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**Social media use at various levels of engagement and its emotional
consequences**

or:

How I learned to stop worrying and love the scroll

Student: Fabian Ceder-Thorin

Supervisor: Kristina Stenström

Course supervisor: Johan Lindell

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Abstract

Social media has become ubiquitous in modern society. Both as a way to connect with others and as a popular form of entertainment and relaxation. This dependency on social media can lead both to beneficial and adverse consequences. A common concern about social media use relates to how active or passive a user is, with some indicating that passive behaviours, such as absently scrolling through the feed are particularly harmful. Research that investigates social media's adverse effect on the individual depending on the user's engagement level currently suffers from problems with categorisation, methodology and philosophy. This thesis sought to fill this research gap. Its research questions were accordingly: "What motivates adult users to use social media at various levels of engagement?" and "What factors of social media use impact adult users' adverse emotional outcomes?"

To answer this research question, the study utilised a methodology of focus group discussion with pre-existing social groups consisting of adults aged 20-30, a demographic with potentially unique insight into their relationship with social media. This was followed by thematic analysis which in turn was placed within a framework of Use & gratification theory and the networked public. These theories were chosen since the research adheres to concepts of the active audience and disagrees with conceptualisations of the social media user as passive. Instead, low to high levels of engagement is used to describe individual behaviours. 4 main themes (Level of engagement, Problematic use, category of use and regulation) were discovered as well as 13 sub-themes.

The study discovered that individuals would use social media at several levels of engagement simultaneously but that behaviours could be assembled into four archetypes: Consumption (low level of engagement which included behaviours such as mindless scrolling), Lurking (low level of engagement which included both private and public browsing), socialisation (medium to high level of engagement which included communication), and production (high level of engagement which included publishing content). Different levels of engagement were associated with different adverse emotional outcomes which commonly occurred when users failed to effectively regulate their use or encountered harmful content. It was discovered that users encountered these issues largely due to the platform's incentivisation through subtle and not so subtle means such as media design and notifications.

Keywords: Social media, Scrolling, ASMU, PSMU, SMU, Uses & Gratification, Networked Public

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1. Introduction

Social media, and the way that we interact with it, has evolved dramatically in the last 20 years. Presently, it is one of the dominant methods for communication, entertainment, information and more. Throughout the last few decades, new avenues of use have been made possible, but so has our relationship to digital devices and its platforms changed as well. As social media use continues to increase globally, both in terms of user count and average time spent online (Arness & Ollis, 2022), it is important that researchers continue to investigate what consequences this use can have on the individual.

Social media can help form and maintain important social connections, provide entertainment, distraction and serve as a vital channel for news, education and information (Bhargava, 2023). Despite social media's inherent potential for good, there are many current concerns regarding the way it can harm individuals and society at large. Common contemporary concerns include data security, privacy, misinformation and social media's potential to be an addictive and harmful behaviours (You & Liu, 2022).

There exists a prominent concern today that social media can cause adverse effects on an individual due to its addictive nature or its potential for harmful social dynamics (Bhargava, 2023). These effects have historically been referred to as problematic internet use (PIU) and includes behaviours such as excessive use of social media (Arness & Ollis, 2022). Social media users are reporting feelings of anxiety and stress due to uninterrupted connectivity as well as descriptions of "scrolling through nothing" (Lupinacci, 2021). The description of the infinite scroll and its adverse effects has been a recurring narrative in research investigating social media's negative effects with some researchers arguing that many social media platforms exploit cognitive limitations of their users in order to prolong use and initiate harmful and habitual use for the sake of monetisation (Bhargava, 2023).

These concerns regularly take the level of engagement of the user into account as scrolling is described to be a passive use of social media. Common conceptualisations of internet use as either active or passive would argue that each category of behaviour is capable of causing a variety of effects at varying degrees of intensity. Active social media use (ASMU) typically refers to behaviours in which the user engages with the platform or other users productively

while passive social media use (PSMU) is exemplified by behaviours such as scrolling and generally believed to undermine well-being by stimulating harmful behaviours (Verduyn et al., 2015).

However, conceptualisation of active and passive social media use currently do not align with the nuance of actual behaviours performed online (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Such descriptions neither align with longstanding media theories regarding the active audience (Biocca, 1988). Contemporary research about ASMU and PSMU needs to apply more extended models of description when analysing different kinds of behaviours. This thesis seeks to answer a call for research which investigates the nuances of ASMU and PSMU and the ways that they can affect an individual's emotional outcomes since conclusions in this field currently suffers from both categorical and methodological strain due to a lack of consistency in their definitions (Verduyn et al., 2022).

This will be done through the use of qualitative methods, specifically focus group interviews. The participants of these interviews will be international adults aged 20-30. This demographic serves as an interesting choice due to their continued evolution alongside social media platforms. Most social media appeared in the early 2000's and so this generation has experienced many of its changes and variety of emotional effects, making them an intriguing demographic to examine. How has their use changed over the years? How has their relationship to specific platforms been altered? Why do they use social media actively and passively and at what specific scenarios does this use occur?

1.1 Problem Description

Social media habits such as scrolling have become increasingly characterised as mind numbing, harmful and passive (Bhargava, 2023). Applications like TikTOK, with its immersive design features, endless feeds and apparent intention to prolong use, have been accused of causing harm and turning users into passive consumers of 'worthless' content. This ongoing narrative can be likened to previous descriptions of media use which happened both to the radio and the TV, aligning with criticisms about the mass audience as irrational, easy to manipulate and generally lacking self-control (McQuail, 2010).

This thesis intends to fill an evident research gap as described by other scholars (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Verduyn et al., 2021). This gap regards the lack of nuance in descriptions of active social media use (ASMU) and passive social media use (PSMU) and their respective

effects on emotional outcomes. This follows a line of media theory and the networked public which regards even small behaviours and habits performed online as valuable (Boyd, 2010). Such theoretical frameworks refute the concept that social media use can be truly *passive* but does accept the fact that certain actions may have a higher level of engagement than others. Notably, this thesis rejects the hypothesis that passive use should be naturally linked to more negative outcomes than active use and instead opts to understand ASMU and PSMU as a spectrum of behaviours that can cause a variety of emotional effects.

Additionally, social media platforms undergo constant changes to their design and user base. This thesis will investigate the topic of ASMU and PSMU as it relates to adult users aged 20-30 years old who have been avid social media users since its earliest inception. It is believed that this generation may have had the most diverse relationships with social media and an awareness of how their relationship to it has evolved. It has also been previously observed that this generation has become increasingly passive online, decreasing their publishing habits in favour of smaller, more social dynamics (Bhargava, 2023). What motivates these individuals to use social media at various levels and what specific emotional effects can this cause? Moreover, what power do these individuals have to limit potential harm in the face of social media expectations and institutions?

1.2 Research Aim & Research Question

This thesis answers the call for explorative research into dynamic levels of social media engagement by using extended models of ASMU and PSMU. The study is focused on the experiences of adult users between 20-30 years old from a variety of nationalities, predominantly Swedish. The participants were distributed across the ideal age group, gender and various nationalities, making them somewhat emblematic of the general demographic but limited due to the relatively low number and a lack of true diversity in terms of socioeconomic background or nationality. The study investigates what motivates such individuals to use social media at various levels of engagement and what specific emotional effect this can cause. Additionally, it seeks to answer what actions this group of individuals take to limit potential harm to themselves when faced with problematic social media use. It does so predominantly out of a desire to create a more fruitful vocabulary for describing ASMU and PSMU while avoiding binary categorisations.

- **What motivates adult users aged 20-30 to use social media at various levels of engagement?**
- **What factors of social media use impact adult users' aged 20-30 adverse emotional outcomes?**
 - **What actions do adult users aged 20-30 take to limit adverse emotional effects?**

It must be noted that the sampled respondents, while probably aligning with the average user, can't be generalised. The results of this thesis should not be used to point out what the general public experiences on social media. The results can, however, indicate relatively common archetypes of behaviours present within this specific age group and demographic. Furthermore, the study's methodology could be applied to any group as could its vocabulary, leading to a balanced reliability.

1.3 Thesis Structure

In chapter 2, the thesis continues by providing a background on social media and its different modes of interaction. This chapter also describes active and passive social media use and the commonly held hypotheses of each, followed by a description of problematic social media use and the way that this is tackled from the perspective of media and communications research. In chapter 3, the thesis provides a thorough overview of the research field. It describes the history of how active and passive social media use has been studied, what methodologies are common and what research gaps have led to the current research question. This is followed by chapter 4 which provides a summary of the relevant theoretical framework utilised by the study to describe user motivations and the conceptualisation of the active audience. This is done mainly through an implementation of Uses & gratification theory as well as the networked public theory. In chapter 5, the thesis described the chosen methodology of focus group discussions and motivates its decision of method and sampled respondents. There is also a description of how coding was done in service of analysis. Finally, chapter 6 provides the results of the data collection and analyses responses provided by participants. The thesis then concludes with chapter 7 which discusses the findings and makes suggestions moving forward.

2. Background

2.1 Social media

Social media refers to a variety of interconnected platforms utilised by humans (and machines) to interact with one another through the internet. Social media platforms vary widely in application and audience but commonly seeks to connect unique users with one another through the production of content such as text, images or videos (Obar & Wildman, 2015). While all media, such as the TV, inherently has a social aspect to it, social media is defined by features that allow for collaborative communication and interaction. These features can include functions such as comments, likes and sharing. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and TikTok also provide the user with the tools necessary to create their own media content (Van Dijck et al, 2018).

Social media as a concept originates from the early 2000's when popular sites such as Myspace and Facebook began platforming human interaction online. In contrast to earlier online communication methods, social media facilitated interaction through unique accounts and large, centralised platforms. This change is commonly referred to as WEB 2.0 which, alongside a falling cost of data storage capabilities, is considered a key reason for social media's success in the early 2000's and onward (Obar & Wildman, 2015). WEB 2.0, also known as the participatory internet, is a catch-all concept used to explain the levels of interaction and convergence of technologies that define the modern online experience. This is meant to contrast to previous experiences online, such as forums, which were less inherently interactive and not designed to reach massive audiences (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). The production and consumption of user generated content (UGC) is the lifeblood of contemporary social media sites. Each platform, be they focused on text, videos or images, are reliant on the continued activity of its users, both in terms of production and consumption of content (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The business model of the largest social media sites today relies on the production and dissemination of UGC. The platform offers a free and convenient service for users who wish to produce or consume content or connect with others socially. The platforms then monetise whatever is produced on their site through advertising or by selling user data to third-party groups (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

There is a large variety of social media platforms in the current landscape. There are social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, microblogs like Twitter (now X) and video hosting

sites like YouTube. While similar in the ways mentioned previously, each platform has a different utility, audience and mechanisms at play which alter the user experience in a variety of ways. For example, one might use Facebook for the purposes of communication and connection while YouTube serves to provide entertainment or information (Li et al., 2021). Regardless of motivation, research indicates that passive behaviours such as browsing, are prevalent on most social media platforms and that gratification through entertainment and information are the dominant motivators behind social media use (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Consumption of content is the most prevalent on sites such as Instagram and TikTok however, often accused of being an extreme passive behaviour with the potential to cause adverse emotional effects (Zhang et al., 2019).

TikTok is a short form video sharing platform which has taken centre stage in contemporary debates regarding accusations of its addictive design (Montag et al., 2021). It launched in 2017 and is owned by Bytedance, a Beijing-based tech-company. It is monetised primarily through ad space. TikTok enables users, like past social media, to make unique accounts from which they can create, share and edit short form content, enhanced with filters and current musical trends. The “for you” page provides users with an infinite stream of videos algorithmically designed to be engaging to the user (Montag et al., 2021). While the original conceit of TikTok, and its predecessor Musically, was to create lip-sync videos, the content and use of the platform has changed in recent years to include any number of genres and categories such as entertainment, information, memes and more. While TikTok is only one of many platforms with such features today, it is mentioned specifically due to its popularity as well its controversial position. Other common platforms that are often accused of having addicting qualities include Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

2.2 Active and Passive social media use

This chapter will provide a general understanding of the conceptualisations of ASMU and PSMU as well as common pitfalls. It is the intention of this chapter, and this thesis, to provide a less binary understanding of ASMU and PSMU which takes the nuances of user behaviour and motivation into account. This chapter begins by describing what ASMU and PSMU typically entails and then offers a more extended description to counter that.

Active social media use (ASMU) and passive social media use (PSMU) are two conceptualisations which seek to describe the ways that the user can choose to engage with

social media. ASMU typically entails actions such as sending private messages or making public posts whereas PSMU refers to actions such as browsing (Valkenburg et al., 2021). ASMU also includes behaviours such as liking, commenting, sending messages and otherwise engaging others (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). ASMU is generally understood to be a virtuous behaviour which leads to beneficial emotional outcomes since it creates social connection and leads to greater levels of intimacy (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Because of this, ASMU has classically been hypothesised to correlate with greater levels of well-being. There are however apparent scenarios in which ASMU can cause adverse effects such as cyberbullying. Additionally, different sets of people are likely to have different motivations with their social media use which is likely to cause different outcomes at different levels of engagement (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019).

PSMU is regularly less precisely described but it is typically described as the monitoring of online life without engagement and includes behaviours such as browsing. As the flipside of ASMU, PSMU is commonly correlated with negative effects (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This thesis adheres to concepts that make accepting the truth of this description difficult to follow. For instance, media theories such as the active audience might state that audience reception and selectivity alone make them active users despite not producing content themselves. For the purpose of clarity, this thesis will continue to use ASMU and PSMU as a way to describe the way that users engage with media at different levels. Like previous frameworks, this thesis describes ASMU as actions where the user produces content or engages other individuals and PSMU as actions that do not. The key difference of the approach is that this thesis utilises an extended model which posits that behaviours exist on a spectrum of actions in accordance with active audience theories.

This approach has been borne out of necessity since the conceptualisations of ASMU and PSMU present in the field have thus far led to inconclusive empirical evidence (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This shift of perspective is for the most part led by media scholars who argue that existing descriptions fail to capture the complexity of relationships between SMU and well-being. For instance, behaviours are commonly entangled such as how the act of “liking” something could be considered active by one scholar and passive by another (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Such confusions are unfortunately common within the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy as are the relations these behaviours have to well-being and ill-being. This has led researchers to call for extended models of ASMU and PSMU which take into account the nuances of

behaviour practised by social media users (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2022).

The origin of this confusion goes back further than the internet, let alone social media. Previous frameworks of a passive audience and its negative connotations date back as far as Herbert Blumer in 1939. Here, mass media is understood as “large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed” (McQuail, 2010, p. 333) and the massification of media such as the radio was understood as a moral flaw on society and a less virtuous way to consume culture. It follows that television, comics, video games and now social media have been accused of similar effects on individuals and society. According to McQuail, it is easy to associate negative features with an audience the more they are considered a mass rather than individuals or social groups. Common negative features attributed to a mass audience include irrationality, lack of self-control and vulnerability to manipulation (McQuail, 2010). Passive and mass consumption of media has predominantly been understood as negative and “bad” throughout the modern age which is sure to have affected the common perceptions of ASMU and PSMU (McQuail, 2010).

2.3 Problematic social media use

Regardless of the activity being classified as active or passive, social media has the potential to cause a variety of adverse emotional effects on the individual (Verduyn et al., 2017).

Problematic (sometimes referred to as pathological) internet use (PIU) has been a concern since the internet’s mainstream adoption in the mid 90’s. Early researchers examined how the internet could be addicting (Griffiths, 1999) or abusive (Brenner, 1997) while contemporary research covers a much larger scope of more specific topics (Verduyn et al., 2017; Wolgast et al., 2023). While it has been observed that the internet has immense potential for emotional consequence, conclusions regarding PIU are largely inconclusive due to differences in diagnostic criteria, epistemology, methodology and more (D’Angelo & Moreno, 2020).

Common conclusions indicate however that people with genetic, personality and individual struggles with self-regulation are at higher risk of developing PIU (Spada, 2014) and that PIU may be the result of various factors such as loneliness, anxiety or the desire to alleviate boredom turned into pathological obsession (Davey & Davey, 2008; Soror et al., 2021).

PIU and internet addiction have been utilised interchangeably even though they represent two separate frameworks for identifying internet overuse. Internet addiction is likened to classic

substance abuse while PIU represents a broader variety of problems, including social, behavioural and emotional issues (D'Angelo & Moreno, 2020). PIU is currently understood to be risky, excessive or impulsive in nature, leading to adverse life consequences, specifically physical, emotional, social or functional impairment. PIU may lead to depression, hyperactivity, issues with concentration and a litany of other adverse consequences (Montag et al., 2020).

This thesis does not belong to a medical or biological paradigm and makes no attempt to diagnose its research subjects, but frameworks of PIU can be useful to create fruitful analysis of what participants describe as problematic behaviours. This thesis intends to investigate what levels of engagement causes adverse emotional effects and why, which is why it is motivated to examine PIU as an aspect of its theoretical foundation. For example, it is likely that research subjects will speak about what adverse effects they experience when engaging with social media actively or passively. These descriptions will be valuable for future research which seeks to describe social media use and its effects with more nuance. Such research can include media and communication research but also work that does not fit this thesis' paradigm, such as medical or psychological research investigating adverse effects of social media use. All branches of research must adapt extended models of ASMU and PSMU and their effects on well-being or risk making undue conclusions.

2.3.1 Addictive social media use

Be it TV, comics or video games, excessive media use has often been viewed as harmful, leading to addiction and dissociation from the real world's worthwhile activities (McQuail, 2010). Concern about excessive media use has been especially prevalent for children due to their vulnerability. While television has historically been the most prominent culprit, social media may recently have taken its place as the prime example of how people can easily become addicted to their media habits.

Addiction to social media refers here to a psychological dependency on varied social media behaviours such as shopping, browsing, chatting or scrolling through one's feed. Importantly, this thesis regards pathological and addictive social media use not as a disease but as a result of habitual use (You & Liu, 2022). There is a prominent concern today regarding the adverse effects that certain digital platforms may cause in terms of addiction and self-regulating, with users indulging in excessive and compulsive behaviours that interfere with daily activities (Bhargava, 2023). Addiction to social media may be caused by a variety of factors, ranging

from dependence on social media for positive affirmation (Andreassen et al., 2016) to lack of self-control in the face of powerful algorithms (Alcott et al., 2022). Similar to ideas of PIU, this thesis does not investigate medical or biological aspects of social media addiction. It does, however, investigate the ways that research subjects can describe themselves as addicted to social media and how this negatively affects their mood.

3. Literature Review

This chapter reviews and summarises existing literature on the characteristics that define active, passive and problematic social media use. The chapter begins with a description of the conceptual frameworks which define the field and continues with an overview of the adverse and beneficial effects of active and passive social media use. Finally, it reviews motivations for a more nuanced description of social media use and the necessity for utilisation of extended models.

3.1 Problematic Internet Use

Research into problematic social media use is primarily driven by cyber-psychologists and media and communication scholars. This field of research seeks to investigate the ways in which social media can be harmful to people and how its unique features can affect mental health (Tyagi & Tripathi, 2023; Singh & Tripathi, 2016). Before we continue, it should be noted that this thesis makes no claim that pathological social media use is analogous to substance addiction but does state the importance of studying obsessive behaviour. PIU is herein approached as a social concept, not a biological or medicinal one. While it is a common rhetoric that the modern individual has become addicted to their smartphone, the truth is likely more complicated. Research of the last few decades states that individuals have instead become addicted to what the phone enables (Kuss & Griffith, 2017).

According to some researchers in the field, overreliance on social media can lead to a variety of problematic effects such as attention dysregulation, isolation, compulsive use and more (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Kuss & Griffith (2017) provides a useful vocabulary for the description of these symptoms in which (1) *Salience* describes how social networking becomes the foremost preoccupation to the user. (2) *Mood modification* describes how activities on social media can affect one's mood. (3) *Tolerance* describes how more time and energy must be put in in order to reach the same effect as in earlier phases of use. (4) *Withdrawal* describes how, when SMU is discontinued, addicted individuals will experience negative psychological symptoms often leading to (5) *relapse* (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

One common conceptualisation of social media's adverse effects is known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). FOMO refers to an individual's apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Secondary interpretations of FOMO further detail the concept by describing state-FOMO, which refers

to the fear of missing information online as well as trait-FOMO which is related to unmet social needs (Mao et al., 2023). These anxieties can increase the frequency with which individual's check their phone due to a fear of missing out on social connection or staying informed. This relates also to descriptions of nomophobia, a fear of being without one's phone and a desire for being constantly available which can also cause feelings of anxiety (Kuss & Griffith, 2017).

While it is clear that social media can have a distinct effect on an individual's moods, empirical evidence has recently observed a negative correlation between SMU and effects on well-being (Verduyn et al., 2022; Kross et al., 2021). Confusions within the field may be due to often generalised and pathologised descriptions of SMU as well as biased comparisons between users, platforms and behaviours which entangles the complexity of SMU and its effects (Valkenburg, 2022). Valkenburg provides 3 recommendations for future research which seeks to investigate problematic internet use (PIU) without suffering from common pitfalls. These are: (1) Do not collapse well-being and ill-being components which refers to how ill-being has been seen as the flipside of well-being without taking into account how both spectrums can exist at the same time. (2) Time-based predictors are no longer sufficient to study SMU effects which refers to how much of SMU research has previously focused greatly on the amount of time spent on social media. (3) Researchers need to adopt a casual effect heterogeneity approach. This applies in experimental studies and longitudinal studies which seek to investigate SMU through person-specific analysis. Valkenburg argues such methods have not seen enough utilisation in the field (Valkenburg, 2022). Out of the three suggestions for future research into PIU, the first and second will be closely adhered to in the following research while the third is not relevant to the chosen methodology. This thesis will work under the assumption that greater well-being does not equate lower ill-being and vice-versa. Secondly, this thesis is not interested in judging a person's emotional effect based on time spent or other quantitative factors. It is likely that participants will speak on how they spend "too much time on social media" but this will not be analysed through numerical measurements such as how many hours is "too much". Instead, it will seek to analyse what the participant describes as the problem and conclude what level of engagement causes them to feel as if they have wasted their time.

PIU has been closely associated with PSMU since PSMU is generally believed to undermine well-being by stimulating harmful behaviours (Verduyn et al., 2015). Scrolling in particular has recently been characterised as both dominant and problematic for individuals and for

society since information and propagation platforms (IPPs) such as Instagram and TikTok have an addictive quality that endorses passive and unhealthy consumption (Rosenquist, 2021). Research that investigates people's unhealthy relationship with social media and the internet must tackle past failings within the field in order to accurately analyse what different kinds of behaviour and interaction can actually lead to various emotional outcomes (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

3.2 Active social media use and Passive social media use

Research into ASMU and PSMU is populated by two major branches of researchers: cyber psychologists and media and communication researchers. This part of the literature review provides examples of both, but it should be noted that the two branches offer different perspectives on the topic, its classifications and effects. This will be mentioned when necessary.

The concept of the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy and the hypothesis that they impact well-being was first categorised within "Social network activity and social well-being" By Burke, Marlow and Lento (2010). The purpose of the study was to validate a common report which claimed that directed interaction was associated with greater feelings of bonding and lower levels of loneliness while consumption was associated with increased loneliness. Seeing as the levels of engagement were a predictor for emotional effect, they predicted that loneliness would decrease with higher amounts of direct communication and that consumption was associated with loneliness (Burke et al., 2010).

Previous research had observed passive use of social media and its effects on the users, but this had been limited to the concept of lurkers, discussed further in 3.2.1. Burke et al. (2010) found that greater SNS use was associated with increased social capital and reduced loneliness (Burke et al., 2010). Additionally, directed communication such as messaging facilitated relationships and increased social capital whereas consumption behaviours were associated with feelings of loneliness. Burke et al. assumed that low-quality content or *noise* would induce weaker emotional outcomes than meaningful communication. Most importantly for the creation of the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy, they discovered that increased Facebook use was associated with greater well-being (Burke et al., 2010).

These findings became the basis of the active-passive dichotomy that has become prevalent in the field today. The hypothesis is summarised as ASMU leading to beneficial emotional

effects whereas PSMU leads to adverse emotional effects and is used both by psychologists and communication researchers who wish to explain the emotional outcomes that different levels of engagement can cause (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Thorisdottir et al., 2019; Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, Pagani, 2011; Weaver & Swank, 2019). This branch of research routinely positions PSMU as a common activity (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Gong et al., 2015) associated with decreased well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015; Thorisdottir et al., 2019). ASMU on the other hand is generally understood to lead to decreases in depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness (Escobar-Viera et al., 2019). The most recent scoping review on the subject of ASMU and PSMU is provided by Valkenburg et al., (2021) where ASMU is defined as “targeted one-on-one exchanges such as sending private messages or public broadcasting such as making a status update” and PSMU is defined as “the monitoring of online life without engagement or exchanges such as scrolling (Valkenburg et al., 2021, p.2).

According to Trifiro & Gerson, ASMU and PSMU has been measured through experimental manipulation, tracking of online behaviour and questionnaires (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Experimental manipulation, they say, have led to inaccurate results due to difficulties in determining whether changes in variables such as mood are a result of using social media passively or a result of the participants remembering specific use for the purposes of the study (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Alternatively, they suggest using the Passive Active use Measure (PAUM) as utilised by Gerson, Plagnol & Goll (2017). The PAUM was a Facebook use questionnaire of 13 items designed to identify activities as active or passive (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). However, since the PAUM was directly designed for Facebook, it could not be adapted to other social media sites. In fact, it could barely be utilised in regard to Facebook due to its rapid changes following the development of the PAUM. This led to the PAUM being unable to classify actions such as reacting to a comment (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). The PAUM, alongside other similar quantitative methodologies indicate a desire for researchers to categorise social media use into distinct behaviours that can be understood as active, passive, good and bad. These endeavours fail largely because they, in search of a conclusive understanding, fail to take the nuances of use into account, or the ways in which social media is sure to change. Additionally, due to cyber psychologists and communication scholars defining social media engagement differently, the creation of a scale that fits all definitions and patterns of use, is unrealistic. Trifiro & Gerson (2019) call for a universal measure of social media behaviours which would allow researchers to more accurately map

the impact of engagement. They continue by suggesting that the measure should be able to identify similar behaviours across several social media platforms, should be general enough to withstand changes in the social media landscape and finally, should be adaptable enough to be utilised by all fields from psychologists to marketing. Trifiro & Gerson (2019) suggest that the requirements could be explored through the use of focus groups of users who frequent several platforms which could lead to general understanding of use as well as a common vocabulary for the various levels of engagement. This request has inspired the current study.

Valkenburg, van Driel & Beyens (2021) provide the most recent and thorough scoping review on the subject of ASMU and PSMU as well as a critique on the generally accepted ASMU-PSMU hypothesis. Valkenburg et al. (2021) claim that the concept of “passive” SMU not only challenges long-standing communication theories that consider the reception of media messages as inherently active, but that the classifications themselves suffer from lack of clarity. Their review evaluated the latest empirical basis of the hypotheses' associations of ASMU and PSMU with well-being and discovered general disagreement on several topics. Initially, there is a confound between well-being and ill-being as one unique continuum when they should, in fact, be studied separately. Valkenburg et al. (2021) suggest three indicators for well-being (happiness, life satisfaction & positive affect) and three indicators for ill-being (mood, depression & negative affect). One vital addendum that the Valkenburg review provides is that of Private and Public ASMU and PSMU. In most early research regarding ASMU and PSMU (such as the Burke et al., 2010) research, each behaviour was considered to be *public*. Public active social media use for instance may refer to making a post while public passive social media use is the consumption of that post. Contemporary research would however make the claim that a large part of social media use consists of private use as well as public (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Private ASMU is classified as synchronous one-to-one or small group interactions between known communication members, referring to conversations that users are likely to have with friends or family through communication apps such as Facebook messenger. Private PSMU would then be the consumption of such communication without engagement (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Valkenburg et al. (2021) conclude that the current ASMU hypothesis does not distinguish between public and private SMU and thus predicts that both types of ASMU would lead to increases in well-being and decreases in ill-being with the opposite being true for private and public PSMU. Their report reveals limited support for both the ASMU and PSMU hypothesis, explained by common confusions such as the well-being and ill-being confound, the public and private confound

and ASMU-PSMU entangled activities. For instance, the categorisation of “liking” or “commenting” was widely inconsistent as either ASMU or PSMU while some studies considered “chatting” as PSMU when it clearly involves interaction (Valkenburg et al., 2021). The authors suggested that future research take more nuanced measurements into account when analysing ASMU and PSMU such as valence, intimacy and privateness/publicness.

