



Digitally Naive to Digital Natives: Changes in the Social  
Media Landscape from the Perspective  
of Women in New Zealand

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## **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Riddhi Jayant Shriyan

Date: 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020

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## ABSTRACT

With social media usage creeping into the everyday lives of a global majority, it has become increasingly important to understand a user's engagement with these new-age digital channels and recognise the level and type of impact these platforms can have on a user's behaviour across personal and professional areas of life.

Since the birth of social media, it has continually been in the limelight for controversial reasonings, ranging from topics like the ill effects of its usage on a user's mental health to misinformation and fake news. Studies such as Hajli, 2014; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011 explored how social media impacts the minds of its young users. After a decade of living with social media, the virtual world has undergone gradual evolution with users utilising digital platforms to showcase assorted elements of their lives such as personal lifestyles, careers, interests, luxuries and social circles rather than using it as a tool merely intended for cross-communication.

The area of content sharing has also seen change, with a decrease in interest levels for heavily doctored posts and an increase for purposeful authentic ones. The pattern of evolution is not particularly confined to the platform alone and its changing functionalities and features, but also transcends into the change in user behaviours of the people behind the numerous social media profiles. In New Zealand, the impact of staying home due to the COVID-19 pandemic is visible in terms of an increase in internet consumption (Kalkandis, 2020). As New Zealanders spend more time on their mobile devices, social media activity is likely to grow with it. With millennials indicated to use Instagram more than any other social platform in recent years (Benson, 2018), it will be the focal point of the usage and engagement data gathered from interviews, followed by Facebook.

This study aims to analyse how young female New Zealanders use social media platforms, more specifically Instagram, the motives for their usage and the perceived impact on their



personal, professional and social lives. Structured in-depth interviews were identified as the best approach for the collection of insightful and relevant data on this topic.

The participant responses provide an insight into the different perspectives of social media use with particular attention paid to the Instagram platform. The findings of this study suggest that New Zealand females have not significantly changed their behaviour patterns on social media but have made refinements to their usage in a manner that now benefits their personal and professional life. It also brings to light the gradual changes in the user's approach to user-generated content, information consumption and the plethora of business or commercial avenues that have risen from social networking sites.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1 Overview of the Research

This research is a thematic analysis on the increased consumption and variations in the methods of usage of social media platforms, by young female New Zealanders, by way of Instagram and Facebook. Specifically, it aims to understand the reasoning for the rise in usage of digital channels, motivations for usage by female users, their online behaviours and expectations from various social media platforms alongside a breakdown of the perceived benefits and overall impact on their personal and professional lives. The purpose of this study is to extensively understand the changing behaviour patterns of the new age female users on social media and analyse the underlying factors that drive this change.

### 1.1 Introduction

Chapter One consists of three main sections. The first section provides an understanding of the key concepts to be studied in this research thesis, and the second section covers the breakdown of the manner in which the study is expected to progress. The third section of this chapter aims to discuss the reasoning for undertaking this research and explores the research questions of this thesis. The chapter concludes by presenting how the study is set to be organised and how each of the chapters aims to assist in the final purpose/conclusion of this research. It is crucial to note that the mention of “social media” throughout this document refers to Instagram and Facebook platforms.

### 1.2 The Origins of Research: My Viewpoint

My interests, education and professional trajectory have all been skewed towards the industry of media and advertising. From spending countless hours creating hand-drawn design portfolios to learning about the digital world through numerous textbooks and finally,

through the many professional roles I undertook in the advertising and media industry, the learnings never stopped coming my way. Each of these periods in my life has allowed me to closely observe, understand and appropriately leverage the constantly changing dynamics of various digital platforms across the globe for professional growth. This enabled me to take notice of some rather interesting behaviours of information consumption and dissemination exhibited by women in the ever-expanding sphere of social media.

My observations gave rise to questions like – are an increased number of people now more aware of social media and its impact on their personal and professional well-being? To what extent is social media impacting the lives of its users? And have users figured out a way to use social media that benefits them or are users still gullible to the make-believe virtual reality that exists online? There was an eagerness to understand individual experiences with social networking sites, how it impacts them, what incentivises users and what frustrates them. And the question lingered – What is social media like for a user after over a decade of regular usage?

The objective of this research for me was to unravel insights from independent experiences, opinions and beliefs on what elements shape their individualistic yet social world online. I began the quest to gain information on this topic by conducting interviews with a few women in Auckland, New Zealand, who fit into the age bracket of 25 to 34 years old, an age group that ranks highest for the volume of users on the popular platform, Instagram according to Statista (2020).

The study of social media, its impact and the negatives and positives are often discussed. The highly interactive functionalities of social networking platforms have created a new category of users that do not merely observe and absorb information on social channels but are voluntarily engaging and interacting with customer or user-led content (Dolan et al., 2016). Consumers who seek informative content on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are anticipated to indulge in the mere consumption of content as opposed to interacting with content using comments and getting involved in social dialogue (Ko et al., 2005). In yet another intriguing study, researchers Lee, Hosanagar & Nair (2013) analysed the impact of variable characteristics of a content piece on the engagement activity of consumers with findings

suggesting that a blend of informative and persuasive content is most likely to improve the levels of engagement activity. The research analysis highlighted the positive impact of persuasive content, one that assimilates sentiments and philanthropy on the engagement activity. Thus, understanding the different factors that incentivise users on social media is crucial in recognising the areas where users seek to gain value from these digital platforms at large.

The method for data collection was selected as in-depth interviews, as this assisted me to gather insights into varying user experiences and perspectives in greater detail (Mohajan, 2018, p. 38). It allowed me to collect intricate details wherein participants shared examples of past or present real-life occurrences within the context of the research questions put forth to them. This method also facilitated a conversational setting for information collection as it allowed the participants to share their viewpoints in a storytelling format, approaching each question with sharper characteristics, in line with the core purpose of the study (Andriesson, 2006).

The qualitative methodology undertaken for this study explores the participants' extensive responses to two research questions underpinned by this study. These findings are then disseminated in the form of overarching central themes that are drawn from the responses given by interviewees using the framework provided by Braun & Clarke (2006) that mentions a six-step process for conducting a thematic analysis.

**Figure 1:** *Six Step Process for Conducting Thematic Analysis*

Step 1: Become familiar with the data, Step 2: Generate initial codes, Step 3: Search for themes,	Step 4: Review themes, Step 5: Define themes, Step 6: Write-up.
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*Source: Braun & Clarke (2006)*

The common or widely reinforced themes acquired from the participants' interview dialogue are highlighted with a careful analysis of the dissimilarities observed in other areas as well.

The intention of conducting a thematic analysis is to recognise key themes and patterns in the data collected and use them to communicate additional information on the topic the research is focused on. It requires a high level of finesse to accurately interpret the data, rather than dispersing a merely summarised output (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

The participants of the research are all-female New Zealanders, present on various social media platforms, with their age falling in the bracket of 25 to 34 years old, the highest category for the number of users on Instagram (Statista, 2020). The professions of these participants also vary in terms of industries, thus providing differences in perspectives from a group of professionals that are a collective mix of musicians, marketers, entrepreneurs and influencers. The personal and professional usage of social media platforms from the standpoint of these interviewees provided an array of insights into the topic of varying behaviours and usability of social networking sites, as well as its overall impact on an end-user.

### **1.3 Rationale for the Research and the Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of how female social media users in New Zealand utilise social media platforms, specifically Instagram & Facebook, its perceived benefits and disadvantages, and the impact these digital channels have on the end-user's personal and professional life. It also delves into recognising the gradual changes in an end-user's usage patterns that have risen over-time as social media transitioned from a shiny new concept to its current role as an unmissable everyday activity.

The findings of this study allowed me to identify a change in the manner in which social media is being utilised today for communication, gaining and sharing information as well as usage in a professional capacity by New Zealand's female users. A limitation for the study was the small sample size as interviews were conducted spanning weeks of government-led lockdown in New Zealand due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted its potential for wider generalisations and a greater array of user insights.

This research topic is particularly valuable as it breaks down the different categories of social media and its impact on users, as opposed to a generalised overview of entire platforms being beneficial or detrimental to the user. It also helps in drawing attention to the evolution of a social media user as most studies currently focus on the evolution of the platform itself (Rangwala, 2017; Snow, 2019; Banner, n.d.). Understanding how usage has altered over time can be beneficial for Social Networking Site (SNS) creators to modify the respective platforms for better user experience and value adds, as opposed to further destructive commercialisation.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What is the role of social media in your everyday life and how does that have an impact on your sense of self?
2. Is your social media persona (reel) closely aligned to your lived (real)ity?
3. How does your social media usage benefit you?

The research questions listed above seek to explore a participant's overall usage of various social channels, its incorporation into their everyday life, their perceptions and perspectives of social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram and its corresponding impact on their personal and/or professional lives. The personal experiences and perspectives that can be gauged from the responses given, in relation to the research questions, provide a window of opportunity to intricately understand the different factors that have shaped a participant's sentiment and mindset towards social media, advocated by Leininger (1985, p. 6), as the interviewer needs to uncover and understand the "cognitions that help [the participant] to make sense of the world." The collection of a rich qualitative pool of data such as the one gathered for this research through detailed in-depth interviews further intensifies and accurately captures the essence of the study.

### **1.4 Organisation of the Thesis**

The organisational structure of this thesis is set to flow in a uniform pattern as it progresses. This initial chapter serves as a key piece for contextual information about the research topic,

the brief reasoning for the choice of subject for the study and its methodology and provides a concise framework of the forthcoming sections of research information.

Chapter Two, Section I provides the reader with significant details about the research including the overview of the general topic, an incisive background about social media, various social networking sites and its popularity, as well as providing a summary into the positive and negative sides of social media. Section II of the chapter focuses on social media in relation to female public figures, gender equality and includes existing stigmas, attitudes and identity perceptions as seen on social media platforms.

Chapter Three talks about the methodologies in place for the study and utilisation of appropriate data collection techniques, to fill in knowledge gaps on the research topic.

Chapter Four records the process of research, explaining the method of data analysis and the interview questions required for the data collection implementation, alongside providing a detailed breakdown of insights generated from interviews and the overall themes observed.

The fifth chapter puts together the central themes uncovered from the interviews, provides an overview of the mindset and behaviours of social media users in New Zealand and places these pockets of knowledge in context for the topic the research seeks to address. This final chapter also talks about the limitations of the study and the scope for future research.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

Chapter Two provides contextual information on the birth of the internet and the creation of various social media platforms, following its chronological timeline. Additionally, it provides further knowledge on the rise of social media platforms and the reasonings for it as well as pros and cons of digital social channels like Facebook and Instagram. This chapter will also discuss social media in relation to subjects like the role that social networking sites (SNSs) play in areas of women empowerment, business and entrepreneurial avenues, gendered inequalities and will take a look at usage of the Instagram by public figures. Lastly, this chapter briefly talks about the social stigmas and attitudes present in society and the desire for validation sought online.

## 2 Overview of the Internet

In the current setting of 2020, the term 'Internet' is used in our everyday conversations recurrently and can be accessed through gadgets that rest in the palm of our hands. However, the beginning of the internet can be traced back to as early as the 1960s in the United States (Cohen-Almagor, 2011). A major stepping-stone in the evolution of the internet is the United States of America Department of Defense's (DoD) funding of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, more popularly known as ARPANET. Kickstarting their duties, the engineers at ARPANET reached a turning point when they configured four computers in an experimental setup. The first-ever Interface Message Processors (IMP) was built by Bolt, Beranek, and Newman Inc. (BBN). The IMP was responsible for bringing the famous 'File Transfer Protocol' into light (Marson, 1997). For ARPANET to evolve into what we now call 'The Internet', three advances in technology were crucial. These were the creation of the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol [TCP/IP], EtherNet and the invention of a low-cost TCP/IP (Marson, 1997).



The evolution of technology began with studies that aimed to find further information about packet switching and the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) alongside researching how to improve the scale and overall functionality of the medium. In August 1962, a string of memos penned by J.C.R Licklider from MIT was considered the first recorded instances of interactions that were facilitated by networking. Licklider visualised a world wherein individuals could access data across an array of sites that would be enabled by an interconnected set of computing systems all over the globe (Leiner et al., 2009). In 1990, the World Wide Web or W3 was created by engineers and physicists at CERN (an acronym for The European Organization for Nuclear Research) to act as a medium to facilitate the knowledge shared between collaborators in different parts of the world. The idea that initiated this discovery came from the productive usage of a personal hypertext system called *Enquire* that allowed the engineers to keep track of one's own data on a shared project (Berners-Lee et al., 1994).

In the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), the definition of the internet is stated as “a computer network comprising or connecting a number of smaller networks, such as two or more local area networks connected by a shared communications protocol”. The invention of simple communication mediums such as the telegraph, the telephone, radio and other computing devices have facilitated the manner in which the functions of each medium could be integrated. The unparalleled usability of the internet has significantly transformed the industry of technology (Leiner et al., 2009). After the World Wide Web was made available for the masses in 1991 by CERN, the very first web browser that incorporated text along with visual elements such as graphics was brought to life in 1993. In the year to follow, a commercial browser named Netscape was launched, Microsoft web browser became a reality and the global audience was introduced to ‘spam’. 1995 saw the launch of the world's first dating website called ‘match.com’ (“The Associated Press – Key Milestones,” 2009; Zimmermann & Emspak, 2017). Netflix was founded shortly after in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph (“Netflix Media Center,” n.d.).

## 2.1 Social Media: Background

With the internet acting as a supportive backbone, the stream of social media platforms came into existence. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines social media as a mode of electronic communication through which users create digital communities to disseminate information in various forms such as photographs, text or videos. Looking back a few years, it becomes fairly clear that the modus operandi in which we use the internet has shifted significantly towards user-driven technologies such as social networking sites which have enabled user-generated content and created a global community (Smith, 2009). Social networking sites (SNSs) are platforms wherein users can create a social profile of themselves, connect, interact and engage with other users and additionally engage with the content shared by them. However, the nature of these interactions differed depending on the type of platform being used (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Invented by American entrepreneur and New York native, Andrew Weinreich (Economic Times, 2017), one of the earliest social media sites called **Six Degrees** was born; a name derived from the six degrees of separation concept that states any two individuals on Earth can be connected with an average of six steps (Zhang & Tu, 2009). Launched in 1997, the website allowed people to use their personal email addresses to register for the social website, create their digital profiles and add friends to their personal circles. It was considered to be the starting point for social networking websites. However, the founders of the website constantly nudged users to invite more people onto SixDegrees so as to stay true to the 'six degrees of separation' concept. However, this made the consumers unhappy and played a factor in the decline of user activity, despite garnering over a million registered users. Eventually, the website was bought by YouthStream Media Networks for \$125 million (Economic Times, 2017) in December 2000 (Ahmad, 2018; 'History of SNSs,' n.d.; Terrell, 2015).

