

“Am I a Leader or a Follower?”: Examining Social Media Use Through the Lens of Social Conformity and Individuality

Rachel Dennison¹, Yumna Qaisar¹, Linette Sapper^{1*}, Melanie Selvaggi¹, Safaiya Tobala¹

Abstract

The importance of the role social media plays in modern communication has become increasingly evident. As an information-sharing platform, it allows users to collaborate, befriend others and engage in friendly banter, or identify key social issues. As such, it became apparent that further research on social media would allow us to gain further insight into a user's willingness to self-express online. This led to the inquiry of three research questions; the first seeks to examine whether social media promotes conformity, followed by whether social media can also promote individuality, and lastly, whether a fear of being labelled affects self-expression. To study this phenomenon, we created an anonymous online survey to broadcast to the McMaster University undergraduate population. This survey garnered 37 complete responses which we then analyzed using statistical software and thematic analysis. It was found that social media promotes conformity more than it does individuality due to the lingering fear of being labelled by fellow users. In an increasingly digital world, it is essential that we commit to understanding the serious impact that the usage of these platforms is having on people's ways of communicating and expressing themselves.

Introduction

Social media has become a powerful tool for exchanging and collaborating on information often packaged in the form of posts, likes, comments, sharing content, and displaying news. Users can then digest this information by choosing to align with it and the online majority or deciding to stand out and follow their own lines of thought. As such, the goal of this research was to understand how adults engaged with social media and whether the majority opinion online swayed users' thoughts, actions, and behaviours more than it encouraged the expression of individuality.

Social Psychological Context

Our research was influenced and shaped by existing social psychological theories and concepts that we deemed applicable to this topic of social media use. We examined social

¹ Undergraduate Student, Honours Social Psychology Program, Faculty of Social Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

* While I serve on the editorial board for the journal, there are no conflicts of interest in publication as all grading and final selection of papers eligible for publication were conducted at arms-length, with Dr. Clancy evaluating all final thesis papers and independently contacting the groups who were eligible for publication.

media usage through the lens of social conformity and individuality. Additionally, we assessed the contributing factors to social conformity such as a desire to gain social capital (i.e., a sense of community and likeness with others) through the maintenance of a carefully curated online self-presentation (i.e., the capacity to engage in relational maintenance with others). We were also interested in investigating the prospect of being labelled by the online majority as a potential consequence of nonconformity. We drew on several prevailing social psychological paradigms for the foundations of our research questions such as Asch's social conformity, Janis' theory of groupthink, labelling theory, dramaturgical theory, and attribution theory.

Research Questions

To provide us with a sense of direction, three central research questions were developed. The first of these was, "Does social media promote conformity?" Technology is ever-evolving and it continues to have great influence on our lives, made clear through the advent and rise of various social media platforms. On these sites, users are given free rein to broadcast their personal lives to the masses, share trending posts, and discuss their thoughts on an array of issues, ranging from mundane to complex. As such, we wanted to explore the impact that this form of media is having on individuals in terms of how likely they were to think and behave in a similar manner to those that they followed or idolized online. This was not isolated to close friends and family members that interact with one another virtually, but also the general population's activity on these platforms. This first research question was designed to better understand the social desirability tendency that users may exhibit, affecting their level of conformity.

Our next question was as follows: "Can social media promote individuality?" We were interested in shifting some of our focus to individuals who may have displayed a tendency to deviate from behaviours of conformity and what factors were driving them to do so. We hoped to gain more of an understanding of those who did not conform, and as a result, potentially risked stigmatization or social isolation. With this in mind, we considered how being labelled may have impacted an individual emotionally if backlash was experienced from members of the majority. This was an important element to explore, as it looked into the possible effects of expressing individuality on social media.

This inspired our final research question: "Does a fear of being labelled affect self-expression?" We wanted to investigate the impact of having a label attached to oneself and how this may have threatened an individual's sense of self. We were interested in answering this question, as it could have potentially informed us about whether displaying individuality was frowned upon in online spaces and if a fear of being associated with a negative label led people to alter their self-presentation on social media.

