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A Qualitative Investigation into The Effects of Social Media on
Psychological Wellbeing and Relationships.

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of Cardiff Metropolitan University for the Degree of Bachelor of
Science.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own independent investigation under the supervision of my tutor. The various sources to which I am indebted are clearly indicated. This dissertation has not been accepted in substance for any other degree and is not being submitted concurrently for any other degree.

Candidate

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Abstract

Social media is becoming an increasingly integral part of our daily lives, with 89% of young people aged 18-25 using at least one social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc) on a daily basis (The Guardian, 2017). Many researchers believe that social media is an increasing problem for mental wellbeing and health as well as relationships, with many believing that social media is heavily implicated in mental health issues such as depression, self-esteem issues and problems in interpersonal relationship formation and maintenance (Lin, 2016). On the contrary, other researchers believe these outcomes to be largely positive (Gonzalez and Hancock, 2011). This study aimed to explore both the positive and negatives outcomes of social media on wellbeing and relationships. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted on two males and two females aged 18-25. Five themes emerged from the data: Low mood and anxiety, low self-esteem, expanding social networks, cyberbullying, and impairing relationships.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Social media is becoming an increasingly integral part of our daily lives, with 89% of people aged 18-25 using at least one social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc) daily (The Guardian, 2017). This investigation will explore the effect that social media and our increasing use of it has on mental wellbeing and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Many researchers believe that social media is an increasing problem for mental wellbeing as well as relationships, with many believing that social media is heavily implicated in mental health issues such as depression, self-esteem issues and problems in interpersonal relationship formation and maintenance (Lin, 2016). On the contrary, other researchers don't believe social media to be a problem and believe that social media has positive effects on wellbeing, self-esteem and relationships (Gonzalez and Hancock, 2011). This study will investigate both sides of the argument.

There are two primary forms of social media that are widely used today: Media-based social media (Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat) and text-based social media (Twitter and Facebook). Media based platforms are typically used primarily for sharing pictures and videos with text captions, whereas text-based platforms often allow users to share posts that consist of text only e.g. a 'Facebook status' as well as photo and video posts.

The increase in social media use amongst young people has consequences such as bridging social capital, self-esteem implications, decreased/increased loneliness as well as effects on interpersonal relationships (Lin, 2016). Social media has previously been associated with self-esteem issues, feelings of low mood and feelings of loneliness (Kraut, 1998). Negative effects of prolonged excessive social media use are said to nurture mental illnesses such as depression and feelings of social isolation in people aged 18-25 (Lin, 2016). Other researchers argue that the outcomes of increased social media use are largely positive, with many arguing that social media increases self-esteem, and intensifies relationship formation, in turn increasing feelings of social capital (Gonzalez and Hancock, 2011). The findings of such studies, highlight the importance of research into the effects of social media use on mental wellbeing and relationship maintenance

and formation. This research is essential in our current social climate, as more social media sites are being developed, and in turn young people aged 18-25 in particular are becoming more avid social media users. This is largely due to social media becoming much more accessible than it once was, all social media sites are now available on a mobile device in your pocket, whereas social media was once only accessible on a PC.

With the increase in social media use amongst adolescents, it is essential that we study how prolonged daily use of sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are affecting our mental health as well the quality of our interpersonal relationships. Firstly, the impact of social media on social groups and relationships will be discussed, followed by discussions of how social media affects mental wellbeing including factors such as self-esteem, mental illness, isolation and cyberbullying.

1.2. Social Capital

Social capital is a widely used concept in social sciences to describe social networks and interpersonal relationships that allow people to function within their environments (Lin, 1999). Psychologists define social capital as social investment and expected returns from that investment e.g. giving positive feedback and expecting positive feedback in return and commitment to the relationship (Lin, 1999). Researchers increasingly believe that social media use and our degree of online social networking has a salient effect on our feelings and perceptions of personal 'social capital', with social media allowing for larger social networks and higher quality bonds (Burke et al, 2010). Burke conducted an empirical study examining the relationship between social media and social capital. Burke found there to be a direct correlation between content consumption (likes, comments and messages) and direct communication. Burke interpreted increased direct communication and content consumption as increased feelings and utilisation of social capital. Burke also found that increased social media use and feelings of social capital are associated with decreased feelings of loneliness and increased feelings of bonding within relationships, meaning that adolescents felt increased feelings of positive social investment and expected return needs were met due to social networking online.

Burke's (2010) Replicated the findings of Ellison (2007). Ellison (2007) conducted a study examining the relationship between Facebook and the formation of feelings and maintenance of social capital. Ellison (2007) also found that there was a correlation between Facebook and bonding within social networks, as well as bridging and maintaining social capital. The findings of Burke (2010) and Ellison (2007) both provide evidence for the idea of a strong relationship between social media and social capital.

Researchers also believe that there's a link between self-esteem and social capital in relation to college students' social media use (Steinfeld, 2008). Steinfeld (2008) conducted a two-year analysis using data from Facebook users to investigate this. Steinfeld investigated the relationship between Facebook use and social capital, as well as the relationship between social capital and self-esteem in relation to Facebook use. The findings of this study showed that the intensity of students' Facebook use in the first year of the study, strongly determined the outcome of bridging social capital in the second year of the study. The study also found that those with lower self-esteem gained more from increased Facebook use in terms of bridging and maintaining social capital than those with high self-esteem. Thus, these findings suggest that those with low self-esteem about their relationships use social media, specifically online feedback, to increase self-esteem, i.e., gain self-esteem from online relationships and interactions. From these findings, it can be concluded that social media is heavily implicated in bridging social capital and self-esteem, and that there is a relationship between these two concepts.

1.3. Consequences for Relationships

Researchers believe that social media has a salient effect on the quality of our interpersonal relationships, particularly a negative outcome for romantic relationships (Utz, 2011). Utz (2011) conducted a study investigating the effects of social media on the quality of romantic relationships and found that participants of both genders reported a decline in the quality of their romantic relationships because of social media. Participants reported that this was due to factors such as jealousy and paranoia caused by things that

they had seen on social media e.g. a partner commenting on another person's social media profile and 'liking' images on social media.

