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*Likes, Comments, and Views: Curated Content on Instagram and Identity Negotiation*

This study applies Social Comparison Theory and Cultivation Theory to better understand how Instagram’s algorithmically curated content might influence male users with idealized representations of life, fostering self-evaluation by comparison. Scholars interrogating this relationship have focused primarily on social media’s effects on women, but gaining insight on male perceptions and impacts is just as important. This study intends to analyze how males compare their lives to those presented on Instagram and how those comparisons affect identity formation and self-perception due to social media’s influential role on users' perception of the world and oneself.

As of 2025, there are more than 2 billion active monthly users on Instagram, which is why it is essential to understand its impact on male users (Backlinko Team, 2025). The increase in consumption is encouraged by Instagram’s powerful algorithm, which tailors content for users.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instagram plays a highly influential role in society as it is ranked the 3rd most used social media platform worldwide (Backlinko Team, 2025). This platform is especially popular among teenagers and young adults as a means to share photos or videos about themselves and to craft curated realities. Users can present any version of themselves on Instagram, whether it be authentic or filtered or entirely fabricated. It is important to consider the impact of sustained, frequent exposure to curated media and the effect it can have on male users’ identity.

Thus, the research questions for this study include:

1. How does algorithmically curated content shape the way male Instagram users perceive themselves?
2. How does prolonged exposure to Instagram content shape users' perceptions and identities?
3. What type of content most impacts viewers' perception of themselves?
4. How do users evaluate their identities based on comparing their lives to others presented on Instagram?
5. Does Instagram’s “likes,” “comments,” and “views” features play a role in this change of perception?
6. What are the long-term effects of Instagram consumption and social comparison on users’ identities?

In order to start, it is essential to define how people begin to negotiate one's beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions by addressing Cultivation Theory.

# Literature Review

**Cultivation Theory**

This study applies Cultivation Theory, which was created by George Gerbner and his colleagues during the 1960s and 70s with the intention to explore how television viewing shapes the audience's beliefs about the world (Hermann et al., 2023). Cultivation Theory seeks to explain, as Hermann, et al put it, “how long-term, heavy exposure to the consistent and pervasive images and messages of television fiction helps sustain common beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews among large, heterogeneous audiences” (Hermann et al., 2023, p. 2493). Gerbner’s theory seeks to explain how heavy exposure to television’s content and messages affect its audience. Additionally, he studied how more time spent watching TV would likely increase its effect on the audience’s perceptions of the world. This theory not only applies to television but “any dominant form of mass storytelling” that “shares assumptions about life and society,” according to Hermann, et al. (2023, p. 2493). With this foundational framework, researchers have applied Cultivation Theory in the context of social media.

# Cultivation Theory Applied to Social Media

The application of Cultivation Theory to social media is used to better understand the correlation between users of social media and users’ identity and shifts in their perceptions. A study conducted by Hermann on female college-aged Instagram and Facebook users found “exposure to specific types of content as compared with general social media use” revealed higher effects on users' perceptions of themselves by studying the type of content, engagement levels, and amount of social media exposure in users (Hermann et al., 2023, p. 2496). For example, in this case study, it was revealed that heavy social media users tended to have more negative conceptions about health that were damaging to themselves (Hermann et al., 2023).

While Gerbner focused on television exposure’s impact on viewer’s perceptions of the world, in a social media context, targeting specific genres and communities created by social media users can cultivate and influence users’ beliefs, attitudes, and identities (Hermann et al., 2023). This study suggests that “different “types” of social media (platforms, sites, content categories) might also be said to cultivate specific outlooks and assumptions, even if social media do not provide stable, inescapable messages and lessons” (Hermann et al., 2023, p. 2496). Hermann found that social media does have a cultivation effect on its users depending on the time spent consuming media and the type of content the user is interacting with.

An important finding in this case study conducted by Hermann was that social media offer users a highly individualized experience “based on their social networks, browsing behavior, content engagement (e.g. liking, commenting, following), algorithmic content filtering,” whereas in contrast “cultivation assumes that viewers watch television

