

INFLUENCERS, IDENTITY, AND THE INTERNET: HOW YOUNG GIRLS CREATE  
THEIR IDENTITY THROUGH INSTAGRAM

by

Aleksandra Matranga

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Approved by:

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Dr. Joseph Dippong

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Dr. Vaughn Schmutz

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Dr. Roselyn Mickelson



## ABSTRACT

ALEKSANDRA MATRANGA. Influencer, Identity, and the Internet: How Young Girls Create Their Identity Through Instagram. (Under the direction of DR. JOSEPH DIPPONG).

As technology continues to develop and social media platforms become more commonly used for various reasons, it is important to understand the overarching impact this has on our younger generations. This study looked at influencers, identity, and the internet and how young girls create their identity through Instagram. There has been prior research showing evidence of the good and the bad social media has to offer, but it is important to note how it is being interpreted. I was able to use affect control theory as a theoretical framework for this study and offer a new approach to prior research. I conducted multiple interviews with college-aged women to discuss old and new posts they shared on their Instagram using photo elicitation method and the scrollback method. Participants also filled out the Rosenberg self-esteem survey that allowed me to analyze the results against the discussion of the interviews to present my findings. Multiple dualities of affect control theory components were found throughout the analysis. While this study presented a few limitations, this study brought forward more significant aspects of the theory and encourages future research to explore more of the “why.”

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vi
Introduction	1
Theoretical and Empirical Background	3
[Social] Media Over the Years	3
Social Media + Influencers	5
Affect Control Theory	8
Social Media + ACT	12
Methods	15
The Participants	15
The Interviews	15
The Analysis	17
Results	19
Negative Emotion	19
Positive Emotion	22
Influenced...	26
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Survey	29
Discussion	32
The Interviewees and Affect Control Theory	32
Main Contributions	33
Limitations and Future Research	34
Conclusion	36

References	38
Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire	41
Appendix B: Codebook	41

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Affect control theory flow chart	11
Figure 2: Negative emotion pie chart	22
Figure 3: Positive emotion pie chart	26
Figure 4: Influenced... pie chart	29
Figure 5: Rosenberg self-esteem survey results	30

## Introduction

With the growing popularity of social media, more and more people are turning to websites and mobile apps like Instagram and TikTok for health tips, fashion trends, and even food recipes. This has kicked off the rise of social media entrepreneurs, or popularly referred to as “influencers,” who offer their opinions or advice about a specific lifestyle. Some influencers have a large following, can make an income, and even gain celebrity status by having these influential profiles. While mainstream pop culture celebrities will always have massive following, online users are slowly rising to fame for their popularity on Instagram and having the “influencer” appeal. These influencers post their daily outfits, their favorite dieting snacks, and even promote skin care or hair products. With the powerful influencer culture and the ongoing research about these platforms, it is important to know *who* exactly the influencers are influencing with their content. According to a global demographic survey of Instagram users done in 2021, one of the biggest age groups to use the app is 18-24 years old. However, the app is the most popular and most preferred by users who are between 16 and 24 years old (McLachlan, 2022).

With this information, it is even more important to know how social media influencers impact these teenagers as they use platforms for recreation and self-expression. Affect control theory, or ACT, focuses on the interactions we have with others and how that influences the way we understand our identities, our actions, and the identities and actions of those around us (Heise, 2016). In this way, ACT is potentially useful to help sociologists make sense of how social media influencers affect the perceptions and actions of their viewers. The identity of the influencer affects how a young girl may see herself or how she creates her own identity.

Using ACT as my theoretical framework, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews with college-aged participants to examine how they interpret and respond to content from social media influencers. I employed questionnaires to obtain demographic information about the participants (age, gender, if they use Instagram, how often they are on Instagram, and how their usage has changed over time). The interview contained a photo elicitation process (Marcella-Hood, 2020) that will require participants to present three pictures from different stages of their lives shown on Instagram. Once pictures are chosen, we continued with a memory recall-based questionnaire. This will allow us to understand the thought process behind their posting and the emotional meaning or association behind each photo. By using ACT and conducting interviews, I began my research with the question: how do young girls self-identify through Instagram? Based on my own findings and research, it will open the door for future research with other social media platforms as this generation grows.



## Theoretical and Empirical Background

### *[Social] Media Over the Years*

Before Instagram and its predecessor, Myspace, young girls looked to another form of media for inspiration, advice, and self-expression. Magazines, such as *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan*, focused their content on fashion, make-up, and romantic advice. Peirce (1990) examines the content of *Seventeen* magazine from a feminist perspective and argues that the idea of beauty presented in the magazine was superficial; looking at people's appearance rather than their intelligence. Peirce (1990) supports her argument by mentioning that teen magazines like *Seventeen* have sections or advice columns about what lipsticks or outfits attract the perfect boy, but no columns encouraging education, female health, or sports. For example, there was a regular column titled "*Boy's Eye View*" that highlighted what the columnists believed boys might be thinking.

The popularity of *Seventeen* magazine and other teen magazines encouraged readers to focus on appearance and the approval of others. Peirce (1993) sums up her argument by stressing the impact of teen magazines in a young girl's life and by changing perspectives to show girls counter-stereotypical media content, it could change their entire outlook on the idea of gender roles.

Transitioning from the magazine trend to a social media takeover, we need to understand the advantages and disadvantages of having a platform accessible to and by everyone. If we were to take Peirce's (1990; 1993) argument and compare it with influencer content on Instagram, we can see a similar appeal with Instagram and how influencers or everyday users try to appeal to a certain crowd or niche. Toma (2010) examined the benefits of having social networking sites, or SNSs. She explored how users look for gratification or affirmation via the internet. Social media

accounts allow users to connect with people in their lives, as well as people in their extended networks, and even celebrities, by creating virtual representations of themselves through an online profile. While these profiles can have negative effects on a user's personal relationships, they can also offer a space for positive information about the user themselves. This can be shown through flattering pictures and/or friendly wall posts on their wall or a "friend's" wall (Toma 2010:1749). Toma (2010) found that via Facebook, participants experienced more positive feelings that were both self-directed (feeling loved, supported, connected) and "other-directed" (feeling loving and grateful). While there is a desire to build and maintain social connections, there is an even bigger desire for self-enhancement that may draw users [subconsciously] towards creating social media accounts (Toma 2010).

Looking at how social media influence's identity, Dupont (2020) examined how social media impacts the American skateboarding subculture, in terms of the lingo, the skills, and how a hobby turned into a tight-knit community. Dupont (2020) explored subcultural identities within the skateboarding community and how social media enhances who they portray themselves to be whether it is through certain filters, camera angles, or even the caption they choose to write. While it takes many years of scrapes and bruises, Dupont found that the youth of this group were determined to belong and gain acceptance of the older skaters. He also found that developing and growing this subcultural identity allowed the youth to explore status and understand, gain, or show respect. While it might mean a less authentic persona, Dupont was shown how they learned the skating identity. Dupont's participants showed him how they used Instagram as a "how-to" guide for navigating through the skateboarding community. Younger and newer skaters watched older or more advanced skaters' videos and stories on Instagram to pick-up on certain aspects of

the culture. They were also able to learn the lingo, the kind of music typically listened to by skaters, and even the type of clothes to wear (Dupont 2020).