Shortly after this in March 2002, a new social media site called **Friendster** was launched by Peter Chin, Jonathan Abrams and Dave Lee (Ahmad, 2018). The website allowed its users to connect with their friends registered on the website, meet new people and share content with them online ("Friendster at a glance," 2009). The year after its introduction to the world

in 2003, Google offered \$30 million for its ownership, which was rejected by the founders (Ahmad, 2018). The website lost its popularity over time and began its downward trajectory. By 2011, the website was sold for \$26.4 million to MOL Global, a deal short of \$3.6 million compared to Google's early offer. Eventually, the social networking website was transformed into a gaming platform in 2011 (History of SNSs, n.d.; Shona, 2016). Within the next five years – spanning from 2003 to 2007, the current globally popular social media platforms – LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were launched (McFadden, 2018).

In 1999, Brad Fitzpatrick introduced **LiveJournal** to the world. The site aims to act as the user's own personal diary. A helping hand for the fast-paced growth of LiveJournal was that users found the website appealing as it allowed a customisable and open platform for writing. LiveJournal's functionalities while simple, offered the users a platform for individual expression in the format of a highly customisable journal (*About LiveJournal*, n.d.) allowing users to communicate freely. The website was sold to Six Apart, a popular blogging company in the year 2005, despite being at the peak of success (Hoffman, 2017).

In the modern world, the most popular platform for businesses and professionals to interact and connect through is **LinkedIn**. In 2003, Reid Hoffman, Allen Blue, Konstantin Guericke, Eric Ly and Jean-Luc Vaillant launched the platform and its humble beginnings started out in the living room of co-founder, Reid Hoffman. By 2013, the community of its users reached 225 million across the globe. Shortly after, in 2016, LinkedIn was acquired by tech giants, Microsoft (LinkedIn Newsroom, n.d.). The platform is now a widely used tool for businesses to scout for employees and acts as an updated digital version of a resume for employees to showcase to their potential employers.

Created in 2003, **MySpace** showed similarity in the base level features seen on Facebook today such as creating profiles, interacting with others and sharing images or videos. It was co-founded by Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson. Between 2005 and 2008, it often surpassed Google in the maximum volume of visitors on the website. For a staggering amount of \$580 million, the platform was sold to News Corporation in 2005 (Kozlowski, 2012).

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004, Google published a news release that spoke of the launch of its newest service called **Gmail**, a webmail service that is now widely used on an everyday basis by individuals for professional as well as personal use (“News from Google,” 2004). It initially provided each user with just 1 gigabyte of storage capacity and as of 2020, has increased the storage capacity to 15 gigabytes per email address (“History of Google’s Email Service,” 2019). It is said that the idea for Gmail was conceived by employee Paul Buchheit using Google’s renowned ‘20 percent time’ policy, one which insisted on Google employees utilising 20 percent of their time in personal projects and testing out ideas (McCracken, 2014). The three key features of this email service in 2004 included the ability to search for emails, sufficient storage to hold onto emails and avoid deleting mail and the fast nature of the service that made it very convenient without compromising efficiency (“News from Google,” 2004).

Predictably, a platform that has now earned a reputation to have been a part of countless controversies and lawsuits is **Facebook**. Mark Zuckerberg, a sophomore at Harvard, founded Facebook in 2004 alongside co-founders Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes and Eduardo Saverind. With a fairly large investment of \$500,000 from Peter Thiel, the co-founder of PayPal, Facebook began its journey to success (Greiner et al., 2019). When Facebook was launched by Zuckerberg in 2004, there were rumours that the idea for the social networking site was stolen from Harvard seniors Cameron Winklevoss, Tyler Winklevoss and Divya Narendra. The trio had initially reached out to Mark Zuckerberg to get his assistance with building coded pages for their networking website named ‘HarvardConnections.com’ (Carlson, 2010). After a few conversations and a brief period of time working on HarvardConnections, Mark is said to have distanced himself from the trio and begun to work secretly to build ‘Facebook’ from ideas known to have come from the three Harvard seniors.

In Facebook’s early days, users who signed up on the platform could post pictures and details about their personal lives like information about their academics, life event updates, etc. It was initially open only to Harvard students, but with rising popularity it saw users from universities like Yale and Stanford join the platform. With time, Facebook rolled out additional features like posting on a user’s wall and introduced the option of tagging friends in images (Hall, n.d.). By the year 2009, Facebook had become the most used social networking service

globally (Bellis, n.d.) and despite scandals and lawsuits, the user community of Facebook continued to grow and crossed a billion users in October 2012 (Greiner et al., 2019).

February of 2005 saw the launch of **YouTube**, the famous video streaming platform by its co-founders Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, three colleagues from the e-payment company – PayPal. Initially created to act as a dating website, the users were skewed to sharing video content across various categories. After a beta run, YouTube was made available to the public in December 2005 amassing 8 million views across an array of video content in a single day (Leskin, 2015). By 2007, YouTube was utilised as a marketing and advertising medium as Google began to run ad campaigns on the video streaming platform to generate an increased revenue (Dickey, 2013). Over the years, the platform built a community of avid video streaming enthusiasts, launched the feature to live stream and became a crucial asset for business as well as presidential campaigns. The countries with highest YouTube usage are the United States, followed by India with Japan coming in at the third spot and Russia at fourth (Iqbal, 2019).

In March 2006, the end of one start-up (Odeo) led to the rise of another, now known as **Twitter**. After Google acquired Blogger, a start-up created by Evan Williams, Williams then used the proceeds from the sale of Blogger to start a new venture with his neighbour, Noah Glass. The newly developing platform was visualised to act as a blend of radio and podcasts. Twitter's current CEO, Jack Dorsey joined the team with what began as a chance encounter at a coffee shop. Dorsey worked at a coffee shop alongside writing basic code for a small company when he met Evan Williams who expressed interest in working within areas of technical expertise. Soon after, Dorsey became a part of the team at Odeo (Meyer, 2019). When Apple launched an additional feature of 'podcasts' on iTunes, this challenged and obstructed the success Odeo could achieve. This led to a change from its original feature of podcasting into sharing updates with others on the platform (Carlson, 2011). There were rumours of a power struggle between the two creators – Evan Williams and Noah Glass and by July 2006, Glass was shown the door and Jack Dorsey filled in for the position of CEO (D'onfro, 2013). In September 2011, Twitter reached a community of 100 million Twitter users (Meyer, 2019).

In 2009, Kevin Systrom, a 27-year-old Stanford graduate with no formal training in the field, created a prototype for location-based application with functionality similar to that of foursquare (Blystone, 2019). It allowed users to check-in at different specific locations, create events that include a future check-in, incentivise users for going out with their friends and post pictures of the same. The application was named '**Burbn**' as it was reported that the founder was a passionate fan of Kentucky whiskeys (Garber, 2014). With an increasing need to start building a team, Kevin Systrom approached Mike Krieger, who joined the team of two. After many discussions, the partners understood there was nothing that set the application apart from the rest and decided to remove all its features and make photo-sharing the hero of the application. It would now only allow users to upload photographs, 'like' and comment on these posts. It was then renamed Instagram – short for instant telegram ("How Instagram Started," 2017).

The now popular social media platform, **Instagram** was launched on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Within one year of its launch, the platform went on to become the App Store's "App of the Year" in late 2011. It was initially launched solely on the Apple operating system, iOS. This quickly changed, owing to its rising popularity, with the launch of their Android application two short years after the launch in early 2012. The photo-sharing app was acquired by social media giant, Facebook, in 2012 for \$1 billion when the platform only had 30 million users. Later that year, Instagram announced its latest milestone of reaching 80 million users globally with the addition of another 20 million by 2013. In 2016, Instagram's user growth continued to rise and the platform amassed 500 million users globally. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2016, Instagram unveiled its newest feature, Instagram Stories, imitating a similar feature on Snapchat. In early 2017, Instagram spoke about how the launch of Instagram Stories facilitated the need for video content and helped grow the Instagram community. Along with it, advertisers and other businesses on the platform boasted over 1 million monthly active advertisers (Instagram Info Center, 2017). As of 2019, Instagram is now at over 1 billion monthly active users & over 500 million daily story active users (Instagram Press, 2019). The growing popularity of Instagram is stated to indicate images and videos are becoming crucial forms of digital currencies (Manikonda, Hu & Kambhampati, 2014).

Another popular and widely used social networking platform is ***Snapchat***. Brought to life by Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy and Reggie Brown in 2011, when the trio studied together at Stanford University. The platform allows users to share pictures and videos, with the option of having the recipient view it only for a matter of a few seconds from 1 to 10. Since its entry to the social networking industry, it has introduced new features within the application such as Snapchat Stories, SnapMaps and Geofilters (Molloy, 2017). Snapchat has played a key role in the rise of ephemeral content. In 2012, just a year after launch, Facebook and Instagram chief Mark Zuckerberg had reportedly approached the Snapchat Inc. CEO Evan Spiegel with a \$3 billion offer which was reportedly turned down on more occasions than one (Ellingson, 2018).

## **Summary**

Since the creation of the 'Internet' over two decades ago, many social media platforms have come to life. Some permanently closed their door to users whereas others continue to thrive. It becomes undeniable that social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are gaining popularity and with it, bringing an influx of users across the world. It is becoming an integral part of everyday life for a global majority. Social media trends that were predicted a few years ago have already come to fruition; some of which are the rise in influencer marketing and an increased focus on videos as a preferred format for content creation and advertising (Waldegrave, n.d.).

## **2.2 Rise of Social Media and its Purpose**

It is no new revelation that social media usage has been on a fast-paced rising trajectory. From its early stages in 2002, it has continued to grow over the years as of now in 2020 and does not show any signs of plateauing (Google Trends, 2020). The volume of social media users across the globe in the year 2010 was almost a billion (0.97 billion) and is expected to grow three-fold to a whopping 3.09 billion users in 2021, a statistic that seems realistic, when compared to the 2.82 billion users social media already reached by 2019 (Number of Global Social Network Users 2010-2021, 2020).

The first generation of social media websites and platforms were created to help individuals connect with each other and act as a communication tool. The manner in which these Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are being utilised by the users across the globe has shifted over time. Consumers of these SNSs are now finding an array of new and innovative ways to make use of their time spent online and leverage it.

In a study by the Global Web Index, with a base of over 77,000 internet users, it was found that there are a few key underlying factors for the usage of social media platforms (Valentine, 2018). The top ten reasons mentioned are:

1. To stay connected with friends and be updated on what they are doing
2. To stay informed about the latest news and events
3. To spend free time
4. To find content that is engaging
5. General networking
6. Join the bandwagon of existing friends on SNSs
7. Share content of their own - images/videos
8. Voice their own opinions
9. To learn more about products/services they intend to purchase
10. To meet new people

The Global Web Index conducted further research across 45 countries, with a global sample of 138,962 internet users, to understand social media motivations over time. The results show the volume of internet consumers using SNS for purposeful activities such as engaging with news content, researching products or services and networking for work has increased and being connected with friends has taken a dip, as a key motivator for social media usage in recent years ("Social Media Motivations," n.d.). As of October 2020, Instagram states the number of New Zealand users on the platform at 1,950,000 with a slightly greater half identified to be women (Carney, 2020). Users between the ages of 25 to 34 were the largest cohort followed by those between the ages of 18 to 24 (*Instagram Users in New Zealand - September 2020*, n.d.). According to The New Zealand Facebook and Instagram Report 2020 by Mosh, users are consuming an increased 40% of video content, image posts are said to



generate a higher volume of likes. And, amongst New Zealand's top 25 Instagram accounts, celebrities and influencers accounts are a minority (Thompson, 2020). These statistics indicate a rising presence of New Zealand users on the platform, coupled with an increase in usage.

### **2.3 Advantages**

Social media has been labelled with many terms - some negative and some positive. Despite this, it cannot be argued that social media and its usage has impacted our lives in one way or another (Allen, 2019; Ng, 2019; Wharton University of Pennsylvania, 2019). The aspect of social media is dynamic and is constantly undergoing change, with the creation of new platforms, trends created by users, law, regulations and other varied factors that keep altering the social media landscape.

Occurrences wherein social media has supported and enabled the mobilisation of gatherings for various social causes and protests as well as instantaneous obstruction of a potential act of self-harm such as suicide are examples which showcase the life-changing potential that social media carries (Allen et al., 2014). Certain sectors of the world, such as healthcare, which are otherwise unrelated to the media landscape also reap the many benefits of communicating through social networks. Connecting, networking and interacting with other Health Care Professionals [HCPs] adds specialised knowledge into the wider pool of learning, as well as building skill sets to tackle various problems and health-related concerns (Ventola, 2014).

By nature, humans are said to be social animals (Young, 2008). For human beings to flourish and evolve, communication becomes crucial (Myers, 2011). In the modern age, social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube and Snapchat are available en masse to users across the globe for utilisation. Without these platforms, the task of communicating with individuals living thousands of miles away from the recipient becomes rather time-consuming and tedious. The connectivity through SNSs allows people scattered all over the planet to interact with one another quickly, freely and as they desire (Glenn, 2013); an activity that would sound rather astonishing to the folks in the olden ages wherein hand-written

letters and telephone calls were the only medium that fit the bill, but also pinched the pockets. The way social media is being made use of in the current day and age has also changed with time. A platform initially built to facilitate communication or conversation amongst individuals is now used for the creation of a digital self-identity or online persona that may be an exact representation of self or an altered reality (Gündüz, 2017). It has also given rise to user-generated content and has fostered collaboration amongst social media users for content creation.

Keeping aside the new varied ways that users have discovered for the usage of social networking sites, the manner in which we consume information has also been impacted by this heightened use of platforms. Information about social causes, global issues, environmental crises, employment, healthcare and many other widespread, as well as, sensitive subjects can also be accessed through social media. A social media user of the 21st century can be well-informed about a range of subjects by merely switching between the most popular social media applications (Westerman et al., 2013, p. 171). Young internet users are now skewed towards social media and digital content for engagement, with Google stating that half the volume of YouTube subscribers between the ages of 18 to 34 are likely to stop carrying out an activity to engage with video content shared by their personal favourite YouTuber, highlighting how impactful their engagement with video content is (Google's Video Trends on YouTube, 2017).

