting to parents appropriate support services, if required. A follow up check in will also take place, within one week of completing the interview with the participant, and this once again will be done remotely. This is in order to answer any remaining questions, ask how they are feeling and signpost once again to places of support.

C. **Items from the Ethical Risks Checklist.** Explain how any of the following issues will be handled within your research to ensure ethically sound procedures (max = 300 words per item). Delete those items that do not apply.

1. Co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited

(e.g. students at school, members of self-help group, residents of nursing home, prison inmates). See Guidance Notes on Educational Psychology applications.

- As part of my degree, I am on placement and working within an Educational Psychology Service in a Local Authority. As a result, my role comprises of being both a practitioner and researcher. Being a practitioner as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (EP), means I am already in direct contact with a number of schools in the area for both case and statutory work. Furthermore, alternative schools in the area can be accessed through colleagues working within my Service, who can put me in touch with key members of staff within each setting.

- In order to make the distinction between being a practitioner and researcher, any pupil, who I have been previously involved with, such as through casework, will not be included as a participant within the proposed research. This is to ensure that there is no risk of information being collected whilst in the professional role as a Trainee EP, would be used within the research process.

- It is important to ensure stakeholders, such as key member of staff within the school do not undermine the notion of free consent, by placing pressure on potential participants. This is a risk, particularly as a purposive method of sampling will be initially used, where the staff members assistance will be required to select appropriate participants. In order to minimise this, a meeting with necessary staff, with an accompanying information sheet, prior to starting the sampling procedure will raise these concerns, in addition to there being a standard consent letter sent to participants, rather than correspondences sent out by school, which may place greater pressure on parents or carers. Parents and carers of potential participants will also be provided with my contact details, in order to ask any questions, they may have. Furthermore, if the contingency plan is followed, parents and carers will have multiple opportunities to discuss the research with myself through virtual means.

5. Participants who are vulnerable or may not be able to give free and informed consent (e.g. people under 16, those with learning disabilities or confusion, students dependent on you for their grades).

- The proposed research does intend to use a sample of eight female* participants, aged between 12 and 13 years.
- An information sheet will be provided for both the participant's parents or carers and for the young people themselves, which will be written at their level of understanding. This will involve details regarding the procedure, their right to withdraw, if they so wish and subject topic of the interviews.
- Alongside written consent forms the parents or carers, active 'opt in' consent will also be gained from each participant, prior to commencing the interview. This will be through an 'active participation' form for the child to complete.
- All consent forms and information sheets can be found attached to this ethical checklist.

12. Procedures from which participants might not feel free to withdraw at any point or may regret taking part in.

- There is the potential risk, over the course of the interview that those participating will discuss potentially sensitive topics, and therefore may regret agreeing to take part.
- Participants may be in a new, unusual situation when being interviewed, and may feel they have to continue, in order to please the researcher.
- Ensure all participants fully understand their right to withdraw at any point of the study during the briefing. Participants should also be reminded of this in the debrief.
- Participants will also receive an information sheet prior to starting, in order to support them in making an informed decision relating to their involvement.
- It may also be necessary to have a visual symbol on display during the interview, perhaps on the desk, almost like a 'pause button', which the participants can point to indicate they would like to stop, if perhaps this is something, they feel they cannot say. If the contingency plan is followed and interviews are completed using virtual means, a non-verbal hand signal could be developed with the participant, prior to the interview starting, which would lead to the interview being paused. Furthermore, additional verbal 'check ins', during the interview to ensure participants are comfortable to continue would also be utilised.

20. Prolonged testing or multiple sessions with the same participant.

- The study does not propose to engage in multiple interviews with a participant, however, there is the possibility that an interview may be paused and recommenced at a later time, if the participant indicates they would like a break, or level of focus has diminished.

21. Procedures likely to change participants' mood, be aversive or stressful.

- It is possible during the course of the interview, participants may find it upsetting to talk about their self-perception, perhaps if they have perceived low self-esteem or have had a negative experience whilst accessing SNS.
- The researcher's interpersonal skills will provide supportive encouragement to manage the situation and judge whether or not it is appropriate to continue.
- Interviews should not be too intrusive into the participants' self, and participants should feel comfortable, only sharing as much as they wish. Participants will be informed during the briefing, that they should only discuss information they feel comfortable sharing and that they do not have to answer a question if they do not want to.
- Furthermore, the interviews must always end on a positive note, such as through a discussion of an interest or the playing of a short game.
- A warning of the subject matter and topic of the interview will be included in the information sheet and also the brief for participants.
- During the initial stakeholder meeting with necessary school staff, it will be arranged that time will be allocated to pupils, immediately following the interview, in a designated space, where they can calm down, if necessary, prior to returning to their class. Should the contingency plan be followed, parents will also be informed of this.