non-selectively” (Hermann et al., 2023, p. 2495, as cited in Bakshy et al., 2015; [Intravia et al.,](https://journals.sagepub.com/reader/content/1919b9af539/10.1177/14614448231180257/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml?hmac=1740616579-ljpiG9D8LCzehyvdzdkNwNJRZXtWuAxSk2WBrpBcfJg%3D&bibr33-14614448231180257) [2017](https://journals.sagepub.com/reader/content/1919b9af539/10.1177/14614448231180257/format/epub/EPUB/xhtml/index.xhtml?hmac=1740616579-ljpiG9D8LCzehyvdzdkNwNJRZXtWuAxSk2WBrpBcfJg%3D&bibr33-14614448231180257)). Even though social media may not provide a sustained overall message as Cultivation Theory studies initially interrogated, Hermann’s study and other literature suggests that social media content still shapes user perspectives through user engagement, participation, and interaction with the media platform (See (i.e., Baker & Moore, 2008; Barker, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ross et al., 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Social media users consume extremely different content based on personalization, but sustained exposure to types of content can cultivate attitudes, beliefs, and identities about oneself and others (Hermann et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Gabriel Ionescu and Monica Licu on 40 TikTok teens and young adult users found that a user’s “personal experience is shaped by the individuals’ motivations and behaviors which, in the perspective of values-aligned and personalized content bought by the algorithm, can enhance positive experiences and promote psychological wellbeing” (Ionescu & Licu 2023, p. 1, as cited in Ostic et al. 2021; Nashlund et al. 2020). Their findings suggest that TikTok algorithms and prolonged exposure to algorithmically curated content influenced users' perceptions of themselves in a positive manner, aligning with Cultivation Theory’s premise (Ionescu & Licu, 2023).

A similar study on TikTok users’ algorithm experience with sustained exposure was conducted by Bhandari and Bimo. A study on 14 college student users of TikTok between the ages from 18 to 24 sought “to understand the processes of self-making on TikTok” by doing a “walkthrough of the app and its surrounding environment, and 14 semi structured participant interviews.” (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022, p. 1). The findings from this study align with earlier results about the algorithm's influence on users’ identity by saying TikTok users’ heavy interaction with personalized algorithms repeatedly confronts users with various aspects of their own identity, aligning with the principle of Cultivation Theory (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This study also suggested that users engage with multiple versions of themselves as the algorithm gets to know the user better, which creates a mode of self-representation and multiple identities (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Linda Kaye and her colleagues analyzed, studied, and distinguished the determinants of using social media and the determinants of behaviors using Instagram and Facebook in five female and four male users between the ages of 18 and 36. Through semi-structured interviews, the four male users would describe their behaviors using Instagram and what drives them to use Instagram. Their research found the common determinants of using Instagram were “maintaining connections” and “normative influences” (Kaye, 2024, p. 4). The types of behaviors users experience while using Instagram consisted of: “maintaining presence, social monitoring, social capital, context dependent, platform affordances, mood states and gratifications, and changes over time” (Kaye, 2024, p. 4). Maintaining presence and social capital were the top reasons for engaging with Instagram. This study found that “categories of active and passive social media use are arguably too broad to capture nuances in behavioral patterns that might occur within them” (Kaye, 2024, p. 2 as cited in Shaw et al., 2022; Verduyn et al., 2022). This suggests the complexity of behavioral analysis in users of social media and labeling behaviors into simply two categories can’t be oversimplified. Their research shows that a gap exists with respect to understanding the long-term behavioral effects heavy engagement with curated media has on users’ identity. More research needs to be done on a larger focus group to analyze the long-term effects of constant exposure to curated media. More Cultivation Theory research needs to be done on social media users for a longer duration of time to study how algorithmically curated content shapes the way we perceive ourselves. More research has been done on teenage to young adult female TikTok and Facebook users and less on Instagram users so to bridge this gap, my study intends to explain how prolonged exposure to Instagram content can shape users' perceptions.

# Social Comparison Theory

Additionally, this study applies Social Comparison Theory to understand how comparison affects users' identities on Instagram. This theory was created by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 to explain that individuals are unable to self-evaluate without comparing themselves to others (Sisler et al., 2021). To test Festinger’s theory on understanding self-evaluation he observed and conducted an experiment in a theater setting. Festinger would ask members from the theater audience to evaluate the performance after watching it (Festinger, 1954). Festinger found that individuals would compare their evaluations of the performance with each other to seek consensus and to compare differing opinions (Festinger, 1954). This experiment found that when individuals self-evaluate, individuals relied on social comparison to gauge their own opinions (Festinger, 1954).