In entirety, social media and the various networking platforms are a great widespread and cost-effective medium for its users to obtain information and be informed on a range of subjects (Agrawal, 2016). They also help provide a platform to share ideas and opinions, educate, learn, collaborate with others, empower each other and communicate in a multi-faceted fashion. If used correctly, social media platforms or SNSs can be made use of and leveraged in a far superior, beneficial and uplifting manner.

## **2.4 Disadvantages**

Just as there are two sides to every coin, social media and its usage have its own share of pros and cons. Despite its potential to be utilised as a positive and productive medium, more often

than not, social media falls under scrutiny for its negative usage by users, alongside the malicious features on the platform that are likely to benefit businesses and celebrities. In recent times, the ill effects of social media usage, as well as consumption of content showcased on them, is widely spoken about in relation to the negative impact it has on one's mental health (Barr, 2019; Walton, 2018).

Social media has enabled anyone with an internet connection and a smartphone to share their opinions directly to friends, colleagues or even strangers. Many times, these opinions come in the form of hateful comments and are shared anonymously with the intention to cause harm to others. This is considered as cyber-bullying (UNICEF, n.d.). A report by the PewCenter.org states that most young internet users have fallen victim to cyber-bullying. Sending harsh comments, judgemental remarks, malevolent rumours as well as threatening and provoking messages can not only disrupt a well-functioning virtual community but can also severely impact the mental wellbeing of the recipient (Ahmad, 2016).

Another hindrance in the effective and positive use of SNSs is the likelihood of personal and private data being compromised by third-party applications, or hackers themselves. Since users on these platforms share numerous personal and intimate pieces of information about their lives online, these bits of information can become key tools for businesses or organizations to leverage for advertisement targeting as it provides them with multi-fold benefits (Freedman, n.d.; Hatch, 2018; Truyo, n.d.). A few third-party applications have come under fire for obtaining this type of user data by unethical means and the general lack of transparency in the process of acquiring data itself (Muoio, 2019). Data theft and misuse are terms often seen in newspapers and news articles, with one such example of the popular Cambridge Analytica scandal. In mid-2019, the leader of social media platforms, Facebook, was forced to suspend thousands of third-party applications, as it was brought to light that these applications had covertly gained access to users' data (Abril, 2019).

Social media platforms are now drifting away from being used merely as tools to communicate, towards being a medium to showcase one's daily life (Herhold, 2018). SNSs have also given rise to micro-celebrities or influencers (Hutchinson, 2019; Van der Ende, 2020). A platform such as Instagram, an application that relies heavily on the visual appeal of

peoples' lives, is now commonly used by celebrities and influencers to mass advertise products to their audience, helping businesses generate revenue and act as a wealth creation tool for influencers.

In an age where social media is so easily accessible to anyone around the world, the creation of false information and fake news becomes a reality. Accurate detection of fake news on social channels has now mushroomed into a prominent area of research that is quickly gaining attention (Shu, Silva, Wang, Tang & Liu, 2017). This spread of misinformation can be misleading to many uninformed users who rely on social media platforms to keep themselves cognisant of various global issues. A study observed that individuals who received their share of news through social channels were increasingly likely to believe false information on the COVID-19 pandemic (Escalante, 2020). It is understood that fake news is propagated faster and significantly more broadly (Langin, 2018), which makes it an imperative subject to address and tackle. There is an array of ways social media can be made use of for adverse and ill-fated motives; the instances of fake news, falsified viral content, clickbait, identity theft, cyber-bullying, damaging fads and the creation of an unrealistic virtual reality, are examples of this.

## **2.5 Women on Social Media**

It is unlikely that all genders use social media platforms in the same exact fashion. Men are said to use social media platforms in a far less personal way, compared to women who seek to share snippets of their lives, stay in touch with their families and friends as well as voice their individualistic opinions in a considerably more intimate manner (Vermeren, 2015). It is frequently stereotyped that women spend limitless hours of their time immersed in the online world. There may be a mere fragment of truth in it, with the State of the Media (2012) report by Nielsen stating that women spend an extra few minutes browsing through SNSs as compared to men. Another study carried out by Facebook Research found that women using Facebook are more likely to share personal moments with family, friends and/or colleagues for their audience to see, whereas men on the platform indulged, interacted and shared information or content on abstract topics such as politics, sport or finance (Wang et al., 2013). However, the study cannot be used to come to the conclusion that women are not interested in the topics that men share on digital platforms.

Alongside the difference in functionality of various SNSs between the genders, the portrayal of different genders on social media is also staggeringly dissimilar. Women online are sexualised in a negative manner such as being labelled 'lacking shame' or 'too bold' whereas men are sexualised online in a positive light for similar content and instead are called fit, confident, active or dominant (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Rose et al., 2012). The pressure of being visually appealing is often one that women face online and offline, particularly when they do not fit into society's unrealistic yet idealised thin, flawless and youthful criteria (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019, p. 1). Ageism is widely prevalent on social media platforms (Siroto, 2018) and can also be challenged as showcased by a case study on female Instagram users over the age of 40. These users leveraged the picture-based platform to fight against the reprehensible belief that older women should shy away from presenting themselves online (Tiidenberg, 2017).

A study undertaken by Kavanaugh et. al (2019), spoke about the sexualization and gender-based violence in the digital media against female athletes. Various sportswomen received sexualised comments, threats of physical violence, immodest remarks about their physical appearance and various other gender-based vulgar and demeaning remarks. Popular celebrities and individuals from an array of industries such as that of politics, sports and media were often the primary target for these unpleasant and vile environments in the online world. In the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls report (Zurbriggen et al., 2007) by the American Psychological Association identified that girls are sexually delineated more often as compared to boys. The hyper sexualisation of women in the media adversely impacts the overall well-being of females across the world (Swift & Gould, 2020).

## **2.6 Positive & Negative ways Women use Social Media + Influencers**

Social Media Influencer (SMI) is a term that defines an individual who has built a substantial fan-following across one or more of their accounts on Social Media platforms. These individuals have the ability to influence their audiences to make certain purchase decisions because of their knowledge in a particular sphere or industry as they have generated credibility for the information they share (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018; MediaKix, 2018).

The most simplified method to draw a distinction between SMIs and traditional celebrities is the medium through which both parties generate or build their influence. Traditional celebrities are known to have gained their popularity and fame through traditional media such as the Television, Radio and Print media like Newspapers and Magazines. However, SMIs have built their following by utilizing non-traditional media like social media platforms, blogs and video-blogs, now commonly known as vlogs (Barker, 2018). In layman's terms, the role of an SMI is to encourage his/her followers to purchase, experiment with or simply try a product or service offered by the brands they work with. Influencers work alongside their client brands to drive engagement and sales by leveraging the influencer's fan following, credibility, expertise in a particular area and popularity in the relevant audience circles. According to the Global Trust in Advertising survey by Nielsen, 92% of customers trust influencers more than advertisements or traditional celebrity endorsements (Nielsen, 2012).

There have been multiple instances wherein the ethics and credibility of influencers has been at stake. It is a common occurrence for celebrities and influencers to promote and glorify products and services they do not make use of; merely because they were paid to do so. Currently, there is no feature on Instagram that allows viewers to know if an image is filtered or manipulated, feeding into the world of 'altered reality'. Instagram now requires all paid content to be specified clearly as a tag right below the user handle and post (Blair, 2018). Scarlett Dixon/London, a popular Insta-Blogger came under fire for posting a picture showcasing her 'ordinary mornings' that looked entirely staged and was in fact, a paid brand post for Listerine (Moss, 2018). Behaviours like these from influencers, whom the audiences rely on for credible information takes back any progress made to build trust and transparency. There is a need for improved laws concerning the credibility of content shared, so that influencers are held responsible for the consequences of their actions. A SMI's social media feed is a portrayal of the most impeccable life; imitating which is known to breed vanity, narcissism or materialistic and shallow desires; but more importantly it alters how users perceive the reality. Technology has certainly made achieving materialistic goals easier, but it has not wholly worked in a constructive manner (Payne, 2018; Burton, 2018; Willingham, 2018).

Despite experiencing the societal pressures of living up to unrealistic beauty standards first-hand, female influencers are incessantly seen pushing out inauthentic content with brands that they themselves do not believe in as well as content that may induce a feeling of insecurity amongst women or make them question their self-esteem. The volume of female celebrities, bloggers and influencers who attempt to break the monotony of a flawless and picturesque life online is far smaller as compared to those who feed into the damaging trends owing to monetisation. This study, through its research methodology, aims to delve deeper into gaining insight on the perspectives and preferences of women in New Zealand regarding various social and gender issues risen from social media and participants' personal assessment of content on Instagram & Facebook.

## **2.7 Social Media and Social Identity**

According to McLeod (2019), social identity is an individual's sense of who they are depending on the group they are considered to be a part of. According to Tajfel, individuals felt a sense of pride by being affiliated with a certain group, telling us that groups provide individuals with a sense of belonging in the enormous world. Each individual is said to have curated their identities based off the groups they are connected with and this provides a sense of security and helps strengthen their sense of self-identity (Islam, 2013). Henri Tajfel and John Turner undertook experiments wherein they discovered that individuals are likely to favour members of their own group as opposed to members of other groups ("What is social identity," 2011).

'Identity is an umbrella term used throughout the social sciences to describe a person's conception and expression of individuality (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brewer & Gardner, 2004; Coley, 2004, Mead, 2004, Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998, Dean, Raats, & Shepherd, 2012) and holds various meanings. In fact, defining identity is not linear or singular (Nairn, 2013). Identity is a source of meaning for people as it is a developmental process that occurs within the personality and is a product of the socio-cultural context within which it is formed (Shoemaker, 1963). Furthermore, it refers to the capacity for self-reflection and awareness of self (Schechtman, 1996). Identity is, thus, the entire personality of a human in their uniqueness, encompassing one's psychological, biological and societal nature (Penelhum,

1967). By extension, self-identity refers to stable and prominent aspects of one's self-perception (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992).

According to social identity theory, individuals define the sense of self in terms of social categories or group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The social elements of our lives influence who we are and how we think and what we do (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). In essence, social identity is a product of communicative behaviours, as it is formed and developed through social interactions (Guan & So, 2016). Through communicating with others, individuals express their belonging to various groups, assess group image and reputation (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994) and use the defined identity to navigate their social interactions (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Thus, examining individuals' interaction and relationships with others or their affiliations with particular social groups likely contribute to a more nuanced understanding of individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. When individuals identify with a particular group, they value and emulate the characteristic attributes of the group. Past research has indicated that social identity serves as the basis for linking individuals' group membership to group-approved behaviours (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is expected that the more strongly an individual identifies with a group that advocates a particular behaviour, the more an individual will possess a higher level of voice and agency in accordance with what the group advocates. This focus of this research will explore key mechanisms that can explain women posting calculated content online through social media is based on an increase of their self-identity.

As humans, we have the tendency to mimic others' behaviours, small and big (Rice, 2019; Yarbrough, 2017). We are likely to imitate or closely replicate the behaviour and attitudes of groups or individuals that we believe are viewed by society as ideal ones such as celebrities ('How Celebrities Influence Teens and Why it Matters', 2018; Sasson, n.d.). Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are majorly used to share content from an individual's travel experiences, promotions and various other joyful moments, feeding into the perception that a good majority live a happy and extravagant life.



## **2.8 About Instagram**

Instagram was initially expected to be a location-based application similar to the likes of Foursquare. However shortly after, it was changed into a photo-based application leveraging the visual nature of human beings. The pre-existing features of the application during the launch in 2010 have undergone significant tweaks and changes, with many new functions added to the popular networking platform over the years. Some of the basic features at launch were sharing images that fit a square frame (1:1 ratio), liking and commenting on images, viewing others' profiles and following other user accounts of personal interest. The 'popular' page that showcased some of the most liked posts or posts from profiles with higher follower count is now branded as the 'explore' page. Instagram has also modified its requirement to share only square images in a 1:1 ratio to now allowing images and video of various dimensions. The global platform known for its filters and retro image frames has also seen tremendous alterations with Instagram introducing the functionality to edit the strength of their filters and various other image editing parameters such as saturation, highlight, warmth, vignette and lux; shifting the old school heavily filtered feed into a modern subtly edited aesthetic feed (Meisenzahl, 2019).

The rise of Instagram has also led to an increase in the addition of new features and functions for businesses and public figures for the purpose of advertising or revenue generation.

## **2.9 Instagram's Timeline of Growth and Key Milestones**

2010 saw the launch of Instagram for iOS devices and a mere year after its launch, the application was crowned the 'App Store iPhone App of the Year'. By 2012, Instagram was made available for Android users alongside iOS users. The steady growth of the application carried on for the coming years with Instagram reaching 100 million users in 2013, 300 million users in 2014, 400 million users in 2015 and half a billion users by 2016, all across the globe. In 2017, they welcomed 1 million advertisers onto the platform and grew their user base to a whopping 700 million users worldwide. With the launch and success of the Boomerangs feature in 2016, Instagram roped in a few more visual features such as the IGTV and video

chat in 2018. The latest functionality in 2019 was the introduction of Checkout, a feature that allows users to purchase from brands without leaving the platform.

## **2.10 Growth of features for Marketers and Advertisers**

The rise of Instagram has also led to an increase in the addition of new features and functions for businesses and public figures for the purpose of advertising or revenue generation. According to a report by eMarketer in 2019, in the USA, Instagram will generate a revenue of \$12.32 billion through advertisers as compared to the \$9.08 billion generated in 2019. To ensure the surplus amount of revenue continues to be generated for years to come, it becomes essential for Instagram to keep their advertisers happy by introducing new functions and improving existing metrics for advertising. With video content garnering higher engagement rates as opposed to images or static media, Instagram enabled longer videos, introduced IGTV, Instagram Stories with shoppable tags on them to make online purchases even more simplified for the users (Lee, 2019). Instagram (2016) stated that their users missed over a majority of the posts shared on the platform making the overall reach of the post taking a hit. With the change in the Instagram algorithms wherein the system predicts the ranking of posts users are more likely to care about, provides advertisers a better chance to break through a saturated clutter with quality content and in turn enable their audiences to be more susceptible to be exposed to their branded content (Lua, 2018).

### **Stories**

On August 2nd, 2016, Instagram announced the introduction of a new feature for its users called 'Stories'. It allowed them to share images and videos on their profile as a story which would only be displayed for 24 hours. It was pitched to users as a way you can avoid 'over-posting', a phenomenon wherein a user makes multiple posts on their profile in a short period of time. When an individual has posted a story, a ring appears around their profile image. Clicking the profile image will enable users to then view these 'Stories' (Instagram Info Center, 2016). Some of the many features of this new function include sketching, creating videos that play on loop, short boomerang, tagging other accounts, creating polls, adding stickers/emoticons and more.