Purpose of the Research

Our main purpose for conducting this research was to understand if social media prompts individuals to socially conform to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the majority and whether social media can also be used for the opposite – to deviate from the majority and freely self-express. Some people may use social media to run counter to these majority-held viewpoints and, instead, explore different avenues of thought that may not be wildly popular or conventional. In this way, we sought to expand on previous research affirming that online social conformity is a real phenomenon. However, we

looked to further investigate if social media platforms could be utilized to also express individuality and the potentially associated consequence of labelling as a factor affecting self-expression. By studying the experiences of undergraduate students at McMaster University who were 18 years of age and older, we strived to learn how this demographic attempted to either fit in or stand out in this technology-driven society, through the use of social media as a tool to voice their opinions, ideas, and beliefs.

Overview of Paper

To further elaborate on this topic, we conducted a thematic analysis of previous research on this subject matter in the form of a literature review, as well as addressed the appropriate theoretical frameworks that served as a basis for our study. Then, we detailed our methodological approach by outlining the various steps involved in the research process, as well as any ethical concerns associated with our research, and highlighted the data analysis procedures implemented to make sense of our findings. This was followed by a summary of our results through figures and text, a discussion of our research findings and their place in the broader literature, and finally, notable limitations and insights made evident throughout our study.

Literature Review

Conformity

Due to the abstract nature of groupthink symptoms, past literature has relied upon operationalizing and conceptualizing groupthink and its conditions to research it effectively (Kameda & Sugimori, 1993; Turner and Pratkanis, 1998; Matusitz & Breen, 2012; Wyemayake et al., 2021). For example, Kameda & Sugimori's (1993) research used collective entrapment, which shares a strong likeness to groupthink, to understand how and when collective entrapment occurred in groups under unanimity rule or majority rule (Kameda & Sugimori, 1993). The conceptualization and operationalization of groupthink and its conditions were found in most of the literature, which made finding results for our initial research inquiry, how social media affects groupthink, difficult (Kameda & Sugimori, 1993; Turner and Pratkanis, 1998; Matusitz & Breen, 2012). The concept of conformity was intriguing as it shares a slight similarity with groupthink (Janis, 1972 & Asch, 1955).

Wijenayake et al., (2021) produced a similar experiment using a Facebook survey where participants were shown a fake news article with no comments and then were asked to rate their "familiarity of the article, their opinion on the article's trustworthiness, and their confidence on the provided trustworthiness rating" (Wijenayake et al., 2021, p. 14). They were then asked how they would respond to the article or if they would respond at all and were given the choices of "commenting, fact-checking, sharing, or reporting it" (Wijenayake et al., 2021, p. 14). Participants were then shown the unaltered news article, intact with the original comments, and were asked to read the comments thoroughly and to determine whether they were reassuring or skeptical of the article's credibility (Wijenayake et al., 2021). The participants were asked a second time to relay their opinion regarding the article's credibility and to provide their level of confidence in their rating of the article's credibility (Wijenayake et al., 2021). The results showed that participants altered their opinions about the news article's credibility after they had been provided with

information about how other readers felt about the credibility of the news article (Wijenayake et al., 2021).

This study is a great example of Asch's (1955) conformity experiment being conducted by using a social media platform (Asch, 1955; Wijenayake et al., 2021). However, there was a distinct difference between the studies, and that was the absence of a fictitious peer group or authority figure, whose role was crucial to the original experiment (Asch, 1955; Wijenayake et al., 2021). This would suggest that a strong influence, such as an authority figure or group of peers, whether real or imagined, is not needed for conforming behaviours to take place (Asch, 1955; Wijenayake et al., 2021). Most of the literature we found on conformity and social media uses Asch's (1955) technique of exposing and/or revealing the responses or comments of other people on social media to the individual (Asch, 1955; Wijenayake et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2017; Zhu & Huberman, 2014; Colliander, 2019; Neubaum et al., 2018). Random comments and responses by unknown social media users, whether real or manufactured, appear to be enough to sway the opinion of an individual (Asch, 1955; Wijenayake et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2017; Zhu & Huberman, 2014; Colliander, 2019; Neubam et al., 2018).