This brings us to the extended model for ASMU and PSMU provided by Verduyn et al. (2021). The extended model seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between SMU and well-being since empirical findings using simple models have been inconclusive thus far. The model positions ASMU as “activities that facilitate interactions with other people” and PSMU as “viewing content without engaging in interactions with other users” (Verduyn et al., 2021, p. 63). These behaviours are characterised by posting or chatting and consumption respectively. The extended Active-Passive model of SNS use recognises the complexity of ASMU and PSMU in the following ways. The effect of active use on well-being is unlikely to be identical for all types of active use but depends instead on *reciprocity* and *communion*. Reciprocity refers to targeted and nontargeted communication. The degree to which active use is reciprocated depends greatly on the type of activity individuals engage in (Verduyn et al., 2021). For example, a user that messages another directly is likely to have greater reciprocity than a user who publishes an image for everyone. Verduyn et al. (2021) also define communion as warm and cold kinds of communication. In short, active use will only foster beneficial outcomes when behaviour is agreeable rather than quarrelsome (Verduyn et al., 2021). By utilising these two characteristics, the model can more accurately explain specific behaviours and their outcome. If a user were to post hate speech on a public forum for example that would be considered as public, active and cold behaviour and therefore likely to result in adverse outcomes. Conversely, if a user were to chat in private with a close friend that would be considered private, active and warm behaviour. Verduyn et al. (2021) provide similar characteristics for PSMU as well in the form of *self-relevance* and *achievement*.

Self-relevance intends to describe the scenarios in which a passive user might suffer due to comparison and suggests that high relevance is associated with greater ill-being. For example, unhealthy female body ideals might have greater relevance (and effect) on other women than men (Verduyn et al., 2021). The relationship between the user and the content therefore describes what causes emotional distress rather than the activity being classified as passive. The second characteristic provided is achievement (success vs failure). This relates to if the

content consumed regards success or failure with the hypothesis that if one passively consumes stories about success (which is common on SNS) one is likely to suffer while if one passively consumes stories about failure, one is likely to commit to downward social comparison (Verduyn et al., 2021). In short, the extended active-passive model suggests that active use is not always beneficial and passive use is not always detrimental for well-being. While far more nuanced than previous simple models of ASMU and PSMU, the extended model still fails to take certain passive behaviours into account such as entertainment or other motivators behind SMU. This is explored further in chapter 3.3 regarding uses & gratification research.

3.2.1 Lurkers

Research into passive social media use originates within the study of *lurkers*. Lurkers were described as “participants (...) who do not post any messages in an online community such as interactive mailing lists and bulletin board systems” (Takahashi et al., 2003, p. 1). Because of this, lurkers have been characterised as unwelcome observers and free riders (Gong et al., 2015), benefiting from the public goods of others without contribution (Takahashi et al., 2003). However, early research concluded that lurking individuals do not constitute a threat to the online landscape and should not be considered a negative behaviour (Nonnecke et al., 2006). In fact, lurking was a common behaviour perpetuated by a majority of social media users on a daily basis and silent users constitute a healthy part of the ecosystem (Gong et al., 2015).

Others have called lurkers harmless observers who may for a variety of valid reasons choose to opt out of interaction (Nonnecke et al., 2006). Research about lurkers is similar, but not identical, to research about PSMU. It has introduced notions of silent use and more dynamic ways to participate in online communities without direct engagement which will be relevant for future analysis. Like Nonnecke (2006) and Takahashi et al., (2003), this thesis believes that passive consumptive behaviours such as browsing or lurking does not possess some inherent flaw or is particularly harmful to the user. It is instead interested in investigating what levels of engagement causes adverse emotional effects, be they on the active or passive side of the spectrum. As such, it still understands active to include engagement and passive to include lack of engagement relatively speaking.

3.3 Uses & Gratification literature

Uses & Gratification theory (U&G) provides a framework for understanding what motivates individuals and groups to prefer specific mediums as well as specific behaviours within these mediums (McQuail, 2010). U&G theory originates from within the media effects research of the 40's and onward. It has historically been used to study the ways in which audiences interact with radio, tv (Ruggiero, 2000), and now social media (McQuail, 2010). Although it is sometimes open to diverse definitions and individual attributions (Ruggiero, 2000), U&G is considered a useful framework for understanding what motivates media use.

Within the specifics of ASMU and PSMU, U&G has been utilised by researchers who seek to explain how and why individuals use social media at different levels of engagement (Shao, 2009). U&G provides the simple idea that use of certain media can result in gratification of individual needs and only if relevant needs are gratified, will individuals continue to use the media (Montag et al., 2021). According to Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020), gratification was the most relevant driver to understand a range of behaviours on social media such as TikTok, including passive consumption of content. U&G theory has provided great insights into the motives that drive individuals to use social media despite the numerous claims that passive consumption is bad for one's health (Montag et al., 2021).

Shao (2009) suggested that individuals interact with UGC in three ways. Consumption, participation and production. (1) Users who *consume* do not interact with content but do watch and read it. (2) *Participation* includes both user-to-user interaction and user-to-content interaction but does not include actual production. (3) *Producing* encompasses creation and publication of content. Shao further suggested that users are driven by various motivations for social interaction, community development and production of content. U&G research of this era claimed that people produce content to inform and entertain others or to trigger responses and participation. If they were self-interested, production may be motivated by self-expression or self-actualisation (Shao, 2009). Fame is mentioned as well as individuals had just recently begun to utilise YouTube as a way to market oneself (Shao, 2009).

Arness & Ollis (2022) provides a valuable framework for a mixed methods study from which the focus group portion can inspired the ongoing study. In that study they understand the motivations behind social media use through previous frameworks of U&G. The qualitative results located the difficulties of self-regulation as well as motivations for purposeful social media use (Arness & Ollis, 2022). For instance, self-regulation was perceived to be difficult

since it requires effortful self-control that many participants claimed was difficult to achieve. Participants could also express how they would get lost in social media, describing it as a trance-like state. Some participants would describe how they purposefully removed their phones from their immediate vicinity to keep it out of sight and mind in order to avoid getting hooked (Arness & Ollis, 2022). The parallel theme was that of purposeful social media use. Many participants did report mindless use but almost all had a variety of purposes such as entertainment, information, motivation, connection and escapism that was intentional and directed (Arness & Ollis, 2022). The study utilised a six-step thematic analysis to create the codes via an inductive approach. The analysis found that awareness of problematic use and the intention to reduce social media use were not sufficient to actually lead to self-regulation. In fact, self-regulation was perceived to be extremely difficult even when participants were aware of evident side effects.

3.4 Methodologies of Previous literature

This chapter reviews quantitative and qualitative methods that have been utilised in order to investigate ASMU and PSMU and their effects on emotional outcomes. Like with all literature reviewed in this part, sources belong to media and communication schools as well as psychological ones. While the majority of research in this field appears to be quantitative, this thesis is primarily inspired by qualitative methods.

3.4.1 Quantitative research

The majority of research regarding ASMU, PSMU and their respective emotional affect that has been discovered for this thesis consists of quantitative methods. For example, the Valkenburg review (2021) reviews 40 survey-based studies. These studies were predominantly cross-sectional in nature but were largely unable to make claims regarding the impact of SMU on well-being. Similarly, quantitative methods overall have yielded varying results and inconclusive associations (Verduyn et al., 2021; Kross et al., 2020). At large, researchers are suggesting more explorative research that investigates the nuances of effects present in social media use.

The field of social media research into well-being currently exists in a debate for methodological reform with a general call for stronger research designs with more valid, universal measurements (Kross et al., 2020). Kross (2020) does however note how social media research in general faces a deeper psychological issue and believes the current corpus

fails to recognise the nuance of SMU. Because of these reasons, this thesis opted out of utilising quantitative methods as the methodology appears to be insufficient in actually describing social media use well enough to reach valid and consistent results. Qualitative methods, while not generalisable, may be better suited to describe what motivates individuals to perform specific behaviours and how these behaviours actually affect them.

3.4.2 Qualitative research

While most of the reviewed literature is quantitative in nature and deals primarily with surveys, there exists a few qualitative investigations as well that delve into the topic of active and passive social media use as well as problematic social media use. Common methodological approaches include content analysis (Chegeni et al., 2021), open interviews (Arness & Ollis, 2023) and addiction tests (Aksoy, 2018). Some researchers have argued that social media monitoring in large quantities may be a poor substitute for in-depth qualitative research (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011) while others claim that qualitative research is uniquely positioned to gain immersed understanding of SMU (Chegeni et al., 2021) and to explore the lived experiences of individuals of interest (Arness & Ollis, 2023).

In Chegeni et al. (2021), 18 participants were selected from psychiatric clinics who had been diagnosed with an addiction to social media. These individuals participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews that included questions such as “what factors made you tend towards SM?” and “What motivated you into using these social networks?”. The data of the interviews were then analysed through methods of transcription and several stages of coding. Codes were refined and merged until a number of categories were formed which could be arranged into the main meaning of the data (Chegeni et al., 2021). The main inspiration for the methodology of this thesis can be found in Arness & Ollis (2023), however. This study utilised a mixed methods design of both quantitative and qualitative. In the initial design of this thesis, this was the intended methodology, but this was changed to only include the qualitative method due to time constraints and the perceived failings of quantitative measurements of ASMU and PSMU. The interviews performed in Arness & Ollis (2023) consisted of first year psychology students at Western Sydney University. Participants were asked to self-report measures of ADHD symptoms, psychological well-being, PSMU and social media motivations. The qualitative results were analysed through thematic analysis which could lead to themes and sub-themes (Arness & Ollis, 2023). Despite the loss of the quantitative methodology, this has still inspired large parts of the chosen methods for this

thesis. The last common method, an addiction test such as the one found within Aksoy (2018) has not been applied.

It is the perception of this author that qualitative methodology is uniquely positioned to reach worthwhile conclusions about the effects of everyday, habitual social media use. Despite certain self-reporting fallacies, these methodologies can explore new, experimental models of active and passive SMU as well as its effects without relying on unclear categories.

3.5 Conclusion on Literature review

This chapter has sought to summarise both the history and the contemporary field of ASMU and PSMU research as well as PIU research. It has provided descriptions of the field and its goals as well as common methodologies to reach these goals. It has also gone over common criticisms of the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy and the need to nuance its descriptions.

It is evident that current research which investigates ASMU and PSMU suffers from a variety of inconsistencies that damages our understanding of the emotional effects SMU has on the individual. In some cases, specific behaviours such as liking or commenting is operationalised unreliably which leads to confusion. Future research must come to terms with how the interactive nature of SMU may prevent truthful attributions of effects either as ASMU or PSMU. Additionally, the ASMU-PSMU hypothesis regularly ignores the complexity of psychological activity in social media use and studies opt to study easily operationalised items such as time which does not adequately explain user behaviour. Future designs must take both content and reception into account when analysing ASMU and PSMU and their effects on emotional outcome.

This thesis utilises an extended model of ASMU and PSMU which considers the conceptualisations as a spectrum of behaviours where specific actions can have various levels of engagement depending on the context and intention of the user. Additionally, this thesis does belong to a field of psychological interest but does not make any attempt to diagnose research subjects. The field of problematic internet use and psychological effects is instead approached in terms of sociological perspectives. This thesis therefore belongs closer to a resurfacing media effects research, utilising media theories to analyse user behaviour and emotional effect.

4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a framework of relevant theories that have been utilised to answer the research questions. Each theory provides an understanding of what motivates individuals to use social media at various levels of engagement and how these habits of use can affect them emotionally. This chapter begins by describing uses & Gratification theory which is used to describe what motivates various kinds of use both from the audience and the media side. This theory also relates to the concept of the active audiences and the rejection of binary conceptualisations of media use. This chapter then summarises social presence theory and networked public theory which provides important notions such as active and public social media use and the ways in which social media use is a social habit. Finally, this chapter provides an explanation of affordances as they relate to media theory.

4.1 Uses & Gratification Theory

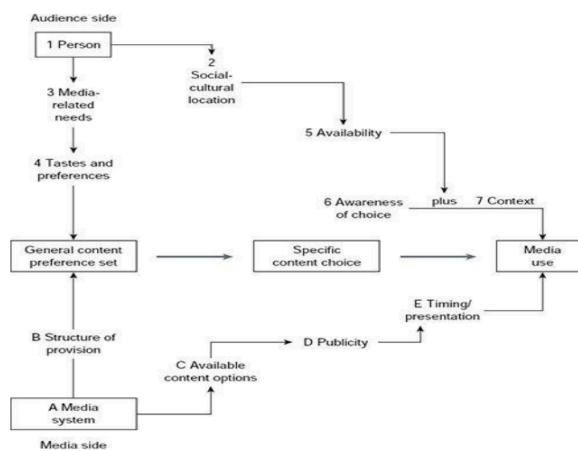
Uses & Gratification theory (U&G) provides an important framework for conceptualising motivation and why individuals may continue to use social media despite evident negative effects (Ruggiero, 2000). According to U&G, media audiences are active participants who seek out and use media to fulfil specific needs and gratifications (McQuail, 2010). Within the context of this thesis, U&G may be used to map the motivations of participants and provide insight into their media intentions since it is a theory which considers the audience to be active and aware (Kut et al., 2013). More specifically in this context, U&G can describe the *how* and *why* of media social media use (Liu et al., 2020) like what platforms or genres of content are preferred (Wu et al., 2013).

As U&G theory intends to understand media use through the motivations of its audience, it usually provides a list of common gratifications that are met through media use. McQuail (2010) provides one such list with 12 aspects but these were later limited to the ones that were directly related to participant responses, with some being merged as well.

- 1. Information and education**
- 2. Guidance and advice**
- 3. Diversion and relaxation / Filling time**
- 4. Social contact**
- 5. Self-expression / Identity formation**
- 6. Emotional release / Cultural satisfaction**

7. Security

These common gratifications are valuable for the thematic analysis conducted in this thesis as they describe what motivates users to perform specific actions at various levels of engagement. McQuail further combines the individual motivations with the influences of the media itself, which may prove relevant, since this thesis assumes some level of responsibility from the media design in relation to negative affects. This model operates both on the audience and media side, working toward mutual orientation and, while originally designed for television, McQuail's version applies to all media, including digital. The following model represents the "general process of choice-making" McQuail, 2010, p. 358).



(Figure 1: McQuail's "integrated model of the process of media choice")

Description of the model on next page:

The audience side	The media side
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal attributes such as age, gender, family position and work situation. 2. Social background such as social class, religion, education and locality. 3. Media-related needs refer to the personal benefits one gains from media use. Common needs are detailed elsewhere. 4. Personal preference for certain genres or specific items of content. 5. Availability and habits relate both to when and how media is available to the audience as well as the economic availability of media. 6. Awareness of choice indicates to what degree specific audience members interact or engage with media. More aware audiences are more likely to plan their media use. 7. Specific context of use will vary according to the medium but generally refers to sociability and location. Ordinarily this relates to where media is used (i.e. watching television with family or alone). For this thesis it relates specifically to the ways people seek to use social media and with whom they engage with. 8. Chance is likely to play a role in media selection and makes <i>perfect</i> description of selection impossible. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Media system refers to the ways choice is influenced by the system the media is communicated. This typically involves what media is available nationally in any given space but for this thesis may relate to the affordances of social media platforms. 2. Structure of media provision refers to the general pattern of what media provide within society. Patterns of media provision will cause long-term audience expectations. 3. Available content options are the specific formats and genres available to audiences. 4. Media publicity includes advertising of the media on their own behalf. 5. Timing and presentation imply how users will likely be influenced by specific strategies of timing, placement, content and design of media according to audience-gaining strategies. Given the asynchronous reality of social media, this does not relate as much to time and place as it does design, which aligns better with the structure of media provision.

Figure 2: (“Description of previous model”)

This model may be utilised in order to analyse the experiences of the interview subjects.

Their reason for and experience with SMU can be explained both from the audience and the

media side, leading to a conclusive argument about what factors actually seem to be at play when users encounter emotional outcomes.

4.1.1 The Active Audience

A central idea to U&G is that of the active audience. The active audience is an old media theory related to other factors that might demassify the concept of the audience such as gender, lifestyle and taste (McQuail, 2010). Biocca (1988) provides a review of various meanings of audience activity and proposes five aspects:

Selectivity: The audience is described as active the more choice and discrimination are exercised in relation to media and content within media. I.e. an active media audience selects their media carefully. Passive use is then found within very heavy media use where the audience makes no selection. This definition considers unselective audiences as those who watch 'whatever's on tv' which becomes complicated within modern social media in which content is increasingly being selected by algorithms.

Utilitarianism: The audience are considered self-interested consumers. Media consumption represents the satisfaction of a more or less conscious need. Essentially: audiences make conscious and unconscious decisions based on their own satisfaction and desires.

Intentionality: The audience is considered active when it engages with information and experiences cognitively. In essence, this means that the audience must think about and consider their media use. It is often correlated with subscription to media.

Resistance to Influence: The aspect of activity is here emphasised by how the audience limits or resists external control and authority. Regardless of content or systems of communication, the audience remains in control. This, too, is very interesting when related to concepts of algorithms and social media feeds.

Involvement: An active audience should be involved with or engrossed with the ongoing media experience. This definition is particularly vague but relates to concepts such as lazily scrolling without involvement or engagement.

These five aspects of audience activity cover a broad range of activities and may be more or less applicable to the ongoing research. In sum, they may provide a more detailed way to describe what social media users experience. Additionally, these aspects and the assumptions

of how audience activity occurs will nuance descriptions of PSMU. McQuail points out however that the notion of audience activity can often be unsatisfactory, saying: “it is open to diverse definitions, its indicators are very mixed and ambiguous, and it means different things with different media.” (McQuail, 2010, p. 347). He does not, however, refute the concept entirely but rather states the need to take the complexity of media use into account. This thesis therefore takes an open approach to explaining audience activity, understanding that while the audience can never be truly passive, certain activities have a higher level of engagement than others.

4.2 Social Presence Theory

This chapter introduces social presence theory and its relevance to definitions of active social media use. It discusses how perceived social presence in online interactions influence user engagement and communication behaviours.

Since the mainstream adoption of the internet in the mid 90’s, researchers have explored the potentially social context of the medium (Gunawardena, 1995). Social presence theory dates back further than digital communication but interest in the theory grew when it could be applied to the more dynamic interactions that were held through digital communication channels. Social presence theory sought to explain these new dynamics as they related to face-to-face interactions. In short, social presence refers to “the degree to which a person is perceived as a *real person* in mediated communication.” (Gunawardena, 1995, p.5). It is suggested that social presence contributes to levels of *intimacy* which depends upon factors such as physical distance, eye contact and topics of conversation. Additionally, a person may convey *immediacy* through verbal and nonverbal communication by way of proximity, formality and expression. Gunawardena states: “a person making a telephone call may choose to speak in such a manner as to give an impression of aloofness (non-immediacy) (...) or she may choose to adopt an attitude of formality and comradeship (immediacy).” (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 5). Different mediums have different relationships with social presence and different ways of applying it.

Social presence in contemporary research has few clear definitions and no valid units of measurement. Despite this, social presence research is able to observe positive influences of social presence in regard to education (Gunawardena, 1995), message effectiveness (Biocca, 2002) as well as e-commerce (Johnson et al., 2023). Researchers expect that social presence

such as personal communication and witnessing people in frame on social media is likely to cause higher levels of motivation to interact with the content. Additionally, social presence may cause content to “seem more intimate, sociable, sensitive and personal which creates a psychological immersion in the absence of an actually physically immersive experience” (Johnson et al., 2023. p.546). For this thesis, social presence theory is relevant due to its implications of behavioural use. The ways in which individuals behave on social media may have different levels of social presence which may lead to various emotional outcomes. It is likely, for instance, that interaction with a high degree of social presence has greater emotional affects. Such behaviour may include (but not limited to) private communication between individuals or public content that strives for intimacy and immediacy through expression and other factors (Gunawardena, 1995).

4.2.1 Private & Public

Social presence relates to public and private use of social media. Public SMU refers to behaviours such as making a post or commenting on one while Private SMU typically refers to one-to-one or small group interactions (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Additionally, private and public SMU may be categorised as public active social media use (public ASMU), public passive social media use (public PSMU), as well as private active social media use (private ASMU) and private passive social media use (private PSMU) (Valkenburg et al., 2021). A summary of each category follows for the sake of clarity:

Public active social media use	Visible behaviour that is open for the general user base to see and engage with. Common behaviours: Posting, commenting
Public passive social media use	Engagement with visible and public content. Common behaviour: Browsing
Private active social media use	Engagement with one-to-one or small group communication. Common behaviours: Chatting with friends & family. Sending and interacting with content.
Private passive social media use	Encounter with one-to-one or small group communication without interaction or engagement. Common behaviours: Observation.

Figure 3: (“Description of public ASMU, public PSMU, private ASMU and private PSMU”)

Since private SMU is much more likely to occur than public (Faelens et al., 2019) and often deals with close relationships and directed communication (Valkenburg et al., 2021), it is possible that it routinely causes more emotional resonance due to the high degree of intimacy and immediacy caused by social presence (Johnson et al., 2023) and therefore may affect well-being differently. Valkenburg reviewed this potential and discovered that the frequency of public PSMU was significantly higher than for public ASMU while the frequencies of private PSMU and ASMU did not differ (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Additionally, their review indicated, as stated in the problem description, that most hypotheses regarding ASMU-PSMU does not distinguish between public and private use and therefore assumes that both types of ASMU (public/private) would lead to beneficial effects whereas both types of PSMU would lead to adverse effects (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This thesis intends to avoid this confound by acknowledging the difference of behaviours between private and public ASMU/PSMU as well as the possibility that some behaviours may exist outside of or between the model's descriptions.

4.3 Networked Publics

Communication and media studies have for some time offered a specific perspective on the notion of what constitutes a public. The public has been synonymous with an audience, referred to as a “group bound by a text” (Livingstone, 2005) and while this public is often unconsciously formed by viewers, they have rarely been observed as truly passive. In fact, it has been argued that the public (and the networked public even more so) are reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors of media content (Ito, 2008). The specific notion of the networked public exists against this historical backdrop where the audience is viewed as consumers and producers of culture in equal parts and where consumption equals activity.

The networked public was introduced in order to “reference a linked set of social, cultural and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (Ito, 2008, p.2). As such, the networked public refers both to the space and the collection of individuals. Each social media, despite similarities, differ in certain ways from one another and therefore offer a difference in what they provide the networked public. While affordances such as profiles and friend lists are commonly found in most social media platforms, the features will vary in utility and subtle system intention (Boyd, 2010). For example, Facebook's communication channel (messenger) has a widely

different application than Tik-Tok who were the first to offer private communication high in immediacy and intimacy.

The ritualistic communication performed on social media channels may at first glance appear innocuous but daily check-ins are a performance of social grooming. In her introspection on the networked public, Danah Boyd states: “Through mundane comments, participants are acknowledging one another in a public setting, similar to the way in which they may greet each other if they were to bump into one another on the street. Comments are not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience.” (Boyd, 2010, p. 6). Additionally, the browsing and consumption of content produced by or shared by known actors may contribute to feelings of the public for lurkers (Boyd, 2010).

4.4 Affordances

This chapter explores the ways that the platform themselves may be responsible for behaviours and how they incentivise active or passive use.

Affordances as a concept is entangled in social science, technology and design, often confused with technology features and literal mechanics (Leidner et al., 2018). Affordances was originally coined by Gibson (1969) as a unique combination of qualities that specifies what the object affords us. It was discussed by Gibson in an ecological context and spoke about the ways animals would interact with the environment. Contemporary understanding of affordances however (at least in technological research) describes it in terms of user design. In the context of social media for instance, affordances are the qualities afforded by the platform to the user which enables actions. Affordances are defined in a recent literature review as “the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms.” (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p.14). Importantly, affordances recognise the role of human agency in technological behaviours and should not be understood as the actual mechanical system but rather as something constructed by humans interacting with it. Some key points of affordances are summarised here. (1) Affordances are directly tied to the values, thoughts and capabilities of the actor, not the technology. (2) Affordances exist within the constraints of cultural norms. (3) Affordances can constrain action by failing to meet up to

intended standards. (4) Affordances are discrete and can be considered to be the intersection of mechanical application and user intention (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 13).

Affordances have the ability to consciously and unconsciously affect behaviours on social media platforms. Each researcher tends to focus on different sets of affordances on social media depending on their area of study, but common affordances include *visibility*, *persistence*, *editability*, *association*, *searchability* and more. The *visibility* affordance for instance, highlights the ease with which social media enables users to make previously invisible information visible, as well as the ease with which other users can then locate that information” (Ellison & Vitak, 2015, p. 5). At the same time, the *invisibility* affordance implies the opposite. As such, affordances may be used to explain why users engage in active or passive behaviours, influenced both by their own agency as well as the affordances of any given platform. A user may engage in more passive behaviours on TikTok for instance, due to the affordances of that platform nudging that kind of behaviour with features such as the endless scroll and adaptable algorithms.

4.4.1 Addictive by design

There has been a reoccurring claim that passive consumption behaviours are becoming dominant within social media, which when coupled with their potential for addiction, may interfere with daily life (Bhargava, 2023; Rosenquist et al., 2021). Some researchers have indicated the knowing culpability of social media platforms in relation to ill-being and addiction, claiming that platform design may intentionally lead users to certain harmful behaviours such as addiction in order to prolong usage (Bhargava, 2023). Users may lack the self-control necessary to protect themselves against huge content and recommendation algorithms (Allcott et al., 2022) or they may rely heavily on social media for affirmation and validation (Schou et al., 2016), incentivising continued use. Additionally, users may suffer from fear of missing out (FOMO) or crave the dopamine release that scrolling content provides (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

IPPs have several methods to incentivise prolonged use. Through the use of sophisticated algorithms, personalised content moderation and immersive interface designs which emphasise attention over quality (Ichihashi & Kim, 2022). These decisions are made to satisfy the attention-driven revenue model that populates most social media today. A model that strives to turn users into a valuable product for advertisers by way of direct advertising as well as data-collection principles (Bhargava, 2023). It is commonly believed that social

media platforms practise wilful ignorance when it comes to harmful and inflammatory content since “enraging content is engaging (...) and causes users to open their device as often as possible and to scroll for as long as possible” (Hari, 2022). Prolonged stay in turn results in deeper personal insights and more sophisticated algorithms which are in turn used, not only to filter content the user desires, but also for microtargeting and advertising (Montag et al., 2021). Design elements such as the “for you” page is carefully constructed to prolong “passive” consumptive behaviours and facilitates users to return through notifications (Van Dijk et al., 2017) which may in turn lead to problematic and addictive behaviours.

Social media designs which emphasise endless scrolling of immersive entertainment content have become dominant in the landscape with some applications being based around the concept (TikTok) and others adding such alternatives to their previous services (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube). Within this design, interaction is not predominantly between users but rather between the user and their algorithmically filtered content (Montag et al., 2021). A kind of relationship which implies passive consumptive behaviours based on gratification and entertainment with the potential for interaction not only between user and platform but also user and user.

4.5 Conclusion on Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework here is intended to provide a detailed description of what motivates individuals to perform specific actions on social media at various levels of engagement. U&G offers insight into what common gratifications users seek out and offers models of descriptions that can be utilised to create a thematic analysis of user intention. Social presence theory can describe how individuals are influenced by specific tactics present within social media or how the concepts of public and private can describe which levels of intimacy are required for passive users to become active. The notion of the networked public here serves to describe what social media constitutes in terms of social reality. It considers habitual and ritualistic media actions as worthwhile, despite the actions being classified as passive. This will be relevant when describing participant behaviours as it allows the analysis to consider the fact that even minute actions have consequences. Finally, affordances and general platform design may assist in describing how the media side of this interaction provides users with specific consequences.

5. Methodology

This chapter describes how data will be collected and analysed in order to answer the research question. A qualitative methodology of semi-structured focus groups consisting of participants of pre-existing social groups has been chosen. The 4 discussions lasted for approximately 1 hour and were recorded. The transcription of the focus group discussion was then analysed via a coding schedule consisting of six steps. The codes were then transformed into themes and sub-themes that allowed conclusions to be drawn which will be concluded within the results chapter.

5.1 Data Collection

Focus group discussions is a technique where data is collected through group interaction about a subject specified by the researcher (Ekström & Johansson, 2019). Focus groups are typically employed when interaction is a key element of the research object and can provide knowledge not visible within individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups allow the researcher to develop an understanding about why individuals feel the way that they do through direct statements and contextual clues provided by the social aspect, particularly because the participants may discuss with one another or probe each other's reasoning (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, the focus groups may reflect on social dynamics and the processes through which meaning is constructed (Bryman, 2016), which may help form a vocabulary on social media use at various levels of engagement. In interviews of this kind, the discussion can be facilitated by other stimuli such as images (Wibeck, 2010). It is likely that focus group participants will be allowed to open their phones during conversation to spark memories about prior use and habits.

The ideal participant for this study was between 20-30 years old, had experience with a variety of social media platforms and regularly utilised social media in a variety of habitual behaviours. Participants came from various nationalities, predominantly Swedish, and were rather evenly spread across the intended age group as well as gender. Respondents belonged to pre-existing social groups. Pre-existing social groups allow for more natural and free-flowing conversation which can enhance the quality and level of discussion. Additionally, people who know each other may be more willing to discuss potentially awkward or complicated experiences (Bryman, 2016). However, since this technique

sometimes leads to participants bypassing information that is taken for granted, the moderator must be keen to ensure that participants stay on track and explain their habits in true detail.

