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# Instagram: The Real Stranger Danger

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Professor Hendricks

English 176

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Instagram:

### The Real Stranger Danger

A stranger, in simple terms, is best defined as a person with whom one has no personal acquaintance. Society constantly warns children from a young age to not accept candy from, get in a car with, and most importantly talk to strangers. Even after growing up, adults are still warned against going places alone, meeting people online, and putting their trust in people they have never met. The underlying message is this: strangers equal danger. Despite these frequent warnings, social media has found a way to glamorize strangers and make it socially acceptable to interact with them. Disguised under the pretense of becoming more cultured, adolescents and young adults are increasingly willing to connect and interact with strangers through social media. On the social networking site, Instagram, these strangers appear attractive, captivating, and flawless. They attract the attention of others because their lives allude to something better, something other users viewing their profile will then strive to attain. Although the people that Instagram users follow may not seem as threatening as a stereotypical stranger, they still pose an entirely new danger to their followers; a danger whose magnitude has yet to be evaluated.

Even though these strangers appear virtually instead of physically, the risk they pose should be taken just as seriously. Through my research I will show how the instantaneous nature of Instagram coupled with features such as; likes, comments, followers, following, and photo editing all lead to depression and low-self esteem. Additionally, the number of strangers

followed has the potential to increase the severity of these negative effects because users are only seeing snippets of these strangers' lives. This paper will focus on the adolescent and young adult Instagram user whose age ranges from thirteen to thirty-five. Although Instagram is an easy to navigate social media platform that welcomes a variety of users, my analysis will be done with the average user in mind instead of celebrities and users who do not engage with Instagram often. These users post at least once a week and have a range between one hundred and fifteen thousand followers and people they are following. Lifestyle envy is one of the main focuses of my research and because of that I chose to narrow my research to focus solely on Instagram instead of Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace. Previous studies have shown that the passive use of Facebook (browsing other's profiles without posting new material) triggered feelings of resentment and jealousy both present in lifestyle envy.<sup>1</sup> Similarly on Instagram, users can view both friends and strangers' posts without being required to upload any content of their own. Therefore, the image driven nature of Instagram, whose features are based off of the passive use of Facebook, puts users at a greater risk for lifestyle envy and subsequently, depression and low self-esteem. These negative consequences of lifestyle envy on the average user's mental health demonstrate that, in fact, Instagram is the real stranger danger.

Although strangers have always been present in society, now research detailing a new definition for strangers in the context of social media demonstrates that strangers are closer than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the traditional definition, the word stranger now includes people that one has met before. For example, classmates from high school who are still considered friends yet have not spoken to each other for an extended period of time or childhood friends who have

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<sup>1</sup> Katerina Lup, Leora Trub, and Lisa Rosenthal. "Instagram #Instasad?: Exploring Associations Among Instagram Use, Depressive Symptoms, Negative Social Comparison, and Strangers Followed." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, (2015) : 248

<sup>2</sup> Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal. "Instagram #Instasad?" 248.

drifted apart through the years could now be considered strangers to each other. Strangers on social media now consist of everyone apart from current close friends and family. These individuals are grouped together because they have not been an integral or consistent part of one's current life. Because these people are essentially strangers, users lack the information needed to make rational judgments about their lives. When users see refined and polished Instagram photos they believe these photos are that person's everyday reality, not the hand selected, filtered, and edited snapshots that they are. Therefore, users view these photos through the same lens they use to view the photos of other strangers and are at risk for experiencing lifestyle envy. Lifestyle envy is jealousy or resentment any individual feels towards another or the way in which they live. It is the feeling a person gets when seeing others who have something they want but cannot have.

Lifestyle envy descends from the theory of social comparison, which was developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954. Throughout the article, "A Theory of Social Comparison Process", Festinger highlights nine hypotheses, which make up the entirety of his theory.<sup>3</sup> The first three hypotheses are the most relevant to issues of social comparison through Instagram and lifestyle envy. These hypotheses are the following: (1) In human nature there exists a drive to simply evaluate one's own abilities and opinions, (2) Due to the fact that there is no (structured) existing way to evaluate one's own abilities and opinions, one must compare oneself to those around, and (3) Once one has established and evaluated one's abilities and opinions, the desire to compare oneself decreases.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, individuals are driven to gain truthful self-evaluations through the comparison to and the opinions of others. When these individuals are able to compare themselves to the people around them it helps to reduce their

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<sup>3</sup> Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes." *Human Relations*, (1954) : 117.