Dupont (2020) and Toma (2010) demonstrate the benefits of learning a new skill and gaining positivity and affirmations through social media platforms such as Instagram. However, social media platforms also come with potential downsides. For the past three years, Instagram's parent company, Facebook, has been looking into how exactly Instagram is affecting its young users. They found that Instagram has worsened body image for one in three teenage girls specifically (Wells et al., 2021). The girls themselves directly blame Instagram for their increase in anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. 39 percent of the participants felt they needed to "create the perfect image" on Instagram and 41 percent felt they were not attractive enough for Instagram. Furthermore, 55 percent of the participants felt they were not good enough or they felt alone, sad, depressed, or lonely (Wells, et al., 2021). With the number of young girls feeling this way, it is worth asking the questions: how do young girls think they are supposed to look or act? And how are they able to find themselves or express themselves through a platform they feel they do not belong on?

### ***Social Media + Influencers***

Having considered how social media in general impacts some identity-related outcomes. In this section, I define an "influencer" and offer a better understanding of who or what makes an influencer. I also describe their audience and how they self-brand through their profiles (cooking influencers, religious influencers, fashion influencers, etc). In their study of Instagram and its users, Burnette, et. al (2017) asked participants if they followed the accounts of any celebrities and the kids' emotions or feelings their content evoked. Many of the participants stated that even though they enjoy following celebrities, it often comes with feelings of low self-esteem or even

jealousy (Burnette et al. 2017). They also expressed the same emotions or feelings when asked about if they post selfies on their Instagrams. Some participants responded that they felt ugly or they did not feel comfortable posting close-up pictures of themselves (Marcella-Hood 2020; p 867). However, when asked about their own personal profiles, the participants made sure to tell the researchers that they found it self-centered and attention seeking when others posted selfies (p 120). These reactions and feelings of jealousy, low self-esteem, and even hostility is consistent with other research on social media (e.g., Toma 2010). In this study in particular, the young girls were not comfortable being their true selves on social media. Instead, they post and base their content on the way they think others might feel or how they might feel about themselves.

For those who feel more comfortable posting more authentic depictions of themselves or simply not caring about what others may think, Maares, et. al (2020) conducted a study looking into these carefree creators, or “influencers.” Many influencers post everyday details about their lives, fashion, music, food, and much more. They can portray an authentic persona for their followers and encourage others to do the same. Maares, et. al (2020) took a closer look at how influencers often collaborate with various businesses to gain a bigger audience and receive some sort of payment. Many influencers receive brand deals, make business transactions, gain monetary rewards, and earn more popularity on Instagram. With these deals and influencer lifestyle, a certain look is expected, whether it be with the product they are asked to advertise or how they specifically post or caption their content. With this, Maares, et. al (2020) questioned if it is a truly authentic persona being shown by these influencers when the advertisements are posed and used in online video diaries (p 1). Maares, et. al (2020) also found that the influencer lifestyle entailed creating a new persona and dropping a previous lifestyle. Many of the

influencers expressed that with the new social media fame and popularity, they had to delete older posts to maintain a certain look and/or have an alternative account for less attractive pictures (also known as a “Finsta” or fake Instagram).

Maares, et. al (2020) findings related to social media influencers can be further understood through work from Khamis, et. al (2017) regarding “Micro-Celebrities” and self-branding. Khamis, et. al (2017) suggests while social media was popular for candid and fun photo sharing, the “consumer market takeover” has thrown social media into a new type of popularity. This type of popularity includes influencers and “Instafame.” Khamis, et al (2017) explains this phenomenon through a couple of different processes. One that includes the effects of self-branding through social and interactive media.

For example, Khamis et al. focused on one influencer who focuses their social media “brand” on nutrition and health. This person’s followers look to her profile for diet-based advice and health tips. Even though this woman may not be licensed or certified, 80 percent of all internet users (primarily women) use social media for their health information (p 24). Thus, the influencer’s profile becomes a business page rather than a personal page. Peters (1997) wrote about the narrative to gain control of one’s own branded identity. He argues that in order to stand out in a market (i.e. social media), you have to consistently deliver a “memorable image” to employers or the market and produce unique content to viewers and consumers. With this consumer market aspect of Instagram comes how the influencers themselves feel about the content they post and if they feel it is beneficial to their followers or community.

Wellman, et al (2020) found that when posting and collaborating, influencers kept in mind not only their own ethical standards, but their audience’s as well. Some of these standards include working with brands only if they had similar content (diet, fashion, sports, etc) or views

(moral, political, religious, etc) to keep the content tailored for their audience's needs (p 79). They also found that even though influencers try to stay as authentic to their "brand" as possible, they also make sure not to post negative or "unhelpful" content. That is, if they want to post something, they make sure that their followers can gain something from their post rather than doing it for fun or for themselves. This style of specific posting is on behalf of the brands they choose to work with while also continuing to foster relationships with their audiences. While the branding and content may not seem authentic to some, the participants believe they were staying true to themselves based on who they decided to work with and what they chose to post (p 79).

By examining the different ways social media has been used over time, we can understand the good and bad effects it has had on each generation. In Peirce's (1990) research with magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Seventeen*, there were more columns adhering to stereotypical gender roles rather than encouraging young girls to pursue academics and sports. These young girls are being pushed into a specific stereotype that can alter their identity process. On the other hand, Dupont's (2020) and Toma's (2010) research examined new media platforms, Instagram and Facebook, and the positive benefits that came with new apps. They found that there were communities being formed online that fostered positivity and encouragement on Facebook profiles (or "walls") as well as niche groups (i.e. skateboarding groups) that allowed newcomers to learn specific lingo and tricks. With the transition from magazines to social media platforms, it came with the rise of "influencers," or content creators with large social media followings. By curating their content specific to who they are or what they do, they are able to share their everyday lives to gain popularity on the app and expand their following even more.

### ***Affect Control Theory***

With an understanding of social media and the pros and cons of using the platform, it is important to understand the sociological impact. We can do so using affect control theory (ACT). In this section, I will focus on affect control theory and all its components. I will define key elements of the theory, including deflection, sentiments, impressions, and EPA as well as the foundation of the theory as it relates to identity creation and maintenance.

Before jumping into the theory, it is important to establish an understanding of identity itself. Based on identity theory, identity can be defined as a set of meanings that defines someone in terms of the roles they occupy (role identity), the social groups or categories they belong to (social identity), and the personal characteristics that define them (person identity) (Burke and Stets, 2014). Specifically, role identity is the set of meanings individuals attributed to themselves, social identity is the set of meanings individuals claim as a member of a social category, and person identity is a set of meanings people claim as individuals that set them apart from others. Essentially, identity is an emphasis on what it means to be a student (role identity), a female (social identity), or a helpful person (person identity) and how (Burke and Stets, 2014). Social and role identities allow individuals to tie themselves to others and their person identity influences the meaning held in their social and role identities. Using the research question as an example, if a young girl considers herself outgoing and photogenic (person identity), she may choose a career that carries that meaning such as modeling or a social media influencer (role identity) and belong to groups such as a talent agency or marketing team (social identity).