According to Instagram Business, 50% of all global businesses are now utilizing the Stories feature at least once during a month with  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the most viewed stories coming from these businesses. They also report that businesses are now seeing improved results by using this feature across various different brand objectives and goals. Businesses can now use various Call-To-Action (CTAs) buttons on Stories to match their goals such as brand awareness, traffic to website or product, reach, video or post views, application installs, lead generation and lots more (Donnelly, 2019). Recently, to further monetise this feature, Instagram has introduced 'Shopping Tags' on Stories. This enables users to shop from Stories of different brands with a simple tap and swipe (Hutchingson, 2018).

### **2.11 Gender Inequality, Women Empowerment and Agency**

Biased perception of genders is not a newfound occurrence of modern-day life and has been prevalent for an extended period of time (Ridgeway, 2011). Societal norms around the world vary and so does the characterisation of gender roles and perceptions. Spread across decades, there exist numerous organizations around the world that work tirelessly with an aim to reduce and negate gender-related biases across professional and domestic lives (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The presumed characteristics attached to men and women reinforces the often-problematic boundaries of behaviour leading to discriminatory and unjust treatment of the genders (Ridgeway, 2011).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), the term empowerment is described as 'the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you'. In our current existential world, words such as female and women are so often strung alongside 'empowerment' that they may nearly pass as a prefix for it; a phenomenon that provides insight into the sheer seriousness and vitality of this widespread situation (Bristow, 2012; UNFPA, n.d.; United Nations, 2019). Experiences of gendered biases and instances of inequality that stem from being a female has not been confined to any one category or a specific set of individuals. It is commonly perceived to span across ages, races, professions as well as personal preferences.

Social media is now a popular tool of choice to engage with a widespread audience. However, the manner in which individuals leverage and utilise these tools are up to their very own discretions. Bearing this in mind, the usage of social media can be at either extremes or at any given point in between, solely on the basis of how each individual on the platform chooses to make use of it. Globally popularised stereotypes about women may be amplified in large volumes and reinforce unpleasant norms set for women, making them feel suppressed and subdued.

Gender equality advocates have long championed women's right to participate in all areas of political and public life because such participation is essential for the full development and advancement of women and because it is a basic means to guarantee women's agency (UNESCO, 2014). McLeod et al., (2018) highlight that women face equity and justice obstacles that prevent them from expressing, sharing, or applying their knowledge, therefore, gender is a key factor driving climate vulnerability and opportunities to respond (in addition to age, race, class, caste, indigeneity, and (dis) ability). In this instance, Arora Jonsson (2014, p. 27) expresses gender as the reference to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities of women and men. Specifically, it refers to "power relationships and the practices through which what is a 'man' or 'woman' get defined in different environmental contexts." The lack of attention to the voices of women can be heard and seen more loudly on social media, and in general, reflects a broader pattern of underrepresenting the importance of gender and the freedom of expression individual thought.

According to Charrad (2010), in its most basic definition, agency is the capacity to act. Insofar as individuals can act, they exert some form of agency. In sociological terms, the capacity to act, however, can only be understood within the context of specific social structures in given times and places ranging from states, social institutions, groups, culture, or norms to name only a few. In addition, Srilatha (1994) highlights agency is an individual's (or group's) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes and furthermore, agency can be understood as the process through which women and men use their endowments and take advantage of economic opportunities to achieve desired outcomes (Cabezas, Reese, & Waller, 2007; Freeman, 2001; Oza, 2001). Thus, agency is key to understanding how gender outcomes emerge and why they are equal or unequal. Across all countries, women and men differ in their ability to make effective choices in a range of

spheres, with women typically at a disadvantage (Gustafsson-Larsson, Thurén, Dahlgren & Westman, 2007). Radu and Rao (2008) state that social norms shape women's agency and determine the endowments and opportunities that women have and whether they can exercise the choices to use them. Norms can constrain women's agency, as social norms are particularly binding when increases in women's agency would directly shift power balances in the household and in society and of course, online (Kim, Puri, & Kim-Puri, 2005).

As Alloo and Harcourt (1997, p.12) have pointed out, there is no necessary commonality among women's voices, nor do women always form a homogenous group or have a "feminine focus" simply because they are women of the one nationality. Instead, their skills, interests, goals and priorities, modes of operating and thinking, ways of strategizing, and global outlooks may well differ. This is as true of New Zealand women as women elsewhere. Indeed, the differences provided by rank, kinship relationships, social status, level of education, access to resources, and the nature of their life experiences suggest that they will have a wide diversity of responses to development opportunities. For example, the idea that women experience universal subordination regardless of class differentials has been widely disseminated in feminist and development literature (Mohanty, 1988; Mendoza, 2002; Butler, 2006; Morgensen, 2012; Arvin, Tuck & Morrill, 2013). This move can also be reflected online with more women being more 'vocal' on social media.

## **2.12 Role of Social Media in Women Empowerment and Gender Equality**

The emergence of a digital world has impacted various aspects of day-to-day life, with social media driving a significant portion of these changes. Social media has experienced both – critical vilification as well as an amplified glorification, but the reality remains unchanged that it impacts the lives of those making use of it (Allen, 2019; Ng, 2019; Wharton University of Pennsylvania, 2019). A simple example of which can be seen by scrutinizing how a mere photo-sharing platform such as Instagram has drastically altered the approach in which users now share images such as those of their meals or polished-up travel stories for the world to consume. The image below is a preview of the first post shared on Instagram by former CEO, Kevin Systrom (Evans, 2018). Since then, there have been many refinements in the visual appeal of his Instagram posts. (See figure 2)

**Figure 2:** Instagram: The dog that launched a social media giant



**Figure 3:** Previews from Kevin Systrom’s Instagram Feed in 2018 and 2017.

Source: (@Kevin - Instagram, n.d.)





This shows the potential a single platform can hold in drastically changing the narrative about an already known subject. Social media has the power to act as a catalyst and accelerate the conversation around equality and to promote a balanced and non-stereotypical image of women (Brar, 2020; Cottrell, 2018).

In a study that examines how social media was made use of by women entrepreneurs in Egypt, researchers Beninger et. al (2016) state that social media can positively lead women entrepreneurs towards the road of empowerment. In another study undertaken in 2013, it is learnt that with a multi-fold growth in the volume of Arab female social media users, there is a belief amongst these very women that their involvement in different untouched facets of the society such as economic and social lives were greatly improved through social media, stating it as a way of self-expression.

### **2.13 Instagram for Business or a Professional**

It is widely known that social media usage is not limited for any exclusive set of entities. Any individual who wants to set up an account on Instagram can do so simply by signing up with a unique username and some contact details such as an email address or phone number to match. The platform also allows the user to set up their account as a personal non-commercial profile or as a business. The option to set up an account comes with the added flexibility of

classifying a business profile by categories such as public figure, government organization, politician, personal blog, product/service, musician, artist and an array more (Landis, 2018). Business profiles of all categories come with additional features in comparison to personal profiles, one distinct feature is to run advertisements for the account across the platform (“About Instagram Ads,” n.d.; Collier, 2020).

## **2.14 Social Media Usage by Global Icons and Public Figures**

As of March 2020, the most followed professional profile on Instagram, excluding their own business account, was for the globally renowned footballer, Cristiano Ronaldo (@Cristiano) with a whopping 209.25 million followers worldwide (Clement, 2020). Another popular figure raking in millions of followers on Instagram is Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom as well as another few commonwealth kingdoms. The majesty’s social presence on Instagram is under the username of *@TheRoyalFamily* but focuses majorly on the activities and announcements centred and undertaken by the Queen herself. By cautiously examining the Queen’s Instagram profile, one can quickly arrive at the evident manner in which this social channel is being utilized. *@TheRoyalFamily* account is mainly used to showcase the involvement of Her Majesty the Queen’s involvement in various community-driven activities, family achievements and other occasions such as birthdays and ceremonies, in a highly professional tone of communication (Instagram Profile: @TheRoyalFamily, n.d.). It would be rather difficult and rare to spot a thoughtless portrayal of Her Majesty the Queen by sharing photographs of trivial moments such as personal travel or meals shared on the said profile, a significant distinction of how the very same platform can be used very differently amongst its users for communication.

This approach can be seen in other professional accounts on the platform as well. Another such example is the profile of the American Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, with the username @AOC on Instagram. As a young politician, Ocasio-Cortez has a marginally different approach towards the utilization of her voice on Instagram. She uses the platform to not only share a more personalized opinion on the changing political dynamics but also to reinforce, support and non-commercially promote the values and morals she stands for (Instagram Profile: @AOC, n.d.). She is often seen sharing posts of encouragement for



beneficial changes to government policies and empathy for those individuals, communities and minorities who face inequality, which occasionally occurs due to a lack of financial support and monetary privileges for them to fall back on.

### **2.15 Social Stigma and Attitudes**

Social media usage comes along with its own set of stigmas, be it physical appearance, expected behaviours or choice of topics for voicing personal opinions. An ideal Instagram user may be one who fits the conventional ideas of beauty, professionalism and lifestyle. Instances wherein social media users have stigmatised and shamed individuals who do not fit between the 'skinny' range on a weighing scale are not unheard of. Body shaming has commonly seen healthier women bullied, made fun of and labelled with unpleasant titles (Akhauri, n.d.). These types of unpleasantries and stigmas do not come to an end with just the weight criterion; women have been stigmatised regarding cultural or racial differences, labelled a 'psycho' for speaking out or 'crazy' if suffering from any mental illness.

Just as every story has two sides, social media is now being used to advocate the image of a new age woman and break gendered stereotypes. A growing number of women are now fighting back against the age-old ideals set for them by society; notions that have been hardwired into our minds for over decades. There are now a large string of user accounts on Instagram that not only highlight but positively celebrate big noses, body hair, scars, stretch marks, bloated bellies and many more features of a woman's body that society has conditioned human beings to perceive as unattractive and unpleasant (Hosie, 2019).

### **2.16 The Realities of Social Currency in Social Media**

In 2009, Erich Joachimsthaler coined the term 'social currency', defining it as the lengths people would go to publicise various brands and information about them as their daily social routine (Joachimsthaler, 2017). Fast-forward to 2020 and individuals are now focused on building their own brand image, fallen well off the trajectory presumed by the man who

coined the term. These words are now commonly used in marketing conversations as leveraging social currency of a brand or an individual holds potential gains for a business.

In today's world, social currency is more about the popularity and favourability quotient of an individual's personal image rather than a brand building metric for a product or business. The growing popularity of social currency primarily branches out from the desire and yearning that human beings possess to engage, interact and build relationships with those around us (Klein, 2018). By observing the usage of social media channels today, one may comprehend the manner in which users believe social currency is gathered or increased. Users on Instagram share visual content with the intention for it to be seen by their friends, family or complete outsiders who are given access to it. A major skew of content is towards imagery of moments, objects, situations and environments that will boost the sharer's personal image. Most user profiles on Instagram are likely to look like an exceptionally extravagant storytelling of their own life, inclusive of their travels, gourmet meals, lifestyle, artsy captions and witty banter. Any content that makes the user appear 'cool' is believed to grow your social value. Through this study, the researcher seeks to gain insights on users' perspectives on their ideal social media setting, preferences in content and portrayal of self on Instagram. This data will help enrich and refine the broader information that currently exists on the subject.

### **2.17 Seeking Desirability and Validation from an Online Audience**

It is no speculation that the rapid growth of social media has heightened individuals' need to be connected. Now more than ever before, individuals are intensely drawn towards feeling a sense of belongingness and connectivity with family, friends, colleagues and even strangers on the internet (Meleon, 2017). The need to be aware of a friend's luxury travel or a colleague's career milestones is now amplified with the growth of the various channels that enable simplified access to this nature of personal content. In 2012, a Harvard study shared an astonishing insight stating that human beings utilize up to four hours of our time towards sharing information about ourselves to others and it is said to be an experience that is just as enjoyable as other physical activities, such as consumption of food or indulging in intercourse (Feiler, 2014). In another undertaken observation, few people were given better incentives for answering factual interrogations as opposed to answering questions that require

individuals to voice their own opinions about a topic. Despite being presented with an opportunity to receive higher incentives, there was a clear preference to talk about oneself (Feiler, 2014).

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

## 3 Introduction: Research Methodology

The first part of this chapter will provide an explanation and rationale for the use of qualitative phenomenological research methods as well as discuss constructs that provide context when describing the phenomenon including describing the sampling, approach, size, and composition. The second half of this chapter will discuss the data collection and analysis of the steps taken to demonstrate trustworthiness. Lastly, this chapter will close with a discussion regarding the ethical considerations when engaging in research involving human subjects.

### 3.1 Qualitative Research

'Research methodology' is a term that covers "the overall epistemological paradigm adopted within a particular discipline or tradition, or within a specific research project" (Mikula, 2008, pp. 127-128). The methodology in this study sits within an overarching qualitative paradigm of research that explores the lived experiences of people. Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help people understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 2001). Qualitative researchers set out to discover the often disparate 'realities' that individuals construct within their own social worlds (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and inevitably, carrying out qualitative research means becoming involved in other people's lives and writing about that participation (Cohen et al., 2007; Ezzy, 2002), because the purpose of the research is to understand how people make sense of the world that they live in.

As Patton (1990, p. 1) explains:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to

understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting.

Qualitative researchers, then, enter the worlds of the participants, and try to create conditions in which the participants can share their stories, perceptions, and feelings about the topic under enquiry (Bouma & Ling, 2004; Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) so that the observations, collected as field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) allow interpretation of the material and immaterial practices that make the participants’ worlds visible and meaningful.

Located under the wide umbrella of qualitative research, ethnography is a particular form of research that means (literally) ‘writing about a people’. For practical purposes, it is probably easiest to describe ethnography as the study of human societies (Burns, 2000; Crang & Cook, 2007; Merriam, 2001), immersing the researcher in a social setting for an extended period of data gathering to develop understanding of the emic –the insider’s point of view (Bernard, 2000; Denzin, 1997; Holmes & Earcus, 2005), and the ‘insider view’ here is a key point. This approach is also where the core focus of the study is to uncover and understand how individuals experience situations or certain phenomena by allowing the researcher to view experiences from the participant’s perspective (Austin & Sutton, 2015). Some of the most commonly used methods under this approach are various combinations of interviews and participant observations amongst some others (Finlay, n.d.). The foundation of this approach is one that is centred around the researcher’s aim to understand the occurrence of a phenomena as experienced by the subject or participant themselves and enable the essence of their experiences to emanate and come into view for an improved understanding using the rich data sets (Groenewald, 2004). Ethnography should be understood less by how data are collected, and more by the lens through which the data are interpreted (Bernard, 2002; Merriam, 2002).