Kelly et al., (2017) produced a similar study where statistics about how others responded were provided to participants and were sufficient to produce "conformity in moral judgements" (Kelly et al., 2017, p. 65; Asch, 1955). This suggests that merely providing statistical information is also enough to induce conformity on behalf of individuals online (Kelly et al., 2017). This realization was crucial to our understanding of conformity because the remaining literature that we found surrounding the concept of conformity and social media usually encompassed exposing users to comments, shares, and likes by other anonymous social media users (Asch, 1955; Farmer et al., 2018; Packer, 2009; Colliander, 2019).

The concept of desiring to be socially accepted being tied to conforming behaviours online is something Colliander (2019) attempted to understand. Specifically, the role that positive self-concept plays on social media platforms when it comes to sharing, commenting, and re-posting fraudulent news articles (Colliander, 2019, p. 203). The goal was to understand how maintaining a positive self-concept online influenced the users' likelihood to conform to the belief and opinions of other users about whether a news article was fraudulent (Colliander, 2019, p. 203). The hypothesis theorized that users would conform to "others' beliefs and behaviors in order to enhance, protect, or repair their self-esteem" (Colliander, 2019, p. 203). It was found that users who were exposed to negative comments regarding the fraudulent news article were more likely to comment negatively, hold negative attitudes about the article, and were more likely to share the article (Colliander, 2019). Furthermore, it was found that disclaimers that were placed upon potentially fraudulent news articles, that are used by social media companies to help stop the spread of misinformation, were not as effective as user comments (Colliander, 2019). Users on social media heavily relied upon other users' comments as a tool in deciding whether the news article was fraudulent and highly influenced their reactions, including their intention to share or comment on the fraudulent news article (Colliander, 2019). This finding was pivotal to our understanding of conformity and social media because it showcased how conformity can be used as an impression management tool to help users maintain a positive self-concept online (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019). It also showcased the powerful influence that online users possess as people are more

likely to adhere to the opinions and beliefs of other social media users rather than adhere to corporate disclaimers and warnings (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019). This would suggest that group and/or majority opinion, whether it be a group of peers or a group of anonymous strangers online, is more influential than a corporation, which could be interpreted as an authority figure expressing a cautionary warning (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019). Furthermore, it implied that what is deemed misinformation, or fraudulent news, is determined by comments made by other social media users, which would suggest that the spreading of misinformation and fake news articles is in the hands of the majority opinion held within those comments (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019).

It became obvious that majority influence was a meaningful, contributing factor in eliciting conforming behaviours among social media users (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019; Wijenayake et al., 2021; Neubaum et al., 2018; Zhu & Huberman, 2014; Farmer et al., 2018). Many of the studies utilized methodology that took into consideration the number of likes, shares, comments on a post, and whether the comments were majority positive or negative, to determine what combination of factors induced conformity on social media platforms (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019; Wijenayake et al., 2021; Neubaum et al., 2018; Zhu & Huberman, 2014). The results measured the participants' likelihood to share, like, or comment based upon what was shown to them (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019; Wijenayake et al., 2021; Neubaum et al., 2018; Zhu & Huberman, 2014). A majority influence in the form of likes, shares, opinions, and comments was usually the determining factor that facilitated conforming, behavioural reactions online (Asch, 1955; Colliander, 2019; Wijenayake et al., 2021; Neubaum et al., 2018; Zhu & Huberman, 2014).

However, Neubaum et al., (2018) wanted to see how "peer reactions influenced behavioural reactions" (p. 185) offline. Specifically, how an online "call to vigilantism" (p. 189) influenced offline behaviour among users (Neubaum et al., 2018). Users were more likely to engage in offline behaviours when the users strongly identified with the commenters (Neubaum et al., 2018). Additionally, users who were higher in empathy and altruism were more likely to engage in offline behaviours regardless of other users' reactions (Neubaum et al., 2018). This finding suggests that social identification plays a role online and can influence offline behaviours among social media users (Neubaum et al., 2018). It also highlighted how users' dispositional traits, such as empathy and altruism, play a role in whether users conform to group reactions and participate in offline behaviours related to vigilante justice (Neubaum et al., 2018).