The framework of Social Comparison Theory is that “individuals assess the appropriateness of their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors against standards that are avowed and/or modeled by reference group members, usually shifting their own to match those of the group” (Stacks et. al., 2019, p. 485). Social comparison is used when individuals engage in “self-evaluation across social norms or opinions or personal performance comparisons with others in order to improve or compete” (Sisler et al., 2021, p. 2). This need for personal improvement and self-evaluation leads to an endless process of comparison, which can influence one's identity. The mechanisms of social comparison are categorized as upward and downward comparisons. When an individual engages in upward comparison then the individual is comparing themselves to others deemed as better (Sisler et al., 2021). The motives for this type of comparison are typically a source of motivation and inspiration. Whereas when an individual engages in downward comparison then the individual is comparing themselves to those deemed as worse (Sisler et al., 2021). By engaging in downward comparison, the individual can enhance their self-esteem.

# Social Comparison Theory Applied to Social Media

Festinger found that individuals evaluate and determine the value of their opinions and themselves through comparison. In a social media setting, his theory can be applied to social media users comparing their life to those presented on their curated feed. Studies have been done applying this theory to social media and how social comparison operates. A study applying Social Comparison Theory was conducted on 35 males and 30 females users of Facebook which sought out to understand how exposure to physical images influences the users self-perception.

The study found that the major motives for users to engage in social comparison was self-enhancement, interest, self-improvement, and self-evaluation with self-enhancement being the most influential motive (Lee et al., 2020). This case study found that almost half of users made appearance-related comparisons to the posts they were exposed to. Additionally, this study found that a third of the participants who posted a picture of themself would write a narcissistic self-description (Lee et al., 2020). Lastly, this study found that 96% of the users would compare themselves to their acquaintances (Lee et al., 2020). These users evaluated their own appearance and beauty based on the images curated to their feed showing that most users had poor perceptions of themselves when comparing. A study conducted by Vogel, Rose, Roberts, Eckles applying Social Comparison Theory on Facebook users examined “the impact of chronic and temporary exposure to social media-based information” to see if there was an effect on users' self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 206). This study was conducted on 145 undergraduate students, 106 female and 39 male, found that frequent Facebook usage correlated with users having lower self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 210). This meant that more exposure to social media led users to engage in upward social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014). This study provides valuable insights to the field of social comparison research as it finds a relationship between Facebook usage and a user’s well-being (Vogel et al., 2014). By the users being exposed to constant social comparison, this led the users to have lower self-esteem and a lower perception of how the user views themself.

# Goffman on Identity Negotiation

Moreover, it is important to discuss the work of Erving Goffman’s research on impression management in order to better understand how users navigate and manage their identities within social contexts, in this case on social media. In his work, he explores the idea that in public social encounters individuals will only show partial or incomplete glimpses of their “true” self (Chriss, 2015). Goffman’s research identifies “three distinct types of identities which are personal identity, social identity, and ego (felt) identity” (Chriss, 2015, p.17). Personal identity is the characteristics and traits that make an individual unique (Chriss, 2015). Social identity is when a part of an individual’s identity is on display depending on the social context and expectations (Chriss, 2015). Ego identity is when the individual “takes liberties to fashion whatever identity is seen by him or her as most relevant or suitable in a given situation” (Chriss, 2015, p. 18). His research on studying how individual’s identities shift and adjust based on the social situation contributes value to my research. This concept of identity negotiation is the root of my research and studies have been done analyzing the relationship between identity and social media. Goffman’s and Festinger’s research work together in my study so it is important to understand how social comparison and identity negotiation occurs in individuals but more importantly how it is both applied to a social media context.

# Identity Negotiation & Social Comparison Theory Applied to Social Media

A study conducted by Stephanie Steiner analyzed 16 graduate students' responses as to what Instagram postings reveal about an individual's sense of identity (Steiner, 2017). Her study examined “the relationship between the intentions of the Instagram post and the attributions of intentions other users provide” (Steiner, 2017, p.182). The application of Social Comparison Theory in this context shows that participants evaluated their own identities in relation to those observed in the postings. This case study found that the participants were “able to see more about someone than that person even knew they were revealing about their identity,” showcasing the social identity principles from Goffman (Steiner, 2017, p.188). From the participants, 15 different themes emerged comparing the “intended self-identity messages from the selected posts” (Steiner, 2017, p.187). Her research found that “social media can serve as an extension of one’s personality and identity” (Steiner, 2017, p.188). Furthermore, her study suggests that users present a version of themselves (part of their identity) on social media whether it is an extension of the users’ true identity or a new identity, aligning with Goffman’s research.