Sampling occurred in the following way. The researcher sought out one social connection of the correct age demographic and requested that they assemble a few of their own connections interested in participating. The method of relying on social relationships to find respondents is sometimes frowned upon in research as it might damage the study’s validity. However, the natural rapport and the higher level of trust between participants and researcher might result in a more effective and honest interview than ones performed between complete strangers (Brewis, 2014). All in all, 4 groups were assembled, as detailed below in figure 4. Moving forward, all respondents will be adhered to as Respondent 1 of focus group 1 (for example) or R 1.1 for short. This is done to adhere to anonymity.

Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
5 participants total 3 men 2 women	4 participants total 3 men 1 woman	6 participants total 6 women	5 participants total 5 women
Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: German, Italian, Finnish, Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish
Time: 1 hour 10 minutes	Time: 1 hour 30 minutes	Time: 1 hour 15 minutes	Time: 1 hour

Figure 4: (Presentation of focus group participants)

Data collection took place between April 7th and April 21st and a topic guide was used to facilitate conversation. This was not strictly adhered to as to follow ideals of free discussion (Derges et al., 2023). The general outline followed by all focus groups was as follows: (1) Initially, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss their social media habits. What platforms do they prefer and why? (2) The participants were then asked about specifics of this behaviour such as what levels of engagement they usually use on social media. (3) If participants consider their scrolling behaviour to be problematic, the moderator may ask if they regulate or moderate their social media content. (4) The participants were allowed to discuss their emotional outcomes in relation to scrolling behaviours. (5) The participants were allowed to discuss what they consider to be active, passive and problematic use of social media in order to facilitate discussion. (6) When the researcher felt as if all major topics had been touched on, the participants were allowed to continue the discussion for a while longer.

Recording continued a short while even after officially ending the discussion in case important topics were mentioned.

5.2 Data Analysis

The study utilised a thematic analysis of its qualitative data to infer its conclusions. The analysis was driven by the questions ‘what motivates adult users to engage with social media at various levels of engagement? And ‘what emotional effect do various levels of engagement have on the individual?’.

The thematic analysis present in this study was greatly inspired by the six-step method utilised by Braun & Clarke (2006) in which the thematic analysis is made through six distinct steps in order to infer its conclusions while minimising the apparent power that the researcher has in creating themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step includes *familiarising* oneself with the data which occurred both during collection and transcription. The second step includes the *creation of initial codes* which consisted of many expected subjects such as ASMU, PSMU and PIU. Despite this, initial codes were numerous and often vague with the intention to filter many out eventually. The third step includes *searching for themes* in which previous codes such as *frequency* or *categories of use* were refined and the theme *regulation* was added due to its frequent appearance as a major topic. *Problematic social media* use was made into a theme at this point, which consisted of a variety of previous codes in which the participants had described the way social media was harmful to them. In stage 4, one should *define the themes* which resulted in the four main themes of dynamic social media use, problematic social media use, regulation and use & gratifications. In stage five, refinement was hindered by the apparent ways in which the remaining themes overlapped. For instance, one common overlap could be discovered in the way that descriptions of PIU could often result in descriptions of regulation. The author has attempted to make this kind of overlap as plain as possible by coding each semantic unit individually and making segmentations when the topic changes. In the last part of the thematic analysis (production report), the analysis endeavours to tell the complicated story of the data which consists of vivid and useful examples (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This part can be seen in its entirety within the results section of this thesis.

In practicality, coding largely consisted of verbal segments performed through several readings of the transcription. These sentences and phrases were coded and summarised within

a split table as to create specific codes. When the creation of all four major themes had been made, the researcher went through these codes once again and places each as a sub-theme that belonged to the four main themes. Additionally, the results were conceptualised through four common archetypes that appeared among all focus groups which are detailed within chapter 6.

What follows are descriptions of each of the four major themes. The code ASMU & PSMU relates to how participants describe their use as specifically active or passive. Since the moderator always mentioned at the start that no description of active and passive use would be provided, the participants were free to imagine how their active or passive use would look like. While it was most common that participants spoke about active and passive use when primed to do so by a question, the topic did also occur naturally in discussion. This theme relates also to how the participants struggle to define what active, or passive might entail, or otherwise, where delineations between the two should be made.

The code Uses & Gratifications relates to what motivates participants to perform a variety of media behaviours. Since it also includes all mentions of how the participants use social media and by what platforms, it became a common code. Additionally, this code includes occurrences when participants discuss how a platform works or how it can be used. This does relate to how the media side of U&G can affect the user and motivate them toward specific behaviours. It does however mean that this code is sometimes treated in the coding schema as an “other” category in which to put otherwise unclear points.

The code regulation & moderation relates to descriptions of regulating behaviours. For example, participants might describe how they turn off notifications or limit their screen time. While this sometimes relates to PIU, correlation is not always clear. This is one reason why regulation has been made into its own category. Another is due to it being mentioned often. During earlier steps of the coding process, it became clear that regulation is a behaviour that participants perform actively and in a variety of ways. Additionally, regulation was performed very differently between participants, which earned it sub-themes.

The final code was Problematic internet use. It includes all mentions of negative outcomes caused by social media use and all mentions of pathological use or addiction. Most commonly, this related to scrolling behaviours, which participants often considered to be both harmful and helpful.

In order to make the themes clear, an example from the code schema is provided below. To the left you will see the transcription of the discussion and to the right you will find the written analysis performed by the researcher during all stages of thematic analysis except for the production of the report. The semantic segmentations are coloured differently in accordance with their general topic with blue indicating a discussion on how and why one uses social media and purple indicating problematic internet use. You will be able to see that not all semantic units are segmented since the two final units discuss a similar topic. Other coloured topics included green for regulation and orange for ASMU and PSMU. The entire code schema is provided in supplement to this thesis on the basis of transparency.

Focus group 2 part 14: Group chats	Analysis
<p>R 2.4: I am almost always a ghost in group chats. That can only be like, two other people. But I don't think you always have to be active. You can check and see what people are doing without interaction, or just liking. The larger the group is, the smaller the chance there is that I will actually write anything.</p>	<p>The discussants speak about their private use. Some participants admit to being passive private users, but they claim that this still serves a social function. While they will rarely write due to personal preferences, they may still be considered as taking part in the social dynamic such as one might be silent in real life scenarios as well.</p>
<p>R 2.1: Me too. A lot can be said in group chats, but I almost never write myself. I prefer to call people if you actually have to talk about something. I have a little bit of social anxiety, writing to a lot of people at the same time. If I don't write, people can't ignore me.</p>	<p>One participant describes how they are a private passive user and prefers to call them in order to converse. The reasons provided is related to anxiety and a fear that people may not reply.</p> <p>One participant reports that group chats are a smooth way to converse with several friends. This can be related to notions of the networked public.</p>
	<p>Messenger is seen to have high immediacy and intimacy.</p>

Figure 5: Example of code schema (the entire thematic analysis and sub-themes can be found in supplemental material).

This thesis does not aspire to provide exhaustive or even representative finding about the experiences and uses of social media. Its aim is instead to identify patterns across individual experiences as provided by ordinary adult users. It seeks to define the observed shift in social media platform design as well as user intention. It has been the author's intent to avoid common pitfalls of thematic analysis such as making biased conclusions or misinterpreting what a participant has said (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To avoid this, participants were allowed to go over the results of the code schema in order to comment on any misconceptions or disagreements with what they had said. All participants were therefore given the chance to

opt out of the study once again or else remove parts which they did not want to share. Two participants took this opportunity to go over parts of the results with the researcher which further illuminated certain aspects and provided more insight into what had been said. Other pitfalls include themes that overlap or are generally weak and a potential mismatch between the data and the analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These pitfalls have been avoided by familiarising yourself with the field and deciding upon conclusive theories without including too many. Each theory corresponds to something that was discussed and if a theory was initially included but did not appear relevant within the coding, it was cut. This was the case for theories regarding social capital specifically.

5.3 Ethical considerations

This research has taken the following ethical considerations in relation to its data sampling and treatment of its participants.

Most ethical considerations belong to one of the four main areas. (1) harm to participants, (2) lack of informed consent, (3) invasion of privacy and (4) deception (Bryman, 2016).

One way in which this thesis could potentially harm its participants is by having them discuss topics that can cause them emotional harm or by manipulating their emotions (Bryman, 2016). In order to avoid this, the questions were formed in such a way that avoided prompting particularly difficult topics. Topics that could have been harmful such as addiction were as such always initiated by the participants themselves. Additionally, the presence of the pre-existing social groups might have assisted participants who discussed such topics. No part of the research was ever disguised to the participants as the topic and measures of the research was made clear. Additionally, the participants were informed at the start of focus group recordings that they had the ability to opt out at any time, including after the discussion. Furthermore, they could have anything said stricken from the record if they so wanted. The anonymity and privacy of the participants has been preserved and the researcher kept an open mind to situations in which information may be removed due to being sensitive. As such, no written consent was used in the study which could be considered an ethical flaw. The researcher believes however that the numerous times that participants were given the opportunity to opt out and the ability for participants to edit or discuss their responses limits the potential harm caused by this oversight.

Additionally, the concept of interviewing people close to you, is sometimes frowned upon. The author can't see a reason why the validity of the research should be put into question because of the chosen sampling method as the strengths of this method has been outlined above. In fact, the security provided by this format may likely have provided the study with more honest and direct responses than those provided by strangers.

6. Results and analysis

6.1 Social media use

6.1.1 Different platforms for different purposes

All four focus groups initiated their discussion by describing what social media platforms they generally use. These included social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, communication channels such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Snapchat, video hosting platforms such as TikTok and YouTube and finally various blogs such as Reddit. Participants would also sometimes describe how they used the platform or for how long.

I started with Facebook like many others maybe. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. The things that came during high school. I don't know where we put the limit, but I would say YouTube as a social medium too. I use that every day.

(Respondent 2.2)

It became evident that participants used similar platforms and for mostly similar purposes, even if the levels of engagement present on each would vary depending on the attitude of the participant.

Many participants claimed to have a Facebook account but would very rarely use it to publish content. Facebook was most commonly just used for “birthdays, events or marketplace” (R3.6) since only “old people” would post content on Facebook (R 4.1). Facebook’s private message function (messenger) was however used by many participants and was considered an important and worthwhile endeavour which allowed close communication with friends and family.

Instagram was another of the most frequently mentioned platforms during all discussions which served a variety of purposes. For some, Instagram was a place where content could be published in order to be shared with close relations, even if this came with certain anxieties (R 1.4). For others, Instagram was a platform primarily used for entertainment and information purposes where the Reels function was often mentioned in relation to scrolling behaviours. The third related to production of content for the purposes of expanding one’s reach, which related only to the two participants who had such ambitions.

TikTok was mentioned by many participants. All focus groups discussed TikTok's controversial position in some way even if not everyone expressed it being negative (R 3.1). Common accusations laid at TikTok regarded security, addictive features, faulty content moderation algorithms and reinforcing harmful body ideals. Common motivations for using the app related mostly to entertainment, inspiration and information. Low levels of engagement were the norm for TikTok use across the board except for one participant who had a prominent influencer account there as well as on other platforms. For some participants, even making a comment on TikTok was seen as being "too active" (R 4.3).

YouTube was mentioned by several participants as a common social media platform. Use on YouTube was motivated by entertainment, information and inspiration. Consuming videos on YouTube was generally viewed as more worthwhile than short-form video formats such as those found on TikTok and Instagram. Notably, YouTube's own short-video feature (YouTube shorts) was regularly regarded by its users as the worst alternative of such platforms.

YouTube reels is so strange generally. I use it for games, but I still get Joe Rogan shouting about communists. That algorithm I think is awful. Instagram catches my interests much better.

(Respondent 1.1.)

Snapchat was mentioned by some participants and was always regarded as a platform used exclusively for warm, private communication with close friends. Some claimed to be less active than others. Motivations for using Snapchat seemed to be primarily associated with social needs.

Reddit (and other forums) were mentioned by participants who sought niche interests. Main motivations for its use were information and entertainment. Its use was often, but not always, mentioned as a more engaging alternative than other platforms.

LinkedIn appeared in several of the interviews as many participants expressed that they felt obligated to use it in order to find employment. Motivations were naturally inclined toward careers, but it should be noted that no participant expressed actually enjoying their time on the application and all mentions were tinged with a certain disdain.

6.1.1 Valuable use

Throughout the discussions, some specific behaviours were regularly considered to be more valuable than others. Chatting with friends and family was regularly considered the most

important (R 3.6) whereas “mindless scrolling” was usually considered the least valuable way to spend one’s time on social media. There were however some notable exceptions to this as one participant discovered during the discussion that she had several anxieties about her private use, caused by the social obligation to be available to both friends and family. She, apparently, did not consider a majority of this communication to be valuable.

I get so many 10-minute voice messages about what my friends are doing. My friends expect answers about the message, so I have to listen to it and then answer.

(Respondent 3.2)

Several groups discussed the way in which scrolling can be considered a waste of time, discussed in more detail further into this chapter. However, some discussed scenarios in which “mindless scrolling” was not considered so negatively, which took two forms. The first were participants who did not consider their passive social media behaviours to be adverse in the first place while the second consisted of participants who expressed “having earned it”.

Yeah. I feel disappointed in myself. It is irritation and disappointment because I have consumed something I don't think is worth consuming. I feel like “wow, it's been 2 hours” where I could have done something else. (...) If I do it during the weekend when you're free it feels completely worthless. But if you have worked eight hours or ten hours and get home it feels much better. You don't have the energy to do something heavy. When you have free time, you have stuff to do, and it gets prioritised. I don't really get anything out of it.

(Respondent 1.1.)

These mentions usually revolved around work or having earned a break at the end of a day and were common among all participants.

6.2 Levels of engagement

6.2.1 Dynamic levels of engagement

Initially, many participants had simple ways of conceptualising ASMU and PSMU which align with previous, somewhat binary definitions.

Active is probably when you share. Post a picture or a comment. To be seen and share an opinion. Passive is probably what I actually am. Look at videos and give a supporting like at best. You don't engage in comments.

(Respondent 2.1)

Despite this common perception, many participants had disagreeing opinions about where to place specific behaviours such as *liking* and *chatting*. Participants also struggled with the definitions due to being themselves classified as “passive”.

I never post. I have maybe three posts on my Instagram. I am not active in this way. I feel I am active in interacting with the platform. Rather than scrolling the feed passively, it is more likely that I say, today I feel like eating vegan, and I will search for my favourite vegan influencer. Of course it is passive, but active search.

(Respondent 3.3)

Similarly, respondents seemed to consider themselves as “active” while “seeking things out” (R 3.4). One respondent who described herself by not liking or reacting to things expressed how she did not feel “ok” with being described as a passive user (R 3.5) since she felt that she still “took it in”. This sentiment was echoed by other groups with one participant saying, “But are you really passive if you like or react to things? In that case, you help the algorithm. I like doing that.” (R 1.4). The participants of focus group 3 also expressed how it is “hard to draw the line” (3.6) and that “maybe it is more like a spectrum” (R 3.2).

6.2.2 Low levels of engagement

Low levels of engagement include behaviours in which the participant interacts with individuals or with the platform features to a lesser extent. Actions typically include scrolling. Low levels of engagement were, similarly to high levels, generally understood according to common conceptualisations of passive social media use. When asked to describe their active and passive social media use, participants would mention “not producing anything” (R 3.4), “watching” (R 4.1) and in one instance, “chatting” (R 2.4). Participants would often follow these descriptions by talking about scrolling behaviours, typically associated with passive use.

I would associate passive use specifically with Instagram reels or YouTube shorts [the group vocally agrees]. I feel as if I don't make a choice staying there. You get stuck. But if I watch a YouTube video, I click on it. I get the same feeling on shorts as I do on Reddit and such. You just keep clicking. You don't approach stuff but rather have a flow that just keeps going. You get stuck in front of that. That for me is passive use. Where I am not aware or make an active choice. It's just the enjoyment machine activating.

(Respondent 1.1.)

Notably, participants would often claim that passive behaviours had both adverse and beneficial emotional effects. The adverse effects are described within later chapters. The most common beneficial effect that low levels of engagement could have related to *inspiration*.

Well, I really like how I use social media. I think it's very fun. It's not something that hinders me in my life in any way, shape or form. You can find new ideas. Something you can cook or listen to. You have so many things you would not have found otherwise. I think it actually gives me a lot. Like hobbies or going out. I get bored very quickly and I also get bored of social media very quickly. So, I just put it away.

(Respondent 3.1)

Like respondent 3.1, participants could describe how the content found while scrolling can be “inspiring” (R 1.4), “entertaining” (R 4.3), “educational” (R 3.6), “informative” (R 1.5) and “culturally satisfying” (R 1.2). Additionally, the act of sharing the content that was discovered was considered a valuable way to passively connect with close friends (R 1.3). Scrolling was also used to fill time (R 3.3).

Scrolling was naturally tied to algorithms and the way that they cater content to the user. Some participants expressed how they enjoyed this process and preferred some platforms over others due to the quality of its algorithms (R 4.1; R 3.1) while others expressed a dislike of being catered to (R 1.5). For participants who did not regulate their algorithms or interact with content (belonging to the lowest level of engagement), the quality of the algorithm was regularly described as worse (R 2.1). However, even participants who typically belonged to high levels of engagement described how the algorithm could fail them, receiving content which they do not align with or enjoy due to overzealous optimisations made by the platform (R 3.3; R 3.5).

I almost never do that. Almost because I think it is fun to see how bad it can get. I can show my girlfriend that I got “how did feminism kill romance”. I try not to regulate too much.

(Respondent 2.1)

In this case, seeing what the algorithm would feed you was considered entertainment in of itself, regardless of if the participant enjoyed the actual content or not.

A low level of engagement was associated with other aspects than just scrolling. Participants could describe themselves as relatively passive in private scenarios as well.

I am almost always a ghost in group chats. That can only be like, two other people. But I don't think you always have to be active. You can check and see what people are doing without interaction, or just liking. The larger the group is, the smaller the chance there is that I will actually write anything.

(Respondent 2.4)

Motivations for being relatively passive within group chats included “anxiety” (R 2.1), “platform features” (R 1.1) and simply not having the time during the day (R 4.5). R 4.5 further explained that when she had failed to read all the messages in a group chat, she could feel “stressed” and “mean”. This aligns with some of the descriptions of how active private use and the failure to adhere to its social rules can cause certain adverse effects.

6.2.2 High levels of engagement

High levels of engagement include behaviours in which the social media user interacts with individuals or features through the social media platform. This interaction occurs in two distinct ways: mechanically and mentally. For the behaviour to be conceptualised as a high level of engagement, it must include mechanical interactions as described by features provided by the platform and/or mental interaction as described by Biocca's aspects of the active audience (Biocca, 1988).

The most common behaviour that was categorised as a high level of engagement was *chatting*. Chatting consisted of communication between individuals or group on various platforms such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Snapchat. Many participants directly expressed participating in chatting behaviours and many more seemed to imply it through context.

I like group chats. I think it is a smooth way to reach out to my groups of friends. You can reach friends even if you don't have a lot of contact. Rather than doing that individually.

(Respondent 2.3)

Despite being a common behaviour, chatting was not generally the same for each participant with some indicating it to be a very frequent occurrence such as the members of focus group 4 and others claiming to be “ghosting” several chats, relatively rarely interacting with individuals through private use.

It is something that helps you keep in touch. Talking with your friends even if you don't see each other. It really feels like you are with your friends every day. That is actually something really positive.

(Respondent 4.3)

As previously mentioned, chatting was generally considered to be the most worthwhile behaviour one could participate in via social media even if emotional outcomes did vary. Beyond the previously mentioned example of respondent 3.2, other negative outcomes included respondent R 2.2 who gave an ambivalent reply, “I think it is easier to include people through group chats. I think it can be scary if you write but don’t get a reply. That can be worrying.” Chatting could also cause anxiety in participants due to the apparent demand to reply (R 1.1), even if some participants had come to terms with being unable to answer at all times (R 1.2). Availability as it relates to problematic use is discussed later in this chapter.

A less common behaviour that indicates a high level of engagement was *posting*. This included any mention of a participant actively producing something to be published publicly on social media. The participants who claimed to post, did so infrequently. It was common to post milestones in one’s life such as birthdays (R 2.2) while other participants claimed a desire to post more due to it being a creative outlet (R 1.4; R 1.5). Naturally, the two participants who had large accounts posted more regularly and considered it a hobby (R 3.2; R 3.4). Their content also seemed to be more casual in nature, but their replies offer little actual detail.

Publishing content was rare among all focus groups, but many participants claimed that they had posted more frequently in their youth. Reasons for the decrease in frequent posts varied from a lack of interest to an increasing awareness of one’s own motivations and the effect that public posting had on the individual. Generally speaking, the participants attributed these changes to the social reality of teenagers (R 3.4) as well as the novelty of social media as it appeared, something which faded over time (R 2.4).

I feel like there was a period of time where people would post. And then influencers happened and posting became a big deal. If your feed wasn’t beautiful, there was no point. Just a feeling I got. This picture isn’t good enough or pretty enough. I have to look so gorgeous for it to be good enough for Instagram. But now I am feeling that we are entering a new phase where it’s ok again to not look perfect.

(Respondent 3.4)

Focus group 4 also went into detail on the social faux pas of publishing too much content or risk seeming vain. There were clear social rules constructed within that group about what could be posted and not and by who.

I want to say that it is a big red flag when a guy has a very curated social media account and posts a lot. It says a lot about what kind of person you are. I associate it with a specific kind of person.

(Respondent 4.1)

These social rules applied differently to different apps. Interestingly, these norms were more or less agreed upon by each focus group. Some examples include “TikTok being for children” (R 4.5), Facebook being “rarely used” (R 1.5), or how it is acceptable to post on Instagram even if several participants express a disdain for the apparent inauthenticity prevalent on the platform (R 2.3; R 4.1). Many factors seem to play into whether or not a participant actively publishes content or not. Similarly, there are multiple reasons given for why one might have stopped publishing content. Some indicate a lack of interest following the initial peak (R 2.4) and some express that the behaviour itself induced anxiety, particularly on young women (R 3.4; R 4.3).

6.3 Problematic Use

Problematic use consists of any mention where social media use had a direct adverse emotional effect on the participant. Problematic use was always self-reported and is not judged on a measurement created by the author within this section of the thesis. Problematic use caused a variety of emotional effects at varying levels of engagement. Some common aspects are exhibited below.

6.3.1 Availability

Several participants expressed that availability could cause them emotional distress. For some, this occurred at a low level of engagement where they would prefer to not engage but are drawn into social media use by other people (R 3.2). Others felt an obligation to try and be online for the sake of availability, describing effects similar to trait-FOMO (R 4.5). It was common for participants to express that increased regulation would lead to a greater fear that they were unavailable. Being unable to reply could make participants feel like “a bad friend” (R 4.5). Worse yet was the fear of being ignored.

You cannot control someone texting you. You are always available even when you are not.

(Respondent 3.3)

One participant also expressed how being social with friends via social media could fulfil a social act even if she were isolated and referred to this as a “comfort blanket” (R 4.3). The availability of social media was viewed as a double-edged sword.

6.3.2 Anxiety

Several participants expressed anxiety due to a variety of reasons. Many of these discussions were related to other people’s opinions. Be it in regard to one’s appearance, comedy, or social capital. Participants regularly described that this kind of anxiety only occurred in relation to higher levels of engagement such as posting publicly. Each mention was usually also connected to a high level of intimacy, in which close friends or peers might judge you.

I want to keep sharing but I hate thinking about what I post. If I share a photo of an outfit, then people will think I am vain or something. I always think about what other people think. I am more happy posting than scrolling but I think it is scary to post.

(Respondent 1.4)

Comparison was typically mentioned as an action that could cause negative effects such as anxiety. This sometimes related to matters of high relevance in which participants felt inferior to people they saw on social media (R 2.3). Similarly to comparison, FOMO was mentioned as something that the participants had experienced more in their past. But a contemporary example includes a recent mother who compared herself to other mothers online (R 4.4).

6.3.3 Excessive Use

Several participants, but not all, considered scrolling behaviours to be addicting in some way. They regularly expressed having lost time to “getting stuck” scrolling. “Getting stuck” was always viewed as a passive behaviour which resulted in negative effects such as excessive use or attention dysregulation.

I have actively removed TikTok because it would be addicting. I would have sat for hours and just looked at videos. But instead of that I just do that at on Snapchat and Instagram. It is easier to get to the reels on those apps. I can get stuck there instead. Looking at TikTok videos that are two months old.

(Respondent 4.4)

Participants related this to dopamine abuse (R 1.5), and some had considered removing social media due to their supposed addiction to it (R 2.2). There were participants that did not

consider their scrolling behaviour to be adverse (R 3.1) but any mention of this behaviour that was not harmful was also closely regulated in some way. Regulation will be discussed more in-depth later.

6.3.4 Attention dysregulation

Participants expressed that extensive scrolling had a negative effect on their attention and impulse control. While mindless scrolling was sometimes considered something that could be earned, many participants correlated it to negative behaviours and called it “brain rot”.

But if you are on TikTok, your attention span shrinks. Mine was incredibly fragile when I had it, so I had to uninstall it for two weeks. When I went back, I went through the same process again. I could notice that when I was waiting for something, the phone appeared immediately, and I noticed that I struggled keeping track of time. You thought 15 minutes had gone by, but it was really one hour.

(Respondent 2.2)

Descriptions of brain rot always relate to short video formats such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. Features of brain rot typically included a lack of awareness, attention and social behaviours. It was sometimes referred to as brain fog, but the conceptualisations seemed well understood by all focus groups as the most passive way to use one’s time on social media.

Yes. If I am sitting with my sambo, I can feel really inattentive to him. You have a period where both are scrolling. So, you have to put it away. Maybe someone said something, and you didn’t even hear it because you are just scrolling. That’s really rude. You have to be more present.

(Respondent 4.2)

Brain rotting typically entailed no regulation of time or content and participants could express disappointment in themselves for having participated in the behaviour. One participant interestingly pointed out how it is not the content itself that makes one feel bad but rather the behaviour (R 4.1).

6.3.5 Affected by content

In some cases, the participants associated negative emotional effects directly with the content. Some felt that the algorithm had failed to adhere to their sensibilities while others encountered harmful content within their preferred topics. Some participants mentioned how heavy news articles could cause negative mood modification while others felt more at ease on

specific platforms that appealed more to their tastes and preferences. R 2.2 for instance, expressed a preference for Reddit over Instagram due to the more “friendly” and “genuine” members of his communities there. All participants desired to avoid conflict and considered “fighting in the comments” to be a waste of time and “embarrassing”. Both participants that mentioned having done so recently in order to correct some misconception, expressed a feeling of pointlessness after the fact.

Recently I watched some documentary on the child abuse that happened on Nickelodeon and there was like a three-day period where all I was seeing was content about child abuse. And it was horrible!

This is taking up my headspace and I didn't like any videos to do with this and it is all that I am seeing. And I had a few bad days because I would scroll three videos and already be upset.

(Respondent 3.4)

Some participants mentioned and struggled with enraging content, particularly male participants. Enraging content consisted of videos that tried to keep the user's attention by being enraging or provocative. YouTube reels was commonly mentioned as a platform that did this. This content sometimes caused direct adverse effects but other participants, like previously mentioned, seemed to find it amusing at worst.

I think the algorithms have bad limits. I know that when I had TikTok, I got a lot of confrontations. Everything from Karens to men confronting each other on the street. No violence but you get sucked in.

(Respondent 2.2)

Interestingly, enraging content seemed to appear more often the less participants regulated their use and occurred in correlation to low levels of engagement. The participants that described themselves as passive were also the ones that more frequently encountered enraging content. The participants believed that this was due to watch-time optimisations.

6.4 Regulation & Moderation

Participants regulated their social media use in a variety of different ways for different reasons. All of which led to different emotional outcomes for each user, always seemingly improving the participant's relationship to social media.

6.4.1 Limiting time and scope

One of the most commonly discussed methods of regulation was to regulate one's time spent on social media platforms. Participants had various ways to do so. Some used internal mechanisms that caused either warnings or limitations to appear that could block excessive use. The limitations participants put on themselves ranged from 20 minutes to several hours. Many participants who mentioned these methods of regulation would often do so after already having discussed the ways in which social media can cause adverse effects. Other methods of regulating one's use on social media was to outright avoid platforms one knew to be harmful, most typically TikTok. This level of awareness was present in a few participants, usually those that had experienced problematic use before and wanted to avoid past pitfalls (R 4.4). Some participants were not so sure that this actually benefited them as they figured that "screen time on the laptop has probably gone up instead" (R 1.2).

I put a limit on my phone. You can do that through Instagram's app, and you can get a warning (...) I've put two hours per day which is still quite a lot. Then there's a warning. I think that is very good, because you can lose time.