With a clear understanding of identity, affect control theory can be explained as a chain of events: someone will create an event to validate their identity or of others and if not validated, they will feel as though they need to re-identify themselves to conform to societal standards (Heise (2002). Beginning with the EPA component that consists of evaluation, potency, and

activity measurements. Robinson, et al (2006) notes that evaluation examines the good versus bad, potency looks at strong versus weak, and activity looks at liveliness or boringness. EPA allows for proper reactions based on an event or interaction. For example, if you were to correct your boss in a meeting, your reaction and their reaction is indicative of how we view the situation and those who are a part of it whether it be positive or negative. One might take that situation as positive, another might view it as a more negative situation, and a group of people standing by could feel differently altogether. Heise (2002) explains this as a cultural sentiment; where others who witnessed the interaction collectively decide how to think or feel by determining each other's reactions. This is where validation or re-identification comes into play for the employee based on the cultural sentiment of that situation.

Another component of ACT is deflection and can be described as the discrepancy in the EPA space between transient meaning (or temporary meaning) and sentiments (or emotional meaning) (Heise 2016). High deflection often leads to more stress and eventually leads to a negative reaction from a situation. For example, if a popular girl were to get a compliment from a stranger, she might take it as weird (evaluation) or too forward (potency/activity) leading to a negative and transient type of interaction. Robinson et al (2016) notes that sometimes interactions produce too much deflection and thus, it becomes difficult to create a behavioral approach for resolving interactions. At that point, there is not much someone can do to restore what they thought about the person prior to the creation of the reconstruction principle, or the idea that allows deflection to redefine a situation (p 187-190). Relating the concept of deflection back to Instagram and the idea of an influencer; if a young girl sees herself as intelligent and wants to post about her latest A/B Honor Roll achievement, but also sees that her favorite influencer focuses on fashion and make-up, she may feel as though she should only post about



fashion or make-up instead of her educational achievements. The traits expressed by the deflection (i.e. the influencer) are processed and analyzed by the young girl. She abandons her idea or identity of intelligence created by her and instead creates a moment where the EPA and deflection component has reconstructed how she identifies or expresses herself. Nothing can be undone to resolve or reconstruct the deflection or image of intelligence unless Instagram and its influencers change their image to reframe how girls interpret certain traits or personas.

Below is a visual representation (Figure 1) of the emotional management process (Francis 1997; 155-156). The figure starts with the potential goal of a young girl creating an Instagram in search of connection and exploration. Instagram influencers cause the deflection because they are inundating the young girl's feed with an alternative of what they should look like or how they should act. From this, the girl either creates her identity immediately or follows the process of redefining her existing identity. This process would consist of aspects of ACT such as emotions and sentiments that would further the process and solidify an identity.

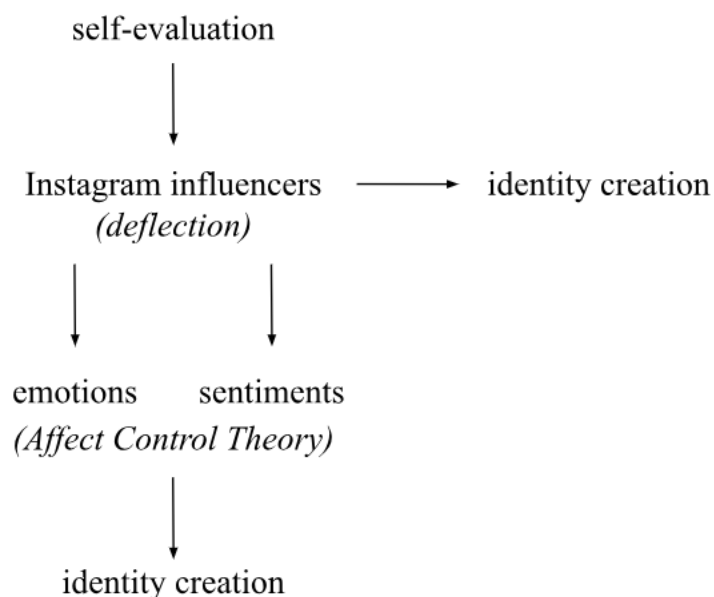


Figure 1: Affect control theory flow chart

### *Social Media + ACT*

With a basic understanding of ACT, we are now able to look at Instagram and how ACT can elaborate on its users' identity modification process. Burke and Stets (2014) explain identity theory as a way we self-identify based on our interactions. If we identify as a nice person, that will follow into our interactions with others because of the role identification created and we continue to think of ourselves as a nice person. For example, if someone were to consider themselves as some sort of content creator or public figure on Instagram, that flows into their everyday life with what they post, how they talk or act, and how they approach their audience. These interactions can also lead to how we identify ourselves. Burke and Stets (2014) use the teacher-student relationship to illustrate this by saying that the teacher's identity in a subject (i.e. math or science) then becomes a counter-identity in the student. Burke and Stets go on to explain that there is a certain negotiation to be had to pull meaning and identity from these interactions. Using the example above and applying it to our research, we can assume that the influencer and their identity is in their niche (i.e. fitness, fashion, music, food). We can see this whenever an influencer creates "how to" videos on how to edit a picture or grow their audience using certain hashtags. The basic knowledge from the "teacher" will be used by the "student" and thus, creating a counter-identity where they feel more confident to edit and post and express their own content.

We see this identity/counter-identity relationship evident in Dupont's (2020) study. The idea of younger skaters immersing themselves into the subculture of skateboarding can be supported by the EPA aspect of ACT. Evaluation (good and bad), potency (strong and weak), and activity (fast and slow) can explain someone's reaction to a situation, thus creating an "affective meaning" within the identity process (Robinson et al., 2006). For example, Dupont

(2020) noted that whenever an older or more advanced skater would talk about skateboarding at all (breaking news, new trick, another skater, etc), the younger ones would give all of their attention to the older guy. The youth were processing the situation to enhance their own identity whether they knew it or not. They were able to make a good evaluation of the subject being discussed, notice the strength or importance of who was talking, and being a part of the fun activity or atmosphere.

We saw another instance of how ACT and Instagram are closely related in the Burnette, et. al (2017) study. When asked how they felt about other people posting selfies, the researchers were met with hostility and judgment (p 119). Some of the participants noted that it was “egotistical” of someone to post a selfie and they were most likely just seeking attention. Where both invoke low self-esteem, they also both invoke some sort of jealousy. With sentiments and emotions of hostility and judgment, it allows for both parties to re-evaluate what they post on social media based on each other’s reactions. This interaction can be explained through a sort-of domino effect of ACT. The bad evaluation and high potency (EPA) of the group’s reactions created a cultural sentiment, or a collective decision on how to think or feel by bouncing off each other’s reactions (Heise, 2002). The collective decision being that selfies are egotistical and attention seeking then creates a self-evaluation of each girl and what they post on Instagram.