Another study was conducted to examine “how self-presentation on social media influences the way people view themselves” (Choi et al., 2022, p.1). This idea of

self-presentation is one of the main motives for engaging with social media. The engagement with social media influences the way users view themselves which in turn affects the user’s identity and their presented self. An important takeaway from this case study was that, “social media provide fertile ground for identity formation, where people construct their identities via presenting various dimensions of the self, which ranges from idealized to actual selves” (Choi et al., 2022, p. 4). This confirms that users undergo identity changes when navigating how to present themselves on social media manufacturing this idealized online-persona. These findings are based on a study conducted on 249 young adult participants ranging from 18 to 34 years old, 59 men and 187 women, who completed an online survey on self-presentation to analyze if users’ had a shift in their perception of themselves (Choi et al., 2022). This case study found that users display only part of their identity in order to project the desired self-image varying on the social context, aligns with Goffman’s research. Alongside Goffman’s research, this case study contributes to the idea that social comparison is essential for identity negotiation. The exposure to social media content and presenting an idealized self originates from upward and downward comparisons.

The research done on Social Comparison Theory and identity negotiation applied to a social media context is still very limited in understanding curated media’s effects on user’s identity, especially long-term. More research has been applied to Facebook users but there is still a need to research on specific types of users hence why my study will focus on Instagram. My research also intends to focus solely on male Instagram users as previous literature has shown that most studies have been conducted on female college-aged users.

# Instagram’s Algorithm Effect on Users

This theoretical framework lays the foundation to my research but lastly it is also essential to address the current impact of Instagram's algorithm on users and how users view the algorithm to better understand algorithmically curated content. A study consisting of 22 Dutch participants, 11 men and 11 women, between the ages of 16 to 26 years old, was conducted on the participants’ daily social media consumption and algorithm awareness (Swart, 2021). This study focused on how these individuals “make sense of, feel about, and engage with algorithmic news curation on social media” (Swart, 2021, p.1). With constant exposure to curated and personalized algorithmic content, it is important to understand “how users come to understand algorithms and how their everyday encounters with algorithms shape these sense-making processes” (Swart, 2021, p.5). This study looked at a wide variety of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Linkedin, Snapchat, and Facebook, but all participants used Instagram. The findings were that algorithms have increasingly impacted young adults perceptions of the world and users navigated their algorithmic experiences around three elements (Swart, 2021). The first element is that users navigate the algorithm curation varying on the selection of the platform (Swart, 2021). The second element is that users make sense of the algorithm based off the personalization features that specific social media platforms offer (Swart, 2021). The last element is the type of content users are exposed to which influences users’ awareness and perception of the algorithm (Swart, 2021). The findings in this case inform users to be careful when navigating personalized and curated media. The data collected suggests that every users’ perceptions of the world, in this case, specifically in news media, varies based on the individual's fluency in algorithm literacy.

Another study was conducted to analyze users' perceptions of the algorithm “as it relates to their identity and goals” (Taylor & Choi, 2022, p. 1). This case study conducted by Tayor and Choi further developed the understanding of human-algorithm interaction on users of Facebook and TikTok (Taylor & Choi, 2022). A major finding of this study is that algorithmically curated content significantly shapes and impacts how users perceive themselves and others (Taylor & Choi, 2022). This study consisted of 406 participants, 53% were male and 47% were female, who used Facebook or TikTok in the past month (Taylor & Choi, 2022). For this study, 302 participants were assigned to Facebook and 104 to TikTok then each user measured algorithm responsiveness, algorithm awareness, medium enjoyment, and social influence (Taylor & Choi, 2022). From this “four-step algorithm responsiveness process, which centers around perceptions of algorithms being responsive and sensitive to one’s sense of self,” the results suggest that “when the participants perceived the platform algorithms to be understanding, validating, and caring for their own identity, they are more likely to enjoy using that medium” (Taylor & Choi, 2022, pp. 8-9). When the algorithmically curated content of the users affirmed and validated the participants sense of one’s self, this meant that the content aligned with their interests, identity, and preferences which satisfied the user (Taylor & Choi, 2022). The validation felt by the participant led the users to feel understood by the algorithm. The participants judge the algorithm based on “how well the algorithm is supporting their identity and motivations” then on “how well the algorithm “listens” to new information” about the user such as providing content about interests and hobbies (Taylor & Choi, 2022, pp. 9-10). The data collected from the participants of this study suggest “that identity development and maintenance happen via the personalized curation of algorithms” (Taylor & Choi, 2022, p. 1, as cited in Lee et al., 2022). This case study reveals that “how people interact with social media algorithms influences the many social categories, beliefs, and roles that make up a person’s identity and sense of self” (Taylor & Choi, 2022, p. 1). The findings of this study align with Goffman’s research on impression management and explain the power of algorithmically curated content influence on users’ identity. While this case study provided valuable insights into the relationship between algorithm and identity; there are still gaps in this field of research. There is a need to do research on a specific social media platform’s algorithm and pinpointing the type of media content which has an influence on the user's identity.