(Respondent 2.3)

Another common method to limit one's excessive social media use was to put the phone out of sight and therefore out of mind. This too, varied in intensity. Some participants simply placed the phone a little further away while doing something else to avoid grabbing for it (R 1.3) while others would let its battery die in order to be rid of it (R 1.1).

I have very few apps. It's only Instagram and YouTube but I have removed Instagram at some points because I noticed a negative impact on my mental health. If I am at home, I can often put my phone away. If I am in bed, I throw it away so I can't reach it. Because it is a hassle to go up and get it.

(Respondent 1.5)

Participants also described how they could remove the phone's internet so that they were still reachable via their number in case of emergencies (R 3.3). Such methods of regulating one's use seemed to be a way to cure a variety of problems connected to social media use, primarily dependency and availability.

6.4.1 Content moderation

Participants expressed vastly different levels of content moderation. This aspect of regulation was almost always described in some unique way between participants as many had individual ways to control what kind of content that they consumed.

I moderate quite a lot. I like the idea that the information is stored somewhere. That Instagram gets some kind of feedback about what kind of content people like or don't like. I want to take some kind of stance from the couch when I am on my phone. Like, "this kind of content is not ok." Usually when it's about violence or women. I also have a special hate in my heart for staged content. I think moderation has a gradual effect on my flow.

(Respondent 2.2)

Some claimed that they unfollowed specific content to "clean their algorithm" (R 2.4) or used the "not interested" button to moderate one's feed (R 4.1). Other participants seemed to perform this moderating behaviour by not clicking on anything at all. Participant 4.2 for instance admits to not interacting mechanically when moderating but rather "looking away" or continuing to scroll (R 4.2), a uniquely low level of engagement as it relates to moderating one's content feed. 4.2 was not alone in not clicking things however as other participants also expressed that they performed very few actions while on social media, including moderation. Participants could also describe how they would moderate their content quite rarely and only in scenarios where the content was particularly harmful. Others expressed how this kind of moderation occurred naturally by liking certain kinds of content and therefore teaching their algorithm what they preferred.

6.5 Summary of themes

The data gathered from the focus group interviews was assembled through a thematic analysis and understood through the theoretical framework. Four main themes and thirteen sub-themes were created, none of which are unique to this thesis. All transcribed focus groups and their respective coding schema are available to read as a supplement to this thesis. The participants belonged to a specific age bracket (25-31) and were divided somewhat evenly between the sexes with the majority being women. Each group consisted of a pre-existing social group which varied in occupation, lifestyle and sometimes nationality. There were 20 participants across the 4 focus groups which naturally does not allow for any generalisability (which was never intended). However, it is this author's belief that these

results can exemplify common narratives across the age bracket and that similar methods could be utilised to further gain a nuanced understanding of what levels of engagement social media users actually belong to.

The participants used many of the same platforms, for similar purposes. For example, Snapchat and Messenger were used for private communication between friends and family while YouTube and TikTok were regularly used for entertainment. Despite some similarities in motivation, the way that participants used these platforms and their relationships to them differed. Participants had different expectations and experiences with the platforms that was related to their preferences and their values. The specifics of each participant's use resulted in a large scope of behaviours which varied in its levels of engagement. Participants regularly expressed that communication was the most worthwhile aspect of social media and that behaviours such as scrolling were, despite its prevalence, not worthwhile. Such behaviours were usually more acceptable when "earned" after a full day of work.

Initially, the participants had common ideas about the conceptualisations of ASMU and PSMU, linking each to common descriptions and examples of activity and passivity. However, several participants pointed out the apparent difficulties in labelling specific behaviours and some disapproved of being categorised as "passive users" if they did not publish content. It also became clear that users could not be so easily categorised as active or passive since they did, in fact, perform many different kinds of actions on a scale of engagement at the same time.

High levels of engagement were not common among the participants as it related to public use, unlike private use. Participants expressed that it was rare to publish content, and many described previous experiences with publishing content that resulted in adverse emotional outcomes. Leading them to eventually stop being as active. Some participants were glad to be active users, considering it a creative outlet and a valuable hobby.

Low levels of engagement were very common among all participants when related to public use. Low levels of engagement were not particularly common as it related to private use, however. Many participants expressed that scrolling behaviours were both entertaining and problematic. This dualistic relationship to scrolling can be divided by what adverse effects appear, and by what degree the participants decide to regulate their problematic use. Many participants were eager to claim that passive use of social media needn't be primarily negative as it can be inspiring and satisfying.

Problematic use consisted of several different aspects, many of which were tied to specific platforms or to specific behaviours. Availability was tied to private communication and could cause anxiety and shame due to social obligations. Attention dysregulation and “brain rot” was regularly described as adverse effects of excessive scrolling and was predictably tied to applications which allowed such behaviour. Addiction and getting stuck is rather similar but was often described in different phrases than the first. Both of these sub-themes belong to a perspective of excessive scrolling being bad for the user, despite the apparent positive outcomes of passive social media use that the participants mentioned. Some participants expressed problems with enraging content or content that was harmful in some way, this was for the most part discussed as a problem associated with low levels of engagement.

Participants had many different ways to regulate their use. These included time constraints, creating space from one’s phone and moderating what kind of content appeared in the feed. Each of these consisted of several different methods, to varying effects. It became clear that regulation was a key piece to if participants experienced adverse effects or not. A narrow majority of participants regulated their use in some way while the rest did not claim to do any regulating action to their social media behaviours.

6.6 Application of theoretical framework

This chapter continues the narrative description of participant discussion by adapting the themes and sub-themes to the theoretical framework.

6.6.1 Common Gratifications and motivations for media use

Participants either directly mentioned or described through context, many of the common gratifications mentioned by McQuail (2010) as motivations for media use. Motivations for high levels of engagement included using social media for *social connection, identity formation/lifestyle expression* or as a *creative* outlet whereas motivations for low levels of engagement included using social media for *entertainment, information, inspiration, advice* or *diversion/filling time*. Many of these common gratifications were however present at various levels of engagement and should not be considered exclusive to specific levels of engagement.

Diversion, relaxation and filling time was a common motivation for many participants which typically included low levels of engagement. This was exemplified by “grabbing for one’s phone” when bored.

Information, education, guidance and advice were typically mentioned by participants together as a motivation that required some level of engagement on their behalf. This was often considered to be worthwhile.

Value reinforcement, cultural satisfaction and emotional release belong to a series of gratifications that could be met when participants were particularly selective. This kind of use was motivated by feelings of belonging or preference.

Social contact was typically the most highly valued motivation for social media use and was almost always considered worthwhile. It did however include a variety of engagement levels with some participants expressing being particularly inactive and others defining themselves as constantly available.

Identity formation and lifestyle expression exemplify the highest level of engagement as participants would publish content to express either their identity or their lifestyle. This kind of behaviour was particularly rare, even if many participants expressed having used social media this way in the past.

Applying the aspects of figure 1 (McQuail’s model of media use) to the results, we can see that the participants have specific media related needs determined by personal attributes. These attributes lead them toward specific platforms and are likely to influence their relationship to these platforms and their content. For example, participants that expressed nostalgia for old methods of media delivery (R 1.5; R 3.6) outlined a worse relationship with media systems such as the short-form video format. Other participants explained that they avoided platforms due to the available content while others seemed to regard TikTok specifically negatively due to its reputation. These factors resulted in complicated relationships to social media. For example, many used social media to connect with both close and faraway friends, but this high level of availability could cause stress. Many scrolled for the sake of entertainment, cultural satisfaction and relaxation, but could easily get stuck in excessive use.

6.6.2 The active audience

Levels of engagement varied greatly in the data but has here been categorised into four archetypes. Each archetype was discovered in the data set and represent few or many of Biocca's (1988) five aspects of what the active audience entails.

Consumption was the behaviour that exhibited the lowest level of engagement since it exhibits few, if any, of the five aspects provided by Biocca (1988). Scrolling behaviour was often described as “mindless” and participants expressed having forgotten what they even saw while scrolling. Similarly, while using social media in this way, they often thought that what they had consumed was culturally unsatisfying and not worthwhile. As such, this level of engagement features particularly low levels of *selectivity* and *involvement* since participants rarely directly controlled what content appeared on their feed. While the participants did admit to scrolling to “relax” or “fill time” which might imply *utilitarianism* or *intentionality*, they also often described reaching for their phones subconsciously and expressed difficulties with quitting these behaviours, indicating the opposite. Finally, participants could at times exhibit shame or disappointment in this behaviour, indicating some level of *awareness* and *resistance* (Biocca, 1988).

As the participants are describing themselves as “being stuck” at this level of engagement, it is worthwhile to apply theories which explain how the application itself can be responsible for adverse effects. Like with previous research, participants are expressing difficulties with limiting their use (Alcott et al., 2022) and are aware that the platforms often will attempt to get their attention in order to prolong use (Bhargava, 2023). Interestingly, some participants indicate that a lack of interaction would lead the platform to feeding them engaging content. This was common in male participants who exhibited low levels of engagement on short-form video platforms which aligns with previous theories about platform responsibility (Bhargava, 2023).

Lurking is here utilised similarly to ways it has been described previously. As a low level of engagement where users are unlikely to interact with others but exhibit still exhibit aspects of activity (Nonnecke et al., 2017). Participants could often describe themselves as passive both in private and public settings. Participants who “ghosted” group chats would, for instance, not exhibit high levels of involvement but would clearly adhere to aspects such as selectivity, utilitarianism and resistance (Biocca, 1988). In public settings, lurkers would interact with content or producers in small ways, such as *liking* but would never express a motivation to

expand this engagement. Despite not being associated with as many adverse effects, lurkers would still describe scrolling as “destructive” and “worthless”. In some of these cases, it seems as if the structure of provision of this media system fail to align with the participant’s desired outcome (McQuail, 2010), leading to lower levels of engagement. This was also true for participants who expressed nostalgia to old media systems.

Lurkers did not seem to consider private use as particularly intimate as according to social presence theory (Gunawardena, 1995) and were, like with public use, likely to interact in small ways. They did mention that private communication, and a fear of being ignored, could lead to anxiety. Indicating that the high intimacy and high immediacy afforded by private communication channels had a greater impact on their emotional impact than public channels (Gunawardena, 1995).

Also present at this, slightly higher level of engagement, are aspects of *resistance* and *regulation*. Several participants expressed adverse emotional outcomes when encountering content or situations which caused upward comparison (Verduyn et al., 2022) and would as such regulate their experiences accordingly. When participants managed to regulate their use in a fruitful way, they seemed to regard passive behaviours as more positive, indicating the value of *resistance* as an aspect of audience activity within social media use (McQuail, 2010). Similarly, participants mentioned scenarios in which passive use was more acceptable, such as relaxation after a day’s work. Indicating that external factors are likely at play when deciding emotional outcomes, not just the media system.

Socialisation is a relatively high level of engagement which includes behaviours that are typically quite high in the private sphere and low in the public sphere. It should not come as a surprise that behaviours exhibit various levels of engagement since this is one of the motivations behind extended models of active and passive use. For a participant to exemplify low levels of public engagement does not equate low levels of private engagement, and vice versa. Unlike the lurker, the socialite is defined by their frequent communication with friends and family which occurred at relatively high levels of engagement. These participants would also frequently share content discovered while scrolling. Indicating the importance of everyday communication behaviours to be important as discussed previously by Boyd (2010). Similarly, socialites believed that social media use came with specific social norms that one was expected to adhere to. Even passive behaviours belonged to a social reality, as participants indicated the importance of keeping up with what far away friends were doing.

The participants of group 4 for instance, considered it important and entertaining to observe old acquaintances. Additionally, the members of group 4 indicated that the reason they did not comment on public content was due to the social stigma related in doing so. Further indicating that social media use is also defined by social reality experienced outside of the internet (Boyd, 2010).

Socialites valued their private communication highly and emotional effects were usually regarded as positive, with a few exclusions. As described by focus group 4, everyday communication made it feel like the user was close to their friends, which indicates that *intimacy* and *immersion* are valued aspects of this kind of behaviour (Johnson et al., 2023).

Production could be considered the most traditionally high level of engagement as it consists of active, public use as well as active private use. Participants who posted often belong to this category. This was limited as only a few participants posted regularly, but several participants described that they had been at this level of engagement in the past. Publishers regarded their followers as a community and valued the behaviour due to as a creative outlet.

The reasons given for why participants were anxious to post or had stopped, were usually explained as social pressures. The higher degree of intimacy and vulnerability that was part of posting caused users to struggle, especially when coupled with the beauty ideals one was expected to follow on Instagram. This was a very common reason for why participants had stopped posting, sometimes mentioned in tandem with a realisation that social media activity was “inauthentic” and “worthless”.

This thesis sought to answer a call for explorative research that detailed nuanced descriptions of ASMU and PSMU. As such, I have provided a brief summary below of these archetypes of use discovered in the data. It must however be noted that no individual belongs solely to one archetype but may exhibit traits that belong more to one than the other. Participants would frequently exhibit behaviours present at various levels of engagement.

Emotional effect

Type of engagement

Initially a behaviour that can be entertaining or informative, consumption may result in habitual exhaustion, desensitisation, shame, disappointment and other negative effects correlated to the concept of “getting stuck” and “brain rot”.

Due to low engagement, the user may not be aware of potential harm, or may struggle to find ways to limit adverse effects.

Consumption: Consists of the consumption of public social media content without interaction of any kind for the purposes of filling time or entertainment. Initially harmless but excessive use can cause adverse effects.

The user fulfils very few, if any, aspects of the active audience.

A very common behaviour that many users adhere to. Lurking can also be known as browsing and should not, despite its low levels of engagement, be correlated with adverse effects.

Lurkers typically select their content with some care and are likely to regulate their use when encountering adverse effects.

Lurking: Consists of the consumption of both public and private social media content with little to no interaction for a variety of purposes such as entertainment, information or social connection. While mostly harmless, awareness is required.

The lurker exhibits selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality and resistance as aspects of the active audience.

Many people consider socialisation to be worthwhile while on social media. Adverse emotional effects are primarily caused by feelings of being ignored or by feelings of being too available. As such, both low and high levels of engagement can cause adverse effects.

Socialites may also exhibit other kinds of behaviour that can lead to adverse effects, such as those previously mentioned.

Socialisation: Consists of communication through mostly private means although previously mentioned behaviours experienced in public spheres may lead to socialisation. Primarily motivated by a need for social connection.

The socialite exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Producers of content can find the action to be creatively fulfilling or socially rewarding but may also suffer from anxiety and unhealthy comparison due to a variety of factors such as social norms, feelings of inadequacy and exposure.

Producers may regulate and moderate their use and by increasing their awareness, avoid unhealthy situations.

Producing: Consists of publishing content publicly on social media platforms to small groups or to large networks. Traditionally, the highest level of engagement. Usually motivated by a desire to express oneself or to connect with others.

The producer exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Figure 6: 4 archetypes of media use at different levels of engagement

7. Discussion

7.1 Summary

This thesis sought to explore active and passive social media use through extended models and nuanced descriptions. It was interested in investigating what levels of engagement are prevalent in adult users, how this use has changed and what emotional effects occur in relation to these engagement levels. It was also interested in the ways which users could limit potential harm to themselves.

The thesis understood the social media user as inherently active in some aspects and refuted concepts of passive audiences in accordance with previous research which put out a call for more nuanced descriptions of passive use (Valkenburg et al, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2022). It utilised common media theories as a perspective to analyse user experiences and assembled these experiences through the use of semi-structured focus groups. Four groups of pre-existing social groups were assembled. The interviews were transcribed and coded through Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

It was discovered that social media use consists of a variety of behaviours which operate at various levels of engagement. Four archetypes have been created to explain the differences in the reviewed sets of behaviours: consumption, lurking, socialisation and production. Each set of behaviours was accompanied by different adverse emotional outcomes. These negative outcomes were almost always limited by some sort of regulation or moderation, indicating that some level of engagement is required to effectively avoid negative effects. This is not to say that the thesis concludes that low levels of engagement are necessarily associated with negative effects except for in the case of extremely low engagement levels. Additionally, negative outcomes also occurred at high levels of engagement when users failed to regulate the behaviour which caused these effects. In fact, many participants had intentionally lowered their production in order to avoid a litany of negative effects associated with it.

7.2 Main Conclusions

Social media use for adult users is motivated by a variety of reasons which occur at various levels of engagement and at different platforms. Common gratifications include social connection, entertainment, information, inspiration, relaxation, diversion and self-expression.

Behaviours that occurred at low levels of engagement included scrolling through public content as well as browsing private content. Scrolling was typically motivated by entertainment and relaxation and was associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes seemed to occur when users failed to regulate their use and fell victim to the modern media design, resulting in excessive use and the consumption of unsatisfying content. Browsing public content was typically motivated by social connection and decided by individual attributes. Negative outcomes occurred when users were placed in social situations that could cause anxiety or stress, such as being ignored or being too available.

Behaviours that occurred at high levels of engagement included chatting and production. Chatting was typically motivated by social connection and was associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes seemed to occur when users encountered awkward or stressful situations or failed to adhere to social norms. Production was typically motivated by self-expression, creativity and social connection and resulted in both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes had occurred to many users in the past which had resulted in lower levels of engagement. These were often tied to feelings of inadequacy.

Regulation behaviours were usually, but not always, associated with ways to reduce adverse emotional consequences. Indicating that a certain level of awareness and resistance may be required by users to withstand the potentially negative effects of excessive media use. Social media designs were regularly described as addictive and harmful and failures to regulate one's use often resulted in negative effects. It is clear that social media design is in some way partly responsible for these effects, causing prolonged stay through the use of immersive algorithms, engaging content and incentivising consumption behaviours in order to satisfy demands both of customers and third-party affiliates.

7.3 Contribution to the field

This thesis was from its outset intended to answer a call for research focused on the nuanced description of ASMU and PSMU. Past measurements of ASMU and PSMU have been inadequate in accurately describing user behaviour and the emotional impact associated with such behaviours (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Researchers have been eager to categorise social media use into distinct sets of behaviour but regularly fail to recognise how user behaviour shifts depending on motivation, current platform or mood. Trifiro & Gerson (2019) suggested that focus groups could be utilised to create a common vocabulary for various levels of

engagement, which this thesis has sought to do. It did this, using previous definitions and conceptualisations, while understanding that use is dynamic and that the audience, especially the networked audience, should not be binarily considered passive.

By avoiding the confounds discussed by Valkenburg et al (2021), most notably by including the aspects of private and public SMU, the thesis had been able to discover the ways that use differs in levels of engagement. Additionally, by defining audience activity by well-understood and defined aspects such as those found in Biocca (1988), the thesis could demonstrate low and high levels of engagement as described by the participants. This could potentially be used to create a measurement of engagement for each individual participant, segmenting their common behaviours in order to discover what causes them adverse effects. Future research could perform this methodology on a larger scale or focus it on specific groups of people, such as producers or consumers, in order to verify the results found here.

This thesis has also approached the question by way of media studies and suggests that medicinal research applies a similar vocabulary and conceptualisation of SMU to better understand emotional consequences. The author strongly states that binary conceptions of ASMU and PSMU cannot be used to describe user behaviours or the way that it affects them.

7.3 Limitations

The study is comprised of several limitations. The first and most apparent is its limitations in scope and sampling. Since the responses cannot be generalised across any larger population, the results may be contradicted by similar studies performed on other test subjects.

Additionally, the participants were all approached via a social connection of the author, which puts validity into question according to some standards of correct sampling procedure (Brewis, 2014). This might have been balanced by the way that social dynamics seemed to expand, not limit the interviews, but some level of proximity was present. Furthermore, participants might struggle self-reporting their use and the emotional effects that come from it. It is not impossible that participants spoke predominantly on negative matters since they felt primed to do so. However, when asked about positive effects, they were also eager to oblige.

The thematic conclusion and the discovered archetypes are naturally creations of the author, despite attempts to abide closely to the provided methodology of thematic construction. Such analysis undeniably cannot be entirely removed from the author, which puts reliability into

question. I believe that my opinion of social media use and the past definitions of ASMU and PSMU are illuminated in the text, and I accept how this might have influenced the analysis. Furthermore, conducting this research with a larger scope or with a more specific kind of user might provide more valuable insight than this approach, which utilised the “common person”. Particularly, this research would have fit well on adolescents. Future studies may be more able to operationalise an extended model of ASMU and PSMU better, strengthening our understanding of social media use and its emotional consequences.

Other limitations include those that are coupled to the field itself. Uses & Gratification theory is open to individual interpretations and the concept of audience activity is similarly vaguely defined (McQuail, 2010), which could allow a researcher to make conclusions based on preference and bias. Similarly, while this thesis has attempted to nuance social media use, there is a risk that it minimises certain aspects and generalises descriptions due to unintended exclusion. Descriptions of ASMU and PSMU have been insufficient and the thesis sought to address this, but by using similar vocabulary, it may only have further confused this already messy field, by adding vocabulary and categories that are not useful.

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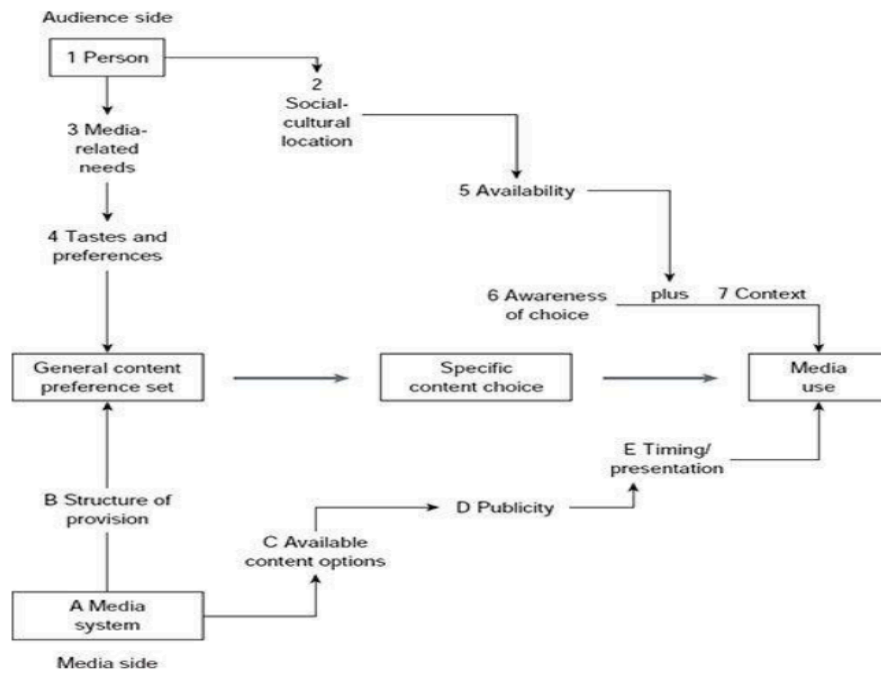
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Figures



(Figure 1: McQuail's "integrated model of the process of media choice")

The audience side	The media side
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Personal attributes such as age, gender, family position and work situation. 3. Social background such as social class, religion, education and locality. 4. Media-related needs refer to the personal benefits one gains from media use. Common needs are detailed elsewhere. 5. Personal preference for certain genres or specific items of content. 6. Availability and habits relate both to when and how media is available to the audience as well as the economic availability of media. 7. Awareness of choice indicates to what degree specific audience members interact or engage with media. More aware audiences are more likely to plan their media use. 8. Specific context of use will vary according to the medium but generally refers to sociability and location. Ordinarily this relates to where media is used (i.e. watching television with family or alone). For this thesis it relates specifically to the ways people seek to use social media and with whom they engage with. 9. Chance is likely to play a role in media selection and makes <i>perfect</i> description of selection impossible. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Media system refers to the ways choice is influenced by the system the media is communicated. This typically involves what media is available nationally in any given space but for this thesis may relate to the affordances of social media platforms. 3. Structure of media provision refers to the general pattern of what media provide within society. Patterns of media provision will cause long-term audience expectations. 4. Available content options are the specific formats and genres available to audiences. 5. Media publicity includes advertising of the media on their own behalf. 6. Timing and presentation imply how users will likely be influenced by specific strategies of timing, placement, content and design of media according to audience-gaining strategies. Given the asynchronous reality of social media, this does not relate as much to time and place as it does design, which aligns better with the structure of media provision.

Figure 2: (“Description of previous model”)

Public active social media use	Visible behaviour that is open for the general userbase to see and engage with. Common behaviours: Posting, commenting
Public passive social media use	Engagement with visible and public content. Common behaviour: Browsing
Private active social media use	Engagement with one-to-one or small group communication. Common behaviours: Chatting with friends & family. Sending and interacting with content.
Private passive social media use	Encounter with one-to-one or small group communication without interaction or engagement. Common behaviours: Observation.

Figure 3: (“Description of public ASMU, public PSMU, private ASMU and private PSMU”)

Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
5 participants total 3 men 2 women	4 participants total 3 men 1 woman	6 participants total 6 women	5 participants total 5 women
Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: German, Italian, Finnish, Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish
Time: 1 hour 10 minutes	Time: 1 hour 30 minutes	Time: 1 hour 15 minutes	Time: 1 hour

Figure 4: (Presentation of focus group participants)

Focus group 2 part 14: Group chats	Analysis
<p>R 2.4: I am almost always a ghost in group chats. That can only be like, two other people. But I don't think you always have to be active. You can check and see what people are doing without interaction, or just liking. The larger the group is, the smaller the chance there is that I will actually write anything.</p>	<p>The discussants speak about their private use. Some participants admit to being passive private users, but they claim that this still serves a social function. While they will rarely write due to personal preferences, they may still be considered as taking part in the social dynamic such as one might be silent in real life scenarios as well.</p>
<p>R 2.1: Me too. A lot can be said in group chats, but I almost never write myself. I prefer to call people if you actually have to talk about something. I have a little bit of social anxiety, writing to a lot of people at the same time. If I don't write, people can't ignore me.</p>	<p>One participant describes how they are a private passive user and prefers to call them in order to converse. The reasons provided is related to anxiety and a fear that people may not reply.</p>
<p>R 2.3: I like group chats. I think it is a smooth way to reach out to my groups of friends. You can reach friends even if you don't have a lot of contact. Rather than doing that individually.</p> <p>R 2.2: The majority of my daily communication is in group chats. I think it is easier to include people through group chats. I think it can be scary if you write but don't get a reply. That can be worrying.</p> <p>Moderator: We have talked about scrolling and reels. How does your sharing of that content look like?</p>	<p>One participant reports that group chats are a smooth way to converse with several friends. This can be related to notions of the networked public. Messenger is seen to have high immediacy and intimacy.</p>

Figure 5: Example of code schema (the entire thematic analysis and sub-themes can be found in supplemental material).

Emotional effect

Type of engagement

Initially a behaviour that can be entertaining or informative, consumption may result in habitual exhaustion, desensitisation, shame, disappointment and other negative effects correlated to the concept of “getting stuck” and “brain rot”.

Consumption: Consists of the consumption of public social media content without interaction of any kind for the purposes of filling time or entertainment. Initially harmless but excessive use can cause adverse effects.

Due to low engagement, the user may not be aware of potential harm, or may struggle to find ways to limit adverse effects.

The user fulfils very few, if any, aspects of the active audience.

A very common behaviour that many users adhere to. Lurking can also be known as browsing and should not, despite its low levels of engagement, be correlated with adverse effects.

Lurking: Consists of the consumption of both public and private social media content with little to no interaction for a variety of purposes such as entertainment, information or social connection. While mostly harmless, awareness is required.

Lurkers typically select their content with some care and are likely to regulate their use when encountering adverse effects.

The lurker exhibits selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality and resistance as aspects of the active audience.

Many people consider socialisation to be worthwhile while on social media. Adverse emotional effects are primarily caused by feelings of being ignored or by feelings of being too available. As such, both low and high levels of engagement can cause adverse effects.

Socialisation: Consists of communication through mostly private means although previously mentioned behaviours experienced in public spheres may lead to socialisation. Primarily motivated by a need for social connection.

Socialites may also exhibit other kinds of behaviour that can lead to adverse effects, such as those previously mentioned.

The socialite exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Producers of content can find the action to be creatively fulfilling or socially rewarding but may also suffer from anxiety and unhealthy comparison due to a variety of factors such as social norms, feelings of inadequacy and exposure.

Producing: Consists of publishing content publicly on social media platforms to small groups or to large networks. Traditionally, the highest level of engagement. Usually motivated by a desire to express oneself or to connect with others.

The producer exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Producers may regulate and moderate their use and by increasing their awareness, avoid unhealthy situations.

Figure 6: 4 archetypes of media use at different levels of engagement

ormatic and Media

Master's Programme in Social Sciences, Digital Media and Society
specialisation: Master's Thesis

**Social media use at various levels of engagement and its emotional
consequences**

or:

How I learned to stop worrying and love the scroll

Student: Fabian Ceder-Thorin

Supervisor: Kristina Stenström

Course supervisor: Johan Lindell

Abstract

Social media has become ubiquitous in modern society. Both as a way to connect with others and as a popular form of entertainment and relaxation. This dependency on social media can lead both to beneficial and adverse consequences. A common concern about social media use relates to how active or passive a user is, with some indicating that passive behaviours, such as absently scrolling through the feed are particularly harmful. Research that investigates social media's adverse effect on the individual depending on the user's engagement level currently suffers from problems with categorisation, methodology and philosophy. This thesis sought to fill this research gap. Its research questions were accordingly: "What motivates adult users to use social media at various levels of engagement?" and "What factors of social media use impact adult users' adverse emotional outcomes?"