Affect control theory’s main objective is to explain behavior in the context of social interactions (Robinson et al., 2006). Heise developed a formal framework that describes creative responses people have when experiencing different situations. There is sentiment and emotion behind every interaction and reaction [evaluated through EPA] that plays a part in identity development. A person can choose to engage in deflection and can easily create counter-identities. As seen in the studies conducted by Dupont (2020) and Burnette, et. al (2017), there

are many ways people present themselves on social media and many ways people view others.

By examining affect control theory and its components, it created a foundation for the

overarching question of my study: how do young girls create their identity through Instagram? I

addressed questions related to the subject surrounding their self-esteem as it relates to their social media posts as well as if they do base their identity on any aspect of social media. These

questions allowed me to contribute new results to the theoretical framework as it relates to social media and its users.

## **Methods**

To examine my research question, I conducted a qualitative study that consisted of interviews and content analysis. Within each interview, participants prepared three photos from their Instagram profile (saved in a private archive through the application or on their public feed profile). We went through each photo as a stage in their lives and their feelings regarding the post. The analysis used photo elicitation methods combined with the scrollback method to explain thought processes. From the participants' answers and feelings, I was then able to compare this with ACT and its elements as it pertains to self-esteem and emotions.

### ***The Participants***

To start, I recruited nine women to participate in an interview to help support the purpose of this study. These participants range in age from 18 to 20 years old and as well as coming from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. I asked sociology professors at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to speak to their introductory courses about this project and research to find participants. I offered a \$50 Amazon gift card drawing as an incentive to the students for helping with this research. All interested students were asked to fill out a pre-screening survey with questions about their name, age, the gender they identify with, and brief questions about their Instagram accounts. It was important to the study that all participants have an active Instagram account to be able to discuss the interview questions and assess emotion. Once those surveys were filled and pre-screened, I asked the participants who qualified to come prepared to share their Instagram photos and I began the interview process.

### ***The Interviews***

Before the date of the interview, I set up a Zoom video call for the participants to enter through an invitation link. When the Zoom call was set up and ready to record and transcribe, I

began asking each participant general questions such as how long they have been on Instagram, how they use their social media page, if their use of social media has changed over time, and if they follow any specific type of accounts (could be influencers, companies, etc).

After these initial questions were answered, I asked the participants to pull up the first picture of themselves from Instagram on their computer to discuss (the photo was not shown or displayed). For each photo, I asked a series of questions regarding their emotion at the time of the picture, who they were following at the time, how they felt about posting the picture at the time, and similar follow-up questions. This portion of the interview allowed for the understanding of the EPA component of this research. Whether the participant felt there was a good or bad reaction with the post (evaluation), whether they felt strong or weak (potency), and whether they thought posting the content was fun or boring (activity). These EPA questions were identified as: “Did you feel good or bad about posting this picture?” and “Did you think it was fun or boring to post this specific picture?”

Next, I gauged the participants’ general thoughts on self-esteem based on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1965). I presented the survey through the Zoom chat so they could fill it out privately. It was not discussed during the interview and was used simply as a measurement of self-esteem by the participants. This was to better understand how social media influencers or social media [generally] plays a role in an identity process. This role could be seen as the deflection element of ACT where the influencer is not purposely pushing their identity onto someone, but the person absorbing their content is taking bits and pieces of the influencers’ content to create their own identity (i.e. a certain outfit, music choice, a pose in a certain post).

As I went through the Instagram photos chosen by the participants, I used two methods to elicit memory recall and reinterpretations. One was the scrollback method; this can be defined as

a way for participants and/or researchers to “scroll-back” on older posts of a social media profile to recollect and reinterpret during present day (Robards and Lincoln, 2017; 722). The other was photo elicitation in which participants are shown images to stimulate a response and enhance memory recall (Marcella-Hood, 2020; 867). Both methods and the interview questions allowed for the understanding of the inner workings of an identity process of the participants and how they did so through Instagram during each phase of their lives as shown through pictures.

To wrap up each interview, I thanked the participants for their time and patience during the interview. I let them know we were done with the interview and allowed for any questions or concerns they had regarding the research. Once questions were answered, I stopped the recording and transcribing to conclude the interview.

### ***The Analysis***

To maintain a natural flow of conversation, I recorded the interview audio through Zoom and transcribed using Microsoft Word. After each interview was conducted and recorded, I saved each audio recording to my computer to move to Microsoft Word to manually transcribe. From the transcripts, I was able to conduct a proper qualitative analysis by noting important themes or similarities throughout all interviews and their interviewees. This was done through NVivo, a software used for qualitative and mixed-methods research. With this software, I was able to analyze the transcripts and note general themes and specific themes that could be created into figures and charts. For example, I was able to take specific themes (or “child code”) (happiness, relatability, confidence, and positive nostalgia) and give them a general code (or “parent code”) noted as “Positive Emotion.” However, each figure shown in the results will provide detailed insight into each child code as well as the parent code. By using NVivo to create codes and note themes, it was easier to understand ACT a little more. With visual representations of themes such

as self-esteem and specific emotions felt, I was also able to see direct examples of EPA. The full codebook can be found as an accompanied attachment; “Appendix.”

While the results of the interviews were as expected (notes of low self-esteem, hyper-awareness of internet presence, and societal pressure), the specific instances of each emotion were deeper and more “PTSD-like” than anticipated. There were many instances of “negative nostalgia” followed by a new-found confidence. Just as those emotions are important to note, it is equally as important to note the direct influence these participants had. These influences ranged from “influenced action,” “influenced thought,” and even “influenced identity.” These will highlight the influence social media and external factors have on young girls that can easily be understood through Affect Control Theory and its EPA component specifically.



## Results

In this section, I will discuss the results of the interviews by examining the negative emotions, positive emotions, and the influenced actions, thoughts, feelings, and identity. Negative emotions were defined as feelings of negative nostalgia (longing for memories, negative view of a memory, etc), insecurity of any kind (body, personality, etc), and general sadness (about themselves, someone else in the picture, that specific time in their life, etc). Positive emotions were defined as feelings positive nostalgia (happiness recalling memories, sentimentality, feeling reminiscent, etc), confidence of any kind (body, personality, etc), and general happiness (about themselves, the picture itself, that specific time, etc). There were four categories of influence: action, identity, feeling, and thought. Influenced action refers to any time the participant acted differently after viewing content; a change in how they post on their own social media, a change in their daily routine, how they acted towards others (positively or negatively), if they became more political or religious. Influenced identity refers to a change in who they are or wanted to become; wanting to “be like” a social media influencer to influence their own peers, using specific language, curating content that might appease an influencer or their peers. Influenced feeling refers to various feelings felt by the participant before, during, or after viewing the content; changed feelings about themselves physically or mentally, changed feelings about the social media influencer or peers themselves, changed feelings. Influenced thought refers to what the participant thought before, during, or after viewing the content; a change in morals or ethics, a change in how they view the social media influencer or peers.