My study intends to meaningfully contribute to the research of Cultivation Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and to Goffman’s research on impression management to examine how algorithmically curated content shapes the way male Instagram users perceive themselves and how prolonged exposure to Instagram content can shape users' perceptions and identities. Both quantitative and qualitative observations will be implemented such as analyzing Instagram posts and users’ curated feed along with interviews and surveys will be conducted to understand the effect of Instagram’s curated feed on users’ identity perception. This paper aims to examine participants' engagement, participation, and interaction with their curated content to determine whether there is an association to the cultivation of users' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of themselves, incorporating Cultivation Theory principles. Additionally, this paper seeks to understand the type of content that leads users to negotiate their own identity and how user’s evaluate their identity based on comparing one life to another presented on Instagram, by applying Social Comparison Theory principles.

# Methodology

**Participants**

This study will consist of male Instagram users between the ages of 18 and 22 from ifferent demographic backgrounds. The participants chosen for this study must be male enrolled in college and active daily users of Instagram, referably having an account for over three years. A survey will be sent to multiple accredited niversities across the United States such as UCLA, Arizona State University, Texas A&M, Georgia Tech, The University of Alabama, and University of Central Florida. The sample of the study will consist of 400 randomly selected students who meet the criteria. This study will be a year long and follow the engagement, participation, and interaction with male Instagram user’s curated content, tracking any changes in their identity and experiences with social comparison.

**Procedures**

This study will be a mixed-method approach implementing both qualitative and quantitative techniques to answer the questions of the study. Initially, quantitative data on the 400 participants in the study will be collected using a comprehensive survey to learn more about the participant on a personal level as well as their social media habits and daily usage on Instagram. The questions that will be on the survey to gain preliminary understanding of each participant consist of the following: What is your age? What is your demographic background? Where are you from? What college do you attend? What is your major? Why did you download Instagram? What is your primary purpose of using Instagram? How many years have you had an account?

How many minutes or hours a day do you spend on Instagram? How often do you interact with other users’ content? Why do you post on Instagram? What types of activities do you engage with on Instagram (e.g. liking, commenting, reposting)? What emotions or feelings do you experience when scrolling on Instagram?

This qualitative study will draw upon in-depth interviews with each participant to learn about each user's experience with Instagram, the type of content each user interacts with, and each user's experience with comparison by using the Social Comparison Scale in order to identify any initial patterns and themes. The Social Comparison Scale was created by Paul Gilbert and Steven Allan as a way “to measure self-perceptions of social rank and relative social standing” (Allan & Gilbert, 1995, p. 2). In my study, each participant will measure themselves on the Social Comparison Scale to assess their tendencies by comparing themselves to others on Instagram (Allan & Gilbert, 1995). Each male will circle a number from 1-10 from Table 1 that best describes how they see themselves in comparison to content and people seen on Instagram. After each participant has completed ranking and circling how they feel, the research team will total each participant’s score with lower scores being associated with poor perceptions of oneself and vice versa.

**Table 1**

*Perception of Oneself in Comparison to those on Instagram using the Social Comparison Scale*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Inferior** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **Superior** |
| **Incompetent** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **More competent** |
| **Unlikeable** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **More likeable** |
| **Left out** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **Accepted** |
| **Different** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **Same** |
| **Untalented** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **More talented** |
| **Weaker** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **Stronger** |
| **Unconfident** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **More confident** |
| **Undesirable** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **More desirable** |
| **Unattractive** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **More attractive** |
| **An outsider** | **1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10** | **An insider** |

*Note*. From “A social comparison scale: Psychometric properties and relationship to psychopathology,” by S. Allan and P. Gilbert, 1995, *Personality and Individual Differences,* 19, pp. 293-299. Posted by The Compassionate Mind Foundation.

Next, each participant will be interviewed individually and be asked a series of questions.