<sup>4</sup> Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes", 117-121.

uncertainty, and consequently they become more self-assured and able to define their self-worth. It is human nature to want to compare and compete with each other. By seeking opinions, individuals are able to become better versions of themselves. Social comparison provides adolescents and young adults the ability to learn their place in the world and develop a sense of maturity.

Unlike today, in the past, if adolescents and young adults wanted to seek out the trends and opinions of their peers, they would need to leave their home and interact with people face-to-face. However, due to the ever-increasing prevalence of social networking sites, without leaving their homes, adolescents and young adults are exposed to and can compare themselves to thousands of people in an instant. In addition, now they have the ability to not only compare themselves to those in their community, but also people from vastly different backgrounds such as celebrities, wealthy elite, and athletes. Festinger suggests the reason that individuals choose to compare themselves to people who are similar in ability and opinions is because otherwise it would be akin to a beginning athlete comparing him or herself to an Olympian.<sup>5</sup> That being said, when we engage in these various social networking sites, especially with strangers, we are unable to identify if these people have similar values and abilities. We only see the aspects of themselves they are choosing to share with us. Therefore, the social comparison that exists throughout these social networking sites, such as Instagram, is not the positive type that leads to maturation and positive self-evaluation. Instead, it is social comparison that leads to lifestyle envy, and more seriously, depression.

Since its founding in 2010, Instagram has become a very influential social networking site. As a social media platform that reaches over 300 million people, Instagram has developed a

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<sup>5</sup> Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," 117-40.

strong influence over adolescents and young adults all over the world.<sup>6</sup> Most users access Instagram through an app on their smartphones although it is possible to access the site from the computer. At first glance, it is simply a site where users upload pictures or videos of their lives for others to see, like, and comment on. The average Instagram user knows otherwise; it is infinitely more complicated than it seems. Each Instagram user has a profile where they upload their photos or videos. They can choose to make their profile private or public. Users can request to follow friends, strangers, and celebrities. In the same way that users can request to follow others, they can receive follow requests as well. If the user's profile is public anyone can follow them but if it is private the user has to accept or decline each individual follow request. At the top of each user's profile, the number of posts, number of followers, and number of people following are listed. Below that are all the photos the user has posted.

Upon opening the app, users see their home feed where all the images or videos posted by the people they follow are shown chronologically from newest to oldest. While scrolling through the feed, users can double tap a post to give it a like or leave a comment as well. The total number of likes per post is shown under the picture or video itself as well as the most recent comments. The number of likes per photo is important to the average Instagram user. Users often compare the number of likes on their photos with other users who have a similar amount of followers. The amount of exposure that each person's profile experiences daily varies, and it becomes a challenge to post a picture that will guarantee more likes than the one prior.

One of the main ways users try to improve their posts is through the many filters and editing tools Instagram provides. There are over twenty different filters that can change the look and feel of the photo.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there are different settings where users can adjust the contrast,

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<sup>6</sup> "Instagram." Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/press/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Instagram." Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/press/>.

brightness, and saturation. Aside from all these editing tools on Instagram, there are outside apps that also offer photo-editing tools such as different filters and frames. Some of these apps include Diptic, Layout, and Afterlight. These apps provide tools to edit the picture into different frames with fun shapes or add borders and text. The filters these apps provide go beyond the default ones provided by Instagram. They are able to transform a photo completely, getting rid of bad lighting, blemishes, and much more. These effects help to glamorize users' lives so that their true persona is barely recognizable. In addition, there is also pressure on users to create captions for their posts that are creative, funny, and have just the right amount of emojis. Instead of Instagram being about sharing pictures, it has become a game to see who can produce a post that will be witty, original, and aesthetically appealing to their followers. Whether they have achieved their goal will be determined by the total number of likes on the post.