### *Negative Emotion*

I was able to categorize two very broad emotional experiences felt during the photo elicitation: positive emotion and negative emotion. When looking at negative emotion

specifically, it was very strong and very easily notable. Almost all participants reported some sort of visceral reaction when looking at and describing their second photo (generally early high school). Whether that negative reaction was some sort of embarrassment, sadness for their past-self, or a clear disdain for the picture itself. For example, one participant said:

*“Yeah, I think it makes me feel a little sad, like, looking back on it. Just because I did, like, base a lot of my time into how I looked and what I posted and stuff and it's just, like, it makes me a little sad because I know that's not who I am now.”*

This participant was not the only one to feel this “negative nostalgia” about their former self while looking through photos. 44 percent of participant comments noted that what they posted back then would never be something they post now whether it was for potential career reasons or simply because it was “cringey.” These comments were directed towards their appearance as a middle schooler; what they were wearing in the picture or how they were posing. One participant noted the difficulty of looking at social media. She explained how she had to actively tell herself not to compare to what she knows are poor beauty standards, so she does not “beat herself up.” Not only were participants expressing embarrassment, negative nostalgia, and general sadness, but they were also desperate to fit in and they used social media to prove it.

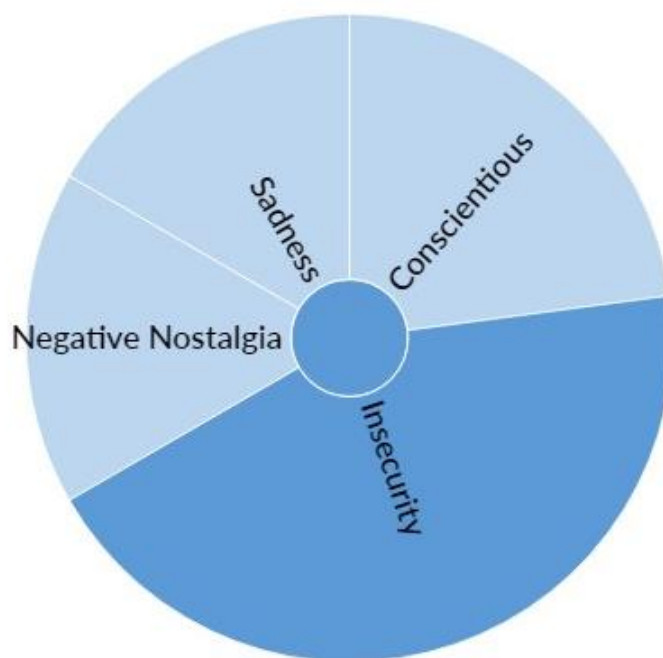
One participant explained the constant struggle to fit in at school and thought social media would be the gateway to popularity. This meant curated posts showing her outings to the popular spots in town and documenting with pictures on Instagram:

*“I just need to post everything that I'm doing so people know that I'm having fun. I have to get a good picture at a concert because I need people to know that I was there.”*

The pressure she felt to act, post, and look like her peers also played a part in the general sadness and ridicule of self. She was considered popular and hung out with the “in crowd.” She explained her goal of posting as a sort-of domino effect; what was coded as “conscientious” posting (i.e. getting the right angle, wearing the right outfit, going to the cool spots) leading to crippling insecurity because she felt like she needed to photoshop or edit her body to fit an image, that then led to the general sadness she felt when going through our photo elicitation process. Due to the extreme curation of these photos and the false sense of self she felt during the process, she expressed general sadness during the duration of the interview. On the other hand, eliciting those negative emotions allowed her to see herself in a different light and move forward with positive thinking about her image, her self-worth, and what social media might be doing to harm her and others. Every participant who felt primarily negative emotions left the interview with a positive takeaway.

*“I think it makes me feel very well-rounded and a lot more self-assured. I just feel really comfortable with who I am. I feel comfortable with what I wear, how I do my makeup, because that's what I surround myself with and that's what I feel I most identify with. So, I definitely think that's what I follow now.”*

After analyzing the negative emotions felt by participants, a large theme to focus on is the deflection avoidance many of them experienced. This was primarily discussed during the second photo, or the participants' high school years. A time where their social identity is still being molded to try and fit in with who they want to become. There was a participant actively working against the deflection, or consumed content, to not elicit feelings of low self-esteem or poor body image. Even though there were conscious efforts to avoid the deflection and protect her own identity and how she thought of herself, there was still an immense pressure to act, feel, or post a certain way.



*Figure 2: Negative emotion pie chart (parent code = negative emotion, child codes = negative nostalgia, insecurity, conscientious, sadness)*

### ***Positive Emotion***

While negative emotions, such as general sadness and insecurity, seemed to be the overarching feeling during these interviews, 88 percent of participant comments expressed some sort of positive emotion such as confidence and happiness. They used their platform to gain confidence in themselves and foster their own beliefs by following those they found “relatable.” For example, two participants followed gym influencers more closely to incorporate their workouts in their gym routines. I found that 55 percent of participants commented that they only followed accounts or people that would boost their confidence, aligned with their beliefs, and did not take themselves or social media too seriously. They posted for themselves and what they thought was good or strong in an EPA lens. For one participant, that meant vocalizing through social media about social injustices no matter who pushed back:

*“I think I was more confident in who I was... I was confident in things that I thought about back then... How I carried myself, what I thought about myself. And so, I think I just kind of posted things that seem congruent with that and followed people who were about the same sort of things.”*

For another, it meant following a group of people she aspired to be. She made sure to present herself in a way that would let younger girls look at her like a role model and someone they aspire to be one day as she experienced with those older than her. This feeling of “conscientiousness” was apparent in multiple participants as they expressed their hyper-awareness of how they present themselves online as well as in person. There was a self-proclaimed pressure for these women to be their best self in every way they could be. While it may be presented as a negative emotion to the reader, it was considered a positive emotion to the

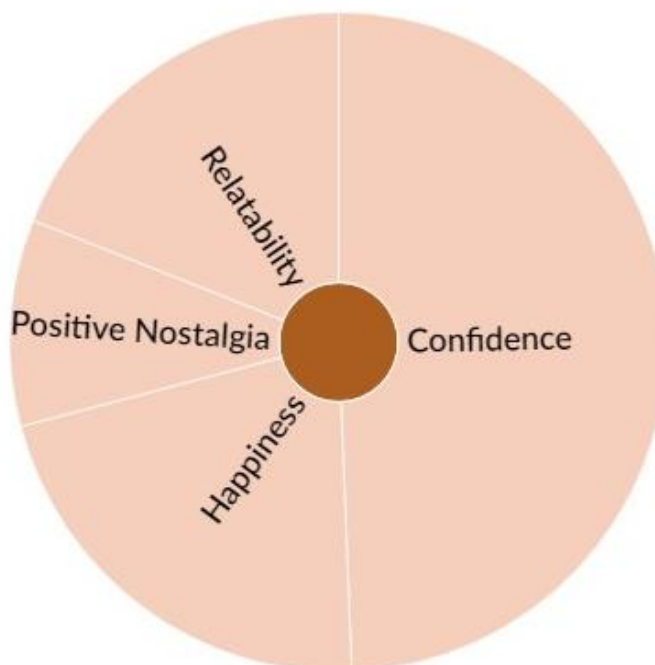
participants because there was a sense of pride. In addition to the participant's goal of becoming a role model, one participant noted the importance of self-presentation for potential career opportunities while another participant mentioned staying appropriate for friends and family.