Research has also shown that social media has implications for friendships. Kraut (1998) for example, believes that a decline in face-to-face contact because of increased social media use impairs the quality of friendships and weakens the bonds between friends. Other researchers however believe the outcomes on friendships to be largely positive, as social media has been shown to strengthen support networks, thus improving the quality of bonds within friendships (Vallor, 2014).

1.4. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a construct used in everyday life and in Psychology (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Self-esteem is defined as a person's sense of self-worth and self-value, i.e., how much a person likes or approves of themselves (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Researchers generally agree that social media sites do have an effect on our self-esteem, however the effects are subjective with some believing that the effects are largely positive whilst others believe them to be largely negative (Valkenburg, 2006). Valkenburg conducted a study aimed to investigate the consequences of a Dutch social networking site on the self-esteem of its users. A survey was conducted on 881 adolescents aged 10-19. Through the use of a series of focus groups, it was found that the frequency of the use of the site had an indirect effect on the self-esteem and self-image of the adolescents. The study found that self-esteem was often impacted by the feedback the adolescents received on their profiles, i.e., likes, comments and friend requests. Valkenburg concluded that positive feedback on social media profiles increased self-esteem whilst negative or little feedback reduced self-esteem. The findings of this study thus suggest that social media always has an effect on self-esteem, but the nature of this effect, i.e., positive or negative, is subjective and dependent on the feedback received. For example, Valkenburg's findings suggest that those with already low self-esteem may in fact gain self-esteem from social media through feedback (likes, comments, etc). This investigation will therefore explore how the outcomes of social media on self-esteem vary between individuals.

Many researchers believe that social media sites such as Facebook are environments that breed social comparison, affecting our self-esteem (Vogel, 2014). Vogel believes that sites as Facebook provide abundant opportunities for comparison due to features such as status and photo sharing, and also believes that comparing ourselves to others based on social posts greatly affects our self-esteem. Vogel (2014) conducted a study exploring the impact of chronic social media use on self-esteem, in relation to social comparison. The correlational study examined whether there was a relationship between increased Facebook use in participants and lower trait self-esteem. The findings supported Vogel's hypothesis, with the findings showing that the higher the degree of Facebook use, the lower the trait self-esteem in participants due to social comparison.

The findings of Vogel's (2014) study are supported by the findings of other similar studies (Woods, 2016). Woods (2016) conducted a similar study investigating the relationship between social media use and the psychological wellbeing and self-esteem of Scottish teens. The findings supported Vogel's (2014) findings and showed that there was a strong correlation between greater social media use and low self-esteem (Woods, 2016). Woods (2016) concluded that those who are more invested in social media, are more likely to have self-esteem issues. The findings of these studies suggest that frequent use and emotional investment in social media can have a drastic impact on the self-esteem of young people. (Vogel, 2014; Woods, 2016; Valkenburg, 2016).

1.5. Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health can be defined as an individual matter involving the condition of the human mind, specifically psychological and emotional wellbeing (Jahoda, 1958). Statistics show that one in four adults experience a mental health condition, with anxiety and depression being the most common mental illnesses amongst young people aged 18-25 (The Guardian, 2017). Researchers increasingly believe that the feeling of social isolation is a prominent cause of mental health issues, particularly in adolescents (Marrone, 1999). Social isolation is defined as feelings of extreme loneliness and a lack of meaningful relationships with others (Marrone, 1999). Many researchers argue that there is a link between social media and feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kraut et al, 1998).

Researchers strongly believe that this in turn, often leads to the development and nurturing of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (Kraut et al, 1998).

Kraut et al (1998) conducted a longitudinal study on 169 participants to test their hypothesis that prolonged daily social media use would lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation and depression. The findings of this study showed that with prolonged and increased social media use over time, there was a decline in face to face communication which led to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Kraut et al (1998) also found that many of the participants who experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation because of prolonged social media use, also developed depression. Kraut et al (1998) therefore concluded that the change in their social media consumption, i.e., increased daily use, was responsible for their developed feelings of loneliness, isolation and depression. The findings of this study provide evidence for the idea that there's a relationship between social media consumption and social media and social isolation, thus influencing mental health.

This study however, was conducted at a time where the internet was still new and there were very little online communication platforms. Since this study, online communications platforms have developed exponentially with many new sites being used for different purposes other than online communication, i.e., Instagram for photo sharing. Thus, it is quite possible that the effects of social media on loneliness and mental health may now be amplified with more platforms being used and more time being spent on these platforms.

The findings of Kraut et al's (1998) study are supported by the findings of Lin (2016). Lin (2016) also hypothesised that there is a link between increased persistent social media use and the development of mental health issues. Lin (2016) specifically believed there to be a link between increased social media use and the development of depression. Lin (2016) tested this hypothesis by conducting a survey on social media use, as well as a PROMIS depression scale survey on 1,787 young American adults. Lin (2016) found that those in the highest quartile for social media use showed increased odds of developing depression than those who used social media much less. Thus, Lin (2016) concluded that there is a significant association between increased social media use and the development of mental health problems amongst adolescents.

In contrast, some researchers believe that increased use of social media sites decrease loneliness and improve mental wellbeing (Pittman, 2016). Pittman (2016)

suggests that photo sharing sites such as Instagram specifically, reduce feelings of loneliness and unhappiness due to enhanced feelings of intimacy that come with personal photo sharing. Pittman (2016) conducted a study to test this hypothesis. The quantitative study of self-report data was conducted on social media users aged 18-25 years. The study found that feelings of loneliness and isolation do in fact decrease with increased use of image sharing websites such as Instagram. Pittman (2016) also found that feelings of happiness and life satisfaction increase with increased use of photo sharing social media platforms. Pittman (2016) thus concluded from the findings that media based social media sites, i.e., photo and video sharing decrease feelings of loneliness and unhappiness.