Users who strongly identified with a group of peers or an anonymous group of online users, were more likely to conform to the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of that group, and thus, were more likely to engage in behaviours offline that are related to the ideas, opinions, or beliefs of that group (Neubaum et al., 2018). Furthermore, users who have higher levels of empathy and altruism can override the opinions and reactions of others if the users feel that they are engaging in a prosocial behaviour or positive cause (Neubaum et al., 2018).

This is important to our research inquiry because it is evidence that online interactions can influence ideas and opinions which can ultimately result in real-world actions (Neubaum et al., 2018). These actions can potentially have real-world consequences, good or bad (Neubaum et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is also evidence that certain emotional dispositions can overpower the desire to conform depending on the subject matter, in this case, a call to vigilantism (Neubaum et al., 2018).

Individuality

The concept of individuality has many versions, but arguably the first proposal of the idea of individuality came from John Stuart Mill (Hinchman, 1990). Individuality is best understood in the context of the contrasting concept of conformity (Hinchman, 1990). Mill described individuality as an expression of one's own desires and varying aspects of their personality (Hinchman, 1990). He argued that "taken-for-granted" aspects of the self must be externalized to be able to achieve an individual identity (Hinchman, 1990, p. 761). It is important to note that individuality is not synonymous with the term individualism. The idea of individuality is in opposition to the idea of conformity, which is relevant to our paper's main focus. The main goal of this paper is to see whether adults conform or if they extract different ways of thinking and ultimately form an opinion that is unique from the majority-held opinion.

Individuality can be measured or conceptualized as the ability to express yourself without fear (Bailey et al., 2020; Orehek & Human, 2017; Fox & Warber, 2015; Ma & Zhang, 2021). Authentic self-expression is said to help individuals "affirm their sense of self" (p. 2) through asserting an individual's personal traits (Bailey et al., 2020, Orehek & Human, 2017, p. 60). Bailey et al. (2020) aimed to understand how the need for authentic self-expression, and the desire to present an idealized version of oneself on social media, can create inner conflict and tension on behalf of social media users (Bailey et al., 2020). The tension arises because both serve a psychological, yet contradictory, need that comes with different costs (Bailey et al., 2020). Self-idealization has been described as a "fundamental part of human nature" (p. 2) as it allows individuals to curate an image of themselves that is socially acceptable and allows others to view them positively (Bailey et al., 2020). However, if an individual behaves in a way that deviates from the carefully curated image that they have created for themselves, they are likely to experience psychological distress, conflict, and intense emotional despair (Bailey et al., 2020).

Using "the Five Factor Model of personality" (p. 2) and Quantified Authenticity, which assessed "authenticity as the proximity between the self-view and self-expression" (p. 7), Bailey et al. (2020) hypothesized that people who were higher in "authentic self-expression of personality characteristics" (p. 2) would have higher levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, it was also theorized that individuals who were higher in authentic self-expression would not all benefit from authentically expressing themselves online (Bailey et al., 2020). The reasoning behind this was due to certain traits being perceived by others as more socially acceptable than others (Bailey et al., 2020). Those who held more acceptable traits would be more likely to undergo lessened inner conflict and "tension between self-idealization and authentic self-expression on social media..." (Bailey et al., 2020, p. 2).

It was found that "...authentic self-expression on social media was correlated with greater life satisfaction" (Bailey et al., 2020, p.7). However, there was inconsistent evidence to support the notion that individuals with particular personality traits would benefit more from self-expression online (Bailey et al., 2020). This finding suggests that users who prioritize being authentic and true to themselves online have a better quality of life (Bailey et al., 2020). This may imply that users who sacrifice their authenticity and conform to social norms or majority opinion could have lower life satisfaction and overall well-being (Bailey et al., 2020). This is an important finding because it highlights the important role that individuality plays when it comes to social media users well-being and

could imply that users who use social media as a means to authentically express themselves, and who avoid conforming, could be at a greater advantage psychologically, emotionally, and in everyday life as they are remaining true to themselves in the face of online pressure (Bailey et al., 2020).