The use of filters and other editing tools might remind people of the editing software Photoshop, which has recently undergone a negative campaign when modeling and marketing agencies used Photoshop to essentially edit and change the feel of the picture, creating an image that represents a false reality. The article "Instagram is OK, but Photoshop is evil? The Truth About Digital Lies" by Simon Dumenco argues that Instagram is essentially encouraging users to do the same thing.<sup>8</sup> Although society fights strongly against publishing photos tainted by Photoshop, the same thing happens over a million times a day on Instagram. Dumenco reasons that this is because "deep down, we know that the digitally manipulated lie is more appealing than the truth".<sup>9</sup> Instagram users who religiously follow accounts that have posted thousands of carefully edited photos to the extent where there is no distinction where the truth ends and the lie begins support this claim by Dumenco. Take for example fashion and beauty YouTuber, Zoella;

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Dumenco "Instagram Is OK, but Photoshop Is Evil? The Truth About Digital Lies." *Advertising Age* (2012) : 11.

<sup>9</sup> Dumenco, "Instagram Is OK", 11.

she has 115,000 followers and all of her images showcase her stylish outfits and carefully applied makeup.<sup>10</sup> In each picture she appears stunning, fashionable, and perfect. Because these photos are edited, her followers do not see realistic images of how she looks without filters or makeup; yet she is still growing increasingly popular because as Dumenco said, the lie is more appealing than the truth.

The saying “ignorance is bliss” is clearly reflected in the increasing popularity of social networking sites like Instagram. With digital manipulation being able to make even the worst hair days look intentional, some of the most frequently posted photos on Instagram are selfies – self-taken photos of oneself. These clearly edited photos of users have introduced terms like “selfie game strong” and the ever-popular “Selfie Sundays”, into our vocabulary. Surprisingly, these photos can reveal a lot about the people who post them. In the article “Let Me Take a Selfie: Associations Between Self-Photography, Narcissism, and Self-Esteem” the authors, Christopher Barry, Hannah Doucette, Della Loflin, Nicole River-Hudson, and Lacey Herrington, discuss how individuals with low self-esteem may be “more inclined to self-disclose on social media as opposed to making overt displays of their appearance or personality during face-to-face interactions”.<sup>11</sup> That being said, people who have their lives together and appear confident on Instagram may be, according to this article, people who have low self-esteem in real life. Furthermore, the article states, “social media may foster low self-esteem through the inherent opportunity to compare oneself to others and the possibility that one may receive negative, or no, social feedback”.<sup>12</sup> On Instagram, it is easy for people to feel insecure and worry about what they post. Unlike with Facebook where one can post witty written blurbs and be well liked, on

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<sup>10</sup> “Instagram.” Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/zoellazoella/>.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Barry, Hannah Doucette, Della C. Loflin, Nicole Rivera-Hudson, and Lacey L. Herrington. ““Let Me Take a Selfie””: Associations Between Self-Photography, Narcissism, and Self-Esteem.” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, (2015) : 1

<sup>12</sup> Barry, Doucette, Loflin, Rivera-Hudson, and Herrington. ““Let Me Take a Selfie””, 3.

Instagram one must post a photo or video. Posting a personal picture and leaving it out there to be judged by others creates an opportunity for feedback, both positive and negative. This proves to be difficult for many, especially the self-conscious, after all no one likes being rejected. Therefore, the fear of receiving negative feedback, or worse, none at all, fosters low self-esteem among many Instagram users.

Instagram provides one of the first quantifiable ways to receive social feedback through likes and the followers ratio. The ratio deemed the “followers ratio” by users serves to indicate how popular an Instagram account is. This ratio is the number of followers one has versus the number of people one follows. In Festinger’s theory of social comparison, his second hypothesis states that the reason why one looked to others to evaluate one’s self-worth was because there was no existing system to evaluate it.<sup>13</sup> Now with the existence of likes and the followers ratio users are offered a system. The followers ratio is very noticeable, especially in popular Instagram accounts. For example, Taylor Swift, a popular singer/songwriter, has 43.5 million followers and is only following 72 accounts.<sup>14</sup> Although many acknowledge the followers ratio exists, there is no discussion of it on Instagram. The only proof of it’s existence is when users unfollow other users in order to maintain their ratio. This is made possible by the fact that the relationship between users does not need to be reciprocal, allowing people to follow and unfollow as they please. These numbers as well as the number of likes per photo are important to the average Instagram user. They present the first quantifiable way to measure self-worth. Although it is not an accurate statistic, the Instagram community encourages users to use these numbers to define themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> Festinger, “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes,” 117-121.