The strongest positive emotion felt by participants was confidence. This was a theme throughout each photo, but shown in different ways. For example, a participant felt confident in the first photo because they were younger and did not feel the pressure to post a certain way or curate a specific type of content if only their family was going to see it. The second photo might have been a little less confident, but still posted the way she wanted to because she thought her friends would like and comment on the photo. The third picture presented itself in a more secure sense of self type of confidence where phrases such as "I posted it because I felt good" and "...because I liked it" were more used than in the other two pictures. 44 percent of participants commented that they unfollowed a lot of influencers and people they could not find relatable, so their confidence did not shift. It seemed the participants really wanted to preserve their identities and confidence with positive accounts and people they could align themselves with. Therefore, confidence and relatability were positively correlated throughout this study.

Not only were participants feeling confidence and a sense of relatability, but there was also an apparent feeling of "positive nostalgia." Particularly with the first two photos analyzed, participants reminisced on old memories with family members and friends that they had not spoken with in a while. They noted the carefree attitude felt when posting and the naive mindset surrounding social media that allowed them to post what they wanted and how they wanted.

*"Yeah, very, very nostalgic. I just remember how happy I was at that time. I wasn't really worried about, like, real life. I just was very much my own [person]. And I was just extremely happy."*

When it came to the positive emotions felt by the participants, they were the same themes seen in the negative emotions section. However, they were felt in different ways at different times. For example, deflection avoidance was a negative theme during the second picture because the participants did not want to feel any insecurity from the content they were consuming. With the last picture (the most recent posted on the participants' profile), deflection avoidance was a positive theme because the participants wanted to surround themselves with likeminded people who shared their same morals and ethics to preserve their person identity. Another example of the same things seen in negative orientation as seen in positive orientation is the theme of conscientiousness when posting. For the first and second pictures, the participants were conscientious about what they posted because of their peers (deemed negative by the participants). For the last picture, it turned into feeling conscientious because of potential employers and feeling a sense of pride in how they presented themselves as young adults (a positive emotion).



*Figure 3: Positive emotion pie chart shows comments largely made by participants were feelings of confidence, next largest set of comments made were feelings of happiness, followed by feelings of relatability and positive nostalgia (parent code = positive emotion, child codes = confidence, relatability, positive nostalgia, happiness)*

### ***Influenced...***

Not only was there a focus on negative emotion and positive emotion during this process, but there was also a focus on influence. This was split up into four specific categories: influenced action, influenced thought, influenced feeling, and influenced identity. These categories can give us direct examples of the EPA component of affect control theory from the participants. Starting with the most referred to, “Influenced Action” was specifically seen when referring to how they posted on social media. Whether it was to mimic what they were seeing at the time or what they were hearing from peers. In one instance, a participant expressed that English was not her first



language and was starting to become the topic of negative jokes, so she felt she needed to present herself a certain way (both in real life and on social media) to compensate for the way she was being treated by others. Another example would be a few participants who mirrored what others posted. One went through Pinterest to find ideas of what to post or how to pose in a picture with friends while the other would go to the same places she saw the popular group of girls going to.

*“If I saw somebody else post something like that... There's no way that me and (friend's name) came up with that. So, like, that's probably something that I saw somewhere and I was like, I like that. That's cute. Let's do that.”*

The next highest influenced category, “Influenced Thought,” came with a mix of positive and negative emotions. Some, as discussed prior, were thoughts of pride and wanted to present themselves in a positive way to others. Whether that was for a potential employer or younger people on their sports team, they wanted to make sure they were always presentable on and off social media. However, for some, that also came with a high dose of anxiety and perfectionism that contributed to their self-worth and self-esteem. Most of the negative emotions discussed in the prior section were related to the influence of thought and therefore, are primarily analyzed and discussed there.

Moving to “Influenced Feeling,” this was met with more negative emotions such as insecurity and sadness. For one participant, every time she scrolled through social media, it was a constant reminder that she did not have “the perfect body.”

*“I definitely notice the girls with a flatter stomach and I'm like, oh, well, I don't look like that. If I get a compliment, it's like well, I'm not as good as this girl or something.”*

That theme was present throughout multiple interviews and was followed-up with an explanation. Some talked about how they used photoshop or editing tools to edit their bodies before posting. Others only chose specific poses or make sure to not post their legs or below the stomach. These influenced feelings, whether consciously or subconsciously, are detrimental to the mental health and self-esteem of young girls that inevitably trickle into a false sense of identity.

While “Influenced Identity” was the least referenced of the categories, it is just as important to discuss because of the lasting effects. For example, we saw how one participant started to hide her first language (Spanish) because it was met with jokes and corrections. She often felt she could not truly be herself and due to her school being predominantly white, she tried her hardest to “just blend in” with her peers to avoid feeling like an outcast.

*“Based on how they acted, based on what they did, based on how they talk, that's how I try to fit in. How I pose, how I speak, that's how I try to dress and act and all that.”*

She continued to explain how she was the only Spanish-speaking student in her whole school so there was no chance someone would understand her or how she felt. Another participant experienced a different side of that and explained how she felt accepted into two different groups of friends and would change her attitude and even her attire to match theirs. With the popular group, she felt more inclined to dress up in heels and act a certain way while the other group of

friends got to see the more genuine, sweatpants-wearing, relaxed side of her. Because she was not confident in who she was at the time, she morphed into what she thought was what another group of people wanted and that came with instant gratification.