- An enhanced debrief will take place after each stage of the data collection process, which will also include the signposting of additional external support, a reminder of key staff within school who they can talk to and follow up 'check in', within one week of the participant taking part in the study.

23. Lack of 'backup' / counselling / follow-up arrangements in cases where participants may be distressed or embarrassed.

- The enhanced debrief will include signposting to appropriate services, in order for participants to access support if necessary. These support services will be tailored with information delivered for the age range of those taking part in the study. Participants will also be reminded of key staff within school who they can talk to if necessary.
- The researcher's contact details will also be provided to participants, so contact can be made, following the completion of the research study.
- Key stakeholders and parents and carers will also be reminded of the research and potential effect this this may have had on those taking part, alongside appropriate support services. This is particularly pertinent, should the contingency procedure be delivered.

24. Recall of personal memories.

- During each of the data collection stages, an adolescent may recall personal memories, such as previous experiences when accessing SNS.
- This could be managed through the debrief process, which would include signposting to appropriate support services and the researcher's contact information.
- During the brief, participants will be reminded to only share information they feel comfortable in sharing.

26. Discussion or investigation of personal topics (e.g. relationships, feelings of success and failure) or any other procedure in which participants may have an emotional investment.

- The discussion and collection of views relating to emotional wellbeing, may be perceived to be a sensitive topic. In order to account for this, the data collected would be coded and anonymised, alongside being confidential.
- The researcher will also be aware of the school's safeguarding procedure, including being aware of the setting's Designated Safeguarding Lead.
- During the brief, participants will also develop an understanding of the concept of 'confidentiality', and how if they say anything which may put either themselves or others at risk, the researcher has a duty of care to pass this onto the appropriate member of staff within school. This is in addition to also adhering to the safeguarding procedures within the placement Educational Psychology Service and also passing on this information to my Placement and Research Supervisors.
- The interview schedule will not explicitly ask about experiences of cyberbullying or online abuse; however, it is possible participants may wish to discuss such experiences within their answers. Young people taking part will be informed to only

share information they feel comfortable sharing and that it is okay if they choose not to answer a question. Signposting to appropriate support services will also take place during the debrief.

28. Possible identification of participants (e.g. when reporting results).

- This is a risk within the study, when participants may provide personal examples of their experiences with SNS, and the likelihood of only sampling one school.
- As a result, great care and consideration is required when reporting results, to ensure no identifiers are included. It may be necessary to omit some excerpts of the raw data gathered, to ensure participant anonymity.

Any other reason(s) for possible ethical concern that you can think of.

- Within the interviews, there is the potential risk, of information being shared raising safeguarding concerns, or if perhaps the participants make a disclosure. A disclaimer should therefore be made to participants, prior to commencing the interview, that the information shared is confidential, however, if anything discussed is concerning or puts either themselves or others at risk, then this would have to passed on to the Designated Safeguarding Lead within the setting. Such information would also be passed onto both my Research Supervisor, Dr Victoria Lewis and Placement Supervisor, in accordance with the Service's safeguarding procedures.
- All interviews will be audio recorded onto a password protected digital recording device. Files will also be saved onto a password protect laptop, during the analysis process. Each interview will be coded to a participant, to avoid identification and recordings will be destroyed, following the successful completion of the project viva.

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SJ/tp

Ref: s1268

Thursday 2nd July 2020

Dear Victoria L:ewis and Emily Beth Thompson

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research "Exploring the influence social network site use has on early adolescent social relations and self-perception"

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers;

Reviewer One:

For S1268, my decision is minor revisions (without further submission).

The researchers should make the following minor revisions before commencing data collection:

- On the information sheets (parents/child) and debrief documents include a deadline for when the child's data can be withdrawn
- On the information sheet for parents, include the information about breaking confidentiality for safeguarding reasons
- Develop an appropriate COVID contingency plan for administering consent. I would recommend collecting electronic consent using Qualtrics
- Good signposting to support services, but are there some general advice websites for young people on issues of self-esteem and cyberbullying that you can include, as well?

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site.

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Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

School of Psychology
Young Person Consent Form

The University of Nottingham

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An exploration of female early adolescent self-presentation and social comparisons, when engaging with social networking sites.

Researcher: Beth Thompson – [beth.thompson@nottingham.ac.uk]

Supervisor: Dr Victoria Lewis – [lpavl2@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk]

Thank you for expressing an interest to take part in the research about social media.

Please complete this form and answer the questions below:

- I am happy to be interviewed as part of this research.   YES/NO

- I understand my interview will be audio recorded.   YES/NO

- I understand the views I give in my interview may not be included in the final study. YES/NO

Name: _____

School: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix AA: 15-point quality checklist for Thematic Analysis

A table which outlines the quality checklist for the Thematic Analysis process, taken from Braun & Clarke (2006: 96).

Process		Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach) but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once over lightly.
Written Report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as *active* in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Braun, V, & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.