More specifically, qualitative research is a term used to describe a set of data collection methods and techniques. It includes various types of qualitative research methods such as

focus groups, interviews, participant observations amongst many others (Hennink et. al., 2020). These types of research methods are used with an intention to uncover answers to a research question in a thorough and structured manner with the added benefit of gaining an understanding of how the topic in question impacts the local audience. It is said to be particularly useful in gaining knowledge and information about culturally specific elements such as personal values, ideologies and behavioural patterns. The nature of qualitative research is one that allows the researcher to get insights of a far more complex nature adding the real-life or 'human' element to the research problem (Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide, n.d.).

The dominance of quantitative research methods now seems to be skewing towards the usage of qualitative research methods in various spaces of research such as social sciences, public health and cultural studies (Mohajan, 2018, p. 23). This occurrence is mainly facilitated by the fact that qualitative research methods hold the potential to gain important information from the viewpoint of the local audience by understanding human behaviour, sentiments and experiences that a research problem involves and impacts (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2001; Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, & Craig, 2012). Researchers using qualitative methods are focused on gaining knowledge and learning from people's belief and personal experiences (Mohajan, 2018, p. 23).

Alasuutari (1998, p. 61) asserted that ethnographic interest lies with "questions related to the difference, to the otherness of the collectivity", and in this project, I am a young female researcher conducting a study in a new technological environment on a topic that I also take part in, as I too am an active social media user on both Instagram and Facebook. My position in the research, then, matches Eppley's (2001) notion of the "insider-outsider" (p. 11). There are many benefits to insider status. As Hockey (1993) points out, an insider is immune to culture shock and, from a base of common understandings, is able to speak easily to participants and build rapport, so is likely to be seen as empathic. An insider-researcher is also in a strong position to assess and make sense of responses to question. All of these points are positive justifications for my decision to undertake semi structured interviewing.

One of the frequently-addressed concerns about qualitative research is that of researcher bias (Wicks & Roland, 2009), and certainly, research that is carried out in a close relationship with a (usually) relatively small number of participants, has the potential for overly personal readings of the data or skewed data-gathering. Many scholars (see, for instance, Cohen et al., 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002) agree that high quality research should be firmly grounded in the conceptual framework, should employ congruent methods for data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), and should clearly demonstrate trustworthiness in all stages of operationalisation.

It was a concern of mine that my research should be considered trustworthy, in large part because of my insider status in a small community, where my actions in this research project, and its outcomes, could become known to many more people than those directly involved, but also because this research is about women written by a woman. As I approached my research, therefore, I was conscious of those elements that contribute to trustworthiness. Validity, which in the context of research “usually means whether a method investigates what it purports to investigate” (Kavale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 327), is a key to producing meaningful, useful and trustworthy research. Here, I submit that semi-structured interviewing and thematic analysis is a valid tool, appropriate to my topic and both familiar and relevant to my participants. Marshall and Rossman (2006) maintain that trustworthiness can be judged if the research process is transparent so that every phase can be checked for a valid contribution to the overall purpose of the project. Thus, it is possible for readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of research if researchers provide field notes, interview transcripts and other records of the research process to validate the conduct and the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Patton (2002) asserts that the skill, professionalism and integrity of the researcher all play an important part in ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research, because, as Bryman (2004) says, although complete objectivity is impossible in social research, a high level of trustworthiness is possible when researchers act in good faith, not allowing personal values to sway either the conduct or the findings of the research.

### **3.2 Significance to this research**

As this research project is heavily focused on gathering insightful information on the topic of social media usage and the consumption of new age digital platforms, it relies strongly on the

personal preferences of a person, their cultural nuances, as well as individual experiences, that influence or shape their very own digital behaviour; one that may significantly differ from another's. This research study aims to tap into the aforementioned areas of insights so as to fully understand the many varied behavioural and cultural factors that drive social media consumption via Instagram amongst women in New Zealand. Qualitative research methods such as an in-depth interview allows the researcher to interact with participants in a more thorough and flexible manner (Mohajan, 2018, p. 38-39). Additionally, in an interview, the participants are likely to provide more elaborate responses as opposed to a yes or no question. A qualitative research method such as an interview is well suited for this topic as it allows participants to share with the researcher their personal stories and the emotional connect or disconnect they experience with certain digital activities in their own words that are far more detailed, one that cannot be achieved in a close-ended response format. Researchers Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander (1995) debate that, if a study requires the researcher to analyse and comprehend behaviours that are considered rather complicated, the method of conducting interviews is plausibly favoured over other research methods, particularly when the researcher aims to gain informational bits that act as missing pieces of a puzzle.

Some other added advantages of using qualitative research methods are context that participant responses provide or the storytelling that cannot be seen through numerical data, the ability for the researcher to observe and accurately capture the changing attitudes, emotions or dynamics of a group or individual and well as flexibility it allows in facilitating a much more detailed understanding and analysis.

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting - what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting." (Patton, 1990, p.1).



Alongside gathering insightful data, it is also crucial to be aware of the limitations of various data collection or research methods. As with anything else, qualitative research methods have their own set of limitations or disadvantages. A key drawback to this method of research is the smaller sample size. As many of these research methods are focused on smaller groups and participants, the potential to use conclusions from the study is restricted for scale and generalisation to a larger audience (Atieno, 2009).

### **3.3 Considerations for alternative methods**

An online survey was considered as the potential research method to utilise for this research study. However, after a conscious analysis of its strengths and limitations, it did not appear to be the most well suited fit. Despite the ability to achieve a significantly larger sample size for scale and generalisation using this method, coupled with the convenience of a digitalised questionnaire, it fails to provide thorough details of personal experiences or opinions and does not facilitate culturally rich storytelling.

### **3.4 Reasoning for the selection of in-depth interviews**

With the World Health Organisation ([WHO](#))(2020) declaring the COVID-19 disease as a pandemic that is sweeping across the world since the start of the year 2020, the approach to an appropriate method of gathering insights and collecting data was tweaked and decided as a combination of face-to-face interviews as well as digital video interviews. The main reasoning for this approach sprouted out of New Zealand moving into Alert Level 4 lockdown. On March 24th, 2020, Auckland University of Technology shared an email informing research students to pause all face-to-face data gathering methods that involved participant interaction, as it could have placed the researcher and/or the participants at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was in line with the safety guidelines set by the NZ government, that had to be met through the course of the various stages of lockdown in New Zealand. The guidelines did not permit individuals to meet anyone outside of their own bubble, for any form of interaction or activity. As the participants of this study were based out of different regions in Auckland or other parts of New Zealand, travelling to different places across the

city and nation was not possible. Setting up a digitally conducted video interview became a far more feasible alternative for all parties involved.

The decision of selecting in-depth interviews for the purpose of data collection for this research can be understood by recognizing the value it can add to any study. Semi-structured interviews are conversational by nature, allowing the participants to provide well detailed and elaborate responses to the interviewer's many questions (Longhurst, 2003). As stated by Robert Weiss, interviewing others provides us with the opportunity to gain insights from someone else's perception and observation of a phenomenon, information that would otherwise not be available to the researcher without being exposed to the phenomenon, themselves in exactly the same combination of settings (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Successfully navigating interviews are not as simplified as they appear because it requires the interviewer to seamlessly facilitate a conversation, pay attention to every minute detail and keep aside their own biases. However, when conducted correctly and with flair, this approach can garner a rich pool of data (Dumay & Qu, 2011).

As the usage of this methodology allows us to gain granular details about one's personal experiences and the occurrences of various phenomena in a cultural and social setting, methods such as semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and focus groups have been made use of in various studies wherein the objective was to identify how specific new age tools and channels such as social networking sites (SNSs), information and communication technologies et cetera, held the potential to improve people's daily lives and as well as to understand user behaviours and the impact of various social media in areas of empowerment and professionalism with women users at its core (Beninger et al., 2014, 2016; Chib et al., 2015; Durukan et al., 2012).

I selected my participants using snowball sampling (Bernard, 2002; Bouma & Ling, 2004; Bryman, 2004; Davidson & Tolich, 2003), which took two months using word of mouth, phone calls and emails. I began by leaning out into my own networks to engage possible participants, then let the snowball gather size from that point (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Liangputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Friends and acquaintances who knew of my research suggested names, and I then followed up with an introductory email and information sheet. When people accepted

the invitation, I applied the snowball technique to them too, and I stopped seeking more people when I noticed that each conversation was yielding different details but similar principles. I took that to mean that I had reached data saturation. The interviews themselves took place over a two-month period, in two main phases, partly because some personal events required that I take a period of leave. At the time, the break seemed to disrupt the flow of the research, but in fact the period of leave turned out to be an opportunity for deep reflection.

Most of my participants lived in Auckland, with many of them originally from different parts of New Zealand. The participants were all female, who self-identified as New Zealanders, 80% of whom were born in New Zealand. Every participant is regarded as highly competent in their chosen creative areas; and they are all technologically savvy millennials who have a good understanding of digital media. The latter section of this chapter will provide additional details about each participant of the study.

Once the participants were found, I sent a formal invitation to them for a conversation with me at an agreed time and place, for just under an hour. Although, the discussion was in no way limited by time as each individual was overtly generous with their time. The interview was semi-structured and allowed follow-up questions to better interpret some generic responses. Since all participants are fluent in English, the conversations were conducted using the language that best facilitated the interview.

Strachan (1997) offers a discussion of inter-subjectivity defining it as “a sharing of knowledge between the researcher and the participant[s] which includes the researcher’s own experiences, and details of the research process so there is no hidden agenda, and an input by the participant into the research process” (p. 95). Inter-subjectivity, which is significant in all qualitative research and essential to this research, sums up the notion that researchers should build trust and good relationships with participants by respecting cultural norms such as reciprocity “because the conduct of the study depends exclusively on the relationships that the researcher builds with participants” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 78). The sharing that took place between me and my participants during the interviewing sessions flattened the asymmetrical power relations potentially inherent in research relationships (Strachan, 1997),

and resulted in the development of special relationships, out of which valuable and relevant information was provided that gave credibility to this research.

Ethical conduct is vital if research is to be considered trustworthy and valid (Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Maxwell, 1998; Merriam, 2002). Ethical considerations include avoiding harm to participants (Bernard, 2002; Bouma & Ling, 2004; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Kvale, 1996) and obtaining consent that is based on full, clear information so that both the researcher and the participants share a mutual understanding of their relationship so that commitment from both parties is genuine (Blaxter et al., 2001; Burns, 2000; Cohen et al., 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003d; Kvale, 1996), and ensuring that participants know that they have the right of withdrawal from the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003c; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Confidentiality is very important so that participants will not feel threatened and, therefore, willingly share with the researcher (Bouma & Ling, 2004; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002).

I ensured that I closely all ethical procedures laid down by Auckland University of Technology as I fully accept that “the rights of the people are greater than the researcher’s need to know” (Bouma & Ling, 2004, p. 192). As a social researcher, I have the responsibility not only in the search for knowledge, but also to the participants I depended on for the research; that is, I have to preserve the dignity of my participants (Cohen et al., 2000). Therefore, doing no harm to participants meant that this study strictly complied with AUT’s guidelines. The participants knew that their involvement was entirely optional. They were sent a letter inviting them to participate and were given information about the research, and what I would need from them if they agreed to be part of the project. They were also assured that all their responses were confidential and that the findings would be analysed and presented in such a manner that they would not be individually identifiable. Furthermore, they were informed that all the materials related to the study would be securely stored for five years after the completion of the study then all materials, interview tapes and transcripts would be destroyed or returned to the participants if they wanted them.

Informed consent is very important as it gives the participant rights to freedom and self-determination about joining the project (Cohen et al., 2000; Kvale, 1996). A consent form was sent to participants. An accompanying letter was attached to the transcripts informing the

participants that they could amend the transcript, that a one-page summary of the research findings would be given to them for comment and discussion, and that the final research report would be made available to them. Confidentiality is extremely important as it ensures that participants “private data identifying the subjects will not be reported” (Kvale, 2007, p. 27). The participants were, therefore, informed that the access to the information obtained from the interviews was restricted to the participants, me and my supervisors, and that any additional access to the information would only be granted with the permission of the participants. Every participant was thanked by letter and I still maintain close contact with my participants on a regular basis.

### 3.6 Overview of Participants of the Study

For this study, five female New Zealanders were interviewed through in-depth interviews. The table below provides a briefly summarized background of the participants involved in the research.

Name	Age	From	Profession	Device Type	No. of Apps on Device	Type of Apps on Device
P1	25	Tauranga	Marketer & Business Owner	Smartphone - iOS	124	Shopping, Social Media and other Service-oriented apps.
P2	26	Christchurch	Musician	Smartphone - iOS	44	Social Media, Entertainment, Photography,

						Voice Recorder, Rideshare Apps.
P3	26	Auckland	Communications	Smartphone – iOS	69	Horoscope, Travel, Social, Shopping, Service Oriented – Uber, Air NZ, etc.
P4	26	Tauranga	Brand Manager & Photographer	Smartphone – Android	115	Photography, Educational, Social, Podcasts, Service Oriented Apps, Work Apps – Outlook, Teams, Skype)
P5	32	Auckland/ Hamilton	Influencer & Social Media Expert	Smartphone – Android	59	Social, Work Apps – Slack, Zoom, Music, Podcasts, Travel, Shopping, Service Oriented.

The average age of participants is 27 and the average number of applications on a participant's smartphone is 82. 100% of the participants have social media and service-oriented applications such as Uber or bank specific apps on their mobile devices. The section below will further provide a brief description of each participant's portrayed personality.

Participant 1 (P1) is a highly motivated individual running who runs her own business when not working at their corporate job at a social media agency. Despite being a social media

expert, she spends a fairly low range of time on social channels for personal use and thoroughly enjoys outdoor activities and is highly social.

Participant 2 (P2) is a skilled musician who performs live gigs as well as plays music and is the vocalist at many events and weddings around New Zealand. She also undertakes a corporate role in a community-driven organization. Her interests range from music and cultural arts to travel and education.

Participant 3 (P3) is a fitness enthusiast working in the communications industry. A highly sociable and energetic individual who enjoys outdoor activities, sports, travel, events and social gatherings.

Participant 4 (P4) is a passionate branding specialist and an ardent photographer when not at their desk. She is an individual who enjoys scheduling their day-to-day activities and planned adventures, encourages and executes social gatherings and keeps themselves well-informed about local and global topics.

Participant 5 (P5) is a micro-celebrity doubling down as a social media specialist in their corporate role. She is bold, authentic, encourages positive dialogue and amplifies many social causes through her personal social mediums. She is a vintage clothing and travel enthusiast.