<sup>14</sup> “Instagram.” Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/taylorswift/>.

Clearly, users are inclined to strive for a celebrity-like followers ratio and the desire to have the greatest number of likes does not go unnoticed. This indicates a sense of competition among Instagram users. Humans have always been inherently competitive; this can be traced back to the evolutionary theory, survival of the fittest. Similarly, individuals compete so that they can rank themselves and establish where they are located on the metaphorical scale of social hierarchy. In the article “Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression Among College Students: Is Facebook Depressing?” the authors Edson Tandoc Jr., Patrick Ferrucci, and Margaret Duffy, mention the social rank theory as very important theoretical framework in beginning to understand why seeing others’ successes often lead to depression. The social rank theory revolves around competition. Although we are not competing for food or survival, “social comparison can refer to competition for power or attractiveness, among other things. Those who do not succeed, or those who perceive they have not succeeded, feel subordinated.”<sup>15</sup> Instagram users demonstrate the accuracy of this theory through their obsession with followers ratios and number of likes per photo. When users see others doing better than them in terms of likes and the followers ratio, especially users these individuals consider to be less attractive or popular, a fierce competition begins. To them there is no justifiable reason why they are not “on top” and will compete until they have achieved their desired place. These numbers are far more than just numbers; they represent social standing and an individual’s rank amongst their peers.

As users compare the number of likes on their photos to the number of likes on the photos of the people they follow, it can foster a strong sense of resentment, especially if their likes are significantly lower. This can lead to self-questioning such as, “Why did their photo receive more likes?” and then lead to lower self-esteem by wondering, “Are they better

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<sup>15</sup> Edson Tandoc, Patrick Ferrucci, and Margaret Duffy. "Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression Among College Students: Is Facebooking Depressing?" *Computers in Human Behavior*, (2014) : 139-46.

looking?” or “Are they more popular?”. Seeing a number that quantifies how much one is liked is a cold, hard fact, it cannot be changed. Consequently, Instagram fosters a community of users who will never be satisfied. In addition to wanting the highest number of likes, users also look for certain people to like their picture to justify their self-worth. For example, one could be following someone they think is attractive or have a crush on. If that person does not like their picture they may think that person does not like them, which may lead to them beginning to question and doubt their self-worth. The concept of likes fosters an extremely unhealthy way for users to justify their self-worth and improve their self-esteem. Moreover, when users see the photos of the people they follow with more likes than they have, they try to replicate their photo or change the way they present themselves in order to get more likes. This is not encouraging users to be confident in their own identity, rather it is saying if you look like this or act like this or do these activities you can be popular. As this happens, users are also going about their day trying to find their place in their physical lives as well.

Keeping up with two lives and two identities can be physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing. In their book “The App Generation: How Today’s Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World”, authors Howard Gardner and Katie Davis discuss how individuals are now responsible for maintaining two identities: one for the people they deal with in person on a daily basis and another for the audience they reach through various social media apps.<sup>16</sup> These individuals using Instagram and other social media sites create identities that are “developed and put forth so that they convey a certain desirable – indeed, determinedly upbeat – image of the person in question.”<sup>17</sup> Gardner and Davis have also found substantial

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Gardner and Katie Davis. "Personal Identity in the Age of the App." In *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 60-91.

<sup>17</sup> Gardner and Davis. *The App Generation*, 61.

evidence showing that “youth take care to present a socially desirable, polished self online”.<sup>18</sup> Because so many adolescents and young adults are online, it is just as important to have a polished social media presence online, as it is to dress presentably when going out to see people. These online identities take more time to create and maintain however, because users can be whomever they want. They are not confined by who they are in face-to-face interactions; rather through social media they have the freedom to choose. Furthermore, Jacqueline Nesi and Mitchell Prinstein state in their article “Using Social Media for Social Comparison and Feedback-Seeking: Gender and Popularity Moderate Associations with Depressive Symptoms”, that social networking sites facilitate the creation of a second social world.<sup>19</sup> They claim that social networking sites like Instagram “have a number of unique features: a personal profile with photos, text meant to represent the user, and public commentary on a user’s profile and photos” which in turn create “an online social world that is fundamentally different than its offline counterpart”.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Instagram users are living in two separate but fully functioning worlds. The added stress of maintaining two separate lives contributes to the negative mental health repercussions.