1.6. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is defined as any sort of bullying or harassment that takes place online using electronic communication (Smartphones, Tablets, Computers) (Bullying UK, 2017). Cyberbullying generally takes place on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram and online messaging sites such as Facebook Messenger. In recent years, there has been a huge surge in cyberbullying amongst adolescents (Whittaker, 2014). Whittaker (2014) conducted a study on cyberbullying and found social media to be the most commonly used platform for cyberbullying amongst young people. Hamm (2015) conducted a literature review to determine the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media, as well as the consequences of social media bullying on the mental wellbeing and relationships of adolescents. Hamm (2015) conducted the analysis on eleven studies that took place between 2001 and 2011 and found that bullying among adolescents is extremely prevalent on social media with 42% of 12-18-year olds in these studies reporting that they have experienced some form of cyberbullying on social media. Hamm (2015) also found that there is a relationship between bullying on social media and a decline in the mental wellbeing of young people, with the development of mental illnesses such as depression.

Ten of the studies in this review found there to be a statistically significant relationship between cyberbullying on social media and depression in young people as well as social media bullying and suicidality. The findings of this review strongly suggest

that cyberbullying is a prevalent problem on social media and it has serious consequences for the mental health and wellbeing of adolescents. The prevalence of cyberbullying on social media, as well as the negative effects of cyberbullying have likely accelerated since these studies were conducted due to an increase in the number of social media platforms used by adolescents today.

1.7. Rationale

The aim of this study is to investigate how young people aged 18-25 believe that social media affects their mental wellbeing as well as their interpersonal relationships. The aim is to explore whether individuals believe, in their experience, that there is a relationship between social media and mental wellbeing and interpersonal relationships. The study aims to explore all consequences of social media, both positive and negative, as research has shown the outcomes of social media to be both (Gonzalez & Hancock, 2011). The purpose of this research is to gain rich insight into the experiences of young people on social media and explore the general effects of social media on mental wellbeing and relationships. This research was done qualitatively because qualitative methods are much more apt for exploring social phenomena, as opposed to quantitative methods which are typically used to express objective facts (Firestone, 1987). Individual experiences of social media are not objective and may significantly differ between individuals, thus a qualitative method which allows for the exploration of different realities and perspectives was most appropriate for this study.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This is a qualitative investigation using semi-structured interviews.

2.2 Sample

The sample consisted of four participants. The participants in this study were gathered using the method of opportunity sampling. The sample consisted of males and females to gather data that represented the social media experiences of both sexes. The participants in this study were aged 18-25. This age range was chosen because 18-25-year olds are known to be the most avid daily users of social media (The Guardian, 2017).

2.3. Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule of questions was constructed. A participant consent form was written as well as a participant information sheet. A mobile phone was used to record the interviews to later be transcribed.

2.4. Ethical Considerations and Practices

Ethical approval was gained from the University ethics panel in March 2018. This study was approved by the ethics panel on the terms that participants were fully informed of their ethical rights through the participant information sheet and full informed consent was obtained. Participants were also provided with information about support resources for any issues raised at the end of the interview.

2.5. Procedure

The semi-structured interview schedule in this study was developed by considering which topic areas within social media most needed to be explored. The method for this study, as well as the semi-structured interview schedule were constructed after researching the criteria that need to be met to carry out credible and effective qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Based on these principles, the topic areas that accurately represent the social media experiences of 18-25-year olds were considered. To determine the phenomena that needed to be explored through the questions, previous studies on social media and psychological wellbeing and relationships were considered.

For example, the Best (2014) narrative review of adolescent social media use and wellbeing was considered. Best suggested from his findings that the prominent themes in adolescents' accounts of their social media use and wellbeing include cyberbullying, social capital, depression, social support networks, self-disclosure, and isolation. Therefore, the semi-structured interview schedule was designed to cover all of these topics to get an accurate depiction of the relationship between social media and wellbeing and relationships, and to encourage participants to delve as deeply into their experiences of these topics as possible. The interview schedule included questions that explored both the positive and negative effects of social media e.g. "what do you believe to be the positives of social media generally?"

After the initial interview schedule was created, a discussion took place between the researcher and supervisor in order suggest improvements to the interview schedule. The supervisor suggested that more open-ended questions were needed to gather richer

data, as well more verbal prods when closed questions were asked to encourage a further discussion of said topic. These changes were suggested by the supervisor as open-ended questions and verbal prompts are extremely important in semi-structured interviews as they allow for the collection of rich data which is needed for a trustworthy and effective qualitative analysis (Turner, 2010). More questions about the positive outcomes of social media on wellbeing were also added as it is known that many adolescents believe that social media has positively impacted their feelings of wellbeing as well as the quality of their relationships e.g. by increasing their self-esteem and strengthening their relationships (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011).

After the final interview schedule was created, the interviews were then carried out either in the home of the researcher or the home of the participant. The participants were provided with an information sheet which outlines the aim of the study as well as the risks and benefits. The participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the interview and withdraw their data from the sample for up to two weeks after the interview. The names of the participants were not noted, instead, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. It was also disclosed to the participants that their data and records would be kept strictly confidential and would only be seen by the researcher.

If after reading the information sheet, participants wished to proceed with the study, they were asked to sign a consent form also signed by the researcher to obtain written consent. After informed consent was obtained, the interviews were then carried out. Each interview was recorded using a mobile phone and lasted between 15-25 minutes each.

2.6. Method of Analysis

Jefferson's (1996) universal method of transcription of verbal information was used to transcribe the interview recordings. A thematic analysis was then conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis. This particular analysis consists of six stages. Firstly, the transcripts were read over several times in order for the researcher to become familiar with the data. Next, each line of the transcript was given a code, i.e., a word or phrase that accurately summarised the pattern in the data. Thirdly, the given

codes were grouped into themes, this is the stage in which the researcher interprets the phenomena being discussed in a concise theme code e.g. 'cyberbullying' (Boyatzis, 1998). The theme codes were then reviewed, and a final table of themes was created. Finally, a report of the findings was produced.

3. Results

Upon analysing the social media experiences of four individuals, a total of five organising themes were identified. The organising themes identified are listed in the table below along with sub-themes and illustrative quotes.