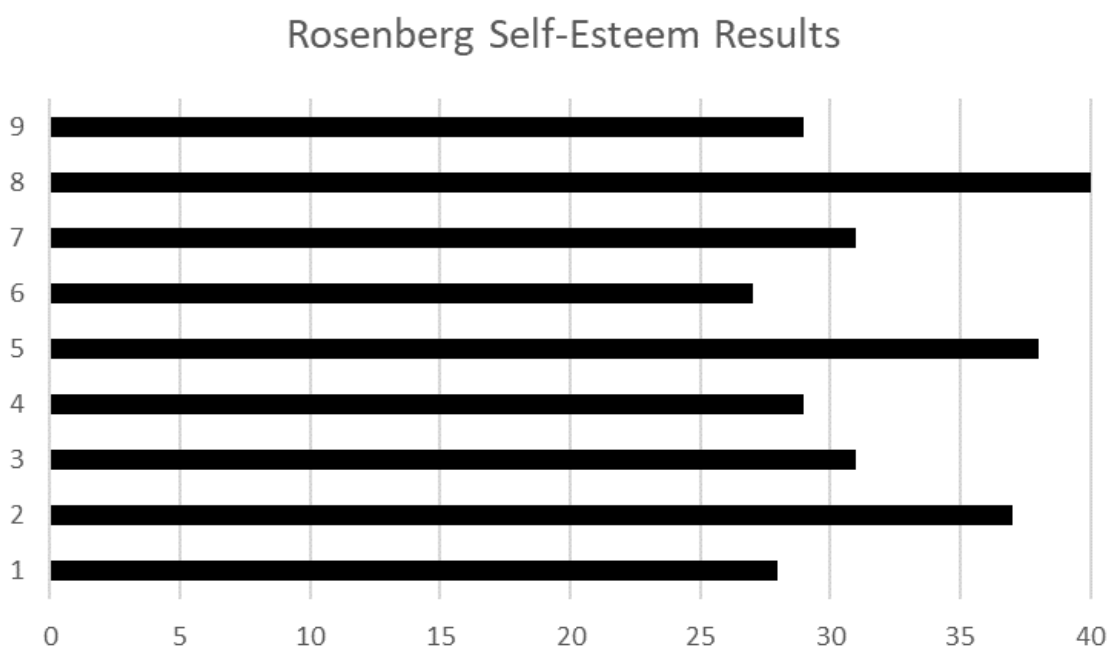


*Figure 4: Influenced... pie chart shows comments largely made by participants were evident of influenced action, next largest set of comments made were influenced thought, followed by influenced identity and influenced feeling (parent code = influenced, child codes = influenced thought, influenced action, influenced identity, influenced feeling)*

### ***The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Survey***

While many of our interviewees rejected the idea of closely following Instagram influencers, it was very apparent that they were still influenced whether directly or indirectly. They vocalized some level of poor self-esteem at some point in their lives when recalling old Instagram photos, but we can also see the impacts through the results of the Rosenberg self-

esteem survey. The survey shows a range of self-esteem levels with the lower numbers indicating lower self-esteem and the higher numbers indicating higher self-esteem. The results were not discussed during the interview as I wanted the participant to comfortably answer the survey to receive the best results for analysis. The results are shown below in Figure 2:



*Figure 5: Rosenberg self-esteem results show centralized levels between 25 and 40 with 40 being the highest level of self-esteem felt by participants (y-axis = participant, x-axis = numbered level of self-esteem)*

As we can see, the results are centralized between 25 and 40 with our average being 32.2 and an outlier of 40; the highest level of self-esteem. The average level of self-esteem is relatively high when the general Rosenberg scale is 10 to 40. I believe this average is higher than expected due to the survey being taken before the interview questionnaire. It can be analyzed as the participant going into the interview with some level of insecurity and as the interview progresses, memory recalls happen, and photo elicitation takes place, the participants are met with old insecurities

that may have since grown or changed into a different form of insecurity. They were met with a past version of themselves that resulted in a negative emotion or a positive transformation. For future research, I would suggest participants take the survey before and after the interview process to assess change and differentiation of insecurity levels.

## Discussion

### *The Interviewees and Affect Control Theory*

After analyzing the results, there are very apparent connections between the interviews and ACT. The biggest theme to note to discuss is the EPA aspect of the theory and the biggest example given was the participant who expressed how detrimental keeping up with social media to impress her peers was. She explained the negative emotions felt with every post she shared and those emotions gave her a bad evaluation of self and others, she felt weak posting the photo and recalling the photo, and while the activity might have been lively because it fit the popular mold, she was unfulfilled emotionally. All of her photos with similar processes paved the way for her to re-identify with someone or a group of people she did not feel truly accepted. That was evident in the way she switched personalities according to friend groups and the way she recalled memories and feelings years later in our interview.

Another example of EPA showing evidence within the interviews was through a different lens. One participant expressed how she wanted to shy away from the “doom-and-gloom” Instagram posting that she felt was taking over social media during 2020. She experienced the social injustices firsthand and wanted Instagram to be a place where she could post anything *but* that type of content. The content she was absorbing at the time was evaluated as bad, she felt weak when consuming it, and she thought it was quite boring. The reconstruction principle allowed her to take a different course: She notices people are posting heavy content, she believes she should post the same so others know she agrees, but instead, she puts that to the side to post more positive and uplifting posts. She abandons her idea of “performative outreach” (as she said) and reconstructs her identity to take a more positive approach to the platform. She was able to find others who did the same as her and felt validated as she continued to express herself.

The last and most obvious example of EPA and the reconstruction principle in this study can be identified through Figure 1 flowchart. At a young age, one of our participants had Instagram to post about friends and with friends. She described herself as confident (self-evaluation) and as someone who posted what she wanted to. She saw another friend group post a certain way on Instagram and her friends wanted to do the same thing (deflection). She recalled receiving very positive feedback with sweet comments and a high like amount (emotions and sentiments) when mimicking the posts of the other friend group. That was her affirmation to continue finding inspiration to receive the gratification of likes and comments. She noted that she takes her social media presence very seriously and always makes sure to look presentable before posting.

It is fair to assume that girls are learning to be more confident in who they are as they grow up and find their own identity. However, the important part of this study is the process that happens. The emotions and sentiments that are being pulled away during their middle and high school years are ones that stick with them regardless of the change in confidence as they grew up. As social media continues to grow and as influencers gain more money by posting, the incentive to flood a young girls' Instagram feed for interaction and money is detrimental to her and her identity process. While deflection avoidance seems to be a healthy habitat that participants have started, at what point does the deflection become too hard to avoid? Which begs the question: why do girls continue to go back to Instagram knowing the risk of low self-esteem? I believe it is a two-fold question about the Instagram algorithm and the need for gratification or affirmation that can be explored in future research.

### ***Main Contributions***

Social media itself has been studied extensively for years and will continue to be analyzed through various lenses as our world becomes more digital. Not only has social media been studied, but self-esteem and the impact it has on the younger generation has also been studied. This study can be an additional resource to future research by putting everything under a theoretical lens; affect control theory. By using affect control theory to understand social media, self-esteem, and young girls, it can open the door for deeper research and a clear understanding as more social media platforms pop-up. I have shown the qualitative approach to this study and attached a crucial theory that allowed us to find concrete results such as deflection avoidance tendencies, extremely low levels of self-esteem, and even careless posting. By naming a theoretical foundation such as affect control theory, this study will be an important contribution to a topic that will be researched for more years to follow.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

An important limitation to this study is time constraint. If given a flexible timeline, an alternative to the scrollbar method in this study could be a longitudinal study rather than a scrollbar method to measure the identity process over time. This could allow for a more personal understanding and real time reactions or emotions as a young person navigates social media. In addition to having that extra time, it would have allowed me to recruit a larger sample size of participants for a wider range of perspectives. These additional participants could have been from different schools, states, or walks of life that may have played a role in how they processed their identities as it relates to social media. Having the additional time to create a more diverse sample size would have also allowed representation from the LGBTQ+ community. This community should be considered specifically when exploring affect control theory and social media as it is important for an understanding of a deeper identity process. On the other hand, if a



smaller sample is preferred, perhaps conducting a more homogenous sample of females would be beneficial. By focusing on a specific race or socioeconomic class of females for this study, it could allow for more control of the variables and concise results as opposed to more broad themes.