Through this second yet only virtual identity, users have a chance to express a part of themselves that may not normally be recognized on a daily basis. With this freedom of expression, they are also tasked with maintaining the two identities through which they experience varying levels of social comparison and social feedback. The photos being posted and viewed by average Instagram users are not accurate descriptions of a person’s life. Instead, they are carefully crafted identities to ensure that the user appears socially desirable. Users who

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<sup>18</sup> Gardner and Davis. *The App Generation*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Jacqueline Nesi and Mitchell J. Prinstein. "Using Social Media for Social Comparison and Feedback-Seeking: Gender and Popularity Moderate Associations with Depressive Symptoms." *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology J Abnorm Child Psychol*, (2015) : 1-12

<sup>20</sup> Nesi and Prinstein. "Using Social Media for Social Comparison", 2.

compare themselves to these photos have no idea that they have been exaggerated. As these false identities entice the users viewing the photos, social comparison is also occurring. This leads to more severe cases of low self-esteem and depression because of the added exposure to lifestyle envy through their multiple identities. Social comparison has never before existed in this magnitude. Although users often try to feign reality by posting intimate photos about their life with no filters, they are still hand selecting what information they choose to share with their audience. Hence, it is not the true representation of their everyday lives. Instagram users only share what they are comfortable with people knowing, whereas in real life, we typically share much more of ourselves as a whole and people are free to judge what they want.

Even though negative consequences exist, adolescents and young adults continue to use social networking sites, sometimes even to an extent where it becomes an addiction. There are times where taking a short break to browse what new photos or videos have been posted on Instagram has turned into two or three hours being spent on the app. “It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens” by Danah Boyd discusses why teens are so obsessed with social media. In the past, the term addiction has been used solely for substance disorders and impulsive-control disorders, yet recently it has been deemed appropriate to use it for social media as well.<sup>21</sup> Although having a social media addiction is far from positive, Boyd explains that part of the reason we spend so much time on our phones is because it is our nature to be “addicted to information and people”. This tendency is “part of the human condition: it arises from a healthy desire to be aware of surroundings and to connect to society”.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, part of the reason adolescents and young adults are so caught up in social networking sites like Instagram is because it is their way of responding to a social world. As mentioned earlier, in

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<sup>21</sup> Danah Boyd "Addiction What Makes Teens Obsessed with Social Media." In *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 77-99.

<sup>22</sup> Boyd, *It's Complicated*, 92.

previous years adolescents would need to leave their homes in order to interact and engage with the world, but now with the click of a button adolescents can instantly engage with the world from the comfort of their bedrooms.

To fully understand how Instagram users create desirability with their online personas, I have conducted an analysis of an average Instagram user's most recent post. User Kelcey Lorenzo, who has 247 followers and is following 189 users, recently posted a photo from her study abroad experience in Germany.<sup>23</sup> The photo had all the characteristics of a typical Instagram post. First, there was the subject matter, a nature hike with her study abroad friends. This photo shows her audience that she is social and adventurous. Coupled with the artsy way in which the photo was taken (only the backs of the hikers could be seen making the main focus on the scenery) the filter that was selected gives the impression that she is creative or an artist. Finally, the caption, carefully worded "t r a i l b l a z e r s" shows her desire to keep things simplistic and trendy. Now, from a single picture I have managed to create an image in my mind of her persona. After seeing her photo, I think Kelcey is a girl who enjoys the outdoors and goes on adventures often. I also think she is talented artistically since her photo was aesthetically appealing. Furthermore, I imagine her to be carefree and positive. Since I do not know her personally, I will never know if the assumptions I have made are correct. From viewing a single picture, users are able to develop an idea of the person that they follow and if that person depicts a life they want, they will begin to experience lifestyle envy.