Table 1: Table of Organising Themes and illustrative Quotes:

Organising Theme	Description	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
Anxiety and Low mood	The negative effects of social media on the mental health and wellbeing of young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependency • Habit • Paranoia • Depression • Isolation • Unhealthy habits • Addiction • Stress • Distraction • Decline in face-to-face contact 	Ray: <i>"it was making my anxiety worse being on it all the time seeing everyone else being happy"</i> (P5, 232-236)
Low Self-Esteem	The negative effects of increased social media use on the self-esteem and self-image of young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Comparison • Low mood • False reality • Maintaining an image • Insecurity 	Angelina: <i>"Yeah I've definitely felt crap about myself cause I saw someone that's much prettier than me get 200 likes on Instagram. I think you're constantly comparing yourself"</i>

			(P15, 246-248).
Expanding Social Networks/ Feelings of Social Capital	The role of social media in building and maintaining friendships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making new Friends • Maintaining friendships • Bridging distance • Popularity 	Angelina: "Yeah, I definitely know of more people because of it." (P13, 126-127).
Cyberbullying	The effects of social media- based bullying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression • Suicidal thoughts • Platform for bullying 	Chris: "my cousin got bullied on the internet" (P19, 144-145).
Impairing relationships	The role of social media in the decline of friendships and romantic relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jealousy • Paranoia • Arguments • Decline in face-to-face contact 	Laura: "Um-in relationships I think social media is terrible for relationships" (P6, 106-108).

3.1. Organising Theme One: Anxiety and Low Mood

This organising theme illustrates the negative effects that social media has had on participants' mental health and wellbeing, specifically how social media contributes to low mood and feelings of anxiety amongst young people.

Low mood

This theme was chosen due to every participant in the study admitting to suffering with low mood because of an experience on social media or general increased use of social media platforms. The following quotation details the experience of one participant:

"Yeah I get so insecure and it really brings me down and makes me anxious and a bit depressed a lot of the time." Laura (P10, 311-314).

This quote highlights how the participant's mental wellbeing has been impaired by their increased social media use, the participant explained that the things that she sees on social media particularly relating to her romantic partner cause her stress and anxiety. Laura also reports feeling what she describes as 'depressed' because of social media:

"... you see people always on holidays or in nice restaurants and obviously you want to do that as well but when that's not the case, you can feel a bit depressed about your life" Laura (P11, 371-374).

Laura explains that her feelings of low mood are due to seeing the highlights of other people's lives on social media and comparing them to her own.

One participant also discussed how their feelings of low mood often stem from measuring their self-worth by the feedback that they receive from others on their social media profiles:

"People measure their worth by how many likes they get on a picture or how many Facebook friends they have and it makes people down and insecure" Angelina (P8, 256-267).

This quote highlights how social media is responsible for Angelina's feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, in turn causing feelings of low mood. This shows that Angelica's mood and wellbeing is often dependent on whether or not she is receiving the desired feedback on social media. When the desired feedback is not received, this causes her feelings of insecurity, thus having a profoundly negative effect on her mood.

Anxiety

This theme was selected as the participants discussed their feelings of 'anxiety' in relation to their social media experiences on several occasions. The following quotation illustrates the experiences of one participant:

“Um-so I think from it I suffered with my anxiety, I would be on social media instead of leaving the house cause I felt like it was the equivalent cause I could keep in touch with people through it.” Ray (P5, 222-227).

Ray believes that social media is largely responsible for his development of an anxiety disorder. Ray believes that he used social media as a substitute for leaving the house and interacting with others. This highlights Ray’s belief that social media was responsible for him isolating himself from others, and that this isolation is responsible for his development of anxiety. Ray believes that his increased use of social media caused him to develop major anxiety about socialising face-to-face:

“it was making my anxiety worse being on it all the time seeing everyone else being happy when I was too anxious to really interact with anyone in person” Ray (P5, 233-236).

This quote illustrates the anxiety that Ray experienced through viewing the profiles of others frequently on social media. Ray explains that much of his anxiety came from comparing himself to others on social media. This quote illustrates that, in Ray’s experience, social media was not only the initial cause of his anxiety, but also a barrier to recovery with increased continued social media use making the anxiety much worse.

Isolation

The participants also discussed feeling isolated because of social media, which in turn had a negative effect on their mental wellbeing. One participant discussed their belief that the feeling of being isolated is due to a decline in face-to-face contact as a result of social media:

“Well you start to get a bit introverted, you just feel anxious then when you meet people in person then, I do anyway like I’m so used to talking through a screen that meeting friends face-to-face can actually make you a bit anxious and when you have less face-to-face contact, that’s not good for you and you can feel a bit anti-social and lonely.” Chris (P18, 73-77).

This also highlights somewhat of an addiction and dependency on social media, with the participant reporting that they are now more used to talking on social media than face-to-face. This is likely due to the accessibility of social media in today's society, with all these platforms of online communication now accessible on a mobile phone in your pocket.

Additionally, Chris discussed the experiences of his cousin who became isolated as a result of an incident of cyberbullying on social media:

"She didn't want to go to school after it because she didn't want to see people" Chris (P19 155-156).

3.2. Organising Theme Two: Low-Self Esteem

This organizing theme was chosen due to all of the participants discussing having low self-esteem to some degree due to social media. Participant largely reported social comparison and online feedback to be the cause of their self-esteem issues.

Social Comparison

This sub-theme was chosen due to each of the participants discussing how they compare themselves to others based on what they see on social media and the impact that this has on their mental wellbeing. One participant details their experience of comparing their own situation to others based on what they see on social media, and feeling inadequate as a result:

"well you see things and think 'my relationship should be like that'" Angelina (P16, 231-132).

Angelina believes that social media is responsible for her believing that her life and relationships should be a certain way and feeling inadequate and insecure as a result.

Laura also reported experiencing low self-esteem due to comparing herself to others on social media:

“you always think someone is better than you or you think they’ve got something that you haven’t which can really give you low self-esteem.” Laura (P10, 245-249).