To answer this research question, the study utilised a methodology of focus group discussion with pre-existing social groups consisting of adults aged 20-30, a demographic with potentially unique insight into their relationship with social media. This was followed by thematic analysis which in turn was placed within a framework of Use & gratification theory and the networked public. These theories were chosen since the research adheres to concepts of the active audience and disagrees with conceptualisations of the social media user as passive. Instead, low to high levels of engagement is used to describe individual behaviours. 4 main themes (Level of engagement, Problematic use, category of use and regulation) were discovered as well as 13 sub-themes.

The study discovered that individuals would use social media at several levels of engagement simultaneously but that behaviours could be assembled into four archetypes: Consumption (low level of engagement which included behaviours such as mindless scrolling), Lurking (low level of engagement which included both private and public browsing), socialisation (medium to high level of engagement which included communication), and production (high level of engagement which included publishing content). Different levels of engagement were associated with different adverse emotional outcomes which commonly occurred when users failed to effectively regulate their use or encountered harmful content. It was discovered that users encountered these issues largely due to the platform's incentivisation through subtle and not so subtle means such as media design and notifications.

Keywords: Social media, Scrolling, ASMU, PSMU, SMU, Uses & Gratification, Networked Public

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1. Introduction

Social media, and the way that we interact with it, has evolved dramatically in the last 20 years. Presently, it is one of the dominant methods for communication, entertainment, information and more. Throughout the last few decades, new avenues of use have been made possible, but so has our relationship to digital devices and its platforms changed as well. As social media use continues to increase globally, both in terms of user count and average time spent online (Arness & Ollis, 2022), it is important that researchers continue to investigate what consequences this use can have on the individual.

Social media can help form and maintain important social connections, provide entertainment, distraction and serve as a vital channel for news, education and information (Bhargava, 2023). Despite social media's inherent potential for good, there are many current concerns regarding the way it can harm individuals and society at large. Common contemporary concerns include data security, privacy, misinformation and social media's potential to be an addictive and harmful behaviours (You & Liu, 2022).

There exists a prominent concern today that social media can cause adverse effects on an individual due to its addictive nature or its potential for harmful social dynamics (Bhargava, 2023). These effects have historically been referred to as problematic internet use (PIU) and includes behaviours such as excessive use of social media (Arness & Ollis, 2022). Social media users are reporting feelings of anxiety and stress due to uninterrupted connectivity as well as descriptions of "scrolling through nothing" (Lupinacci, 2021). The description of the infinite scroll and its adverse effects has been a recurring narrative in research investigating social media's negative effects with some researchers arguing that many social media platforms exploit cognitive limitations of their users in order to prolong use and initiate harmful and habitual use for the sake of monetisation (Bhargava, 2023).

These concerns regularly take the level of engagement of the user into account as scrolling is described to be a passive use of social media. Common conceptualisations of internet use as either active or passive would argue that each category of behaviour is capable of causing a variety of effects at varying degrees of intensity. Active social media use (ASMU) typically

refers to behaviours in which the user engages with the platform or other users productively while passive social media use (PSMU) is exemplified by behaviours such as scrolling and generally believed to undermine well-being by stimulating harmful behaviours (Verduyn et al., 2015).

However, conceptualisation of active and passive social media use currently do not align with the nuance of actual behaviours performed online (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Such descriptions neither align with longstanding media theories regarding the active audience (Biocca, 1988). Contemporary research about ASMU and PSMU needs to apply more extended models of description when analysing different kinds of behaviours. This thesis seeks to answer a call for research which investigates the nuances of ASMU and PSMU and the ways that they can affect an individual's emotional outcomes since conclusions in this field currently suffers from both categorical and methodological strain due to a lack of consistency in their definitions (Verduyn et al., 2022).

This will be done through the use of qualitative methods, specifically focus group interviews. The participants of these interviews will be international adults aged 20-30. This demographic serves as an interesting choice due to their continued evolution alongside social media platforms. Most social media appeared in the early 2000's and so this generation has experienced many of its changes and variety of emotional effects, making them an intriguing demographic to examine. How has their use changed over the years? How has their relationship to specific platforms been altered? Why do they use social media actively and passively and at what specific scenarios does this use occur?

1.1 Problem Description

Social media habits such as scrolling have become increasingly characterised as mind numbing, harmful and passive (Bhargava, 2023). Applications like TikTOK, with its immersive design features, endless feeds and apparent intention to prolong use, have been accused of causing harm and turning users into passive consumers of 'worthless' content. This ongoing narrative can be likened to previous descriptions of media use which happened both to the radio and the TV, aligning with criticisms about the mass audience as irrational, easy to manipulate and generally lacking self-control (McQuail, 2010).

This thesis intends to fill an evident research gap as described by other scholars (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Verduyn et al., 2021). This gap regards the lack of nuance in descriptions of

active social media use (ASMU) and passive social media use (PSMU) and their respective effects on emotional outcomes. This follows a line of media theory and the networked public which regards even small behaviours and habits performed online as valuable (Boyd, 2010). Such theoretical frameworks refute the concept that social media use can be truly *passive* but does accept the fact that certain actions may have a higher level of engagement than others. Notably, this thesis rejects the hypothesis that passive use should be naturally linked to more negative outcomes than active use and instead opts to understand ASMU and PSMU as a spectrum of behaviours that can cause a variety of emotional effects.

Additionally, social media platforms undergo constant changes to their design and user base. This thesis will investigate the topic of ASMU and PSMU as it relates to adult users aged 20-30 years old who have been avid social media users since its earliest inception. It is believed that this generation may have had the most diverse relationships with social media and an awareness of how their relationship to it has evolved. It has also been previously observed that this generation has become increasingly passive online, decreasing their publishing habits in favour of smaller, more social dynamics (Bhargava, 2023). What motivates these individuals to use social media at various levels and what specific emotional effects can this cause? Moreover, what power do these individuals have to limit potential harm in the face of social media expectations and institutions?

1.2 Research Aim & Research Question

This thesis answers the call for explorative research into dynamic levels of social media engagement by using extended models of ASMU and PSMU. The study is focused on the experiences of adult users between 20-30 years old from a variety of nationalities, predominantly Swedish. The participants were distributed across the ideal age group, gender and various nationalities, making them somewhat emblematic of the general demographic but limited due to the relatively low number and a lack of true diversity in terms of socioeconomic background or nationality. The study investigates what motivates such individuals to use social media at various levels of engagement and what specific emotional effect this can cause. Additionally, it seeks to answer what actions this group of individuals take to limit potential harm to themselves when faced with problematic social media use. It does so predominantly out of a desire to create a more fruitful vocabulary for describing ASMU and PSMU while avoiding binary categorisations.

- **What motivates adult users aged 20-30 to use social media at various levels of engagement?**
- **What factors of social media use impact adult users' aged 20-30 adverse emotional outcomes?**
 - **What actions do adult users aged 20-30 take to limit adverse emotional effects?**

It must be noted that the sampled respondents, while probably aligning with the average user, can't be generalised. The results of this thesis should not be used to point out what the general public experiences on social media. The results can, however, indicate relatively common archetypes of behaviours present within this specific age group and demographic. Furthermore, the study's methodology could be applied to any group as could its vocabulary, leading to a balanced reliability.

1.3 Thesis Structure

In chapter 2, the thesis continues by providing a background on social media and its different modes of interaction. This chapter also describes active and passive social media use and the commonly held hypotheses of each, followed by a description of problematic social media use and the way that this is tackled from the perspective of media and communications research. In chapter 3, the thesis provides a thorough overview of the research field. It describes the history of how active and passive social media use has been studied, what methodologies are common and what research gaps have led to the current research question. This is followed by chapter 4 which provides a summary of the relevant theoretical framework utilised by the study to describe user motivations and the conceptualisation of the active audience. This is done mainly through an implementation of Uses & gratification theory as well as the networked public theory. In chapter 5, the thesis described the chosen methodology of focus group discussions and motivates its decision of method and sampled respondents. There is also a description of how coding was done in service of analysis. Finally, chapter 6 provides the results of the data collection and analyses responses provided by participants. The thesis then concludes with chapter 7 which discusses the findings and makes suggestions moving forward.

2. Background

2.1 Social media

Social media refers to a variety of interconnected platforms utilised by humans (and machines) to interact with one another through the internet. Social media platforms vary widely in application and audience but commonly seeks to connect unique users with one another through the production of content such as text, images or videos (Obar & Wildman, 2015). While all media, such as the TV, inherently has a social aspect to it, social media is defined by features that allow for collaborative communication and interaction. These features can include functions such as comments, likes and sharing. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and TikTok also provide the user with the tools necessary to create their own media content (Van Dijck et al, 2018).

Social media as a concept originates from the early 2000's when popular sites such as Myspace and Facebook began platforming human interaction online. In contrast to earlier online communication methods, social media facilitated interaction through unique accounts and large, centralised platforms. This change is commonly referred to as WEB 2.0 which, alongside a falling cost of data storage capabilities, is considered a key reason for social media's success in the early 2000's and onward (Obar & Wildman, 2015). WEB 2.0, also known as the participatory internet, is a catch-all concept used to explain the levels of interaction and convergence of technologies that define the modern online experience. This is meant to contrast to previous experiences online, such as forums, which were less inherently interactive and not designed to reach massive audiences (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). The production and consumption of user generated content (UGC) is the lifeblood of contemporary social media sites. Each platform, be they focused on text, videos or images, are reliant on the continued activity of its users, both in terms of production and consumption of content (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The business model of the largest social media sites today relies on the production and dissemination of UGC. The platform offers a free and convenient service for users who wish to produce or consume content or connect with others socially. The platforms then monetise whatever is produced on their site through advertising or by selling user data to third-party groups (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

There is a large variety of social media platforms in the current landscape. There are social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, microblogs like Twitter (now X) and video hosting sites like YouTube. While similar in the ways mentioned previously, each platform has a different utility, audience and mechanisms at play which alter the user experience in a variety of ways. For example, one might use Facebook for the purposes of communication and connection while YouTube serves to provide entertainment or information (Li et al., 2021). Regardless of motivation, research indicates that passive behaviours such as browsing, are prevalent on most social media platforms and that gratification through entertainment and information are the dominant motivators behind social media use (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Consumption of content is the most prevalent on sites such as Instagram and TikTok however, often accused of being an extreme passive behaviour with the potential to cause adverse emotional effects (Zhang et al., 2019).

TikTok is a short form video sharing platform which has taken centre stage in contemporary debates regarding accusations of its addictive design (Montag et al., 2021). It launched in 2017 and is owned by Bytedance, a Beijing-based tech-company. It is monetised primarily through ad space. TikTok enables users, like past social media, to make unique accounts from which they can create, share and edit short form content, enhanced with filters and current musical trends. The “for you” page provides users with an infinite stream of videos algorithmically designed to be engaging to the user (Montag et al., 2021). While the original conceit of TikTok, and its predecessor Musically, was to create lip-sync videos, the content and use of the platform has changed in recent years to include any number of genres and categories such as entertainment, information, memes and more. While TikTok is only one of many platforms with such features today, it is mentioned specifically due to its popularity as well its controversial position. Other common platforms that are often accused of having addicting qualities include Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

2.2 Active and Passive social media use

This chapter will provide a general understanding of the conceptualisations of ASMU and PSMU as well as common pitfalls. It is the intention of this chapter, and this thesis, to provide a less binary understanding of ASMU and PSMU which takes the nuances of user behaviour and motivation into account. This chapter begins by describing what ASMU and PSMU typically entails and then offers a more extended description to counter that.

Active social media use (ASMU) and passive social media use (PSMU) are two conceptualisations which seek to describe the ways that the user can choose to engage with social media. ASMU typically entails actions such as sending private messages or making public posts whereas PSMU refers to actions such as browsing (Valkenburg et al., 2021). ASMU also includes behaviours such as liking, commenting, sending messages and otherwise engaging others (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). ASMU is generally understood to be a virtuous behaviour which leads to beneficial emotional outcomes since it creates social connection and leads to greater levels of intimacy (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Because of this, ASMU has classically been hypothesised to correlate with greater levels of well-being. There are however apparent scenarios in which ASMU can cause adverse effects such as cyberbullying. Additionally, different sets of people are likely to have different motivations with their social media use which is likely to cause different outcomes at different levels of engagement (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019).

PSMU is regularly less precisely described but it is typically described as the monitoring of online life without engagement and includes behaviours such as browsing. As the flipside of ASMU, PSMU is commonly correlated with negative effects (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This thesis adheres to concepts that make accepting the truth of this description difficult to follow. For instance, media theories such as the active audience might state that audience reception and selectivity alone make them active users despite not producing content themselves. For the purpose of clarity, this thesis will continue to use ASMU and PSMU as a way to describe the way that users engage with media at different levels. Like previous frameworks, this thesis describes ASMU as actions where the user produces content or engages other individuals and PSMU as actions that do not. The key difference of the approach is that this thesis utilises an extended model which posits that behaviours exist on a spectrum of actions in accordance with active audience theories.

This approach has been borne out of necessity since the conceptualisations of ASMU and PSMU present in the field have thus far led to inconclusive empirical evidence (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This shift of perspective is for the most part led by media scholars who argue that existing descriptions fail to capture the complexity of relationships between SMU and well-being. For instance, behaviours are commonly entangled such as how the act of “liking” something could be considered active by one scholar and passive by another (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Such confusions are unfortunately common within the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy as are the relations these behaviours have to well-being and ill-being. This has led researchers

to call for extended models of ASMU and PSMU which take into account the nuances of behaviour practiced by social media users (Valkenburg et al., 2021; Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Verduyn et al., 2022).

The origin of this confusion goes back further than the internet, let alone social media. Previous frameworks of a passive audience and its negative connotations date back as far as Herbert Blumer in 1939. Here, mass media is understood as “large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed” (McQuail, 2010, p. 333) and the massification of media such as the radio was understood as a moral flaw on society and a less virtuous way to consume culture. It follows that the television, comics, video games and now social media have been accused of similar effects on individuals and society. According to McQuail, it is easy to associate negative features with an audience the more they are considered a mass rather than individuals or social groups. Common negative features attributed to a mass audience include irrationality, lack of self-control and vulnerability to manipulation (McQuail, 2010). Passive and mass consumption of media has predominantly been understood as negative and “bad” throughout the modern age which is sure to have affected the common perceptions of ASMU and PSMU (McQuail, 2010).

2.3 Problematic social media use

Regardless of the activity being classified as active or passive, social media has the potential to cause a variety of adverse emotional effects on the individual (Verduyn et al., 2017). Problematic (sometimes referred to as pathological) internet use (PIU) has been a concern since the internet’s mainstream adoption in the mid 90’s. Early researchers examined how the internet could be addicting (Griffiths, 1999) or abusive (Brenner, 1997) while contemporary research covers a much larger scope of more specific topics (Verduyn et al., 2017; Wolgast et al., 2023). While it has been observed that the internet has immense potential for emotional consequence, conclusions regarding PIU are largely inconclusive due to differences in diagnostic criteria, epistemology, methodology and more (D’Angelo & Moreno, 2020). Common conclusions indicate however that people with genetic, personality and individual struggles with self-regulation are at higher risk of developing PIU (Spada, 2014) and that PIU may be the result of various factors such as loneliness, anxiety or the desire to alleviate boredom turned into pathological obsession (Davey & Davey, 2008; Soror et al., 2021).

PIU and internet addiction have been utilised interchangeably even though they represent two separate frameworks for identifying internet overuse. Internet addiction is likened to classic substance abuse while PIU represents a broader variety of problems, including social, behavioural and emotional issues (D'Angelo & Moreno, 2020). PIU is currently understood to be risky, excessive or impulsive in nature, leading to adverse life consequences, specifically physical, emotional, social or functional impairment. PIU may lead to depression, hyperactivity, issues with concentration and a litany of other adverse consequences (Montag et al., 2020).

This thesis does not belong to a medical or biological paradigm and makes no attempt to diagnose its research subjects, but frameworks of PIU can be useful to create fruitful analysis of what participants describe as problematic behaviours. This thesis intends to investigate what levels of engagement causes adverse emotional effects and why, which is why it is motivated to examine PIU as an aspect of its theoretical foundation. For example, it is likely that research subjects will speak about what adverse effects they experience when engaging with social media actively or passively. These descriptions will be valuable for future research which seeks to describe social media use and its effects with more nuance. Such research can include media and communication research but also work that does not fit this thesis' paradigm, such as medical or psychological research investigating adverse effects of social media use. All branches of research must adapt extended models of ASMU and PSMU and their effects on well-being or risk making undue conclusions.

2.3.1 Addictive social media use

Be it TV, comics or video games, excessive media use has often been viewed as harmful, leading to addiction and disassociation from the real world's worthwhile activities (McQuail, 2010). Concern about excessive media use has been especially prevalent for children due to their vulnerability. While the television has historically been the most prominent culprit, social media may recently have taken its place as the prime example of how people can easily become addicted to their media habits.

Addiction to social media refers here to a psychological dependency on varied social media behaviours such as shopping, browsing, chatting or scrolling through one's feed. Importantly, this thesis regards pathological and addictive social media use not as a disease but as result of habitual use (You & Liu, 2022). There is a prominent concern today regarding the adverse effects that certain digital platforms may cause in terms of addiction and self-regulating, with

users indulging in excessive and compulsive behaviours that interfere with daily activities (Bhargava, 2023). Addiction to social media may be caused by a variety of factors, ranging from dependence on social media for positive affirmation (Andreassen et al., 2016) to lack of self-control in the face of powerful algorithms (Alcott et al., 2022). Similar to ideas of PIU, this thesis does not investigate medical or biological aspects of social media addiction. It does, however, investigate the ways that research subjects can describe themselves as addicted to social media and how this negatively affects their mood.

3. Literature Review

This chapter reviews and summarises existing literature on the characteristics that define active, passive and problematic social media use. The chapter begins with a description of the conceptual frameworks which define the field and continues with an overview of the adverse and beneficial effects of active and passive social media use. Finally, it reviews motivations for a more nuanced description of social media use and the necessity for utilisation of extended models.

3.1 Problematic Internet Use

Research into problematic social media use is primarily driven by cyber-psychologists and media and communication scholars. This field of research seeks to investigate the ways in which social media can be harmful to people and how its unique features can affect mental health (Tyagi & Tripathi, 2023; Singh & Tripathi, 2016). Before we continue, it should be noted that this thesis makes no claim that pathological social media use is analogous to substance addiction but does state the importance of studying obsessive behaviour. PIU is herein approached as a social concept, not a biological or medicinal one. While it is a common rhetoric that the modern individual has become addicted to their smartphone, the truth is likely more complicated. Research of the last few decades states that individuals have instead become addicted to what the phone enables (Kuss & Griffith, 2017).

According to some researchers in the field, overreliance on social media can lead to a variety of problematic effects such as attention dysregulation, isolation, compulsive use and more (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Kuss & Griffith (2017) provides a useful vocabulary for the description of these symptoms in which (1) *Salience* describes how social networking becomes the foremost preoccupation to the user. (2) *Mood modification* describes how activities on social media can affect one's mood. (3) *Tolerance* describes how more time and energy must be put in in order to reach the same effect as in earlier phases of use. (4) *Withdrawal* describes how, when SMU is discontinued, addicted individuals will experience negative psychological symptoms often leading to (5) *relapse* (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

One common conceptualisation of social media's adverse effects is known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). FOMO refers to an individual's apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Secondary interpretations of FOMO further detail the concept by describing state-FOMO, which refers

to the fear of missing information online as well as trait-FOMO which is related to unmet social needs (Mao et al., 2023). These anxieties can increase the frequency with which individual's check their phone due to a fear of missing out on social connection or staying informed. This relates also to descriptions of nomophobia, a fear of being without one's phone and a desire for being constantly available which can also cause feelings of anxiety (Kuss & Griffith, 2017).

While it is clear that social media can have a distinct effect on an individual's moods, empirical evidence has recently observed a negative correlation between SMU and effects on well-being (Verduyn et al., 2022; Kross et al., 2021). Confusions within the field may be due to often generalised and pathologised descriptions of SMU as well as biased comparisons between users, platforms and behaviours which entangles the complexity of SMU and its effects (Valkenburg, 2022). Valkenburg provides 3 recommendations for future research which seeks to investigate problematic internet use (PIU) without suffering from common pitfalls. These are: (1) Do not collapse well-being and ill-being components which refers to how ill-being has been seen as the flipside of well-being without taking into account how both spectrums can exist at the same time. (2) Time-based predictors are no longer sufficient to study SMU effects which refers to how much of SMU research has previously focused greatly on the amount of time spent on social media. (3) Researchers need to adopt a casual effect heterogeneity approach. This applies in experimental studies and longitudinal studies which seek to investigate SMU through person-specific analysis. Valkenburg argues such methods have not seen enough utilisation in the field (Valkenburg, 2022). Out of the three suggestions for future research into PIU, the first and second will be closely adhered to in the following research while the third is not relevant to the chosen methodology. This thesis will work under the assumption that greater well-being does not equate lower ill-being and vice-versa. Secondly, this thesis is not interested in judging a person's emotional effect based on time spent or other quantitative factors It is likely that participants will speak on how they spend "too much time on social media" but this will not be analysed through numerical measurements such as how many hours is "too much". Instead, it will seek to analyse what the participant describes as the problem and conclude what level of engagement causes them to feel as if they have wasted their time.

PIU has been closely associated with PSMU since PSMU is generally believed to undermine well-being by stimulating harmful behaviours (Verduyn et al., 2015). Scrolling in particular has recently been characterised as both dominant and problematic for individuals and for

society since information and propagation platforms (IPPs) such as Instagram and TikTok have an addictive quality that endorses passive and unhealthy consumption (Rosenquist, 2021). Research that investigates people's unhealthy relationship with social media and the internet must tackle past failings within the field in order to accurately analyse what different kinds of behaviour and interaction can actually lead to various emotional outcomes (Valkenburg et al., 2021).

3.2 Active social media use and Passive social media use

Research into ASMU and PSMU is populated by two major branches of researchers: cyber psychologists and media and communication researchers. This part of the literature review provides examples of both, but it should be noted that the two branches offer different perspectives on the topic, its classifications and effects. This will be mentioned when necessary.

The concept of the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy and the hypothesis that they impact well-being was first categorised within "Social network activity and social well-being" By Burke, Marlow and Lento (2010). The purpose of the study was to validate a common report which claimed that directed interaction was associated with greater feelings of bonding and lower levels of loneliness while consumption was associated with increased loneliness. Seeing as the levels of engagement were a predictor for emotional effect, they predicted that loneliness would decrease with higher amounts of direct communication and that consumption was associated with loneliness (Burke et al., 2010).

Previous research had observed passive use of social media and its effects on the users, but this had been limited to the concept of lurkers, discussed further in 3.2.1. Burke et al. (2010) found that greater SNS use was associated with increased social capital and reduced loneliness (Burke et al., 2010). Additionally, directed communication such as messaging facilitated relationships and increased social capital whereas consumption behaviours were associated with feelings of loneliness. Burke et al. assumed that low-quality content or *noise* would induce weaker emotional outcomes than meaningful communication. Most importantly for the creation of the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy, they discovered that increased Facebook use was associated with greater well-being (Burke et al., 2010).

These findings became the basis of the active-passive dichotomy that has become prevalent in the field today. The hypothesis is summarised as ASMU leading to beneficial emotional

effects whereas PSMU leads to adverse emotional effects and is used both by psychologists and communication researchers who wish to explain the emotional outcomes that different levels of engagement can cause (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Thorisdottir et al., 2019; Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020, Pagani, 2011; Weaver & Swank, 2019). This branch of research routinely positions PSMU as a common activity (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Gong et al., 2015) associated with decreased well-being (Verduyn et al., 2015; Thorisdottir et al., 2019). ASMU on the other hand is generally understood to lead to decreases in depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness (Escobar-Viera et al., 2019). The most recent scoping review on the subject of ASMU and PSMU is provided by Valkenburg et al., (2021) where ASMU is defined as “targeted one-on-one exchanges such as sending private messages or public broadcasting such as making a status update” and PSMU is defined as “the monitoring of online life without engagement or exchanges such as scrolling (Valkenburg et al., 2021, p.2).

According to Trifiro & Gerson, ASMU and PSMU has been measured through experimental manipulation, tracking of online behaviour and questionnaires (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Experimental manipulation, they say, have led to inaccurate results due to difficulties in determining whether changes in variables such as mood are a result of using social media passively or a result of the participants remembering specific use for the purposes of the study (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Alternatively, they suggest using the Passive Active use Measure (PAUM) as utilised by Gerson, Plagnol & Goll (2017). The PAUM was a Facebook use questionnaire of 13 items designed to identify activities as active or passive (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). However, since the PAUM was directly designed for Facebook, it could not be adapted to other social media sites. In fact, it could barely be utilised in regard to Facebook due to its rapid changes following the development of the PAUM. This led to the PAUM being unable to classify actions such as reacting to a comment (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). The PAUM, alongside other similar quantitative methodologies indicate a desire for researchers to categorise social media use into distinct behaviours that can be understood as active, passive, good and bad. These endeavours fail largely because they, in search of a conclusive understanding, fail to take the nuances of use into account, or the ways in which social media is sure to change. Additionally, due to cyber psychologists and communication scholars defining social media engagement differently, the creation of a scale that fits all definitions and patterns of use, is unrealistic. Trifiro & Gerson (2019) call for a universal measure of social media behaviours which would allow researchers to more accurately map

the impact of engagement. They continue by suggesting that the measure should be able to identify similar behaviours across several social media platforms, should be general enough to withstand changes in the social media landscape and finally, should be adaptable enough to be utilised by all fields from psychologists to marketing. Trifiro & Gerson (2019) suggest that the requirements could be explored through the use of focus groups of users who frequent several platforms which could lead to general understanding of use as well as a common vocabulary for the various levels of engagement. This request has inspired the current study.

Valkenburg, van Driel & Beyens (2021) provide the most recent and thorough scoping review on the subject of ASMU and PSMU as well as a critique on the generally accepted ASMU-PSMU hypothesis. Valkenburg et al. (2021) claim that the concept of “passive” SMU not only challenges long-standing communication theories that consider the reception of media messages as inherently active, but that the classifications themselves suffer from lack of clarity. Their review evaluates the latest empirical basis of the hypotheses’ associations of ASMU and PSMU with well-being and discovered general disagreement on several topics. Initially, there is a confound between well-being and ill-being as one unique continuum when they should, in fact, be studied separately. Valkenburg et al. (2021) suggest three indicators for well-being (happiness, life satisfaction & positive affect) and three indicators for ill-being (mood, depression & negative affect). One vital addendum that the Valkenburg review provides is that of Private and Public ASMU and PSMU. In most early research regarding ASMU and PSMU (such as the Burke et al., 2010) research, each behaviour was considered to be *public*. Public active social media use for instance may refer to making a post while public passive social media use is the consumption of that post. Contemporary research would however make the claim that a large part of social media use consists of private use as well as public (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Private ASMU is classified as synchronous one-to-one or small group interactions between known communication members, referring to conversations that users are likely to have with friends or family through communication apps such as Facebook messenger. Private PSMU would then be the consumption of such communication without engagement (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Valkenburg et al. (2021) conclude that the current ASMU hypothesis does not distinguish between public and private SMU and thus predicts that both types of ASMU would lead to increases in well-being and decreases in ill-being with the opposite being true for private and public PSMU. Their report reveals limited support for both the ASMU and PSMU hypothesis, explained by common confusions such as the well-being and ill-being confound, the public and private confound

and ASMU-PSMU entangled activities. For instance, the categorisation of “liking” or “commenting” was widely inconsistent as either ASMU or PSMU while some studies considered “chatting” as PSMU when it clearly involves interaction (Valkenburg et al., 2021). The authors suggested that future research take more nuanced measurements into accounts when analysing ASMU and PSMU such as valence, intimacy and privateness/publicness.

This brings us to the extended model for ASMU and PSMU provided by Verduyn et al. (2021). The extended model seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between SMU and well-being since empirical findings using simple models have been inconclusive thus far. The model positions ASMU as “activities that facilitate interactions with other people” and PSMU as “viewing content without engaging in interactions with other users” (Verduyn et al., 2021, p. 63). These behaviours are characterised by posting or chatting and consumption respectively. The extended Active-Passive model of SNS use recognises the complexity of ASMU and PSMU in the following ways. The effect of active use on well-being is unlikely to be identical for all types of active use but depends instead on *reciprocity* and *communion*. Reciprocity refers to targeted and nontargeted communication. The degree to which active use is reciprocated depends greatly on the type of activity individuals engage in (Verduyn et al., 2021). For example, a user that messages another directly is likely to have greater reciprocity than a user who publishes an image for everyone. Verduyn et al. (2021) also define communion as warm and cold kinds of communication. In short, active use will only foster beneficial outcomes when behaviour is agreeable rather than quarrelsome (Verduyn et al., 2021). By utilising these two characteristics, the model can more accurately explain specific behaviours and their outcome. If a user were to post hate speech on a public forum for example that would be considered as public, active and cold behaviour and therefore likely to result in adverse outcomes. Conversely, if a user were to chat in private with a close friend that would be considered private, active and warm behaviour. Verduyn et al. (2021) provide similar characteristics for PSMU as well in the form of *self-relevance* and *achievement*.