Social comparison can now take place during all hours of the day due to the instantaneous nature of Instagram. At any time of the day users can open the Instagram app and view photos from the people they follow. In his book, "The Psychodynamics of Social Networking Connected-up Instantaneous Culture and the Self", Aaron Balick expands upon the

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<sup>23</sup> "Instagram." Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/kelceyl/>.

problems created by the online instantaneous world, “where everybody out there is seeking to be in the mind of the other”.<sup>24</sup> Meaning, with endless information available through social media, people are trying to discover all they can about the people they engage with. Balick discusses the difficulty of relationships between users due to the “paradoxical environment where both proximity and distance work hand in hand”.<sup>25</sup> By this he means the feeling users experience when they feel close to the people they follow on Instagram although they are not physically near them and do not know them personally. The feeling of trust they feel towards these strangers facilitates “closer contact with members of their social networks”<sup>26</sup> and because of this they are more likely to engage with them. When users trust these strangers they are more likely to believe what they post. For example, Kayla Itsines is an Australian personal trainer. She has published *Bikini Body Guide* E-books, which are read and used by many. On her Instagram account, which has 3.5 million followers, she posts transformation photos of people who have used her body guides.<sup>27</sup> In one photo, a female young adult showcases her transformation that supposedly took 28 weeks according to the caption on the picture. The transformation was incredible; the woman went from being large and unshapely to toned, lean, and healthy. Although the photo states that it took 28 weeks, Itsines’s followers only see the visual representation of the transformation. It will appear as if minimal effort was required to lose weight. What Itsines’s followers are unable to see is the time and effort it took to achieve her great body. The photo does not show the days she probably struggled to complete all the workouts or the days where she had to sacrifice eating her favorite dessert in favor of achieving this level of fitness. Instead Itsines’s followers may think they can transform their bodies rapidly as well and will be disappointed when they do not

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<sup>24</sup> Aaron Balick, *Psychodynamics of Social Networking Connected-up Instantaneous Culture and the Self*. (London: Karnac Books, 2013),104.

<sup>25</sup> Balick, *Psychodynamics of Social Networking*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "Instagram." Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. [https://instagram.com/kayla\\_itsines/](https://instagram.com/kayla_itsines/).

instantly see a change. This is not to say that her body guides are unsuccessful, but to instead acknowledge that while she shows amazing transformation photos, there are no pictures of what occurs between day one and the end result. Therefore, once again Instagram users are presented with the false sense of reality and the consequences of low self-esteem and depression remain.

The number of strangers users follow further perpetuates the false sense of reality. Through my own observations, I have found that Instagram users, on average, follow more strangers than friends. A typical person has at least ten to fifteen close friends with whom they share personal information with outside of these social networking sites, but these average users follow at least one hundred people if not more. Therefore, the number of stranger's photos being viewed daily, sometimes even twice daily, is significantly more than the number of friend's photos being viewed. In addition, while taking a closer look at various strangers' profiles, I concluded that there is no way to formulate an accurate picture of their lives. I only see bits and pieces of what they choose to share. So, while I can create some type of understanding of their life, it is unlikely that I will ever truly understand them. For example, another Instagram user, Jay Alvarez has 2.2 million followers and is following 165 users.<sup>28</sup> His posts consist mainly of his travels and his girlfriend. He appears as an attractive male who surfs and travels the world free from any worries or cares. Through close examination of his profile, this was all the information I could gather about him. Despite the very little information I was able to collect about him, many users claim that his life is "life goals", a life they strive to replicate. Yet, what they are seeing is only a carefully selected, filtered, aspect of his life. I do not know about his home life, his family, his values, or his hardships. I am only seeing this one fraction of his life. How can anyone strive for a life they know nothing about? Therefore, when users compare themselves to people like Jay Alvarez, they are seeking to achieve something unrealistic; because that

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<sup>28</sup> "Instagram." Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/jayalvarez/>.

carefully crafted person seen on Instagram does not exist. They are only a deliberately selected part of a whole.

Jay Alvarez represents one type of stranger; the stranger users don't know personally but due to his Instagram popularity, have become aware of his existence. The other type of stranger, the one closer to home, can appear as an old classmate or a distant friend. Take for example one of the people I follow, Summer Harrison. She has 3,883 followers and is following 681 people.<sup>29</sup> Growing up we competed against each other on opposing swim teams yet we would get together for the occasional lunch or sleepover. I have not talked to her in years, but I do follow her on Instagram. When her posts pop up showing something amazing she did over the weekend, such as cliff jumping, my immediate thought is "Wow that looks so cool, I want a life like that!" Because I have not spoken to her in a while, I cannot make any rational justifications that her life is not as wonderful and carefree as it seems online. To me she is living the life I want. What I am experiencing is lifestyle envy. If a close friend of mine had posted the same exact picture I would not have responded in the same way. Because I know intimate details about my close friends' lives, I am not likely to jump to conclusions that their life is one great adventure. Rather, I would realize that their post displays one activity they did over the weekend, but does not summarize their entire life. I am not fooled by the glamour of their photos, and therefore I will not experience lifestyle envy.