This quotation once again suggests that social media is an environment that nurtures social comparison. Laura suggests that her feelings of low self-esteem are continuous, reporting that she’s ‘always’ comparing herself to others on social media, resulting in prolonged self-esteem issues. This also highlights how the issue of low self-esteem is amplified due to the instant accessibility of social media on a smartphone as well as the participant’s dependency on it, with Laura suggesting it’s ‘always’ an issue.

Participants discussed the impact that social comparison has on their self-esteem and wellbeing:

“Yeah, when I see other people getting loads of likes and comments when I don’t get that many, it makes you feel bad about yourself.” Chris (P19, 103-107)

Chris reported that he believes that self-worth is often measured by feedback on social media (Likes, comments etc.) in today’s society, Chris believes that this is a prominent cause of social comparison which leads to self-esteem issues, reporting that he often feels inadequate if they see others on social media getting more positive feedback on their social media profiles than he is.

3.3. Organising Theme Three: Expanding Social Networks/ Feelings of Social Capital

This organizing theme illustrates participants’ experiences of social media as a tool for expanding and maintaining social networks. The sub-themes that contributed to this theme include making friends and maintaining friendships.

Making Friends

This sub-theme was chosen due to several of the participants discussing how they have made new friends through social media, i.e., befriending people that they have found on social media sites. For example, one participant explains:

"I've met a few friends through it like on Instagram and stuff, you meet new people through it don't you?" Angelina (P14, 120-123).

Therefore, Angelina sees and uses social media as a tool for expanding social networks, thus increasing feelings of social capital.

Angelina also discussed the positive effect that making friends and expanding social networks on social media has on her mental wellbeing and self-esteem:

"It definitely makes me feel good, you feel like you have more support and you know you can just send someone a quick message when you're upset and that's good. I think you just feel more supported and important I guess." Angelina (P14, 132-138).

In contrast to participants' feelings of social media as a detriment to self-esteem, this shows that participants also believe that social media can increase the self-esteem of adolescents when enhancing feelings of social capital. The above quotation highlights Angelina's view that expanding social networks on social media can have positive outcomes for the wellbeing and relationships of adolescents.

Maintaining Friendships

This sub-theme was selected due to each of the participants discussing how social media has helped them maintain friendships, for example:

“To be fair-I think social media has helped me and my close friends when we’ve all gone our separate ways cause it helps you feel closer to people.” Laura (P6, 84-88).

This shows that Laura believes social media to be an important tool for maintaining contact with friends that are far away and this helps her to feel close with friends despite the distance. This also highlights the accessibility of online communication today, the participant reports maintaining constant contact with friends due to the number of social media sites instantly available on her phone allowing for constant communication.

Participants also felt that talking to friends on social has a positive effect on their wellbeing:

“It helps me keep in touch with my friends at uni and when I’m feeling like a bit homesick-talking to them and seeing them on social media can make me feel a lot better.” Ray (P2, 80-85).

Participants therefore felt that social media is a positive thing when used to maintain contact with friends. Participants also felt that maintaining closeness with friends through social media is an enhancer of wellbeing and reduces feelings of isolation, for example, when feeling homesick at university.

3.4. Organising Theme Four: Cyberbullying

This organizing theme was chosen due to each participant discussing their belief that cyberbullying is a prominent issue on social media. One participant had experienced cyberbullying on social media themselves whilst the others had relatives or friends that had been cyberbullied on social media. Participants discussed why they believed social media is a platform for cyberbullying as well as the effects of social media bullying on mental wellbeing.

Platform for bullying

One participant detailed his experience of homophobic abuse that he received on social media:

“when I was in high school, I used to be called homophobic names by a certain boy on Facebook a lot.” Ray (P3, 160-163).

When asked whether he this also abuse occurred face-to-face at school, Ray stated that this abuse only took place on Facebook:

“No only on the internet.” Ray (P3, 165).

Ray stated that he believed that social media was responsible for this person’s desire to send hateful messages:

“like people say things on social media that they wouldn’t say to your face cause they feel invincible on there like they’re not really saying it.” Ray (P4, 173-177).

Here, Ray suggests that he believes that social media gives bullies a platform to bully as they feel ‘invincible’ when they do not have to face somebody as they make the comments. Ray suggests that people take the things they say on social media less seriously as they are not saying them aloud, suggesting that social media can give individuals a sense of power and courage that can often be utilized in the wrong ways and lead to cyberbullying.

Depression

Two of the participants also discussed the profoundly negative effect that bullying on social media had on relatives of theirs who had experienced it. For example, one

participant detailed that their cousin had become extremely depressed and suicidal because of a cyberbullying incident:

“she became really depressed and had suicidal thoughts.” Chris (P19, 157-158).

This quotation highlights the starkly negative impact that social media has had on the mental health and wellbeing of an adolescent, with the victim developing depression and suicidal thoughts as the result of a profoundly negative experience on social media.

Laura also highlights the dangers of bullying on social media, detailing the experiences of her younger brother:

“Yeah for the younger generation-my younger brother gets picked on a lot on Facebook for the way he looks and I think when you get older you learn about the dangers of social media but when you’re young you don’t really know.” Laura (P10, 236-332).

This quotation highlights Laura’s feelings that social media is often an unhealthy environment for young adolescents who perhaps aren’t as aware of the dangers of social media bullying. Laura details her brother’s experience of impaired mental wellbeing because of this cyberbullying incident:

“he has a lot of self-esteem problems now and he sees a counsellor for depression that was started by the cyberbullying.” (P10, 336-339).

Laura’s story mirrors Chris’ story, detailing an instance in which a loved one has been severely negatively impacted by an experience of cyberbullying on social media. The participants both believe that their relatives’ mental illnesses and self-esteem issues are the result of bullying on social media.

3.5. Organising Theme Five: Impairing Relationships

This organising theme was chosen due to each participant discussing their belief that social media has impaired their interpersonal relationships in some way. Participants believed that social has had a profoundly negative effect on both their friendships and romantic relationships, therefore these are the sub-themes.