Although authentically expressing oneself online is shown to have positive outcomes for social media users, the literature does not take into consideration reasons why some users may not participate in expressing themselves online (Bailey et al., 2020; Fox & Warber, 2015). Marginalized, minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ community are an example of a group of social media users who may want to express their identity and romantic relationships on social media but instead stay silent out of fear of the potential consequences that could result from doing so (Fox & Warber, 2015). Fox and Warber (2015) wanted to understand how members of the LGBTQ+ community experienced self-expression on social media using “spiral of silence theory” (p. 86) as it “details the process wherein individuals remain silent about salient moral issues when they believe that their opinion is in the minority” (p. 83). The spiral of silence emphasizes the idea that the majority opinion is constructed, implemented, and reinforced by individuals who are a part of mainstream culture and who do not belong to minority groups (Fox & Warber, 2015). As a result, the majority opinion is deemed socially acceptable, and therefore, individuals whose opinion aligns with the majority opinion will feel more inclined to speak their opinion and individuals whose opinion does not align with the majority will likely avoid stating their opinion due to the fear of being ostracized and punished (Fox & Warber, 2015).

Opinions on matters that are based on “moral or ideological” (p. 83) frameworks can often foster a hostile and divisive environment which can fuel the spiral of silence (Fox & Warber, 2015). LGBTQ+ opinions and issues usually fall under this category which forces members of the LGBTQ+ community into utilizing self-censoring strategies such as remaining silent, removing themselves from the discussion, or agreeing with the majority to avoid conflict (Fox & Warber, 2015).

Fox & Warber, (2015) wanted to see how the spiral of silence played out on Facebook with LGBTQ+ participants. They found that the spiral of silence was evident in online communications, particularly with individuals who were not “out” (p. 86) to their family, friends, or colleagues. Most cited that religion or highly conservative values among their peers, family, and social groups were the reasoning behind why they chose to remain silent. The spiral of silence took on many forms such as individuals not changing their relationship status or refusing to share their identity online. Additionally, they did not post photos of themselves with their significant other if they were in a relationship, did not share pro-LGBTQ+ political stances, and did not engage with homophobic or transphobic posts that were shared by friends or family.

Being able to show your true self and express your authenticity online seems to be a privilege that is only accessible to certain groups of people or to those who hold the majority opinion (Fox & Warber, 2015). This relates to our research inquiry because it implies that minority users will be more likely to conform out of fear or hide and remain silent (Fox & Warber, 2015). It also showcased why minority group members go along with narratives that seem counterproductive or even dangerous to their group's interest (Fox & Warber, 2015). Furthermore, it highlighted how individuality in the form of self-expression can be stalled and turned into conforming behaviour due to overwhelming fear

(Fox & Warber, 2015). Majority opinion, in this case, would seem to reign supreme when deciding individuality and conforming behaviour (Fox & Warber, 2015).

Self-expression is a way for individuals to showcase who they are through communication styles that highlight their authentic attributes and traits (Orehek & Human, 2017). Individuals desire others to view their unique personality and attributes as socially acceptable and for others to be able to identify their personality traits accurately (Orehek & Human, 2017). Expressing your personality traits and having others affirm and accurately perceive those traits is a normal occurrence in day-to-day interactions, however, this changes when communication and self-expression are being done online (Orehek & Human, 2017).

Orehek & Human (2017) wanted to uncover if Twitter allowed users to showcase their personality traits and have them be perceived “accurately and positively” by other users (p. 60). They found that anonymous Twitter users were able to perceive specific personality traits such as impulsivity and self-esteem online, however, in person interactions were higher in accuracy. Furthermore, users also perceived the personality traits of other Twitter users positively.