My observations about my own experiences have been mirrored by the article, "Instagram #Instasad?: Exploring Associations Among Instagram Use, Depressive Symptoms, Negative Social Comparison, and Strangers Followed" by authors Katerina Lup, Leora Trub, and Lisa Rosenthal. Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal conducted a study to research the associations between the social networking site, Instagram, and depression, social comparison, and strangers followed.

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<sup>29</sup> "Instagram." Instagram. Accessed August 23, 2015. <https://instagram.com/summurrr/>.

The authors' choice to perform their research on Instagram instead of Facebook, a more frequented social networking site, was because Facebook has been previously associated with social overload, low self-esteem, loneliness and depression from prior studies.<sup>30</sup> The cause of these symptoms was the passive use of Facebook and because Instagram regularly incorporates these passive uses, the authors felt that research concerning Instagram would be more valuable.

According to the Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal, the attribution theory "which highlights people's tendency to attribute others' behavior to dispositional rather than situational factors, would suggest that browsing the enhanced photos of celebrities or other strangers on Instagram may trigger assumptions that these photos are indicative of how the people in them actually live".<sup>31</sup> This was supported throughout my analysis of Kelcey Lorenzo, Jay Alvarez, and Summer Harrison. Although I tried to formulate an unbiased opinion about their lives, I was strongly influenced by what they posted and how they presented it. As mentioned above when users are presented with glamorized photos that can be easily misconstrued, they tend to draw conclusions that make them more "vulnerable to judging themselves in relation to the assumed (but often unrealistic) lives of others, which can trigger feelings of distress."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the nonreciprocal nature of Instagram combined with the sharing of overly enhanced photos represent a combination that triggers lifestyle envy which often leads to "negative feelings about the self"<sup>33</sup> and depression.

The study Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal conducted, aimed to examine the association between the frequency of Instagram use and depressive symptoms as well as examine the nature of the relationship between number of strangers followed and depressive symptoms experienced.

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<sup>30</sup> Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal. "Instagram #Instasad?" 248.

<sup>31</sup> Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal. "Instagram #Instasad?" 248.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

This study was designed to quantify their hypothesis. The participants were 18-29 year olds who considered themselves to be Instagram users. All the data was self-reported. The participants reported how much time they spent on Instagram daily, how many strangers they followed (determined by a percentage – number of strangers followed over the total number of people reported following), what degree of social comparison was experienced (measured by a scale adapted by Feinstein who was the social psychologist mentioned above – scale measured how confident, attractive, desirable, and inferior one feels in comparison to others on Instagram using a 10 point scale), and lastly depressive symptoms (measured with the 20 item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale).<sup>34</sup> These results were then analyzed and reported.

The study found that people who followed the most strangers and spent the most time on Instagram were most at risk to experience low self-esteem and depressive symptoms. This supports my findings as well. Those who followed fewer strangers saw more photos of their friends and since they knew the reality of how their friends actually lived, they were less likely to react negatively to seeing their photos. On the other hand, users who followed more strangers experienced greater levels of social comparison and lifestyle envy upon seeing these photos because of their inability to form a realistic conclusion about these stranger's lives.

Instagram allows users to create a perfect image of themselves to share with others. Those on the receiving end are presented with these fake images of perfection, which result in lifestyle envy and users trying to obtain an equally perfect life that does not truly exist. Lifestyle envy can have serious consequences some of which include low self-esteem and depression. In a technology driven world it is unrealistic to expect people to be okay with giving up their smartphones and social networking sites, but it is important that we are aware of the new danger Instagram presents. Never before have we been able to see our self-worth quantified by numbers

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<sup>34</sup> Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal. "Instagram #Instasad?" 249.

and in such a clear-cut manner. Awareness is the next step that needs to be taken. Similar to how we were warned about the dangers of strangers in the past, we need to educate ourselves about Instagram: the new stranger danger that is becoming a part of our future.

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