Impairing Romantic Relationships

Two of the participants strongly believed that social media impairs their romantic relationships and causes relationship problems for couples generally, participants discussed factors such as paranoia and jealousy in relation to this topic. For example, Laura discussed her belief that social media was responsible for the decline of her previous romantic relationships:

“in a personal relationship-there have been times in the past where I’ve seen girls whose pictures-my boyfriend has liked their pictures and I got really insecure and jealous and if I didn’t have social media, this problem wouldn’t exist, so I think it’s a real problem” Laura (P10, 267-274).

Laura therefore states that what she saw on her boyfriend’s social media was responsible for her jealousy and insecurity, thus impairing the relationship. Laura states that she believes the issue is with social media alone, and those issues within the relationship would not have occurred had it not been for social media.

Chris also felt that viewing his partner’s social media activity is responsible for his paranoia and jealousy, causing conflict within the relationship:

“when I see my boyfriend has liked somebody else’s picture and not mine, I feel bad about myself and we end up arguing over it.” (P17, 44-48).

Participants therefore report that, in their experience, social media is a catalyst for conflict within romantic relationships.

Impairing Friendships

Participants also discussed the negative effect that social media has had on the quality of their friendships. Participants discussed their beliefs that social media has caused arguments within their friendship groups as well as a decline in face-to-face communication with friends. For example, Angelina discussed her belief that social media is largely responsible for the conflicts within her social group:

“Yeah definitely, it causes a lot of trouble for friendships I think. You argue over stuff that wouldn’t have happened if social media didn’t exist.” Angelina (P12, 37-43).

“screenshots being taken of private conversations.” Angelina (P12, 43-44).

Thus, Angelina believes that these issues within her friendship exist solely due to social media. She suggests that the issue lies with how social media is used e.g. to screen shot and share private conversations, and misuse of social media can be a catalyst for conflict between friends.

One participant also discussed how their friendships have been negatively affected by a decline in face-to-face interaction because of social media:

“Well when you see friends you haven’t seen in ages, it’s not like you can really catch up and share news cause they’ve seen it all on your Facebook and Instagram so you don’t feel as close to people I don’t think. I definitely talk to people less face-to-face now and just talk on social media instead.” Chris (P19, 62-70).

Therefore, Chris believes that social media has largely replaced face-to-face interaction and believes that this has negative consequences for his friendships. Chris believes that he does not feel as close to his friends when he sees them in person due to how accessible

they are on social media. Chris perceives this to somewhat impair the quality of his relationships with his friends.

Summary of Results

From the five themes, participants discussed a wide range of views and concerns that included impaired mental wellbeing, impact on self-esteem, impact on social networks, cyberbullying and the impact on interpersonal relationships. Participants saliently discussed the dark side of social media, highlighting its profoundly negative outcomes on mental wellbeing, self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. Participants discussed their beliefs that increased social media use is implicated in mental health issues, low self-esteem, social isolation, bullying and the decline of interpersonal relationships. However, participants also discussed some positive outcomes of social media such as bridging distance, expanding social networks and increased social capital. Thus, there was some conflict between themes e.g. participants largely believed that social media expands social networks, but also has negative outcomes for friendships. Whilst some positives of social media were reported, participants largely reported negative outcomes. The findings also highlighted the increased accessibility of social media today, with the participants discussing using several different social media platforms on their smartphones consistently, sometimes referring to themselves as 'addicted'. Thus, suggesting that the outcomes of social media, both positive and negative are amplified to due to increased accessibility resulting in increased use.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of increased social media use on the psychological wellbeing and interpersonal relationships of 18-25-year-olds, through qualitative methodology. Research has shown that social media has a profound effect on the mental health and relationship of adolescents whom use it frequently (Lin, 2016). Some researchers believe the effects to be largely negative and believe social media to be a catalyst for mental health issues such as depression, as well as issues such as low self-esteem (Lin, 2016). On the contrary, other researchers believe the outcomes of social media to be largely positive, increasing self-esteem and improving the quality of interpersonal relationships (Gonzalez and Hancock, 2011). This study therefore aimed to explore both perspectives to gain insight into the relationship between social media, wellbeing and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Four 18-25-year-olds participated in the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis resulted in five organizing themes being chosen: Anxiety and low mood, low self-esteem, expanding social networks/feelings of social capital, cyberbullying, and impairing relationships.

4.1. Anxiety and Low Mood in Adolescents because of Social Media

The participants in this study each discussed experiencing anxiety or general feelings of low mood because of an experience on social media, or general increased use of social media platforms (See results section for analysis). These findings concur with past findings of other studies into the association between social media and adolescent wellbeing, that also found there to be a relationship between social media and impaired mental wellbeing (Kraut, 1998). Each participant in the study discussed experiencing low mood in some form, that they believe to be the result of social media. The participants

expressed that their low mood was due to factors such as measuring their worth by social media feedback, comparing themselves to others and seeing things that caused them upset on social media. Low mood due to feeling inadequacy about themselves and their personal lives because of social media, however, was the most salient theme in participant's discussions. Participants often referred to this feeling as 'feeling depressed'. These findings are supported by those of Labrague (2014) who found there to be a significant correlation between increased social media use and feelings of depression and stress due to feelings of inadequacy because of what they see on social media. Thus, past research supports the findings of this current study.

Participant frequently mentioned feelings of anxiety because of social media. The findings showed that participants believe that their increased social media use makes them anxious and isolated from others, with one participant discussing their belief that social media is responsible for their development of a diagnosed anxiety disorder. These findings correlate with previous research and support the findings of Woods (2016) who found that those who are more emotionally invested in social media experience higher levels of anxiety.

The findings of this current investigation also showed that participants see social media as a barrier to recovery from an anxiety disorder, as they find it easier to use social media than communicate face-to-face, thus developing what they describe as an 'addiction' to social media which in turn worsens their anxiety. This finding is also supported by previous research, Weidman (2012) found that individuals with anxiety use social media as a compensation for lack of face-to-face contact and see social media as a useful alternative for social interaction. Weidman (2012) found that this social compensation however can worsen mental wellbeing and be a barrier to recovery. Thus, these findings support the findings of the current study, with participants in this study reporting that they use social media as a replacement for social interaction, which in turn causes feelings of anxiety and isolation. This dependency on social media resulting in social isolation could be due to the accessibility of social media sites on smartphones, making it difficult for users to disconnect from social media.