The open-ended questions will be:

1. Do you feel like your Instagram algorithm understands or “gets you”?
2. Have you noticed any changes in your beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of yourself since you first downloaded Instagram to now? If yes, what are they?
3. How do you view yourself when you scroll on Instagram?
4. Do you find yourself constantly comparing yourself to others every time you like, comment, or view someone's story or post?
5. Why do you use Instagram everyday? Is it to fill a void, just for fun, or to stay connected with friends or family, etc.?
6. What type of content do you most frequently see on your feed?
7. Does your curated feed change the way you perceive yourself or make you question your identity? Does your curated feed make you fall into comparison, make you feel behind, or make you feel like something is missing from your life or identity?
8. How do you view yourself after being on Instagram? Do you feel satisfied or dissatisfied with yourself? Do you experience lower self-esteem or indifference afterwards? Do you find yourself always comparing your life to those presented on your curated feed?

After this initial analysis, each participant will do a walk-through of their algorithmically curated Instagram feeds. Each participant will go through their thought process when scrolling on Instagram for 8 minutes straight. Each participant will be asked to verbalize their thoughts and feelings when viewing a post, why they like a certain post, what content they see the most of, any type of comparison made, any positive or negative feelings they experience, and if there was a shift in attitude before and after scrolling. The walk-through exercise will provide participants a way to express every thought and emotion each male experiences when on Instagram. It will also provide a way to measure and gauge social comparison and cultivation analysis.

The walk-through exercise will be done once a week for a year straight to test any differences in attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of themselves and social comparison habits. The intention of weekly walk-throughs will be to see if awareness of social comparison and algorithmically curated feeds will change habits or perceptions of each participant over a year's time frame, but more importantly to find the long-term effects of Instagram consumption and social comparison on users’ identity. After each weekly walk-through, each participant will measure themselves on the Social Comparison Scale to see if there are any changes in their perceptions of themselves over a year. Lastly, each participant will be asked to self-report their Instagram usage which can be seen in the Settings app for Instagram that shows weekly and daily usage of the app.

The last element of this year-long test will be hosting monthly focus groups of about 6-8 participants based on where the user resided. During the focus group, each participant will showcase 8-10 posts, reels or stories where feelings of social comparison arose or if there was any shift in their self-perception in any capacity. By hosting focus groups on user’s Instagram content, the research team will be able to identify any patterns with the type of content participants most interact with that brings about identity negotiation and social comparison.

At the end of the year-long study, participants will be interviewed individually and reasked the same open-ended questions answered during the preliminary phase to find trends and any shifts in their attitudes or beliefs which will contribute significantly to overall cultivation analysis. The comparison of the preliminary tests and post-study tests will allow my team to find patterns in how algorithmically curated content influences the way male Instagram users perceive themselves. The study will further reveal long-term effects of Instagram consumption and social comparison on users’ identities, identifying the type of content that most impacts male perception of themselves. Lastly, this study will find how male users evaluate their identities on Instagram by tracking changes in their weekly attitudes over the course of the year.

# Limitations and Future Research

There will be limitations with this study as there is with all types of research studies. Firstly, this study will be focused solely on Instagram so there is a need to do further research with other social media platforms. All platforms are different but this research team decided to select Instagram because of its popularity and worldwide usage amongst teenagers and young adults, additionally, this platform will be selected due to gaps found in previous literature studies. The findings from this study will not have carried over to other social media platforms because every medium has their own algorithms, age range, purposes, and qualities that make it unique.

A more comprehensive study will have to be done to each platform to understand its users’ behaviors and the nature of the platform. Although the study will gather demographic information on each participant, the research team will not conduct psychological tests, so for future research studies, psychological tests should be conducted to better understand each individual. The research team understands that every individual has different experiences that shape their identity, therefore, further research will need to be done to better understand how those experiences influence and reflect their perceptions on social media. The research team will be reliant on the participants to self-report their Instagram usage and habits, as well as being fully transparent and truthful with their responses to the surveys and open-ended questions which could tamper with some of the final results. The accuracy and honesty of the participants’ answers may vary depending on the commitment to the study of each participant. This study will only focus on male, college students so not all cultural factors may be accounted for because participants are from all around the United States. Results will be limited due to the sample diversity because not all genders, age groups, and non-college populations will be accounted for. This research study will just be one approach for examining the relationship between Instagram, social comparison, and identity; there will be a need for more studies to be done either on different platforms or different sample groups. Social comparison is very complex and difficult to measure, thus, more research on developing or finding new methods or techniques to better understand this issue will be needed, to ensure more accurate and precise results. Further method suggestions may include measuring heart rate during questions or analyzing facial expressions. This study will be conducted in a year, however future research could be extended over a longer period of time to gain more insights into the long-term effects of Instagram exposure.

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