Self-relevance intends to describe the scenarios in which a passive user might suffer due to comparison and suggests that high relevance is associated with greater ill-being. For example, unhealthy female body ideals might have greater relevance (and effect) on other women than men (Verduyn et al., 2021). The relationship between the user and the content therefore describes what causes emotional distress rather than the activity being classified as passive. The second characteristic provided is achievement (success vs failure). This relates to if the

content consumed regards success or failure with the hypothesis that if one passively consumes stories about success (which is common on SNS) one is likely to suffer while if one passively consumes stories about failure, one is likely to commit to downward social comparison (Verduyn et al., 2021). In short, the extended active-passive model suggests that active use is not always beneficial and passive use is not always detrimental for well-being. While far more nuanced than previous simple models of ASMU and PSMU, the extended model still fails to take certain passive behaviours into account such as entertainment or other motivators behind SMU. This is explored further in chapter 3.3 regarding uses & gratification research.

3.2.1 Lurkers

Research into passive social media use originates within the study of *lurkers*. Lurkers were described as “participants (...) who do not post any messages in an online community such as interactive mailing lists and bulletin board systems” (Takahashi et al., 2003, p. 1). Because of this, lurkers have been characterised as unwelcome observers and free riders (Gong et al., 2015), benefiting from the public goods of others without contribution (Takahashi et al., 2003). However, early research concluded that lurking individuals do not constitute a threat to the online landscape and should not be considered a negative behaviour (Nonnecke et al., 2006). In fact, lurking was a common behaviour perpetuated by a majority of social media users on a daily basis and silent users constitute a healthy part of the ecosystem (Gong et al., 2015).

Others have called lurkers harmless observers who may for a variety of valid reasons choose to opt out of interaction (Nonnecke et al., 2006). Research about lurkers is similar, but not identical, to research about PSMU. It has introduced notions of silent use and more dynamic ways to participate in online communities without direct engagement which will be relevant for future analysis. Like Nonnecke (2006) and Takahashi et al., (2003), this thesis believes that passive consumptive behaviours such as browsing or lurking does not possess some inherent flaw or is particularly harmful to the user. It is instead interested in investigating what levels of engagement causes adverse emotional effects, be they on the active or passive side of the spectrum. As such, it still understands active to include engagement and passive to include lack of engagement relatively speaking.

3.3 Uses & Gratification literature

Uses & Gratification theory (U&G) provides a framework for understanding what motivates individuals and groups to prefer specific mediums as well as specific behaviours within these mediums (McQuail, 2010). U&G theory originates from within the media effects research of the 40's and onward. It has historically been utilised to study the ways in which audiences interact with radio, tv (Ruggiero, 2000), and now social media (McQuail, 2010). Although it is sometimes open to diverse definitions and individual attributions (Ruggiero, 2000), U&G is considered a useful framework for understanding what motivates media use.

Within the specifics of ASMU and PSMU, U&G has been utilised by researchers who seek to explain how and why individuals use social media at different levels of engagement (Shao, 2009). U&G provides the simple idea that use of certain media can result in gratification of individual needs and only if relevant needs are gratified, will individuals continue to use the media (Montag et al., 2021). According to Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz (2020), gratification was the most relevant driver to understand a range of behaviours on social media such as TikTok, including passive consumption of content. U&G theory has provided great insights into the motives that drive individuals to use social media despite the numerous claims that passive consumption is bad for one's health (Montag et al., 2021).

Shao (2009) suggested that individuals interact with UGC in three ways. Consumption, participation and production. (1) Users who *consume* do not interact with content but do watch and read it. (2) *Participation* includes both user-to-user interaction and user-to-content interaction but does not include actual production. (3) *Producing* encompasses creation and publication of content. Shao further suggested that users are driven by various motivations for social interaction, community development and production of content. U&G research of this era claimed that people produce content to inform and entertain others or to trigger responses and participation. If they were self-interested, production may be motivated by self-expression or self-actualisation (Shao, 2009). Fame is mentioned as well as individuals had just recently begun to utilise YouTube as a way to market oneself (Shao, 2009).

Arness & Ollis (2022) provides a valuable framework for a mixed methods study from which the focus group portion can inspired the ongoing study. In that study they understand the motivations behind social media use through previous frameworks of U&G. The qualitative results located the difficulties of self-regulation as well as motivations for purposeful social media use (Arness & Ollis, 2022). For instance, self-regulation was perceived to be difficult

since it requires effortful self-control that many participants claimed was difficult to achieve. Participants could also express how they would get lost in social media, describing it as a trance-like state. Some participants would describe how they purposefully removed their phones from their immediate vicinity to keep it out of sight and mind in order to avoid getting hooked (Arness & Ollis, 2022). The parallel theme was that of purposeful social media use. Many participants did report mindless use but almost all had a variety of purposes such as entertainment, information, motivation, connection and escapism that was intentional and directed (Arness & Ollis, 2022). The study utilised a six-step thematic analysis to create the codes via an inductive approach. The analysis found that awareness of problematic use and the intention to reduce social media use were not sufficient to actually lead to self-regulation. In fact, self-regulation was perceived to be extremely difficult even when participants were aware of evident side effects.

3.4 Methodologies of Previous literature

This chapter reviews quantitative and qualitative methods that have been utilised in order to investigate ASMU and PSMU and their effects on emotional outcomes. Like with all literature reviewed in this part, sources belong to media and communication schools as well as psychological ones. While the majority of research in this field appears to be quantitative, this thesis is primarily inspired by qualitative methods.

3.4.1 Quantitative research

The majority of research regarding ASMU, PSMU and their respective emotional affect that has been discovered for this thesis consists of quantitative methods. For example, the Valkenburg review (2021) reviews 40 survey-based studies. These studies were predominantly cross-sectional in nature but were largely unable to make claims regarding the impact of SMU on well-being. Similarly, quantitative methods overall have yielded varying results and inconclusive associations (Verduyn et al., 2021; Kross et al., 2020). At large, researchers are suggesting more explorative research that investigates the nuances of effects present in social media use.

The field of social media research into well-being currently exists in a debate for methodological reform with a general call for stronger research designs with more valid, universal measurements (Kross et al., 2020). Kross (2020) does however note how social media research in general faces a deeper psychological issue and believes the current corpus

fails to recognise the nuance of SMU. Because of these reasons, this thesis opted out of utilising quantitative methods as the methodology appear to be insufficient in actually describing social media use well enough to reach valid and consistent results. Qualitative methods, while not generalisable, may be better suited to describe what motivates individuals to perform specific behaviours and how these behaviours actually affects them.

3.4.2 Qualitative research

While most of the reviewed literature is quantitative in nature and deals primarily with surveys, there exists a few qualitative investigations as well that delve into the topic of active and passive social media use as well as problematic social media use. Common methodological approaches include content analysis (Chegeni et al., 2021), open interviews (Arness & Ollis, 2023) and addictions tests (Aksoy, 2018). Some researchers have argued that social media monitoring in large quantities may be a poor substitute for in-depth qualitative research (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011) while others claim that qualitative research is uniquely positioned to gain immersed understanding of SMU (Chegeni et al., 2021) and to explore the lived experiences of individuals of interest (Arness & Ollis, 2023).

In Chegeni et al. (2021), 18 participants were selected from psychiatric clinics who had been diagnosed with an addiction to social media. These individuals participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews that included questions such as “what factors made you tend towards SM?” and “What motivated you into using these social networks?”. The data of the interviews were then analysed through methods of transcription and several stages of coding. Codes were refined and merged until a number of categories were formed which could be arranged into the main meaning of the data (Chegeni et al., 2021). The main inspiration for the methodology of this thesis can be found in Arness & Ollis (2023), however. This study utilised a mixed methods design of both quantitative and qualitative. In the initial design of this thesis, this was the intended methodology, but this was changed to only include the qualitative method due to time constraints and the perceived failings of quantitative measurements of ASMU and PSMU. The interviews performed in Arness & Ollis (2023) consisted of first year psychology students at Western Sydney University. Participants were asked to self-report measures of ADHD symptoms, psychological well-being, PSMU and social media motivations. The qualitative results were analysed through thematic analysis which could lead to themes and sub-themes (Arness & Ollis, 2023). Despite the loss of the quantitative methodology, this has still inspired large parts of the chosen methods for this

thesis. The last common method, an addiction test such as the one found within Aksoy (2018) has not been applied.

It is the perception of this author that qualitative methodology is uniquely positioned to reach worthwhile conclusions about the effects of everyday, habitual social media use. Despite certain self-reporting fallacies, these methodologies can explore new, experimental models of active and passive SMU as well as its effects without relying on unclear categories.

3.5 Conclusion on Literature review

This chapter has sought to summarise both the history and the contemporary field of ASMU and PSMU research as well as PIU research. It has provided descriptions of the field and its goals as well as common methodologies to reach these goals. It has also gone over common criticisms of the ASMU-PSMU dichotomy and the need to nuance its descriptions.

It is evident that current research which investigates ASMU and PSMU suffers from a variety of inconsistencies that damages our understanding of the emotional affects SMU has on the individual. In some cases, specific behaviours such as liking or commenting is operationalised unreliably which leads to confusion. Future research must come to terms with how the interactive nature of SMU may prevent truthful attributions of effects either as ASMU or PSMU. Additionally, the ASMU-PSMU hypothesis regularly ignores the complexity of psychological activity in social media use and studies opt to study easily operationalised items such as time which does not adequately explain user behaviour. Future designs must take both content and reception into account when analysing ASMU and PSMU and their effects on emotional outcome.

This thesis utilises an extended model of ASMU and PSMU which considers the conceptualisations as a spectrum of behaviours where specific actions can have various levels of engagement depending on the context and intention of the user. Additionally, this thesis does belong to a field of psychological interest but does not make any attempt to diagnose research subject. The field of problematic internet use and psychological effects is instead approached in terms of sociological perspectives. This thesis therefore belongs closer to a resurfacing media effects research, utilising media theories to analyse user behaviour and emotional effect.

4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a framework of relevant theories that have been utilised to answer the research questions. Each theory provides an understanding of what motivates individuals to use social media at various levels of engagement and how these habits of use can affect them emotionally. This chapter begins by describing uses & Gratification theory which is used to describe what motivates various kinds of use both from the audience and the media side. This theory also relates to the concept of the active audiences and the rejection of binary conceptualisations of media use. This chapter then summarises social presence theory and networked public theory which provides important notions such as active and public social media use and the ways in which social media use is a social habit. Finally, this chapter provides an explanation of affordances as they relate to media theory.

4.1 Uses & Gratification Theory

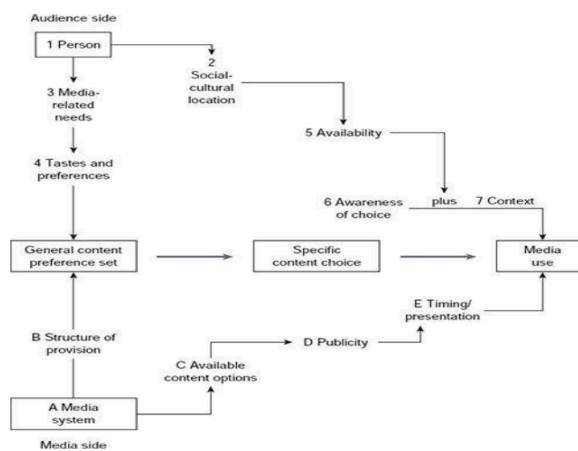
Uses & Gratification theory (U&G) provides an important framework for conceptualising motivation and why individuals may continue to use social media despite evident negative effects (Ruggiero, 2000). According to U&G, media audiences are active participants who seek out and use media to fulfil specific needs and gratifications (McQuail, 2010). Within the context of this thesis, U&G may be used to map the motivations of participants and provide insight into their media intentions since it is a theory which considers the audience to be active and aware (Kut et al., 2013). More specifically in this context, U&G can describe the *how* and *why* of media social media use (Liu et al., 2020) like what platforms or genres of content are preferred (Wu et al., 2013).

As U&G theory intends to understand media use through the motivations of its audience, it usually provides a list of common gratifications that are met through media use. McQuail (2010) provides one such list with 12 aspects but these were later limited to the ones that were directly related to participant responses, with some being merged as well.

- 1. Information and education**
- 2. Guidance and advice**
- 3. Diversion and relaxation / Filling time**
- 4. Social contact**
- 5. Self-expression / Identity formation**
- 6. Emotional release / Cultural satisfaction**

7. Security

These common gratifications are valuable for the thematic analysis conducted in this thesis as they describe what motivates users to perform specific actions at various levels of engagement. McQuail further combines the individual motivations with the influences of the media itself, which may prove relevant, since this thesis assumes some level of responsibility from the media design in relation to negative affects. This model operates both on the audience and media side, working toward mutual orientation and, while originally designed for television, McQuail's version applies to all media, including digital. The following model represents the "general process of choice-making" McQuail, 2010, p. 358).



(Figure 1: McQuail's "integrated model of the process of media choice")

Description of the model on next page:

The audience side	The media side
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal attributes such as age, gender, family position and work situation. 2. Social background such as social class, religion, education and locality. 3. Media-related needs refer to the personal benefits one gains from media use. Common needs are detailed elsewhere. 4. Personal preference for certain genres or specific items of content. 5. Availability and habits relate both to when and how media is available to the audience as well as the economic availability of media. 6. Awareness of choice indicates to what degree specific audience members interact or engage with media. More aware audiences are more likely to plan their media use. 7. Specific context of use will vary according to the medium but generally refers to sociability and location. Ordinarily this relates to where media is used (i.e. watching television with family or alone). For this thesis it relates specifically to the ways people seek to use social media and with whom they engage with. 8. Chance is likely to play a role in media selection and makes <i>perfect</i> description of selection impossible. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Media system refers to the ways choice is influenced by the system the media is communicated. This typically involves what media is available nationally in any given space but for this thesis may relate to the affordances of social media platforms. 2. Structure of media provision refers to the general pattern of what media provide within society. Patterns of media provision will cause long-term audience expectations. 3. Available content options are the specific formats and genres available to audiences. 4. Media publicity includes advertising of the media on their own behalf. 5. Timing and presentation imply how users will likely be influenced by specific strategies of timing, placement, content and design of media according to audience-gaining strategies. Given the asynchronous reality of social media, this does not relate as much to time and place as it does design, which aligns better with the structure of media provision.

Figure 2: (“Description of previous model”)

This model may be utilised in order to analyse the experiences of the interview subjects. Their reason for and experience with SMU can be explained both from the audience and the

media side, leading to a conclusive argument about what factors actually seem to be at play when users encounter emotional outcomes.

4.1.1 The Active Audience

A central idea to U&G is that of the active audience. The active audience is an old media theory related to other factors that might de-massify the concept of the audience such as gender, lifestyle and taste (McQuail, 2010). Biocca (1988) provides a review of various meanings of audience activity and proposes five aspects:

Selectivity: The audience is described as active the more choice and discrimination are exercised in relation to media and content within media. I.e. an active media audience selects their media carefully. Passive use is then found within very heavy media use where the audience makes no selection. This definition considers unselective audiences as those who watch 'whatever's on tv' which becomes complicated within modern social media in which content is increasingly being selected by algorithms.

Utilitarianism: The audience are considered self-interested consumers. Media consumption represents the satisfaction of a more or less conscious need. Essentially: audiences make conscious and unconscious decisions based on their own satisfaction and desires.

Intentionality: The audience is considered active when it engages with information and experiences cognitively. In essence, this means that the audience must think about and consider their media use. It is often correlated with subscription to media.

Resistance to Influence: The aspect of activity is here emphasised by how the audience limits or resists external control and authority. Regardless of content or systems of communication, the audience remains in control. This, too, is very interesting when related to concepts of algorithms and social media feeds.

Involvement: An active audience should be involved with or engrossed with the ongoing media experience. This definition is particularly vague but relates to concepts such as lazily scrolling without involvement or engagement.

These five aspects of audience activity cover a broad range of activities and may be more or less applicable to the ongoing research. In sum, they may provide a more detailed way to describe what social media users experience. Additionally, these aspects and the assumptions

of how audience activity occurs will nuance descriptions of PSMU. McQuail points out however that the notion of audience activity can often be unsatisfactory, saying: “it is open to diverse definitions, its indicators are very mixed and ambiguous, and it means different things with different media.” (McQuail, 2010, p. 347). He does not, however, refute the concept entirely but rather states the need to take the complexity of media use into account. This thesis therefore takes an open approach to explaining audience activity, understanding that while the audience can never be truly passive, certain activities have a higher level of engagement than others.

4.2 Social Presence Theory

This chapter introduces social presence theory and its relevance to definitions of active social media use. It discusses how perceived social presence in online interactions influence user engagement and communication behaviours.

Since the mainstream adoption of the internet in the mid 90’s, researchers have explored the potentially social context of the medium (Gunawardena, 1995). Social presence theory dates back further than digital communication but interest in the theory grew when it could be applied to the more dynamic interactions that were held through digital communication channels. Social presence theory sought to explain these new dynamics as they related to face-to-face interactions. In short, social presence refers to “the degree to which a person is perceived as a *real person* in mediated communication.” (Gunawardena, 1995, p.5). It is suggested that social presence contributes to levels of *intimacy* which depends upon factors such as physical distance, eye contact and topics of conversation. Additionally, a person may convey *immediacy* through verbal and nonverbal communication by way of proximity, formality and expression. Gunawardena states: “a person making a telephone call may choose to speak in such a manner as to give an impression of aloofness (non-immediacy) (...) or she may choose to adopt an attitude of formality and comradeship (immediacy).” (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 5). Different mediums have different relationships with social presence and different ways of applying it.

Social presence in contemporary research has few clear definitions and no valid units of measurement. Despite this, social presence research is able to observe positive influences of social presence in regard to education (Gunawardena, 1995), message effectiveness (Biocca, 2002) as well as e-commerce (Johnson et al., 2023). Researchers expect that social presence

such as personal communication and witnessing people in frame on social media is likely to cause higher levels of motivations to interact with the content. Additionally, social presence may cause content to “seem more intimate, sociable, sensitive and personal which creates a psychological immersion in the absence of an actually physically immersive experience” (Johnson et al., 2023. p.546). For this thesis, social presence theory is relevant due to its implications of behavioural use. The ways in which individuals behave on social media may have different levels of social presence which may lead to various emotional outcomes. It is likely, for instance, that interaction with a high degree of social presence has greater emotional affects. Such behaviour may include (but not limited to) private communication between individuals or public content that strives for intimacy and immediacy through expression and other factors (Gunawardena, 1995).

4.2.1 Private & Public

Social presence relates to public and private use of social media. Public SMU refers to behaviours such as making a post or commenting on one while Private SMU typically refers to one-to-one or small group interactions (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Additionally, private and public SMU may be categorised as public active social media use (public ASMU), public passive social media use (public PSMU), as well as private active social media use (private ASMU) and private passive social media use (private PSMU) (Valkenburg et al., 2021). A summary of each category follows for the sake of clarity:

Public active social media use	Visible behaviour that is open for the general userbase to see and engage with. Common behaviours: Posting, commenting
Public passive social media use	Engagement with visible and public content. Common behaviour: Browsing
Private active social media use	Engagement with one-to-one or small group communication. Common behaviours: Chatting with friends & family. Sending and interacting with content.
Private passive social media use	Encounter with one-to-one or small group communication without interaction or engagement. Common behaviours: Observation.

Figure 3: (“Description of public ASMU, public PSMU, private ASMU and private PSMU”)

Since private SMU is much more likely to occur than public (Faelens et al., 2019) and often deals with close relationships and directed communication (Valkenburg et al., 2021), it is possible that it routinely causes more emotional resonance due to the high degree of intimacy and immediacy caused by social presence (Johnson et al., 2023) and therefore may affect well-being differently. Valkenburg reviewed this potential and discovered that the frequency of public PSMU was significantly higher than for public ASMU while the frequencies of private PSMU and ASMU did not differ (Valkenburg et al., 2021). Additionally, their review indicated, as stated in the problem description, that most hypotheses regarding ASMU-PSMU does not distinguish between public and private use and therefore assumes that both types of ASMU (public/private) would lead to beneficial effects whereas both types of PSMU would lead to adverse effects (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This thesis intends to avoid this confound by acknowledging the difference of behaviours between private and public ASMU/PSMU as well as the possibility that some behaviours may exist outside of or between the model's descriptions.

4.3 Networked Publics

Communication and media studies have for some time offered a specific perspective on the notion of what constitutes a public. The public has been synonymous with an audience, referred to as a “group bound by a text” (Livingstone, 2005) and while this public is often unconsciously formed by viewers, they have rarely been observed as truly passive. In fact, it has been argued that the public (and the networked public even more so) are reactors, (re)makers and (re)distributors of media content (Ito, 2008). The specific notion of the networked public exists against this historical backdrop where the audience is viewed as consumers and producers of culture in equal parts and where consumption equals activity.

The networked public was introduced in order to “reference a linked set of social, cultural and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (Ito, 2008, p.2). As such, the networked public refers both to the space and the collection of individuals. Each social media, despite similarities, differ in certain ways from one another and therefore offer a difference in what they provide the networked public. While affordances such as profiles and friend lists are commonly found in most social media platforms, the features will vary in utility and subtle system intention (Boyd, 2010). For example, Facebook's communication channel (messenger) has a widely

different application than Tik-Tok's where the first offers private communication high in immediacy and intimacy.

The ritualistic communication performed on social media channels may at first glance appear innocuous but daily check-ins are a performance of social grooming. In her introspection on the networked public, Danah Boyd states: "Through mundane comments, participants are acknowledging one another in a public setting, similar to the way in which they may greet each other if they were to bump into one another on the street. Comments are not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience." (Boyd, 2010, p. 6). Additionally, the browsing and consumption of content produced by or shared by known actors may contribute to feelings of the public for lurkers (Boyd, 2010).

4.4 Affordances

This chapter explores the ways that the platform themselves may be responsible for behaviours and how they incentivise active or passive use.

Affordances as a concept is entangled in social science, technology and design, often confused with technology features and literal mechanics (Leidner et al., 2018). Affordances was originally coined by Gibson (1969) as a unique combination of qualities that specifies what the object affords us. It was discussed by Gibson in an ecological context and spoke about the ways animals would interact with the environment. Contemporary understanding of affordances however (at least in technological research) describes it in terms of user design. In the context of social media for instance, affordances are the qualities afforded by the platform to the user which enables actions. Affordances are defined in a recent literature review as "the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms." (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p.14). Importantly, affordances recognise the role of human agency in technological behaviours and should not be understood as the actual mechanical system but rather as something constructed by humans interacting with it. Some key points of affordances are summarised here. (1) Affordances are directly tied to the values, thoughts and capabilities of the actor, not the technology. (2) Affordances exist within the constraints of cultural norms. (3) Affordances can constrain action by failing to meet up to

intended standards. (4) Affordances are discrete and can be considered to be the intersection of mechanical application and user intention (Ronzhyn et al., 2023, p. 13).

Affordances have the ability to consciously and unconsciously effect behaviours on social media platforms. Each researcher tends to focus on different sets of affordances on social media depending on their area of study, but common affordances include *visibility*, *persistence*, *editability*, *association*, *searchability* and more. The *visibility* affordance for instance, highlights the ease with which social media enable users to make previously invisible information, visible, as well as the ease with which other users can then locate that information” (Ellison & Vitak, 2015, p. 5). At the same time, the *invisibility* affordance implies the opposite. As such, affordances may be used to explain why users engage in active or passive behaviours, influenced both by their own agency as well as the affordances of any given platform. A user may engage in more passive behaviours on TikTok for instance, due to the affordances of that platform nudging that kind of behaviour with features such as the endless scroll and adaptable algorithms.

4.4.1 Addictive by design

There has been a reoccurring claim that passive consumption behaviours are becoming dominant within social media, which when coupled with their potential for addiction, may interfere with daily life (Bhargava, 2023; Rosenquist et al., 2021). Some researchers have indicated the knowing culpability of social media platforms in relation to ill-being and addiction, claiming that platform design may intentionally lead users to certain harmful behaviours such as addiction in order to prolong usage (Bhargava, 2023). Users may lack the self-control necessary to protect themselves against huge content and recommendation algorithms (Allcott et al., 2022) or they may rely heavily on social media for affirmation and validation (Schou et al., 2016), incentivising continued use. Additionally, users may suffer from fear of missing out (FOMO) or crave the dopamine release that scrolling content provides (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

IPPs have several methods to incentivise prolonged use. Through the use of sophisticated algorithms, personalised content moderation and immersive interface designs which emphasise attention over quality (Ichihashi & Kim, 2022). These decisions are made to satisfy the attention-driven revenue model that populate most social media today. A model that strives to turn users into a valuable product for advertisers by way of direct advertising as well as data-collection principles (Bhargava, 2023). It is commonly believed that social

media platforms practise wilful ignorance when it comes to harmful and inflammatory content since “enraging content is engaging (...) and causes users to open their device as often as possible and to scroll for as long as possible” (Hari, 2022). Prolonged stay in turn results in deeper personal insights and more sophisticated algorithms which are in turn used, not only to filter content the user desires, but also for microtargeting and advertising (Montag et al., 2021). Design elements such as the “for you” page is carefully constructed to prolong “passive” consumptive behaviours and facilitates users to return through notifications (Van Dijk et al., 2017) which may in turn lead to problematic and addictive behaviours.

Social media designs which emphasise endless scrolling of immersive entertainment content have become dominant in the landscape with some applications being based around the concept (TikTok) and others adding such alternatives to their previous services (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube). Within this design, interaction is not predominantly between users but rather between the user and their algorithmically filtered content (Montag et al., 2021). A kind of relationship which implies passive consumptive behaviours based on gratification and entertainment with the potential for interaction not only between user and platform but also user and user.

4.5 Conclusion on Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework here is intended to provide a detailed description of what motivates individuals to perform specific actions on social media at various levels of engagement. U&G offers insight into what common gratifications users seek out and offers models of descriptions that can be utilised to create a thematic analysis of user intention. Social presence theory can describe how individuals are influenced by specific tactics present within social media or how the concepts of public and private can describe which levels of intimacy are required for passive users to become active. The notion of the networked public here serves to describe what social media constitutes in terms of social reality. It considers habitual and ritualistic media actions as worthwhile, despite the actions being classified as passive. This will be relevant when describing participant behaviours as it allows the analysis to consider the fact that even minute actions have consequences. Finally, affordances and general platform design may assist in describing how the media side of this interaction provides users with specific consequences.

5. Methodology

This chapter describes how data will be collected and analysed in order to answer the research question. A qualitative methodology of semi-structured focus groups consisting of participants of pre-existing social groups has been chosen. The 4 discussions lasted for approximately 1 hour and were recorded. The transcription of the focus group discussion was then analysed via a coding schedule consisting of six steps. The codes were then transformed into themes and sub-themes that allowed conclusions to be drawn which will be concluded within the results chapter.

5.1 Data Collection

Focus group discussions is a technique where data is collected through group interaction about a subject specified by the researcher (Ekström & Johansson, 2019). Focus groups are typically employed when interaction is a key element of the research object and can provide knowledge not visible within individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups allow the researcher to develop an understanding about why individuals feel the way that they do through direct statement and contextual clues provided by the social aspect, particularly because the participants may discuss with one another or probe each other's reasoning (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, the focus groups may reflect on social dynamics and the processes through which meaning is constructed (Bryman, 2016), which may help form a vocabulary on social media use at various levels of engagement. In interviews of this kind, the discussion can be facilitated by other stimuli such as images (Wibeck, 2010). It is likely that focus group participants will be allowed to open their phones during conversation to spark memories about prior use and habits.

The ideal participant for this study was between 20-30 years old, had experience with a variety of social media platforms and regularly utilised social media in a variety of habitual behaviours. Participants came from various nationalities, predominantly Swedish, and were rather evenly spread across the intended age group as well as gender. Respondents belonged to pre-existing social groups. Pre-existing social groups allow for more natural and free-flowing conversation which can enhance the quality and level of discussion. Additionally, people who know each other may be more willing to discuss potentially awkward or complicated experiences (Bryman, 2016). However, since this technique

sometimes leads to participants bypassing information that is taken for granted, the moderator must be keen to ensure that participants stay on track and explain their habits in true detail.