4.2. Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem was highlighted as a prevalent negative effect of social media by each of the participants. The findings of this study concur with the findings of past studies which also found a relationship between increased social media use and low self-esteem in adolescents (Valkenburg, 2006). Participants prevalently shared that they believed social comparison on social media to be a huge factor in the development of self-esteem issues. These findings support the findings of Vogel (2014) whom also conducted a study on adolescents and found that social media, Facebook in particular, is an environment that breeds social comparison, i.e., users comparing themselves to others and evaluating themselves based on what they see on social media. Vogel (2014) found that this in turn causes self-esteem issues in adolescents, thus concurring with the findings of this current study in which each participant discussed having self-esteem issues that stem from comparing themselves to others on social media.

Participants also discussed online feedback (likes, comments etc.) as a contributor to self-esteem issues. Participants believed that the feedback they receive on their social media profiles has a direct impact on their perceived self-worth and self-esteem. This finding is also consistent with the findings of previous research (Valkenburg, 2016). Valkenburg also found that the self-esteem of adolescents was greatly impacted by the number of likes, comments etc. they received on their social media profiles. Consistent with the findings in this current study, Valkenburg also found that positive feedback e.g. a high number of likes increases self-esteem, whilst negative feedback e.g. a lack of likes and comments causes feelings of low self-esteem. Thus, the findings of this current study are consistent with previous research.

Individual differences in the impact of self-esteem were also discussed in this study. Some participants believed that social media generally has a negative impact on their self-esteem but can have a positive outcome when online feedback increases confidence. For example, one participant discussed feeling better about themselves after getting an influx of positive feedback on social media. These findings also concur with Valkenburg (2016) who also found that those with already low self-esteem use social media as a source of self-esteem, but this can have a profoundly negative impact when the desired feedback is not obtained.

4.3 Expanding Social Networks/ Feelings of Social Capital

Social media as a tool for expanding social networks was a prevalent theme in participants' answers. The participants discussed how they felt that they have made friends and expanded their social networks through social media. These findings concur with previous findings (Burke, 2010). Burke also found that social media allows for larger social networks and higher quality bonds across the social network. Thus, the findings of this study are supported by previous research, with the participants in this current study sharing their belief that social media has enhanced their friendships and expanded their social networks and feelings of social capital.

The findings also highlight that participants believe that social media plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of existing friendships, and in turn, feelings of social capital. Participants saliently discussed their belief that social media helps them maintain friendships and bridge gaps in situations of distance and separation. These findings are in agreement with those of Ellison (2007), who also found that there was a strong correlation between social media and maintaining bonds and social capital.

Participants also believe that these feelings of bonding and expanding social networks on social media, have a positive effect on self-esteem in relation to perceptions of their own social capital. The participants discussed feeling increased confidence and importance within their social groups due to social media feedback and communication. These findings are consistent with those of Steinfeld (2008) who also found that social media is pivotal in bridging social capital, and increased feelings of social capital have a positive effect on self-esteem in relationship to social networks.

4.4. Cyberbullying

The theme of cyberbullying was prevalent in the data, with each of the participants stating that they believed bullying to be a prevalent problem on social media, as well as a personal account of cyberbullying. These findings concur with previous research that has found social media to be a commonly used tool for bullying (Hamm, 2015). Participants discussed their belief that social media is an environment in which bullying is rife due to feelings of disconnection when comments are not made face-to-face. A salient theme in participants' discussions was this idea of a feeling of 'invincibility' on social media as a cause for cyberbullying. These findings are supported by previous literature that also shows that adolescents believe that social media is an environment in which individuals feel invincible and disconnected from reality, making it a platform for bullying (Gorzig, 2012). One participant shared their account of receiving homophobic abuse on social media, by someone that did not bully them face-to-face at school, the participant discussed their belief that this person used social media as a tool to bully as they did not feel they had the power to do so face-to-face. This idea is also salient in Gorzig's findings. Thus, this study along with previous literature found that adolescents believe social media to be a platform for bullying.

The effect of cyberbullying was also a salient theme in participants' discussions in this study, with depression, social isolation and suicidality because of cyberbullying being discussed. The findings highlighted the starkly negative outcomes of cyberbullying, with participants discussing how they and others had experienced depression, social isolation, and suicidal thoughts because of a cyberbullying incident. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies that found cyberbullying to be a salient cause of mental health issues amongst adolescents (Hamm, 2015).

4.5. Impairing Relationships

The findings highlight that participants believe that social media can be a detriment for interpersonal relationships. Participants particularly highlighted social media as a detriment to romantic relationships, discussing factors such as jealousy and paranoia arising because of social media, concurring with previous literature (Utz, 2011). Participants of both genders discussed feeling paranoid and jealous because of seeing their partner interacting with others that they perceive as a threat on social media. Participants highlighted that this jealousy often stems from seeing that their partner has 'liked' pictures on image-based media and commented on others' social media profiles. Thus, concurring with Utz (2011) who also concluded that relationships are impaired by jealousy and insecurity over social media 'likes and comments'.

The findings also illustrate that participants believe that social media has a negative impact on their friendships too. Participants illustrated that they have experienced losing friends due to social media. Participants discussed their beliefs that social media is a salient cause of arguments within social groups due to factors such as indirect posting e.g. writing a comment about somebody and the sharing of private conversations on social media. These findings however, contradict the findings of previous studies which found that social media strengthens friendships due to feelings of online support (Vallor, 2012). Participants also reported a decline in face-to-face contact with friends because of social media, which they believe has a negative impact on the quality of their friendships. Thus, supporting the findings of past studies that also found that adolescents' friendships are negatively impacted by a decline in face-to-face contact because of increased social media use (Kraut, 1998. Weidman, 2012).

4.6. Limitations

One limitation of this investigation was the methodology used. As this was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, the findings are subjective to those that were

studied. Thus, it is uncertain if these findings can be generalized to the greater population of 18-25-year-old social media users. Due to a strict time frame, only a small sample of four participants could be studied further limiting the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future studies could use larger samples of adolescent participants to gain more generalizable findings. More questions could also have been included in the semi-structured interview schedule to encourage participants to further discuss their feelings, as some of their answers were quite brief and could have been elaborated on.