Future research(ers) should also consider this study from the male perspective of affect control theory and social media. One participant I conducted an interview with was male and could not be used for the study, but I decided to conduct the interview regardless. I found that he experienced similar situations to the female participants of the study in that he received pushback from his peers about social justice content he posted and felt insecure as he went through his middle school and high school years. Something different that he experienced than his female counterparts was the confidence he later gained that helped him continue his activity on social media and expand his content to YouTube rather than dwindle down his followers. There are many differences and similarities that can be explored should this study look at males specifically that could benefit to the theoretical framework.

## Conclusion

At some point in our lives whether we are aware or not, we have felt some sort of insecurity brought on by social media. It may not have been a blatant copying of an influencer or posting the same as a friend, but we subconsciously bank the outcome of an interaction. When your friend posts a vacation photo on Instagram and it is met with hundreds of likes and comments, you see that as a good post with strong activity and you evaluate it as something you might want to do for the same gratification. As seen with our participants, this can be a positive or a negative. You can feel confident and want to surround yourself with like-minded people or it can be the catalyst for lifelong insecurities. Whatever the outcome, these social interactions change your identity in some way. When putting affect control theory side-by-side to the interview process, we can see the self-evaluation through the Rosenberg self-esteem survey. As we move into the photo elicitation process, we can see the obvious emotions and sentiments taken away from each point of their lives (as shown through pictures). 6 out of 9 participants' first photo was a carefree and innocent picture they posted for their family and friends. As we progressed into the second picture, we were met with general sadness, insecurity, or some sort of influence (thought, action, identity, feeling). Which brought us to the last part of the process, identity creation; what they took away from each photo to the next phase of their lives as shown in their third pictures to then create their identity today and the level of confidence shown in their comfortability of who they are.

As technology continues to evolve and our daily interactions happen more so on social media than in person, it is important to understand the impact this has on our future generations as well as the younger generations. Their identities can and will be largely impacted by how they see their peers and social media influencers present themselves. While there was already prior

theoretical evidence to support this idea, the study presented today is able to provide supporting evidence by expressing the emotions and sentiments happening at each point of their life through Instagram. This study can also be a foundation for future research as technology grows into new platforms and ways to interact with society. It can also be used to understand how the influencers themselves present on social media and their emotions and sentiments as it pertains to their identity creation. For example, TikTok influencers are very different from Instagram influencers in the way they post or cater to the app and its audiences. This study can easily be applied to TikTok and its growing numbers of consumers to understand the immense impact social media has on society and their identity creation. It is important to remember that nothing goes unseen and everything we do should carry some sort of positivity or encouragement to those around us. While we are not in control of someone's identity creation, there is some level of impact to be understood as shown through affect control theory. A younger person deserves an outlet to feel confident, happy, and strong just as these participants' younger selves deserved. There will always be a new app for a new generation, it is important influencers and our peers understand the lifelong impact they have on others whether they know it or not.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Initial/General questions:

1. Tell me a bit about your social media use.
2. How long have you used Instagram? How/why do you use it? In what ways has this changed over time?

#### Instagram Photo Questions/Follow-Ups:

1. Why did you choose this post to share?
2. What do you feel when you see this post?
3. What was going through your mind before you posted this? After?
4. How do you think the people you were following at the time, particularly any influencers, affected the content of your post?
  1. Who *were* you following at the time of this post? Any influencers? Why?
  2. How did these influencers affect the way you acted? How you thought of yourself? Did you want to be like them?
- c. Do you feel like your sense of your identity changed because of them (either your interactions with them or the content they shared), and if so, how?
5. When you made this post, did it make you feel good or bad? Strong or weak? Active or boring?
  1. How would you describe yourself at the time of this post?
6. Sharing this post right now, did it make you feel good or bad? Strong or weak? Active or boring?
  1. Do you think you've gained any sort of sentiments or emotions from following influencers? Did they or do they make you feel strong or fun or lively?
7. Has your sense of your identity changed since this post, and if so, how?
  1. How would you describe yourself now?

## Appendix B: CODEBOOK

**POSITIVE EMOTION**

<p><b>NOSTALGIA</b></p> <p>Refers to feelings of longing for something good, recalling happy memories, feeling reminiscent, sentimental, a positive view on memory.</p> <p>This refers to elicited feelings by participant felt when walking through scrollbar method and going through memory recall to explain the Instagram post made by the participant and the associated feelings.</p>	<p><b>CONFIDENCE</b></p> <p>Refers to feelings of pride, self-assurance, excitement about oneself, including physical and non-physical confidence.</p> <p>An elicited feeling by participant when recalling memories during scrollbar method of Instagram posts. Relating to themes of self-esteem and EPA component of affect control theory.</p>
<p><b>HAPPINESS</b></p> <p>Refers to feelings of general happiness, joy, excitement, including verbal (i.e. outwardly saying “this makes me happy”) and physical happiness (i.e. smile).</p> <p>An elicited feeling throughout the duration of this photo elicitation and how it relates to their evaluation of the self (component of EPA in affect control theory).</p>	



## NEGATIVE EMOTION

<p><b>NOSTALGIA</b></p> <p>Refers to feelings of longing for something in the past, recalling memories, feeling reminiscent of who they once were or who they have become, sentimental, a negative view of memory.</p> <p>This refers to elicited feelings by participant felt when walking through scrollback method and going through memory recall to explain the Instagram post made by the participant and the associated feelings.</p>	<p><b>INSECURITY</b></p> <p>Refers to feelings of “cringe,” embarrassment, lack of excitement about oneself, including physical (i.e. body image) and non-physical (i.e. anxiety) insecurity.</p> <p>An elicited feeling by participant when recalling memories during scrollback method of Instagram posts. Relating to themes of self-esteem and EPA component of affect control theory.</p>
<p><b>SADNESS</b></p> <p>Refers to feelings of general sadness, upset, discomfort, regret, wishing change of the past.</p> <p>An elicited feeling throughout the duration of this photo elicitation and how it relates to their evaluation of the self (component of EPA in affect control theory).</p>	

## INFLUENCE (BY PERSON OR ACCOUNT)

<p><b>ACTION</b></p> <p>Refers to how the participant acts after viewing content; can be a change in how they post on social media, a change in their daily routine, change in how they act towards others (positive or negative); if they become more political or religious; if they feel moved to voice opinions (i.e. activism) or quiet their own opinions (i.e. not wanting to overstep followers and friends).</p> <p>Relating to EPA component of affect control theory and how they change their interactions.</p>	<p><b>FEELING</b></p> <p>Refers to various feelings the participant has before, during, or after viewing content; how they change their feelings about themselves or other based on the content.</p> <p>Relating to the EPA component of affect control theory and the feeling related to self-esteem after an interaction.</p>
<p><b>THOUGHT</b></p> <p>Refers to how the participant thinks before, during, or after viewing content; changes mindset based on what was viewed, alters morals/ethics to adhere or fit to what was viewed.</p> <p>Relating to EPA and how an interaction changes mentality after viewing content.</p>	<p><b>IDENTITY</b></p> <p>Refers to a change who they are or want to become (positive or negative), idolizing, making them a role model, taking content at face value to use for themselves.</p> <p>Relating to affect control theory as a whole and every component of EPA.</p>