Sampling occurred in the following way. The researcher sought out one social connection of the correct age demographic and requested that they assemble a few of their own connections interested in participating. The method of relying on social relationships to find respondents is sometimes frowned upon in research as it might damage the study’s validity. However, the natural rapport and the higher level of trust between participants and researcher might result in a more effective and honest interview than ones performed between complete strangers (Brewis, 2014). All in all, 4 groups were assembled, as detailed below in figure 4. Moving forward, all respondents will be adhered to as Respondent 1 of focus group 1 (for example) or R 1.1 for short. This is done to adhere to anonymity.

Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
5 participants total 3 men 2 women	4 participants total 3 men 1 woman	6 participants total 6 women	5 participants total 5 women
Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: German, Italian, Finnish, Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish
Time: 1 hour 10 minutes	Time: 1 hour 30 minutes	Time: 1 hour 15 minutes	Time: 1 hour

Figure 4: (Presentation of focus group participants)

Data collection took place between April 7th and April 21st and a topic guide was used to facilitate conversation. This was not strictly adhered to as to follow ideals of free discussion (Derges et al., 2023). The general outline followed by all focus groups was as follows: (1) Initially, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss their social media habits. What platforms do they prefer and why? (2) The participants were then asked about specifics of this behaviour such as what levels of engagement they usually use social media. (3) If participants consider their scrolling behaviour to be problematic, the moderator may ask if they regulate or moderate their social media content. (4) The participants were allowed to discuss their emotional outcomes in relation to scrolling behaviours. (5) The participants were allowed to discuss what they consider to be active, passive and problematic use of social media in order to facilitate discussion. (6) When the researcher felt as if all major topics had been touched on, the participants were allowed to continue the discussion for a while longer.

Recording continued a short while even after officially ending the discussion in case important topics were mentioned.

5.2 Data Analysis

The study utilised a thematic analysis of its qualitative data to infer its conclusions. The analysis was driven by the questions ‘what motivates adult users to engage with social media at various levels of engagement? And ‘what emotional effect do various levels of engagement have on the individual?’.

The thematic analysis present in this study was greatly inspired by the six-step method utilised by Braun & Clarke (2006) in which the thematic analysis is made through six distinct steps in order to infer its conclusions while minimising the apparent power that the researcher has in creating themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first step includes *familiarising* oneself with the data which occurred both during collection and transcription. The second step includes the *creation of initial codes* which consisted of many expected subjects such as ASMU, PSMU and PIU. Despite this, initial codes were numerous and often vague with the intention to filter many out eventually. The third step includes *searching for themes* in which previous codes such as *frequency* or *categories of use* were refined and the theme *regulation* was added due to its frequent appearance as a major topic. *Problematic social media* use was made into a theme at this point, which consisted of a variety of previous codes in which the participants had described the way social media was harmful to them. In stage 4, one should *define the themes* which resulted in the four main themes of dynamic social media use, problematic social media use, regulation and use & gratifications. In stage five, refinement was hindered by the apparent ways in which the remaining themes overlapped. For instance, one common overlap could be discovered in the way that descriptions of PIU could often result in descriptions of regulation. The author has attempted to make this kind of overlap as plain as possible by coding each semantic unit individually and making segmentations when the topic changes. In the last part of the thematic analysis (production report), the analysis endeavours to tell the complicated story of the data which consists of vivid and useful examples (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This part can be seen in its entirety within the results section of this thesis.

In practicality, coding largely consisted of verbal segments performed through several readings of the transcription. These sentences and phrases were coded and summarised within

a split table as to create specific codes. When the creation of all four major themes had been made, the researcher went through these codes once again and places each as a sub-theme that belonged to the four main themes. Additionally, the results were conceptualised through four common archetypes that appeared among all focus groups which are detailed within chapter 6.

What follows are descriptions of each of the four major themes. The code ASMU & PSMU relates to how participants describe their use as specifically active or passive. Since the moderator always mentioned at the start that no description of active and passive use would be provided, the participants were free to imagine how their active or passive use would look like. While it was most common that participants spoke about active and passive use when primed to do so by a question, the topic did also occur naturally in discussion. This theme relates also to how the participants struggle to define what active, or passive might entail, or otherwise, where delineations between the two should be made.

The code Uses & Gratifications relates to what motivates participants to perform a variety of media behaviours. Since it also includes all mentions of how the participants use social media and by what platforms, it became a common code. Additionally, this code includes occurrences when participants discuss how a platform works or how it can be used. This does relate to how the media side of U&G can affect the user and motivate them toward specific behaviours. It does however mean that this code is sometimes treated in the coding schema as an “other” category in which to put otherwise unclear points.

The code regulation & moderation relates to descriptions of regulating behaviours. For example, participants might describe how they turn off notifications or limit their screen time. While this sometimes relates to PIU, correlation is not always clear. This is one reason why regulation has been made into its own category. Another is due to it being mentioned often. During earlier steps of the coding process, it became clear that regulation is a behaviour that participants perform actively and in a variety of ways. Additionally, regulation was performed very differently between participants, which earned it sub-themes.

The final code was Problematic internet use. It includes all mentions of negative outcomes caused by social media use and all mentions of pathological use or addiction. Most commonly, this related to scrolling behaviours, which participants often considered to be both harmful and helpful.

In order to make the themes clear, an example from the code schema is provided below. To the left you will see the transcription of the discussion and to the right you will find the written analysis performed by the researcher during all stages of thematic analysis except for the production of the report. The semantic segmentations are coloured differently in accordance with their general topic with blue indicating a discussion on how and why one uses social media and purple indicating problematic internet use. You will be able to see that not all semantic units are segmented since the two final units discuss a similar topic. Other coloured topics included green for regulation and orange for ASMU and PSMU. The entire code schema is provided in supplement to this thesis on the basis of transparency.

Focus group 2 part 14: Group chats	Analysis
<p>R 2.4: I am almost always a ghost in group chats. That can only be like, two other people. But I don't think you always have to be active. You can check and see what people are doing without interaction, or just liking. The larger the group is, the smaller the chance there is that I will actually write anything.</p>	<p>The discussants speak about their private use. Some participants admit to being passive private users, but they claim that this still serves a social function. While they will rarely write due to personal preferences, they may still be considered as taking part in the social dynamic such as one might be silent in real life scenarios as well.</p>
<p>R 2.1: Me too. A lot can be said in group chats, but I almost never write myself. I prefer to call people if you actually have to talk about something. I have a little bit of social anxiety, writing to a lot of people at the same time. If I don't write, people can't ignore me.</p>	<p>One participant describes how they are a private passive user and prefers to call them in order to converse. The reasons provided is related to anxiety and a fear that people may not reply.</p>
	<p>One participant reports that group chats are a smooth way to converse with several friends. This can be related to notions of the networked public. Messenger is seen to have high immediacy and intimacy.</p>

Figure 5: Example of code schema (the entire thematic analysis and sub-themes can be found in supplemental material).

This thesis does not aspire to provide exhaustive or even representative finding about the experiences and uses of social media. Its aim is instead to identify patterns across individual experiences as provided by ordinary adult users. It seeks to define the observed shift in social

media platform design as well as user intention. It has been the author's intent to avoid common pitfalls of thematic analysis such as making biased conclusions or misinterpreting what a participant has said (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To avoid this, participants were allowed to go over the results of the code schema in order to comment on any misconceptions or disagreements with what they had said. All participants were therefore given the chance to opt out of the study once again or else remove parts which they did not want to share. Two participants took this opportunity to go over parts of the results with the researcher which further illuminated certain aspects and provided more insight into what had been said. Other pitfalls include themes that overlap or are generally weak and a potential mismatch between the data and the analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These pitfalls have been avoided by familiarising oneself with the field and deciding upon conclusive theories without including too many. Each theory corresponds in something that was discussed and if a theory was initially included but did not appear relevant within the coding, it was cut. This was the case for theories regarding social capital specifically.

5.3 Ethical considerations

This research has taken the following ethical considerations in relation to its data sampling and treatment of its participants.

Most ethical considerations belong to one of the four main areas. (1) harm to participants, (2) lack of informed consent, (3) invasion of privacy and (4) deception (Bryman, 2016).

One way in which this thesis could potentially harm its participants is by having them discuss topics that can cause them emotional harm or by manipulating their emotions (Bryman, 2016). In order to avoid this, the questions were formed in such a way that avoided prompting particularly difficult topics. Topics that could have been harmful such as addiction were as such always initiated by the participants themselves. Additionally, the presence of the pre-existing social groups might have assisted participants who discussed such topics. No part of the research was ever disguised to the participants as the topic and measures of the research was made clear. Additionally, the participants were informed at the start of focus group recordings that they had the ability to opt out at any time, including after the discussion. Furthermore, they could have anything said stricken from the record if they so wanted. The anonymity and privacy of the participants has been preserved and the researcher kept an open mind to situations in which information may be removed due to being sensitive.

As such, no written consent was used in the study which could be considered an ethical flaw. The researcher believes however that the numerous times that participants were given the opportunity to opt out and the ability for participants to edit or discuss their responses limits the potential harm caused by this oversight.

Additionally, the concept of interviewing people close to you, is sometimes frowned upon. The author can't see a reason why the validity of the research should be put into question because of the chosen sampling method as the strengths of this method has been outlined above. In fact, the security provided by this format may likely have provided the study with more honest and direct responses than those provided by strangers.

6. Results and analysis

6.1 Social media use

6.1.1 Different platforms for different purposes

All four focus groups initiated their discussion by describing what social media platforms they generally use. These included social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, communication channels such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Snapchat, video hosting platforms such as TikTok and YouTube and finally various blogs such as Reddit. Participants would also sometimes describe how they used the platform or for how long.

I started with Facebook like many others maybe. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. The things that came during high school. I don't know where we put the limit, but I would say YouTube as a social medium too. I use that every day.

(Respondent 2.2)

It became evident that participants used similar platforms and for mostly similar purposes, even if the levels of engagement present on each would vary depending on the attitude of the participant.

Many participants claimed to have a Facebook account but would very rarely use it to publish content. Facebook was most commonly just used for “birthdays, events or marketplace” (R3.6) since only “old people” would post content on Facebook (R 4.1). Facebook’s private message function (messenger) was however used by many participants and was considered an

important and worthwhile endeavour which allowed close communication with friends and family.

Instagram was another of the most frequently mentioned platforms during all discussions which served a variety of purposes. For some, Instagram was a place where content could be published in order to be shared with close relations, even if this came with certain anxieties (R 1.4). For others, Instagram was a platform primarily used for entertainment and information purposes where the Reels function was often mentioned in relation to scrolling behaviours. The third related to production of content for the purposes of expanding one's reach, which related only to the two participants who had such ambitions.

TikTok was mentioned by many participants. All focus group discussed TikTok's controversial position in some way even if not everyone expressed it being negative (R 3.1). Common accusations laid at TikTok regarded security, addictive features, faulty content moderation algorithms and reinforcing harmful body ideals. Common motivations for using the app related mostly to entertainment, inspiration and information. Low levels of engagement were the norm for TikTok use across the board except for one participant who had a prominent influencer account there as well as on other platforms. For some participants, even making a comment on TikTok was seen as being "too active" (R 4.3).

YouTube was mentioned by several participants as a common social media platform. Use on YouTube was motivated by entertainment, information and inspiration. Consuming videos on YouTube was generally viewed as more worthwhile than short-form video formats such as those found on TikTok and Instagram. Notably, YouTube's own short-video feature (YouTube shorts) was regularly regarded by its users as the worst alternative of such platforms.

YouTube reels is so strange generally. I use it for games, but I still get Joe Rogan shouting about communists. That algorithm I think is awful. Instagram catches my interests much better.

(Respondent 1.1.)

Snapchat was mentioned by some participants and was always regarded as a platform used exclusively for warm, private communication with close friends. Some claimed to be less active than others. Motivations for using Snapchat seemed to be primarily associated with social needs.

Reddit (and other forums) were mentioned by participants who sought niche interests. Main motivations for its use were information and entertainment. Its use was often, but not always, mentioned as a more engaging alternative than other platforms.

LinkedIn appeared in several of the interviews as many participants expressed that they felt obligated to use it in order to find employment. Motivations were naturally inclined toward careers, but it should be noted that no participant expressed actually enjoying their time on the application and all mentions were tinged with a certain disdain.

6.1.1 Valuable use

Throughout the discussions, some specific behaviours were regularly considered to be more valuable than others. Chatting with friends and family was regularly considered the most important (R 3.6) whereas “mindless scrolling” was usually considered the least valuable way to spend one’s time on social media. There were however some notable exceptions to this as one participant discovered during the discussion that she had several anxieties about her private use, caused by the social obligation to be available to both friends and family. She, apparently, did not consider a majority of this communication to be valuable.

I get so many 10-minute voice messages about what my friends are doing. My friends expect answers about the message, so I have to listen to it and then answer.

(Respondent 3.2)

Yeah. I feel disappointed in myself. It is irritation and disappointment because I have consumed something I don't think is worth consuming. I feel like “wow, it's been 2 hours” where I could have done something else. (...) If I do it during the weekend when you're free it feels completely worthless. But if you have worked eight hours or ten hours and get home it feels much better. You don't have the energy to do something heavy. When you have free time, you have stuff to do, and it gets prioritised. I don't really get anything out of it.

(Respondent 1.1.)

Several groups discussed the way in which scrolling can be considered a waste of time, discussed in more detail further into this chapter. However, some discussed scenarios in which “mindless scrolling” was not considered so negatively, which took two forms. The first were participants who did not consider their passive social media behaviours to be adverse in the first place while the second consisted of participants who expressed “having earned it”.

Yeah. I feel disappointed in myself. It is irritation and disappointment because I have consumed something I don't think is worth consuming. I feel like "wow, it's been 2 hours" where I could have done something else. (...) If I do it during the weekend when you're free it feels completely worthless. But if you have worked eight hours or ten hours and get home it feels much better. You don't have the energy to do something heavy. When you have free time, you have stuff to do, and it gets prioritised. I don't really get anything out of it.

(Respondent 1.1.)

These mentions usually revolved around work or having earned a break at the end of a day and were common among all participants.

6.2 Levels of engagement

6.2.1 Dynamic levels of engagement

Initially, many participants had simple ways of conceptualising ASMU and PSMU which align with previous, somewhat binary definitions.

Active is probably when you share. Post a picture or a comment. To be seen and share an opinion. Passive is probably what I actually am. Look at videos and give a supporting like at best. You don't engage in comments.

(Respondent 2.1)

Despite this common perception, many participants had disagreeing opinions about where to place specific behaviours such as *liking* and *chatting*. Participants also struggled with the definitions due to being themselves classified as "passive".

I never post. I have maybe three posts on my Instagram. I am not active in this way. I feel I am active in interacting with the platform. Rather than scrolling the feed passively, it is more likely that I say, today I feel like eating vegan, and I will search for my favourite vegan influencer. Of course it is passive, but active search.

(Respondent 3.3)

Similarly, respondents seemed to consider themselves as "active" while "seeking things out" (R 3.4). One respondent who described herself by not liking or reacting to things expressed how she did not feel "ok" with being described as a passive user (R 3.5) since she felt that she

still “took it in”. This sentiment was echoed by other groups with one participant saying, “But are you really passive if you like or react to things? In that case, you help the algorithm. I like doing that.” (R 1.4). The participants of focus group 3 also expressed how it is “hard to draw the line” (3.6) and that “maybe it is more like a spectrum” (R 3.2).

6.2.2 Low levels of engagement

Low levels of engagement include behaviours in which the participant interacts with individuals or with the platform features to a lesser extent. Actions typically include scrolling. Low levels of engagement were, similarly to high levels, generally understood according to common conceptualisations of passive social media use. When asked to describe their active and passive social media use, participants would mention “not producing anything” (R 3.4), “watching” (R 4.1) and in one instance, “chatting” (R 2.4). Participants would often follow these descriptions by talking about scrolling behaviours, typically associated with passive use.

I would associate passive use specifically with Instagram reels or YouTube shorts [the group vocally agrees]. I feel as if I don't make a choice staying there. You get stuck. But if I watch a YouTube video, I click on it. I get the same feeling on shorts as I do on Reddit and such. You just keep clicking. You don't approach stuff but rather have a flow that just keeps going. You get stuck in front of that. That for me is passive use. Where I am not aware or make an active choice. It's just the enjoyment machine activating.

(Respondent 1.1.)

Notably, participants would often claim that passive behaviours had both adverse and beneficial emotional effects. The adverse effects are described within later chapters. The most common beneficial effect that low levels of engagement could have related to *inspiration*.

Well, I really like how I use social media. I think it's very fun. It's not something that hinders me in my life in any way, shape or form. You can find new ideas. Something you can cook or listen to. You have so many things you would not have found otherwise. I think it actually gives me a lot. Like hobbies or going out. I get bored very quickly and I also get bored of social media very quickly. So, I just put it away.

(Respondent 3.1)

Like respondent 3.1, participants could describe how the content found while scrolling can be “inspiring” (R 1.4), “entertaining” (R 4.3), “educational” (R 3.6), “informative” (R 1.5) and

“culturally satisfying” (R 1.2). Additionally, the act of sharing the content that was discovered was considered a valuable way to passively connect with close friends (R 1.3). Scrolling was also used to fill time (R 3.3).

Scrolling was naturally tied to algorithms and the way that they cater content to the user. Some participants expressed how they enjoyed this process and preferred some platforms over others due to the quality of its algorithms (R 4.1; R 3.1) while others expressed a dislike of being catered to (R 1.5). For participants who did not regulate their algorithms or interact with content (belonging to the lowest level of engagement), the quality of the algorithm was regularly described as worse (R 2.1). However, even participants who typically belonged to high levels of engagement described how the algorithm could fail them, receiving content which they do not align with or enjoy due to overzealous optimisations made by the platform (R 3.3; R 3.5).

I almost never do that. Almost because I think it is fun to see how bad it can get. I can show my girlfriend that I got “how did feminism kill romance”. I try not to regulate too much.

(Respondent 2.1)

In this case, seeing what the algorithm would feed you was considered entertainment in of itself, regardless of if the participant enjoyed the actual content or not.

A low level of engagement was associated with other aspects than just scrolling. Participants could describe themselves as relatively passive in private scenarios as well.

I am almost always a ghost in group chats. That can only be like, two other people. But I don't think you always have to be active. You can check and see what people are doing without interaction, or just liking. The larger the group is, the smaller the chance there is that I will actually write anything.

(Respondent 2.4)

Motivations for being relatively passive within group chats included “anxiety” (R 2.1), “platform features” (R 1.1) and simply not having the time during the day (R 4.5). R 4.5 further explained that when she had failed to read all the messages in a group chat, she could feel “stressed” and “mean”. This aligns with some of the descriptions of how active private use and the failure to adhere to its social rules can cause certain adverse effects.

6.2.2 High levels of engagement

High levels of engagement include behaviours in which the social media user interacts with individuals or features through the social media platform. This interaction occurs in two distinct ways: mechanically and mentally. For the behaviour to be conceptualised as a high level of engagement, it must include mechanical interactions as described by features provided by the platform and/or mental interaction as described by Biocca's aspects of the active audience (Biocca, 1988).

The most common behaviour that was categorised as a high level of engagement was *chatting*. Chatting consisted of communication between individuals or group on various platforms such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Snapchat. Many participants directly expressed participating in chatting behaviours and many more seemed to imply it through context.

I like group chats. I think it is a smooth way to reach out to my groups of friends. You can reach friends even if you don't have a lot of contact. Rather than doing that individually.

(Respondent 2.3)

Despite being a common behaviour, chatting was not generally the same for each participant with some indicating it to be a very frequent occurrence such as the members of focus group 4 and others claiming to be "ghosting" several chats, relatively rarely interacting with individuals through private use.

It is something that helps you keep in touch. Talking with your friends even if you don't see each other. It really feels like you are with your friends every day. That is actually something really positive.

(Respondent 4.3)

As previously mentioned, chatting was generally considered to be the most worthwhile behaviour one could participate in via social media even if emotional outcomes did vary. Beyond the previously mentioned example of respondent 3.2, other negative outcomes included respondent R 2.2 who gave an ambivalent reply, "I think it is easier to include people through group chats. I think it can be scary if you write but don't get a reply. That can be worrying." Chatting could also cause anxiety in participants due to the apparent demand to reply (R 1.1), even if some participants had come to terms with being unable to answer at all times (R 1.2). Availability as it relates to problematic use is discussed later in this chapter.

A less common behaviour that indicates a high level of engagement was *posting*. This included any mention of a participant actively producing something to be published publicly on social media. The participants who claimed to post, did so infrequently. It was common to post milestones in one's life such as birthdays (R 2.2) while other participants claimed a desire to post more due to it being a creative outlet (R 1.4; R 1.5). Naturally, the two participants who had large accounts posted more regularly and considered it a hobby (R 3.2; R 3.4). Their content also seemed to be more casual in nature, but their replies offer little actual detail.

Publishing content was rare among all focus groups, but many participants claimed that they had posted more frequently in their youth. Reasons for the decrease in frequent posts varied from a lack of interest to an increasing awareness of one's own motivations and the effect that public posting had on the individual. Generally speaking, the participants attributed these changes to the social reality of teenagers (R 3.4) as well as the novelty of social media as it appeared, something which faded over time (R 2.4).

I feel like there was a period of time where people would post. And then influencers happened and posting became a big deal. If your feed wasn't beautiful, there was no point. Just a feeling I got. This picture isn't good enough or pretty enough. I have to look so gorgeous for it to be good enough for Instagram. But now I am feeling that we are entering a new phase where it's ok again to not look perfect.

(Respondent 3.4)

Focus group 4 also went into detail on the social faux pas of publishing too much content or risk seeming vain. There were clear social rules constructed within that group about what could be posted and not and by who.

I want to say that it is a big red flag when a guy has a very curated social media account and posts a lot. It says a lot about what kind of person you are. I associate it with a specific kind of person.

(Respondent 4.1)

These social rules applied differently to different apps. Interestingly, these norms were more or less agreed upon by each focus group. Some examples include "TikTok being for children" (R 4.5), Facebook being "rarely used" (R 1.5), or how it is acceptable to post on Instagram even if several participants express a disdain for the apparent inauthenticity prevalent on the platform (R 2.3; R 4.1). Many factors seem to play into whether or not a participant actively publishes content or not. Similarly, there are multiple reasons given for why one might have

stopped publishing content. Some indicate a lack of interest following the initial peak (R 2.4) and some express that the behaviour itself induced anxiety, particularly on young women (R 3.4; R 4.3).

6.3 Problematic Use

Problematic use consists of any mention where social media use had a direct adverse emotional effect on the participant. Problematic use was always self-reported and is not judged on a measurement created by the author within this section of the thesis. Problematic use caused a variety of emotional effects at varying levels of engagement. Some common aspects are exhibited below.

6.3.1 Availability

Several participants expressed that availability could cause them emotional distress. For some, this occurred at a low level of engagement where they would prefer to not engage but are drawn into social media use by other people (R 3.2). Others felt an obligation to try and be online for the sake of availability, describing effects similar to trait-FOMO (R 4.5). It was common for participants to express that increased regulation would lead to a greater fear that they were unavailable. Being unable to reply could make participants feel like “a bad friend” (R 4.5). Worse yet was the fear of being ignored.

You cannot control someone texting you. You are always available even when you are not.

(Respondent 3.3)

One participant also expressed how being social with friends via social media could fulfil a social act even if she were isolated and referred to this as a “comfort blanket” (R 4.3). The availability of social media was here viewed as a double-edged sword.

6.3.2 Anxiety

Several participants expressed anxiety due to a variety of reasons. Many of these discussions were related to other people’s opinions. Be it in regard to one’s appearance, comedy, or social capital. Participants regularly described that this kind of anxiety only occurred in relation to higher levels of engagement such as posting publicly. Each mention was usually also connected to a high level of intimacy, in which close friends or peers might judge you.

I want to keep sharing but I hate thinking about what I post. If I share a photo of an outfit, then people will think I am vain or something. I always think about what other people think. I am more happy posting than scrolling but I think it is scary to post.

(Respondent 1.4)

Comparison was typically mentioned as an action that could cause negative effects such as anxiety. This sometimes related to matters of high relevance in which participants felt inferior to people they saw on social media (R 2.3). Similarly to comparison, FOMO was mentioned as something that the participants had experienced more in their past. But a contemporary example includes a recent mother who compared herself to other mothers online (R 4.4).

6.3.3 Excessive Use

Several participants, but not all, considered scrolling behaviours to be addicting in some way. They regularly expressed having lost time to “getting stuck” scrolling. “Getting stuck” was always viewed as a passive behaviour which resulted in negative effects such as excessive use or attention dysregulation.

I have actively removed TikTok because it would be addicting. I would have sat for hours and just looked at videos. But instead of that I just do that at on Snapchat and Instagram. It is easier to get to the reels on those apps. I can get stuck there instead. Looking at TikTok videos that are two months old.

(Respondent 4.4)

Participants related this to dopamine abuse (R 1.5), and some had considered removing social media due to their supposed addiction to it (R 2.2). There were participants that did not consider their scrolling behaviour to be adverse (R 3.1) but any mention of this behaviour that was not harmful was also closely regulated in some way. Regulation will be discussed more in-depth later.

6.3.4 Attention dysregulation

Participants expressed that extensive scrolling had a negative effect on their attention and impulse control. While mindless scrolling was sometimes considered something that could be earned, many participants correlated it to negative behaviours and called it “brain rot”.

But if you are on TikTok, your attention span shrinks. Mine was incredibly fragile when I had it, so I had to uninstall it for two weeks. When I went back, I went through the same process again. I could

notice that when I was waiting for something, the phone appeared immediately, and I noticed that I struggled keeping track of time. You thought 15 minutes had gone by, but it was really one hour.

(Respondent 2.2)

Descriptions of brain rot always relate to short video formats such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. Features of brain rot typically included a lack of awareness, attention and social behaviours. It was sometimes referred to as brain fog, but the conceptualisations seemed well understood by all focus groups as the most passive way to use one's time on social media.

Yes. If I am sitting with my sambo, I can feel really inattentive to him. You have a period where both are scrolling. So, you have to put it away. Maybe someone said something, and you didn't even hear it because you are just scrolling. That's really rude. You have to be more present.

(Respondent 4.2)

Brain rotting typically entailed no regulation of time or content and participants could express disappointment in themselves for having participated in the behaviour. One participant interestingly pointed out how it is not the content itself that makes one feel bad but rather the behaviour (R 4.1).

6.3.5 Affected by content

In some cases, the participants associated negative emotional effects directly with the content. Some felt that the algorithm had failed to adhere to their sensibilities while other encountered harmful content within their preferred topics. Some participants mentioned how heavy news articles could cause negative mood modification while others felt more at ease on specific platforms that appealed more to their tastes and preferences. R 2.2 for instance, expressed a preference for Reddit over Instagram due to the more "friendly" and "genuine" members of his communities there. All participants desired to avoid conflict and considered "fighting in the comments" to be a waste of time and "embarrassing". Both participants that mentioned having done so recently in order to correct some misconception, expressed a feeling of pointlessness after the fact.

Recently I watched some documentary on the child abuse that happened on Nickelodeon and there was like a three-day period where all I was seeing was content about child abuse. And it was horrible!

This is taking up my headspace and I didn't like any videos to do with this and it is all that I am seeing. And I had a few bad days because I would scroll three videos and already be upset.

(Respondent 3.4)

Some participants mentioned and struggled with enraging content, particularly male participants. Enraging content consisted of videos that tried to keep the user's attention by being enraging or provocative. YouTube reels was commonly mentioned as a platform that did this. This content sometimes caused direct adverse effects but other participants, like previously mentioned, seemed to find it amusing at worst.

I think the algorithms have bad limits. I know that when I had TikTok, I got a lot of confrontations. Everything from Karens to men confronting each other on the street. No violence but you get sucked in.

(Respondent 2.2)

Interestingly, enraging content seemed to appear more often the less participants regulated their use and occurred in correlation to low levels of engagement. The participants that described themselves as passive were also the one's that more frequently encountered enraging content. The participants believed that this was due to watch-time optimisations.

6.4 Regulation & Moderation

Participants regulated their social media use in a variety of different ways for different reasons. All of which led to different emotional outcomes for each user, always seemingly improving the participant's relationship to social media.

6.4.1 Limiting time and scope

One of the most commonly discussed methods of regulation was to regulate one's time spent on social media platforms. Participants had various ways to do so. Some used internal mechanisms that caused either warnings or limitations to appear that could block excessive use. The limitations participants put on themselves ranged from 20 minutes to several hours. Many participants who mentioned these methods of regulation would often do so after already having discussed the ways in which social media can cause adverse effects. Other methods of regulating one's use on social media was to outright avoid platforms one knew to be harmful, most typically TikTok. This level of awareness was present in a few participants, usually those that had experienced problematic use before and wanted to avoid past pitfalls (R 4.4). Some participants were not so sure that this actually benefited them as they figured that "screen time on the laptop has probably gone up instead" (R 1.2).

I put a limit on my phone. You can do that through Instagram's app, and you can get a warning (...) I've put two hours per day which is still quite a lot. Then there's a warning. I think that is very good, because you can lose time.