4.7. Reflexivity

The role of the researcher in qualitative studies is pivotal, as the thoughts and feelings of the researcher can often impact the results and result in bias (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). As a young avid user of social media, myself, it's possible that my role as a researcher may have impacted the findings of this study. I believe personally that social media has had a profoundly negative impact on my wellbeing, therefore it is possible that I may have focused too much on the negative outcomes of social media in the interviews, rather than explored the effects of social media as a whole. For example, when participants discussed positive feelings about social media, I may not have encouraged them to elaborate on this enough because I personally could not relate to what they were saying. If I conducted this study again, I would edit the interview schedule to include a more balanced set of questions that explored both sides of the argument evenly. I also feel that my shyness and lack of confidence may have impacted this investigation as I felt somewhat uncomfortable interviewing people. Because of this, I think that sometimes I may not have encouraged participants to elaborate enough on their points. I think that my unease may have impacted the way I asked the questions, as well as my responses to the answers.

4.8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored the perspectives of 18-25-year-old's in relation to the effects of social media on wellbeing and relationships. Overall, participants did not have

a black or white view of social media and the effect it has on them. Participants saliently spoke of social media as an impairment of their mental wellbeing and interpersonal relationships, but also felt that social media has some positive outcomes for wellbeing and relationships. Participants prevalently agreed that social media has negative outcomes for wellbeing due to factors such as low self-esteem, social comparison, low mood and anxiety, but can also have positive outcomes on wellbeing when utilized correctly, when used to bridge distance in interpersonal relationships and when desired feedback is received. Participants did not have one particular view on how social media impacts their relationships. Participants agreed that social media has negative outcomes in terms of romantic relationships due to jealousy and insecurity but had conflicting views on the outcomes of social media on friendships, reporting that they have had experiences of social media both expanding and shrinking their social networks. Participants also saliently discussed a feeling of addiction to social media and an inability to delete it, highlighting how dependent adolescents are on social media. This also suggests that the effects of social media, both positive and negative, may be amplified due to adolescents' dependent and consistent use of these platforms due to how accessible they are i.e. apps on smartphones. Future research could explore the determinants of individual differences in relation to the outcomes of increased social media use.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured interview Schedule

Semi structured interview Schedule

Are you a frequent user of social media?

Which social media sites do you use frequently?

How prominent would you say social media is in your everyday life?

Do you like social media or do you feel that you use it out of habit?

What effect do you think social media has on your social networks? Make them bigger or smaller?

How are your friendships affected by social media/social networking?

Would you say that the quality of your personal relationships has improved or worsened with the development of social media?

How do you believe that social has affected your 'face to face' relationships?

Do you believe that social media and how you use it has an effect on your psychological health and wellbeing?

Can you think of an incidence in which social media has negatively affected you?

Can you think of an incidence in which social media has positively affected you?

What do you consider the positives and negatives of social media generally?

Have you ever experienced cyberbullying on social media?

How do you believe social media affects your self-image?

Do you believe social media profiles to be an accurate representation of reality?

Can you think of an instance where social media has positively or negatively affected your mental health?

Have you ever experienced insecurities or upset that you believe to be the result of social media?

Generally, do you believe that the negatives of social media outweigh the positives or vice versa?

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: A qualitative investigation into the relationship between social media use and psychological wellbeing and relationships.

Participant information sheet

The study

This study is a verbal interview using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview will consist of a series of questions investigating your social media use and how you believe social media affects your psychological wellbeing and relationships.

The study will explore the positive and negative effects of social media. The study will explore a variety of topics within social media such as cyberbullying, self-image, social networks and personal relationships.

What would happen if you agree to participate?

If you agree to take part in this study, the following will happen:

1. You will be the interviewee in a semi-structured interview.
2. You will be asked a series of questions about your experiences of social media.
3. Your answers will be recorded using a recording device, and later transcribed as a verbatim account.

Exclusion criteria

You have been asked to be the interviewee in this study as you are a suitable participant, i.e., aged between 18-25. This is the only criteria for this study, as 18-25 year olds are known to be the most frequent and avid users of social media.

Potential Risk

I don't believe that there are any risks to taking part in this study. Should you feel uncomfortable or upset with any of the questions at any point in the interview, you will be able to immediately withdraw from the study and leave if you wish. You will not be prompted to stay or forced to answer any questions which you may find triggering or invasive. You have the right to withdraw your data from the study at any point during the interview, and withdraw your data for up to two weeks after the interview.

Potential benefits

There aren't any personal benefits as such, but there are benefits in terms of wider research into the topic.

Withdrawal, anonymity and confidentiality

Your privacy is of great importance to me as a researcher, and I have taken/ will take careful steps to ensure that your privacy is protected at all times. As previously stated, you will be given a false name so that you are not identifiable. You will be called by this pseudonym throughout the write up of the results and your real name will not be used at all.

Any personal data of yours, i.e., the consent forms will be safely stored away and will not be accessible to anyone but myself or you should you wish to have access to them. It is a requirement of the university that these consent forms are stored for 10 years after the study is completed. The write up of the data will be stored on a password protected PC which only the researcher will have access to.

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any point during the interview should you wish, you will not be prompted to stay. Should you wish to withdraw your data from the sample after the interview is completed, you have up to two weeks to do so by contacting me using the details provided below. You have one week to request to see your interview transcript, then an additional week to withdraw the transcript from the data should you wish.

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

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Reference Number:

Participant name or Study ID Number:

Title of Project: **A qualitative investigation into the relationship between social media use and psychological wellbeing and relationships**

Name of Researcher:

Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before leaving the experiment, without giving any reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature of person taking consent

Word Count Statement

Abstract	150
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Introduction	2,733
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Method	852
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Results	2,940
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Discussion	2,446
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Total	<hr/> 8,971 <hr/>
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Signed: _____

Date: 18/04/2018