### **3.7 Summary**

The purpose of this section is to discover, uncover and understand the array of qualitative research methods available to the researcher for the purpose of data collection. Allowing a breakdown of what some of the most suitable media for collecting data for the study are, by analysing the strengths and limitations of various research methods, understanding the leverage it allows the researcher to have for gaining accurate information and familiarise oneself with existing research within the same topical sphere.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### 4 Introduction:

The purpose of this research was to understand and evaluate the various user patterns and behaviours of young female New Zealanders between the ages of 25 to 34 on popular social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Identifying how women in New Zealand utilise SNSs for personal and professional use, coupled with the different methods in which they leverage new age digital platforms and their reasoning for doing so were key motivators for this research. As a reminder, the research questions below will inform my study and will be analysed in more detail when discussing the findings.

### Research Questions

Q1. How would you describe your social media persona?

Q2. Does your social media persona (reel) match (real)ity?

Q3. What is the role of social media in your everyday life?

Furthermore, the chosen qualitative method of in-depth interviews for data collection allowed intricate insights into a user's mindset and approach towards usage of social media and its increased consumption. This chapter will therefore provide a detailed understanding of the insightful findings gathered from the research alongside some crucial conclusions drawn from these findings. The research participants were requested to provide answers to the below listed questions for the purpose of gathering knowledge on the user's overall usage of social media, various applications of the technology in their everyday life as well as the impact of these digital channels on their personal and professional life.



## **Indicative Interview Questions**

Q4. What would your next post on Instagram look like?

Q5. In what way has social media impacted your consumption of information?

Q6. Do you follow any public figure/celebrity for information rather than entertainment?

Q7. What elicits a 'feel good' emotion on social media platforms?

Q8. What elicits an upsetting emotion on social media platforms?

Q9. How do you think SNSs have changed the way we communicate?

Q10. How do you measure the effectiveness/success rate of your online activity?

Q11. What are some of the worst behaviours seen on SNSs? Why?

Q12. What is your main motive for Instagram usage? Why?

Q13. How often do you share content on social media?

Q14. How does a well-received post on Instagram make you feel?

Q15. How does a post that didn't garner enough likes/comments make you feel?

Q16. How does your online identity shape others' perception of you?

Q17. If all SNSs were to be taken down, how would you feel/how would it impact you?

Q18. In what way do you think SNSs are beneficial?

Q19. How can a celebrity/influencer/user with high reach improve the social media landscape?

Q20. Name a few toxic traits of a social media landscape.

Responses from participants on the above-mentioned questions grant the researcher the ability to get a full picture of a social media user's online behaviour as well as their projected and desired virtual personality. Comprehending these personal experiences enables the research to be sharply focused on areas of impact in an individual life, its significance in relation to modern methods of communication, connectivity, information dispersal, global news, awareness of social or important issues and much more. As social media continues to gain momentum, becoming an indispensable tool in the lives of many, it is of paramount importance to recognise the evolution in the mindset, behaviour and patterns of the users on these very platforms.

The pool of insights garnered from these in-depth interviews will be disseminated in a block style/approach in the succeeding sections below. The chosen approach will focus briefly on the participant responses received across all interviews for each of the twenty individual interview questions, followed by an overarching conclusion of the key findings of this study.

#### **4.1 Findings**

This section aims to discuss in detail the personal experiences, preferences and opinions shared by the participants of the study, classified under their appropriate research question. The section will start off by providing insight into the data collected for RQ1 and will follow the order of research questions as listed under this chapter's *Introduction*.

##### **Q1. How would you describe your social media persona?**

The very first interview question aims to analyse and identify the different versions of personalities created by the users meticulously for their self-portrayal on social media platforms. The findings established from the in-depth interviews show a significant emphasis on a realistic portrayal of one-self in virtual spaces. Another notable insight is the skew towards self-generated content that does not revolve around the user's appearance such as selfies or photographs that have the user as the main focus, contrary to studies that indicate

an increase in self-portraits or selfies with the heightened use of social media alongside links to higher levels of narcissism (Chae, 2017; Fox et al, 2018; Sorokowski et al, 2015). This finding is particularly essential in understanding the gradual evolution of social media users and their behaviours showcased on social networking sites. In response to the first research question, a participant stated - "I poke fun at myself, I am very real, I talk about real stuff. I don't filter (images, etc) at all. I try to be funny and keep it really personable. I like my social media to basically be how I would talk to you in real-life. Pretty much - what you see is what you get." with another participant stating "I'd say that I try to be quite real. I try not to post anything quite 'pose' because I myself get really annoyed at that when influencers do."

## **Q2. Does your social media persona (reel) match (real)ity?**

The second interview question sought to determine if there exists a significant overlap in the personalities portrayed by users on digital channels in comparison to their real and authentic personalities offline. The responses for this question from the in-depth interviews conducted reinforced quite repetitively the high overlap quotient of one's personality on and off digital screens. Users stated that the content generated by them is authentic and largely true to their interests, personal qualities and lifestyles in the real unplugged world. A handful of users seem to incorporate isolated parts of their overall personality into their social media accounts, if not the entirety of their dynamic personalities. A participant, musician by profession, summarised their digital and offline personality overlap by saying "Of my three pages – the acoustic account is definitely a part of my personality but only a select part of my personality and the artist project account is another part of my personality, but they are isolated parts of my personality and not all of my personality. They're definitely 'me' but not all of me.". Another user mentioned their method of leveraging a certain section of their personality in isolation, through another social media account curated specifically for professional or business use, where the isolated personality is in line with the image of the business, brand or professional and benefits the commercial outcome. This enables us to recognise a new aspect of social media usage. The user is able to identify advantageous elements on platforms and curate an image of themselves online accordingly that may be

used for specific business or work opportunities, thus leveraging a digital platform as a tool in enhancing their lives outside of personal settings.

### **Q3. What is the role of social media in your everyday life?**

The goal of the interview research question is to provide additional context to the importance and key functionalities of social media platforms for individual users. For this question, all interviewees mentioned the ability to be connected with family, friends and colleagues as a key role social media plays in their everyday life. One participant expanded on this research question stating - “I think number one, it’s for connecting easily and quickly with those that I care about. As someone who has family living in a completely different city, it’s a vital way to stay in touch with my family members and friends who don’t live in the same cities or countries that I live in.”. Alongside this, users also mentioned the role it plays as a source of entertainment via engaging content and as an information provider for knowledge on various subjects. It also acts as a business resource for hosting a fully digital business and for promotional activities undertaken for the business or professional entity. On the subject of social media providing information, a participant chimed in to say “If I think of Instagram, I use it to follow few influencers and lots of endometriosis activists and activists in general, so I find it quite empowering.”

### **Q4. What would your next post on Instagram look like?**

The objective of the fourth interview question in the interview gained an insight into the type of self-generated content that users share on their personal, professional and/or business accounts. This helps the researcher understand, compare and evaluate the overall persona of the user in a virtual space and to review if it is in line with the descriptions that participants provided for the description of their social media profile. A common thread in the responses across participants was the wider category for self-generated content. A majority of interviewees stated that their upcoming social media post would revolve around an activity – such as a walk with pets, a leisure hike, weekend outings, travel or mundane elements they observe in their surroundings. Users with another account, excluding their personal one, state

that the profile for their professional and/or business use would incorporate content that is relevant for the brand, assists in building awareness as well as enhancing the potential of a business to grow and generate benefits for the owner. One participant shares insight into their next Instagram post stating - "On my business account, it would be a product that I'm selling. On my personal account, it would probably be the next time I would go to the beach or something."

#### **Q5. In what way has social media impacted your consumption of information?**

The fifth interview question aims to recognise changes in the usage patterns and steady evolution of the process of consumption of information with the existence of new age digital platforms of which social networking sites are focused on. SNS, like Instagram and Facebook, were launched primarily to connect with friends and share personal content, specifically images with those connections. Over time, social media usage has seen gradual changes, the specifics of which are explored through this question. All interviewees state an increase in the levels of consumption for information on several subjects spanning geography, science, social issues, world politics, health, professions and more. Interviewees state that social networking sites have improved their awareness on many worldly issues and situations, prompting them to manually seek additional information on topics they have encountered on these networking sites. Users also mention the usage of different types of platforms for different types of information including the ability to choose who you follow and if their content aligns with your interests and subjects you are seeking to learn more about. A participant summarises this by saying - "I will use social media for different types of news. For example, I will go to Facebook for updates on NZ news, I'll use Instagram for updates on world news and I'll use LinkedIn for updates in the business world. I will go to lots of different channels to get news that I need, and I guess that can take time and means that you're consuming quite a bit." This enables users to garner information in an accessible manner wherein they are in high levels of control for the type of content they actively consume and can nit-pick ways in which their consumption patterns can enhance their own lives.

**Q6. Do you follow any public figure/celebrity for information rather than entertainment?**

This sixth interview question allowed the researcher to gather insights into the social media user's everyday feed – what they engage with, what type of information they seek, if they are influenced by celebrities or other public figures and identifying additional sources of information for a user through accounts of other individuals. Through the responses received from the participants, it can be understood that users are likely to follow public figures whether they are celebrities, government officials, artists, activists or comedians for information and entertainment value. Users stated following accounts that garnered and reflected their own personal interests in topics such as global news, social issues, health issues, leisure activities such as photography, gardening and more. This allows us to observe how the new age social media users carefully curate their feed to be relevant, personable and beneficial for their own personal and/or professional rationale.

**Q7. What elicits a 'feel good' emotion on social media platforms?**

The seventh interview question aims to recognise the range of areas within social media platforms that elicit a 'feel good' emotion for its users and learn what these pocketed areas of positivity mean to young New Zealanders. The interviewees reinforced that content centred around animals such as pet dogs or pet cats, nature or sceneries, happy moments of a friend, colleague or distant family member which makes them feel happy when showcased through digital channels. One of the interviewees, who also uses social media as a marketing platform for her personal artist project, mentions that when people react positively to her content about her music, it elevates her spirits by letting her know that people are reciprocating and enjoying her music or content. Another interviewee adds that looking back at all the self-generated content shared on their own profile allows them to look back and reminisce happy memories in the past as if going through an old journal or scrapbook. This question is of significant value as it enables the researcher to analyse the various ways in which social media channels can have a positive and uplifting impact on the minds of its young users and also draw focus on the reality that users are able to quickly identify areas that elevate their own moods and supplement an environment for a nurtured mindset.

### **Q8. What elicits an upsetting emotion on social media platforms?**

The eighth interview question aims to recognise the various negative or destructive ways in which social media channels are used by individuals as discussed by the interviewees. This aids the researcher's understanding of what users consider negative, harmful or deconstructive behaviour on digital platforms. There are many common threads between the responses garnered for this question by the participants. There is a blanket understanding and recognition amongst the users interviewed, that commonly seen behaviours of users such as force feeding individual opinions, conspiracy theories, bullying, animal abuse, racial abuse, perverse engagement, spreading misinformation, false advertising amongst others are not only upsetting but must also cease to exist in the digital space. Two users also mention that the constant bombarding of information on sensitive topics such as racial discrimination incidents such as the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter (2020) movement and excessive conversations about the Coronavirus Pandemic (2020) can bring one down and illicit upsetting emotions.

### **Q9. How do you think SNSs have changed the way we communicate?**

Question nine looks at the changing communication landscape with the addition and evolution of various social media channels and its usage by individuals. A key element indicated as a factor for the change in methods used to communicate today is convenience. Social media platforms allow users to easily manage, maintain and utilise connections both, locally and globally. This facilitates the process of communication as it enables the user to be connected to others around the globe in real-time, with minimal inputs and at no additional cost. Participants also mention a rise in the frequency of their communication with family and friends, giving social media credit for simplifying the interaction process. A participant also adds that social media has not only changed the way people communicate with friends or members of their personal life but has also impacted the professional setting in areas such as engagement with colleagues stating – “We’re Facebook friends with our manager now, which

probably wasn't something you would do (before)." The method of communicating via social media platforms hasn't changed drastically since the beginning of digital media, with convenience and global connectivity still at its core, however, it has seen refinement overtime. Individuals are also seen utilising the 'dual-citizenship' technique (Mostaghimi & Crotty, 2011) on social media wherein a single user has two social media profiles – one for personal use and one for professional networking.

#### **Q10. How do you measure the effectiveness/success rate of your online activity?**

The tenth question delves into what the users perceive to be their personal metric for measuring the success quotient of self-generated content on social media platforms. Participants state that engagement metrics such as likes, comments and/or re-shares are their primary tools to quantify the success ratio for their newest piece of content. Users prefer it when their content leads to a dialogue between their audiences and them, replicating the scenario that would unfold in a physical setting when they share some news with their friends or colleagues. A user also mentioned the need to limit focus on self-validation metrics such as the ones stated above. However, for most users, their preferences for the performance of their own content is ideally interaction with their followers or connections, which acts as a positive conversation or constructive feedback.

#### **Q11. What are some of the worst behaviours seen on SNSs? Why?**

Interview question 11 enables us to take a peek into the perspectives of individual users as to what behaviours on social networking sites are unwanted and harmful. It sets the tone for recognising what an ideal environment for digital usage would be for an individual user if the certain elements they consider harmful in the current landscape were removed or reduced. The presence of highly opinionated users who are unable to move away from their own beliefs whether correct or incorrect, users who spread malicious content in the form of posts or dialogues with others spreading misinformation, support on divisive and unethical issues such as racism, bullying and conspiracies form the overarching theme of what the new age



social media user does not want to see prevalent in a global digital landscape. There appears to be a significant level of awareness among the participants about the increased occurrences of unpleasant activities undertaken online such as creation and dissemination of fake news, scams, racist comments and trolling, amongst many others.

**Q12. What is your main motive for Instagram usage? Why?**

Insights into the varied and personalised motives for usage of the popular social media platform, Instagram, are sought through this question helping understand the underlying reasons for the continuing popularity of the platform amongst the young user base (Statista, 2018, 2020). Reinforcing the responses received to Interview Question 9 that look at the factors leading the changes in how individuals communicate online, the convenience element holds true by allowing users to be abreast with the affairs and activities of one's social circles as one of the main motives for Instagram use. Apart from the need to be aware of people's daily lives, participants have additional motivations for utilising SNSs. Business owners or professionals who leverage Instagram for commercial or career-related advantages state the platform acts as a tool to improve their brand's awareness amongst a target audience and provides opportunities to market the brand or their professional project to a much wider digital audience in comparison to the offline audience volumes.