(Respondent 2.3)

Another common method to limit one's excessive social media use was to put the phone out of sight and therefore out of mind. This too, varied in intensity. Some participants simply placed the phone a little further away while doing something else to avoid grabbing for it (R 1.3) while others would let its battery die in order to be rid of it (R 1.1).

I have very few apps. It's only Instagram and YouTube but I have removed Instagram at some points because I noticed a negative impact on my mental health. If I am at home, I can often put my phone away. If I am in bed, I throw it away so I can't reach it. Because it is a hassle to go up and get it.

(Respondent 1.5)

Participants also described how they could remove the phone's internet so that they were still reachable via their number in case of emergencies (R 3.3). Such methods of regulating one's use seemed to be a way to cure a variety of problems connected to social media use, primarily dependency and availability.

6.4.1 Content moderation

Participants expressed vastly different levels of content moderation. This aspect of regulation was almost always described in some unique way between participants as many had individual ways to control what kind of content that they consumed.

I moderate quite a lot. I like the idea that the information is stored somewhere. That Instagram gets some kind of feedback about what kind of content people like or don't like. I want to take some kind of stance from the couch when I am on my phone. Like, "this kind of content is not ok." Usually when it's about violence or women. I also have a special hate in my heart for staged content. I think moderation has a gradual effect on my flow.

(Respondent 2.2)

Some claimed that they unfollowed specific content to "clean their algorithm" (R 2.4) or used the "not interested" button to moderate one's feed (R 4.1). Other participants seemed to perform this moderating behaviour by not clicking on anything at all. Participant 4.2 for instance admits to not interacting mechanically when moderating but rather "looking away" or continuing to scroll (R 4.2), a uniquely low level of engagement as it relates to moderating

one's content feed. 4.2 was not alone in not clicking things however as other participants also expressed that they performed very few actions while on social media, including moderation. Participants could also describe how they would moderate their content quite rarely and only in scenarios where the content was particularly harmful. Others expressed how this kind of moderation occurred naturally by liking certain kinds of content and therefore teaching their algorithm what they preferred.

6.5 Summary of themes

The data gathered from the focus group interviews was assembled through a thematic analysis and understood through the theoretical framework. Four main themes and thirteen sub-themes were created, none of which are unique to this thesis. All transcribed focus groups and their respective coding schema are available to read as a supplement to this thesis. The participants belonged to a specific age bracket (25-31) and were divided somewhat evenly between the sexes with the majority being women. Each group consisted of a pre-existing social group which varied in occupation, lifestyle and sometimes nationality. There were 20 participants across the 4 focus groups which naturally does not allow for any generalisability (which was never intended). However, it is this author's belief that these results can exemplify common narratives across the age bracket and that similar methods could be utilised to further gain a nuanced understanding of what levels of engagement social media users actually belong to.

The participants used many of the same platforms, for similar purposes. For example, Snapchat and Messenger was used for private communication between friends and family while YouTube and TikTok was regularly used for entertainment. Despite some similarities in motivation, the way that participants used these platforms and their relationships to them differed. Participants had different expectations and experiences with the platforms that was related to their preferences and their values. The specifics of each participant's use resulted in a large scope of behaviours which varied in its levels of engagement. Participants regularly expressed that communication was the most worthwhile aspect of social media and that behaviours such as scrolling was, despite its prevalence, not worthwhile. Such behaviours were usually more acceptable when "earned" after a full day of work.

Initially, the participants had common ideas about the conceptualisations of ASMU and PSMU, linking each to common descriptions and examples of activity and passivity.

However, several participants pointed out the apparent difficulties in labelling specific behaviours and some disapproved with being categorised as “passive users” if they did not publish content. It also became clear that users could not be so easily categorised as active or passive since they did, in fact, perform many different kinds of actions on a scale of engagement at the same time.

High levels of engagement were not common among the participants as it related to public use, unlike private use. Participants expressed that it was rare to publish content, and many described previous experiences with publishing content that resulted in adverse emotional outcomes. Leading them to eventually stop being as active. Some participants were glad to be active users, considering it a creative outlet and a valuable hobby.

Low levels of engagement were very common among all participants when related to public use. Low levels of engagement were not particularly common as it related to private use, however. Many participants expressed that scrolling behaviours were both entertaining and problematic. This dualistic relationship to scrolling can be divided by what adverse effects appear, and by what degree the participants decide to regulate their problematic use. Many participants were eager to claim that passive use of social media needn't be primarily negative as it can be inspiring and satisfying.

Problematic use consisted of several different aspects, many of which were tied to specific platforms or to specific behaviours. Availability was tied to private communication and could cause anxiety and shame due to social obligations. Attention dysregulation and “brain rot” was regularly described as adverse effects of excessive scrolling and was predictably tied to applications which allowed such behaviour. Addiction and getting stuck is rather similar but was often described in different phrases than the first. Both of these sub-themes belong to a perspective of excessive scrolling being bad for the user, despite the apparent positive outcomes of passive social media use that the participants mentioned. Some participants expressed problems with engaging content or content that was harmful in some way, this was for the most part discussed as a problem associated with low levels of engagement.

Participants had many different ways to regulate their use. These included time constraints, creating space from one's phone and moderating what kind of content appeared in the feed. Each of these consisted of several different methods, to varying effects. It became clear that regulation was a key piece to if participants experienced adverse effects or not. A narrow

majority of participants regulated their use in some way while the rest did not claim to do any regulating action to their social media behaviours.

6.6 Application of theoretical framework

This chapter continues the narrative description of participant discussion by adapting the themes and sub-themes to the theoretical framework.

6.6.1 Common Gratifications and motivations for media use

Participants either directly mentioned or described through context, many of the common gratifications mentioned by McQuail (2010) as motivations for media use. Motivations for high levels of engagement included using social media for *social connection, identity formation/lifestyle expression* or as a *creative* outlet whereas motivations for low levels of engagement included using social media for *entertainment, information, inspiration, advice* or *diversion/filling time*. Many of these common gratifications were however present at various levels of engagement and should not be considered exclusive to specific levels of engagement.

Diversion, relaxation and *filling time* was a common motivation for many participants which typically included low levels of engagement. This was exemplified by “grabbing for one’s phone” when bored.

Information, education, guidance and *advice* were typically mentioned by participants together as a motivation that required some level of engagement on their behalf. This was often considered to be worthwhile.

Value reinforcement, cultural satisfaction and *emotional release* belong to a series of gratifications that could be met when participants were particularly selective. This kind of use was motivated by feelings of belonging or preference.

Social contact was typically the most highly valued motivation for social media use and was almost always considered worthwhile. It did however include a variety of engagement levels with some participants expressing being particularly inactive and others defining themselves as constantly available.

Identity formation and *lifestyle expression* exemplify the highest level of engagement as participants would publish content to express either their identity or their lifestyle. This kind

of behaviour was particularly rare, even if many participants expressed having used social media this way in the past.

Applying the aspects of figure 1 (McQuail's model of media use) to the results, we can see that the participants have specific media related needs determined by personal attributes. These attributes lead them toward specific platforms and are likely to influence their relationship to these platforms and their content. For example, participants that expressed nostalgia for old methods of media delivery (R 1.5; R 3.6) outlined a worse relationship with media systems such as the short-form video format. Other participants explained that they avoided platforms due to the available content while others seemed to regard TikTok specifically negatively due to its reputation. These factors resulted in complicated relationships to social media. For example, many used social media to connect with both close and faraway friends, but this high level of availability could cause stress. Many scrolled for the sake of entertainment, cultural satisfaction and relaxation, but could easily get stuck in excessive use.

6.6.2 The active audience

Levels of engagement varied greatly in the data but has here been categorised into four archetypes. Each archetype was discovered in the data set and represent few or many of Biocca's (1988) five aspects of what the active audience entails.

Consumption was the behaviour that exhibited the lowest level of engagement since it exhibits few, if any, of the five aspects provided by Biocca (1988). Scrolling behaviour was often described as "mindless" and participants expressed having forgotten what they even saw while scrolling. Similarly, while using social media in this way, they often thought that what they had consumed was culturally unsatisfying and not worthwhile. As such, this level of engagement features particularly low levels of *selectivity* and *involvement* since participants rarely directly controlled what content appeared on their feed. While the participants did admit to scrolling to "relax" or "fill time" which might imply *utilitarianism* or *intentionality*, they also often described reaching for their phones subconsciously and expressed difficulties with quitting these behaviours, indicating the opposite. Finally, participants could at times exhibit shame or disappointment in this behaviour, indicating some level of *awareness* and *resistance* (Biocca, 1988).

As the participants are describing themselves as “being stuck” at this level of engagement, it is worthwhile to apply theories which explain how the application itself can be responsible for adverse effects. Like with previous research, participants are expressing difficulties with limiting their use (Alcott et al., 2022) and are aware that the platforms often will attempt to get their attention in order to prolong use (Bhargava, 2023). Interestingly, some participants indicate that a lack of interaction would lead the platform to feeding them engaging content. This was common in male participants who exhibited low levels of engagement on short-form video platforms which aligns with previous theories about platform responsibility (Bhargava, 2023).

Lurking is here utilised similarly to ways it has been described previously. As a low level of engagement where users are unlikely to interact with others but still exhibit aspects of activity (Nonnecke et al., 2017). Participants could often describe themselves as passive both in private and public settings. Participants who “ghosted” group chats would, for instance, not exhibit high levels of involvement but would clearly adhere to aspects such as selectivity, utilitarianism and resistance (Biocca, 1988). In public settings, lurkers would interact with content or producers in small ways, such as *liking* but would never express a motivation to expand this engagement. Despite not being associated with as many adverse effects, lurkers would still describe scrolling as “destructive” and “worthless”. In some of these cases, it seems as if the structure of provision of this media system fail to align with the participant’s desired outcome (McQuail, 2010), leading to lower levels of engagement. This was also true for participants who expressed nostalgia to old media systems.

Lurkers did not seem to consider private use as particularly intimate as according to social presence theory (Gunawardena, 1995) and were, like with public use, likely to interact in small ways. They did mention that private communication, and a fear of being ignored, could lead to anxiety. Indicating that the high intimacy and high immediacy afforded by private communication channels had a greater impact on their emotional impact than public channels (Gunawardena, 1995).

Also present at this, slightly higher level of engagement, are aspects of *resistance* and *regulation*. Several participants expressed adverse emotional outcomes when encountering content or situations which caused upward comparison (Verduyn et al., 2022) and would as such regulate their experiences accordingly. When participants managed to regulate their use in a fruitful way, they seemed to regard passive behaviours as more positive, indicating the

value of *resistance* as an aspect of audience activity within social media use (McQuail, 2010). Similarly, participants mentioned scenarios in which passive use was more acceptable, such as relaxation after a day's work. Indicating that external factors are likely at play when deciding emotional outcomes, not just the media system.

Socialisation is a relatively high level of engagement which includes behaviours that are typically quite high in the private sphere and low in the public sphere. It should not come as a surprise that behaviours exhibit various levels of engagement since this is one of the motivations behind extended models of active and passive use. For a participant to exemplify low levels of public engagement does not equate low levels of private engagement, and vice versa. Unlike the lurker, the socialite is defined by their frequent communication with friends and family which occurred at relatively high levels of engagement. These participants would also frequently share content discovered while scrolling. Indicating the importance of everyday communication behaviours to be important as discussed previously by Boyd (2010). Similarly, socialites believed that social media use came with specific social norms that one was expected to adhere to. Even passive behaviours belonged to a social reality, as participants indicated the importance of keeping up with what far away friends were doing. The participants of group 4 for instance, considered it important and entertaining to observe old acquaintances. Additionally, the members of group 4 indicated that the reason they did not comment on public content was due to the social stigma related in doing so. Further indicating that social media use is also defined by social reality experienced outside of the internet (Boyd, 2010).

Socialites valued their private communication highly and emotional effects were usually regarded as positive, with a few exclusions. As described by focus group 4, everyday communication made it feel like the user was close to their friends, which indicates that *intimacy* and *immersion* are valued aspects of this kind of behaviour (Johnson et al., 2023).

Production could be considered the most traditionally high level of engagement as it consists of active, public use as well as active private use. Participants who posted often belong to this category. This was limited as only a few participants posted regularly, but several participants described that they had been at this level of engagement in the past. Publishers regarded their followers as a community and valued the behaviour due to as a creative outlet.

The reason given for why participants were anxious to post or had stopped, were usually explained as social pressures. The higher degree of intimacy and vulnerability that was part

of posting caused users to struggle, especially when coupled with the beauty ideals one was expected to follow on Instagram. This was a very common reason for why participants had stopped posting, sometimes mentioned in tandem with a realisation that social media activity was “inauthentic” and “worthless”.

This thesis sought to answer a call for explorative research that detail nuanced descriptions of ASMU and PSMU. The call for a universal measurement of social media behaviours that inspired this concept was provided by Trifiro and Gerson (2019), who suggested that focus groups could serve to a better vocabulary for various levels of engagement. As such, I have provided a brief summary below of these archetypes of use discovered in the data. It must however be noted that no individual belongs solely to one archetype but may exhibit traits that belong more to one than the other. Participants would frequently exhibit behaviours present at various levels of engagement.

Emotional effect	Type of engagement
Initially a behaviour that can be entertaining or informative, consumption may result in habitual exhaustion, desensitisation, shame, disappointment and other negative effects correlated to the concept of “getting stuck” and “brain rot”.	Consumption: Consists of the consumption of public social media content without interaction of any kind for the purposes of filling time or entertainment. Initially harmless but excessive use can cause adverse effects.
Due to low engagement, the user may not be aware of potential harm, or may struggle to find ways to limit adverse effects.	The user fulfils very few, if any, aspects of the active audience.
A very common behaviour that many users adhere to. Lurking can also be known as browsing and should not, despite its low levels of engagement, be correlated with adverse effects.	Lurking: Consists of the consumption of both public and private social media content with little to no interaction for a variety of purposes such as entertainment, information or social connection. While mostly harmless, awareness is required.
Lurkers typically select their content with some care and are likely to regulate their use when encountering adverse effects.	The lurker exhibits selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality and resistance as aspects of the active audience.

Many people consider socialisation to be worthwhile while on social media. Adverse emotional effects are primarily caused by feelings of being ignored or by feelings of being too available. As such, both low and high levels of engagement can cause adverse effects.

Socialites may also exhibit other kinds of behaviour that can lead to adverse effects, such as those previously mentioned.

Socialisation: Consists of communication through mostly private means although previously mentioned behaviours experienced in public spheres may lead to socialisation. Primarily motivated by a need for social connection.

The socialite exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Producers of content can find the action to be creatively fulfilling or socially rewarding but may also suffer from anxiety and unhealthy comparison due to a variety of factors such as social norms, feelings of inadequacy and exposure.

Producers may regulate and moderate their use and by increasing their awareness, avoid unhealthy situations.

Producing: Consists of publishing content publicly on social media platforms to small groups or to large networks. Traditionally, the highest level of engagement. Usually motivated by a desire to express oneself or to connect with others.

The producer exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Figure 6: 4 archetypes of media use at different levels of engagement

7. Discussion

7.1 Summary

This thesis sought to explore active and passive social media use through extended models and nuanced descriptions. It was interested in investigating what levels of engagement are prevalent in adult users, how this use has changed and what emotional effects occur in relation to these engagement levels. It was also interested in the ways which users could limit potential harm to themselves.

The thesis understood the social media user as inherently active in some aspect and refuted concepts of passive audiences in accordance with previous research which put out a call for more nuanced descriptions of passive use (Valkenburg et al, 2021; Verduyn et al., 2022). It utilised common media theories as a perspective to analyse user experiences and assembled these experiences through the use of semi-structured focus groups. Four groups of pre-existing social groups were assembled. The interviews were transcribed and coded through Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

It was discovered that social media use consists of a variety of behaviours which operate at various levels of engagement. Four archetypes have been created to explain the differences in the reviewed sets of behaviours: consumption, lurking, socialisation and production. Each set of behaviours was accompanied by different adverse emotional outcomes. These negative outcomes were almost always limited by some sort of regulation or moderation, indicating that some level of engagement is required to effectively avoid negative effects. This is not to say that the thesis concludes that low levels of engagement are necessarily associated with negative effects except for in the case of extremely low engagement levels. Additionally, negative outcomes also occurred at high levels of engagement when users failed to regulate the behaviour which caused these effects. In fact, many participants had intentionally lowered their production in order to avoid a litany of negative effects associated with it.

7.2 Main Conclusions

Social media use for adult users is motivated by a variety of reasons which occurs at various levels of engagement and at different platforms. Common gratifications include social connection, entertainment, information, inspiration, relaxation, diversion and self-expression.

Behaviours that occurred at low levels of engagement included scrolling through public content as well as browsing private content. Scrolling was typically motivated by entertainment and relaxation and was associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes seemed to occur when users failed to regulate their use and fell victim to the modern media design, resulting in excessive use and the consumption of unsatisfying content. Browsing public content was typically motivated by social connection and decided by individual attributes. Negative outcomes occurred when users were placed in social situations that could cause anxiety or stress, such as being ignored or being too available.

Behaviours that occurred at high levels of engagement included chatting and production. Chatting was typically motivated by social connection and was associated with both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes seemed to occur when users encountered awkward or stressful situations or failed to adhere to social norms. Production was typically motivated by self-expression, creativity and social connection and resulted in both positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes had occurred to many users in the past which had resulted in lower levels of engagement. These were often tied to feelings of inadequacy.

Regulation behaviours were usually, but not always, associated with ways to reduce adverse emotional consequences. Indicating that a certain level of awareness and resistance may be required by users to withstand the potentially negative effects of excessive media use. Social media designs were regularly described as addicting and harmful and failures to regulate one's use often resulted in negative effects. It is clear that social media design is in some way partly responsible for these effects, causing prolonged stay through the use of immersive algorithms, enraging content and incentivising consumption behaviours in order to satisfy demands both of costumers and third-party affiliates.

7.3 Contribution to the field

This thesis was from its outset intended to answer a call for research focused on the nuanced description of ASMU and PSMU. Past measurements of ASMU and PSMU have been inadequate in accurately describing user behaviour and the emotional impact associated with such behaviours (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Researchers have been eager to categorise social media use into distinct sets of behaviour but regularly fail to recognise how user behaviour shifts depending on motivation, current platform or mood. Trifiro & Gerson (2019) suggested that focus groups could be utilised to create a common vocabulary for various levels of engagement, which this thesis has sought to do. It did this, using previous definitions and conceptualisations, while understanding that use is dynamic and that the audience, especially the networked audience, should not be binarily considered passive.

By avoiding the confounds discussed by Valkenburg et al (2021), most notably by including the aspects of private and public SMU, the thesis had been able to discover the ways that use differs in levels of engagement. Additionally, by defining audience activity by well-understood and defined aspects such as those found in Biocca (1988), the thesis could demonstrate low and high levels of engagement as described by the participants. This could potentially be used to create a measurement of engagement for each individual participant, segmenting their common behaviours in order to discover what causes them adverse effects. Future research could perform this methodology on a larger scale or focus it on specific groups of people, such as producers or consumers, in order to verify the results found here.

This thesis has also approached the question by way of media studies and suggests that medicinal research applies a similar vocabulary and conceptualisation of SMU to better

understand emotional consequences. The author strongly states that binary conceptions of ASMU and PSMU cannot be used to describe user behaviours or the way that it affects them.

7.3 Limitations

The study is comprised of several limitations. The first and most apparent is its limitations in scope and sampling. Since the responses cannot be generalised across any larger population, the results may be contradicted by similar studies performed on other test subjects.

Additionally, the participants were all approached via a social connection of the author, which puts validity into question according to some standards of correct sampling procedure (Brewis, 2014). This might have been balanced by the way that social dynamics seemed to expand, not limit the interviews, but some level of proximity was present. Furthermore, participants might struggle self-reporting their use and the emotional effects that comes from it. It is not impossible that participants spoke predominantly on negative matters since they felt primed to do so. However, when asked about positive effects, they were also eager to oblige.

The thematic conclusion and the discovered archetypes are naturally creations of the author, despite attempts to abide closely to the provided methodology of thematic construction. Such analysis undeniably cannot be entirely removed from the author, which puts reliability into question. I believe that my opinion of social media use and the past definitions of ASMU and PSMU are illuminated in the text, and I accept how this might have influenced the analysis. Furthermore, conducting this research with a larger scope or with a more specific kind of user might provide more valuable insight than this approach, which utilised the “common person”. Particularly, this research would have fit well on adolescents. Future studies may be more able to operationalise an extended model of ASMU and PSMU better, strengthening our understanding of social media use and its emotional consequences.

Other limitations include those that are coupled to the field itself. Uses & Gratification theory is open to individual interpretations and the concept of audience activity is similarly vaguely defined (McQuail, 2010), which could allow a researcher to make conclusions based on preference and bias. Similarly, while this thesis has attempted to nuance social media use, there is a risk that it minimises certain aspects and generalises descriptions due to unintended exclusion. Descriptions of ASMU and PSMU have been insufficient and the thesis sought to

address this, but by using similar vocabulary, it may only have further confused this already messy field, by adding vocabulary and categories that are not useful.

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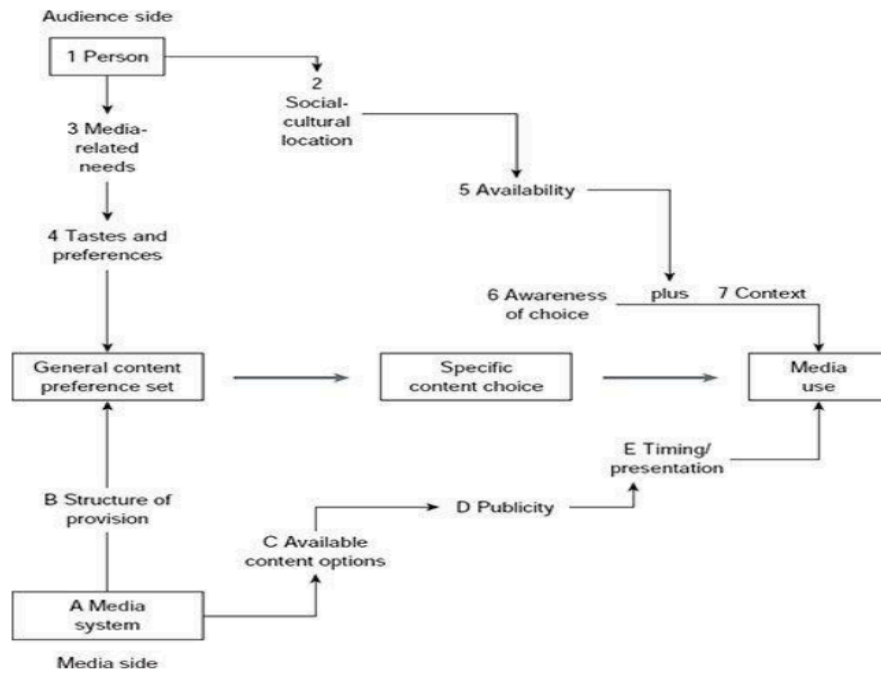
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Figures



(Figure 1: McQuail's "integrated model of the process of media choice")

The audience side	The media side
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Personal attributes such as age, gender, family position and work situation. 3. Social background such as social class, religion, education and locality. 4. Media-related needs refer to the personal benefits one gains from media use. Common needs are detailed elsewhere. 5. Personal preference for certain genres or specific items of content. 6. Availability and habits relate both to when and how media is available to the audience as well as the economic availability of media. 7. Awareness of choice indicates to what degree specific audience members interact or engage with media. More aware audiences are more likely to plan their media use. 8. Specific context of use will vary according to the medium but generally refers to sociability and location. Ordinarily this relates to where media is used (i.e. watching television with family or alone). For this thesis it relates specifically to the ways people seek to use social media and with whom they engage with. 9. Chance is likely to play a role in media selection and makes <i>perfect</i> description of selection impossible. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Media system refers to the ways choice is influenced by the system the media is communicated. This typically involves what media is available nationally in any given space but for this thesis may relate to the affordances of social media platforms. 3. Structure of media provision refers to the general pattern of what media provide within society. Patterns of media provision will cause long-term audience expectations. 4. Available content options are the specific formats and genres available to audiences. 5. Media publicity includes advertising of the media on their own behalf. 6. Timing and presentation imply how users will likely be influenced by specific strategies of timing, placement, content and design of media according to audience-gaining strategies. Given the asynchronous reality of social media, this does not relate as much to time and place as it does design, which aligns better with the structure of media provision.

Figure 2: (“Description of previous model”)

Public active social media use	Visible behaviour that is open for the general userbase to see and engage with. Common behaviours: Posting, commenting
Public passive social media use	Engagement with visible and public content. Common behaviour: Browsing
Private active social media use	Engagement with one-to-one or small group communication. Common behaviours: Chatting with friends & family. Sending and interacting with content.
Private passive social media use	Encounter with one-to-one or small group communication without interaction or engagement. Common behaviours: Observation.

Figure 3: (“Description of public ASMU, public PSMU, private ASMU and private PSMU”)

Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
5 participants total 3 men 2 women	4 participants total 3 men 1 woman	6 participants total 6 women	5 participants total 5 women
Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish	Nationalities: German, Italian, Finnish, Swedish	Nationalities: Swedish
Time: 1 hour 10 minutes	Time: 1 hour 30 minutes	Time: 1 hour 15 minutes	Time: 1 hour

Figure 4: (Presentation of focus group participants)

Focus group 2 part 14: Group chats	Analysis
<p>R 2.4: I am almost always a ghost in group chats. That can only be like, two other people. But I don't think you always have to be active. You can check and see what people are doing without interaction, or just liking. The larger the group is, the smaller the chance there is that I will actually write anything.</p>	<p>The discussants speak about their private use. Some participants admit to being passive private users, but they claim that this still serves a social function. While they will rarely write due to personal preferences, they may still be considered as taking part in the social dynamic such as one might be silent in real life scenarios as well.</p>
<p>R 2.1: Me too. A lot can be said in group chats, but I almost never write myself. I prefer to call people if you actually have to talk about something. I have a little bit of social anxiety, writing to a lot of people at the same time. If I don't write, people can't ignore me.</p>	<p>One participant describes how they are a private passive user and prefers to call them in order to converse. The reasons provided is related to anxiety and a fear that people may not reply.</p>
<p>R 2.3: I like group chats. I think it is a smooth way to reach out to my groups of friends. You can reach friends even if you don't have a lot of contact. Rather than doing that individually.</p> <p>R 2.2: The majority of my daily communication is in group chats. I think it is easier to include people through group chats. I think it can be scary if you write but don't get a reply. That can be worrying.</p> <p>Moderator: We have talked about scrolling and reels. How does your sharing of that content look like?</p>	<p>One participant reports that group chats are a smooth way to converse with several friends. This can be related to notions of the networked public. Messenger is seen to have high immediacy and intimacy.</p>

Figure 5: Example of code schema (the entire thematic analysis and sub-themes can be found in supplemental material).

Emotional effect

Type of engagement

Initially a behaviour that can be entertaining or informative, consumption may result in habitual exhaustion, desensitisation, shame, disappointment and other negative effects correlated to the concept of “getting stuck” and “brain rot”.

Consumption: Consists of the consumption of public social media content without interaction of any kind for the purposes of filling time or entertainment. Initially harmless but excessive use can cause adverse effects.

Due to low engagement, the user may not be aware of potential harm, or may struggle to find ways to limit adverse effects.

The user fulfils very few, if any, aspects of the active audience.

A very common behaviour that many users adhere to. Lurking can also be known as browsing and should not, despite its low levels of engagement, be correlated with adverse effects.

Lurking: Consists of the consumption of both public and private social media content with little to no interaction for a variety of purposes such as entertainment, information or social connection. While mostly harmless, awareness is required.

Lurkers typically select their content with some care and are likely to regulate their use when encountering adverse effects.

The lurker exhibits selectivity, utilitarianism, intentionality and resistance as aspects of the active audience.

Many people consider socialisation to be worthwhile while on social media. Adverse emotional effects are primarily caused by feelings of being ignored or by feelings of being too available. As such, both low and high levels of engagement can cause adverse effects.

Socialisation: Consists of communication through mostly private means although previously mentioned behaviours experienced in public spheres may lead to socialisation. Primarily motivated by a need for social connection.

Socialites may also exhibit other kinds of behaviour that can lead to adverse effects, such as those previously mentioned.

The socialite exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Producers of content can find the action to be creatively fulfilling or socially rewarding but may also suffer from anxiety and unhealthy comparison due to a variety of factors such as social norms, feelings of inadequacy and exposure.

Producing: Consists of publishing content publicly on social media platforms to small groups or to large networks. Traditionally, the highest level of engagement. Usually motivated by a desire to express oneself or to connect with others.

The producer exhibits all aspects of the active audience.

Producers may regulate and moderate their use and by increasing their awareness, avoid unhealthy situations.

Figure 6: 4 archetypes of media use at different levels of engagement