**Q13. How often do you share content on social media?**

Question 13 attempts to seek additional information on the participant's usual activity on social networking sites, a response useful in identifying the importance and impact of the platform in a user's everyday life. Participants who access these networking platforms through a single personal login, mention the lack of regular activity across their social channels averaging a post every week or every fortnight. However, this is only an indicator of how often they share self-generated content and does not take into account the total time spent across platforms by the said user. On the other hand, participants who access SNSs through multiple social handles such as those for business or professional use, state that their

ideal goal for a posting frequency that benefits their business or project is fairly high, averaging between a post every day or every two days. Business or project owned users are informed on the best posting schedules and attempt to follow these guides to ensure and maximise the advantageous potential of the platform.

**Q14. How does a well-received post on Instagram make you feel?**

The purpose of interview question fourteen is to analyse if and how positive incidences or situations that occur in a virtual space can impact the user's behaviour and mood, both online and offline. It helps recognise the impact a digital channel can have on an individual's overall mindset and behaviour pattern. The responses by all participants acknowledged that a well-received post on Instagram elicited a positive and happy emotion, even if the objective of the well-received post in question was not intentionally aimed at seeking validation from their audiences. This emotion is also stated to translate into their offline personality, albeit for a short period of time. This is an important indicator of the impact audience responses to a user's content on social media can have on the individual, and the power it holds to transition a happy emotion that was felt online, into the offline mindset of the young user.

**Q15. How does a post that didn't garner enough likes/comments make you feel?**

Similar to Interview Question 14, this question aims to assess how negative or unsatisfactory incidents or situations that occur in social channels make a user feel online and offline. A common theme in the responses by participants was the acknowledgement that an underperforming post would dampen their spirits by a notch or two and would translate into their offline behaviour but would only last for a short-lived moment and not make them dwell in an unhappy frame of mind. An interesting addition, by a couple of participants, mentioned the role Instagram algorithms play in the performance of a user's post, indicating sufficient knowledge to recognise the workings of the platform and an understanding of how these metrics may not be accurate for the content shared, thus not letting their spirits take a hit but

in turn work on identifying what can be done better, specifically in a professional or commercial facet.

**Q16. How does your online identity shape others' perception of you?**

The 16<sup>th</sup> interview question aims to understand the level of awareness users have about the persona created for themselves through their own curated content and to analyse if their online personalities, as perceived by the audience, is true to their real offline persona. Each participant described the persona they believe is perceived by the audience for their social profiles. For most of these users, their perceived personality is often a sectional overlap of their true personality. Some participants also believe that their online personality heightens or brings attention to a certain quality they possess or are perceived to possess. An example of this is when a user who travels quite often is presumed to always be on a vacation or quite the explorer, which may not be the reality.

**Q17. If all SNSs were to be taken down, how would you feel/how would it impact you?**

Interview question 17 sought to understand the different areas of a user's life that are impacted by the usage of social media on a daily or habitual basis and seeks to identify the eminent changes that would follow if social media sites were to be taken down indefinitely. All participants flagged that it would be increasingly different to connect and interact with friends and family from all over the world. It would lead to a decrease in the level of communication across groups of friends, colleagues and even family members. While most said the impact of the absence of social media would not be incomprehensibly distressing, excluding the lack of ease in communication, many spoke of the impact it would have on their business or project created through various digital media. A participant who pursues a career in music stated that it would be 'nearly impossible' to get the word out about gigs and performances as widely and efficiently as possible, through social networking sites. With another participant, mentioning that they would feel their business, which was mainly built using these platforms – didn't actually exist as much, making them feel as though all the effort

and hard work put into the business was in vain. While there may be a handful of inconveniences to users with the absence of social media, the impact on the professional lives of individuals who have created career-driven avenues using these platforms would take a consequential hit.

**Q18. In what way do you think SNSs are beneficial?**

The 18<sup>th</sup> interview question aims to gain perspective on the positive side of social media platforms as seen or believed by users, pin-pointing areas of the digital world that provide nifty benefits in different categories of one's life. While connectivity and interaction with others on the platform continues to be an enormous advantage and deal-breaker for the participants, they also mention the usage of social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn to be informative by creating awareness and educating its users on a range of topics such as social issues, global news, cultural elements as well as a tool for invoking inspiration for an array of subjects. Users also believe that social media platforms have created a new plethora of freedom, in relation to potential careers, by offering the platform as a tool to pursue newer professions, market themselves and their businesses independently, without paid assistance, and network with other professionals to drive their business by fostering collaborations, cross-promotions and partnerships.

**Q19. How can a celebrity/influencer/user with high reach improve the social media landscape?**

Social Media Influencers or SMIs have been in the media limelight for quite a period of time, commonly for controversies (Khamis et al, 2017). With many engaging and interacting with these influencers and the content shared by them on a regular basis, this interview question aims to understand a user's knowledge, understanding and views on the influencer community's current content types and the avenues these micro-celebrities possess to initiate valuable conversations and bring about positive change in greater detail. All participants voiced their desire for SMIs to share content that is authentic. Users recognise

that influencers generate income through sponsored content and the monetisation of their feed, however, there is still a strong need for influencer content to be honest, real and relatable. It is understood that participants of this research expect more value from the influencers they currently follow or would want to follow in terms of content on important topics like body positivity, health issues, cultural and racial diversity, environment and sustainability and many more. Users want SMIs to create content that generates awareness about different cardinal subjects rather than heavily modified posts used for revenue or to fortify an unrealistic persona of themselves and their lifestyles. A handful of users mentioned the potential influencers have to bring about positive changes but also recognising the constant harsh scrutiny they face from the social audience on a said platform. To summarise, a participant stated – “I think they (*influencers*) have got a lot of power for a lot of change and I think they are not using it enough at the moment.”

**Q20. Name a few toxic traits of a social media landscape.**

The final interview research question focuses on gaining insights into activities and behaviours that social media users consider harmful, unethical or toxic in the current digital landscape. These range from activities undertaken by friends, micro-celebrities as well as social media accounts of different companies or brands. The popular bandwagon wherein individuals use these digital platforms to showcase a life of ultimate perfection – lifestyle, career, relationships and more is one that the participants of this study are particularly irked and displeased about. A user’s behaviour that stems from their need to portray the most happy and positive moments of their life every chance they get not only sets an unrealistic standard of a ‘happy life’ that does not truly exist but can also make other users feel poorly about their very own normal lives through comparisons with others’ virtual feed. Another facet of social media that is considered toxic by the participants is the overall positivity, support and encouragement for a specific body type. Body shaming on social media has been in the spotlight after studies recognising the impact it can have on a young user’s perception of their own body versus the unrealistic body image crafted and reinforced by society (Datar, 2019). A participant also pin-points the way social media drives a single, specific and unattainable aesthetic for a platform of thousands of unique and diverse individuals; usually

along the lines of – skinny, tall, flawless skin, booming career and an overall extravagant life. Other negatives in the social sphere included false advertising (e.g.: fit teas for a skinny body), addiction to social media use (e.g.: constantly checking for updates or validation from their audiences), forcing one’s own opinion and beliefs onto others, emotional pressure to become a part of a trending bandwagon as well as misinformation, fake news and fraud.

## **4.2 Summary**

In sum, the findings of this study recognise the different areas of social media sites that participants consider to be useful, impactful or distressing, alongside providing valuable insights and reasonings for their own social media usage and behaviours. From the era social media was introduced to the global audience up till 2020, the adoption rate of social media platforms has seen an astonishing ascend with 5% in 2005 to a multi-fold increase of 79% in 2019 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). It brings to life what an impact an unimagined platform of the early 2000s has had on the lives of all its users today. Social media platforms have evolved drastically over the years, with its functionalities, design, structure and monetisation capabilities. Similarly, a user’s social media usage has also seen levels of evolution over time.

# DISCUSSION

## 5.3 Key themes

The below sections will summarise the three key themes drawn from the major findings of this study gained through the above-mentioned set of structured interview questions. By revisiting literature in areas of social media, digital natives and social media experiences these themes address the Research Questions that this study posed in more detail.

### **The Evolution of a Social Media User and their Changing Preferences**

## 5.4 Consciousness of Content

A common thread in the blueprint of social media platforms is the ability to showcase user-generated content and the audience's engagement with it. With over 3.6 billion users across SNSs (Statista, 2020) each creating content that primarily resonates with their interests first-hand, the array of possibilities and combinations are endless when it comes to segregating vast content types. When social media sites were launched, users who were still exploring the functionalities of the platform primarily engaging with their connections via chat-based conversations and shared self-generated content about their personal lives in the form of textual or visual updates. Over a decade after SNSs came to life, in 2016, Facebook was said to have observed a serious decline in the volume of users sharing self-generated content about their personal lives for their digital friends to see (Efrati, 2016). The sharing of personal content by users was taking a 21% hit each year, with Facebook seeing a 16% decrease mid-year in 2016 (Robles, 2016). This is an important insight as it recognised the drop in a user's interest for continually sharing information about themselves and users instead began gaining interest in mass-created or generic content as well as private information sharing through messaging or chat applications ("Business Insider Intelligence," 2016; Traphagen, 2018).

In a survey conducted by Stackla (2017), it was discovered that a vast majority of consumers (86%) prioritise authenticity from companies/brands and a whopping 90% of these millennials stated authenticity as the most crucial factor when making decisions on what brands were worthy of their support. Millennials are also seemingly ahead of the curve in cutting loose brands that share inauthentic content with 68% unfollowing a brand account on social media. The statistics are supported by participant responses that mention the need for authenticity and 'real' content on social platforms, from themselves and others. The figure below depicts the importance of authenticity in relation to corporate brands and/or companies shown in percentages for different age cohorts.

**Figure 4:** *Authenticity Matters Most to Millennials Stackla Report 2017*

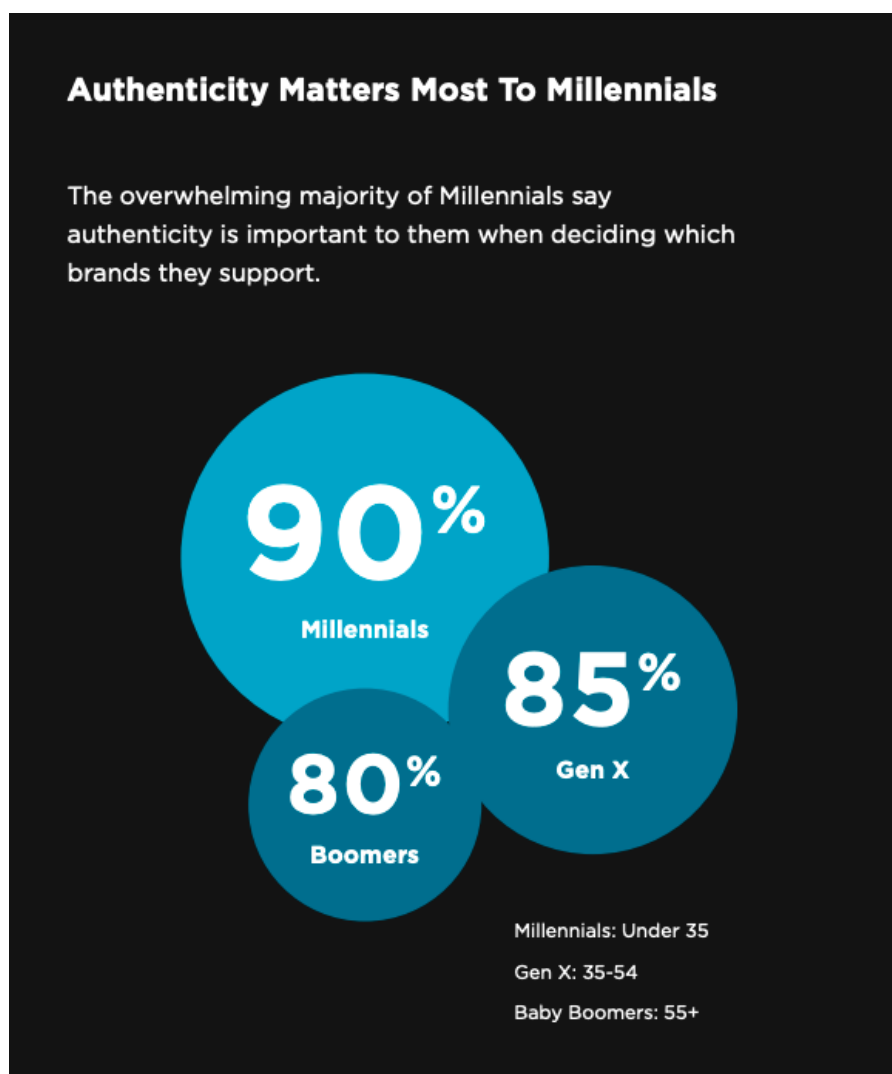


Image Source: Stackla (2017)



With these statistics in mind, the participants' responses that centred sharply on the need for authentic content from brands and users appears to be in line with a majority of social media users within the same age group. Participants showcased an increased interest in the realistic and true to life portrayal of their friends' and colleagues' lives on social media with an unpleasant reaction to heavily edited, filtered, staged and commercial content generated by companies as well as individuals including both – influencers and ordinary users.

While the participants shared interest in authentic content, they also indicated a personal interest in engaging and interacting with accounts that shared content that was insightful, informative and improved their awareness on topics that intrigued them, alongside following feel-good social media accounts dedicated to sharing animal or nature imageries. Only a tiny percentage of interviewees showed interest in content by mega-stars or micro-celebrities online. Another common ground amongst participants was the need to be better informed about global news and issues.

The overall mindset of the participants towards the content they seek to share, engage with and appreciate on social networking sites required a strong ethical, informational and/or honest foundation. There was an emphasis from a majority of participants on the need for social media to act as a channel of valuable information sharing on various subjects and as a platform for widespread constructive dialogue. Users believed social networking sites to have an unused potential to bring awareness to many global issues and increase conversations on subjects that really matter to human beings as a whole.

At the start of the social media era, there was a guileless approach to social media from most of its shiny new users. The beginning of a user's journey on SNSs years ago included navigating vulnerable pitfalls of the new platform consistently, and many a times unsuccessfully. However, it seems to be undergoing some change. One of the research interviewees commented on this saying – "I would've probably been more naïve to some things that were posted when I first started using social media, I think I'm a lot more aware of not believing the first thing I see (on social media)."

## 5.5 Consumption of Information

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have now become a popular pathway to global news, with more than half of all internet users (64%) learning about a breaking news story through social media platforms (Martin, 2018). The below figure displays the platform specific percentages for the user's pathway to news.

**Figure 5: Social Media Sites as Pathways to News**

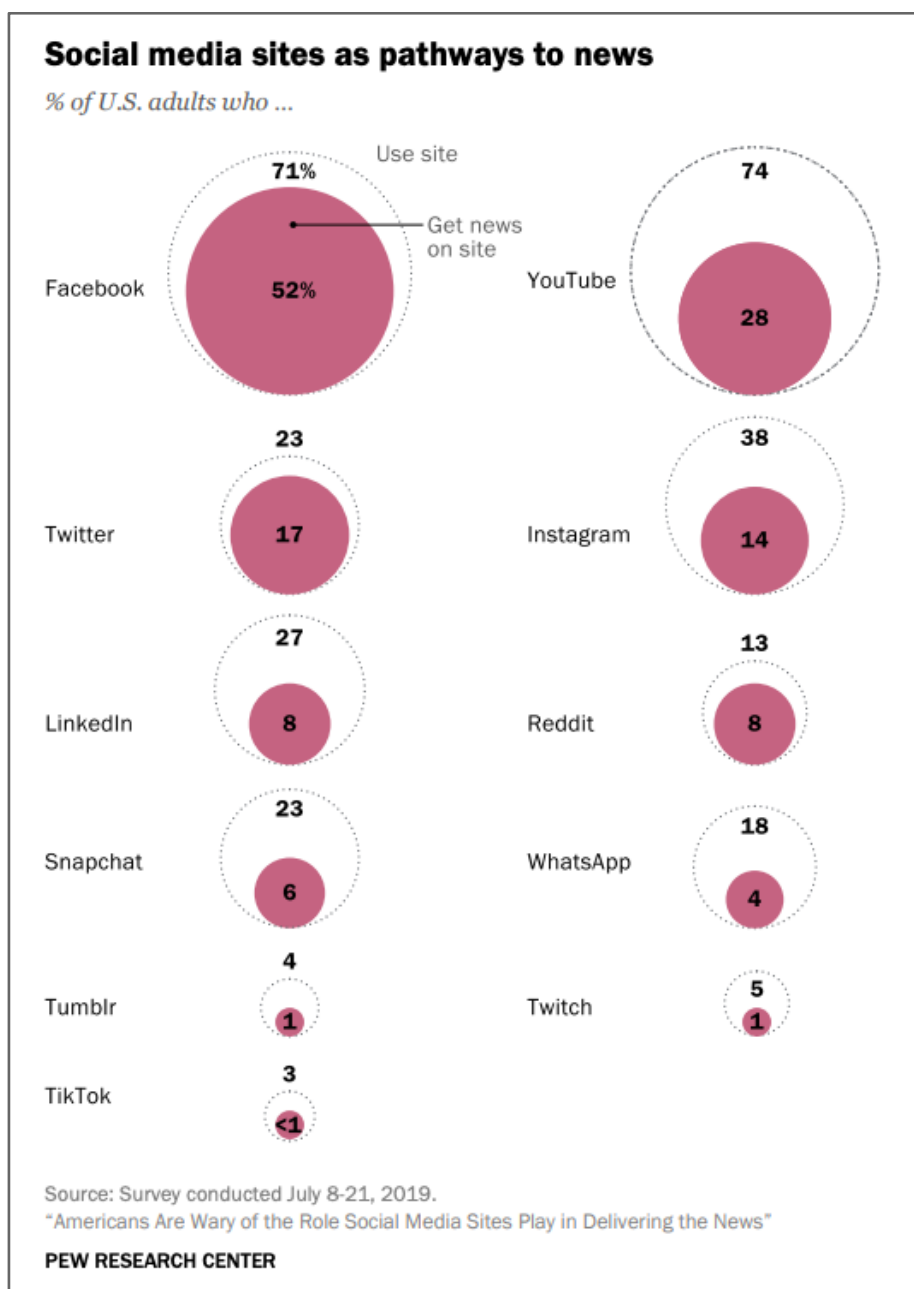


Image Source: [Pew Research Center](#), 2019

With the increase in consumption of news through social media, participants reaffirm that networking sites have increased their awareness levels on many worldly news topics. An intriguing insight in this area of information consumption was the ability for each user to pick and sample news or information topics that were of interest to them, with the ability to intentionally or unintentionally overlook other equally important articles and news. The ability to filter content by those popular in their specific social circles leads users to have a like-minded approach to a topic or subject, due to their restrictive exposure to a larger range of factual information and statistics. This can dampen the benefits social media offers in the area of speedy and wide-spread digital communication and information (Pentina, 2013).

Traditionally, an individual had to seek information or news from different providers, however, social media has now changed that landscape. Users are now coming across information on various topics from various providers all on a single aggregated platform (such as Facebook). This highlights a significant shift in the manner in which people engage with content. Users are now choosing individual stories and articles that gauge their interest rather than identifying different credible or preferred sources for informational content (Ismail & Latif, 2013).

The accessibility of social media channels on smartphones also facilitates the usage of these platforms and a possible increase in the exposure to content on them. While participants mention an increased consumption of information in their every-day life through social channels, whether this information touches different areas of the global news or is specifically filtered to match the interests of the user during every usage of the platform, cannot be identified with certainty.

Social media has changed the way individuals gather information about family, friends and colleagues. Interactions that usually occurred in physical spaces and face-to-face with another human being now take place behind digital screens, more often than not. Findings from LivePerson's Report (2017) states that 65% of Gen Z and Millennials have a higher ratio of interaction with one another through digital channels, rather than in person. Looking back a decade, if an individual wanted to gain information on an event or milestone in someone else's life, they would have to telephone the person or interact with them face-to-face. In

today's world, these details can be found on the individual's social profiles in just under ten seconds. This briefly allows us to recognise the drastic changes in our consumption of information, even when it is about those in a user's close-knit social circles.

## **5.6 Purpose-driven Utilisation of Platforms**

There is an ever-growing dynamic list of ways social networking sites can be utilised by different types of end-users. Social media can be used for communicating with family, friends and colleagues, to share moments from one's personal life, engage with others' user-generated content, for entertainment and information as well as commercial purposes (Fernando, 2012).

The respondents for this research shared a breakdown of the different reasons or purposes for their usual social media usage, which included general communication with friends and family, being connected and aware of events in others' lives, to view content relevant and specific to their interests, consumption of news or information, as well as, a mention of social media use for professional benefits.

It is identified that over 94% of recruiters leverage LinkedIn for assessing potential candidates for a role (Smith, 2020) making the usage of this professional networking site an asset for many. With networking sites integrating into various areas of one's life and becoming an instrumental part in the fabric of society, female entrepreneurs are now learning to grab these platforms as an opportunity for professional or business growth. Facilitated by the internet, the volume for newly created female entrepreneurs stood at 183 million in 2019 with 12.2 billion female-owned businesses in 2018 (Ayers, 2020; Lesonsky, 2020).

Eighty percent of respondents mentioned creating a social media account to carry out professional or commercial communication to an audience via these digital channels with 60% of them continuing to do so. Respondents also emphasised the increased opportunities and avenues being generated through social media platforms, that assist and boost their ability and capacity to further their independent projects of professional, commercial and/or business nature. The modern businesswoman now knows how social media can supplement

her career, aspirations and entrepreneurial journey, through effective marketing and communication on social channels (Ayers, 2020). In a research report by Facebook, women who owned small businesses asserted that SNSs are beneficial to their business, with women in over 35+ countries ranking the assistance of social media in business at a much higher rate as compared to their male counterparts (McGorman & Schneider, 2019).

As the central themes identified in this chapter suggest, social media users are evolving. They aren't merely sending quick messages to their connections or posting a picture of their coffee on Facebook & Instagram anymore. Users are now harnessing the power of social channels in a multi-purpose fashion. Their activity on digital channels now includes content creation, preferred content consumption, advertising activity, self-promotion, learning about their interests, building a professional network and running a business, to name a few. These evolutions are evidently visible through the responses gathered from the research participants. All participants of the study indicated multi-purpose uses and motivations for their social media activity. Ranging from setting up business and artist projects on Instagram to the consumption of global news and information on social issues on Facebook; the participants are using these mass platforms to enhance their everyday lives. Businesses are being run, careers are being created and connections are being fostered far and wide, using these very social media sites.

Digital native is a term used to describe a group of people, usually born after the 1980s, who have a compatible equation with digital technologies (Čut, 2017). We are now looking at a generation of digital natives who have either grown up with digital devices embedded in the palms of their hands during their early teenage years or right from childhood (Myers, 2012). To believe a peer group, with this level of technological integration, as a naive cohort on digital media would more often than not, be presumably inaccurate.

# CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

## 6 Introduction

This research aimed to uncover and analyse the different roles social media platforms play in a user's personal and professional life, how it impacts them and to gain a new amalgamated perspective on the benefits and drawbacks of these digital channels. It undertook the qualitative method of semi-structured in-depth interviews for its data collection. The participants interviewed for this study were female New Zealanders aged between 25 to 34, the age cohort most popular on Instagram. The interviews provided detailed insight into each of the participant's social use, motivations for use, impact on their everyday lives and personal experiences on various social networking sites. The previous chapter showcased the many findings drawn from the pool of insights garnered, using qualitative research components. The interview questions that framed this study are listed in Chapter 4 along with the responses collected from participants for each question.

This final chapter will provide an outline of the findings from the study and draw conclusions from the key themes identified, aligned with the three main research questions in this study. The chapter will also briefly summarise the limitations of the study as well as future recommendations and scope of research.

## 6.1 Conclusion

The statements made by the participants during the in-depth interviews reveal and reiterate specific preferences, in terms of content and information consumed on social media, its benefits, drawbacks and their personal motives for usage.

According to research findings, users consider social media platforms not just a channel for communicating with their family and peers, but also a resourceful medium for accessing information on news around the globe, additional knowledge on their personal interests in a

wide range of subjects or activities, as well as keeping abreast of professional networking and/or avenues for advancing their careers. This insight responds to *Research Question 3: What is the role of social media in your everyday life?* It appears as though users have now identified the isolated pockets of benefits they can harness from different social channels with each functionality or feature on a social media platform utilised differently by different end-users, tying it down to a matter of personal preference. With this being said, users actively seek content that is authentic and positive from their perspective, which may include posts shared by immediate social circles or public figures. Mindset of the evolved social media user focuses on consuming content that is honest, beneficial and/or educative, with the same approach towards the absorption of global and local news on social networking sites.

This research has also found that there is an increased level of consciousness and maturity in the consumption of content on these platforms, which responds to *Research Question One: How would you describe your social media persona?* The participants are well-informed on the pitfalls that exist in the virtual social world and are well-aware of how they can navigate around these snags, contrary to the naïve mindset of a user newly introduced to social media. There is an added layer of sentience in consumption patterns by participants who are seeking genuine and true to life content from friends, colleagues and public figures as well as the need for a decrease in malicious activity online such as encouraging divisive dialogue, bullying, spreading misinformation and other fraudulent schemes. Users are also focused on sharing content of their own that matches the mental guidelines they have set for others with authenticity at its core, which responds and answers *Research Question 2: Does your social media persona (reel) match (real)ity?* While users aspire to share authentic and truthful user-generated content, research observes that their self-portrayal does not necessarily summarise their entire offline personality through a social media profile. Different qualities or areas of a user's real-life personality is showcased on SNSs, with users conscious of only sharing content that has an overlap with their true personality away from digital screens. This showcases a positive change in the manner social media is now approached, with users sharing an elevated sense of responsibility and accountability for their behaviours online.

Lastly, this study also delved deeper into the motivations of social media use and found that participants have a multi-purpose approach to the usage of social channels. While social

media aligns itself as an exceptional tool for quick and easy communication, these popular channels are leveraged by its end-users in far more advanced techniques. Participants share experiences of using SNSs to engage in information, activities and events relevant to their interests, to showcase their hobbies and passions and most importantly, utilise professional avenues that present itself through social media. Over 60% of the participants stated they use social media channels like Instagram and Facebook in professional and business practice. One of the participants credited the existence of their online e-commerce business to Instagram, mentioning the opportunities available on the platform to connect with other businesses, the individuals running them and having a vast platform of audiences to showcase their business products and/or services to. Another interesting insight shared by the user mentioned a 100% digital-only interaction with all businesses and business-owners currently onboard their e-commerce brand with no requirement for physical or face-to-face interaction, making it highly convenient and quick-paced.

Participants are also found to be utilising social channels as an access portal to other professionals and businesses. A second participant speaks briefly on the professional independence social media has allowed them by enabling a medium to seek business-minded relationships directly, assisting in fostering their careers. An example of this, shared by the interviewee, a musician, is having the ability to reach out to their audience and share their music without the need to depend on record labels or external agents to make it a reality. This is believed to allow individuals with greater freedom and independence to pursue their professional aspirations.

## **6.2 Limitations of the Research**

As the nature of the sample for this research was relatively small in size, it limits the potential for the results of this study to be scaled nationally or globally. Factors such as the consumption of extended time required for interviews, inability to interact with others in a physical setting due to the COVID-19 and overall convenience, led to this constraint of a reduced sample size.



Secondly, the scarcity of reliable data available on the evolved behaviour and usage patterns of social media users, limits the scope of analysis for this study. There is little to no data on the changing mindset of a user towards social media, decades after its launch.

### **6.3 Scope for Future Research**

While there appears to be a significant volume of literature on how social media has undergone an evolution over the last two decades, there exist very few sources of literary information and conversations on the evolution of the social media user themselves. The findings of this study drew attention to some intriguing changes observed in the behaviour and usage patterns of social media platforms amongst female users in New Zealand. Future research on these topics could assist in exploring and identifying areas of constructive improvement in the creation and usage of social media platforms using granular details on a social media user's evolutionary journey and current preferences. Information on how different social media users leverage digital networking platforms can help educate others on a more constructive usage of the platform.

Furthermore, it could be worthwhile to explore changes in the consumption patterns for information on social media and utilise this knowledge to facilitate a mindset wherein creators of these platforms are able to develop functionalities that allow and encourage users to be well informed and educated on a rounded global scale as opposed to confining individuals and the information they consume into restrictive social bubbles of an alternate personalised reality.

Future researchers should consider extending the analysis undertaken in this study to a wider user base across regions or nations, enabling them to make comparative evaluations on this topic and gaining a holistic perspective. Rich qualitative data and statistics in areas that recognise how new-age social media users in New Zealand leverage channels like Facebook and Instagram, in professional and entrepreneurial practice will be constructive. It can help identify functionality improvements for individual platforms and facilitate an educative experience for users, on the different ways social media can be leveraged for personal and

professional growth. For future researchers, another area that shows great potential is filling the knowledge gaps in the preferences of New Zealand social media users in terms of content consumption and creation, as well as, identification of individual platform features found to be most beneficial to the end-users.

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