This is relevant to our research inquiry because it implies that individuality, in the form of authentic self-expression of individual traits, can be perceived and regarded as positive on social media platforms (Orehek & Human, 2017). This would also suggest that individuality itself is regarded in a positive way, and as a result, could foster an environment that promotes individuality and self-expression online which could potentially lead to a higher level of users choosing to participate in expressing themselves authentically, without fear and to avoid conforming (Orehek & Human, 2017).

Self-expression is key to understanding how individuality is presented on social media platforms, however, opinion expression is another form of self-expression that “refers to individuals’ eagerness to share or post their opinions in public” (Ma & Zhang, 2021, p. 2). Ma and Zhang (2021) wanted to see how opinion dynamics influenced opinion expressions in “social media chat groups” (p. 1) like WhatsApp. The opinion dynamic proposes that individuals must perceive that they have support from their friends in the group and must have willingness to express an opinion (Ma & Zhang, 2021). If individuals believe that they have the support of their friends then they will be more willing to express their opinion (Ma & Zhang, 2021).

It was discovered that perceiving a decline in support from friends in the group would drastically “increase individuals’ expression willingness to protect his/her opinion” (Ma & Zhang, 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, people who held a minority opinion were more fragile when it came to having a friend or friends who changed their support and were more willing to express themselves as a result (Ma & Zhang, 2021).

These results are important because they highlight how individuality, in this case opinion expression, prevails in social media group chats whether or not an individual feels that they have the support of their friends (Ma & Zhang, 2021). This would suggest that, among groups of friends online, individuality would prevail over conforming behaviours (Ma & Zhang, 2021). It would also suggest that friendship, or online groups whose members are close and share a common interest, facilitates individuality rather than conformity online (Ma & Zhang, 2021).

Social Capital

Social capital is defined as a sense of community and the feeling of 'likeness' with others (Barker et al., 2013). Social capital has been increasingly acquired through virtual means, specifically on social media sites. Julien (2015) discussed digital social capital and argued that internet memes themselves are a sign that a user is a part of this process of expanding their digital social capital. Users shared memes as a way to expand their social networks and relationships based on this one item (Julien, 2015). This idea can be extrapolated to other social media avenues such as posts, tweets and comments that illustrate that once a user posts such content online, they are already acquiring their digital social capital through this process of posting and engaging with other users' opinions on that post. In addition, Phua et al., (2017) looks at the different ways you can engage with social media through the intention of either using bridging or bonding social capital. For Twitter users, they mainly acquire social capital through bridging capital by posting surface-level tweets and engaging with strangers about the tweet (Phua et al., 2017). They do not develop an intimate level of connection or relationship besides the tweet (Phua et al., 2017). On the other hand, users on Snapchat and Facebook acquire social capital through bonding capital (Phua et al., 2017). These users are likely to seek out intimate support, emotional support, and general advice from close friends (Phua et al., 2017). As such, this suggests that social media sites are an emerging way to expand one's social capital. This is dependent upon the type of social media used and whether bridging or bonding capital would be appropriate in the acquisition of social capital.

Social capital is a big factor when engaging on social media sites. The concept of social capital will help us understand the extent to which users engage with social media and if the opinions of online strangers matter. In particular, it will help us determine how social media engagement differs depending on the platform and the intention that frequent social media users have with interacting and conforming to other users' opinions. However, this research does not explicitly identify if social media sites and the types of social capital influences social conformity or self-expression. As such, it is the goal of this research to understand if social capital is a factor in the behaviour of social conformity or self-expression on social media sites. Thus, digital social capital is a new avenue that individuals are acquiring to expand their networks and relationships with others and whether to label these networks as weak-tie or strong-tie relations.

Self-Presentation

Self-presentation is the intention to perform an image in an online sphere (Trieu & Baym, 2020). Trieu and Baym (2020) investigate the phenomenon of self-presentation of users on Instagram and its influence on relational maintenance with others. In the case of posts, users are likely to spend significant time editing and crafting a specific image of themselves to post to a public audience and ensure that it is worthy of praise (Trieu & Baym, 2020). However, when sharing private Stories, users had lower expectations of presenting themselves carefully, and wanted to build relationships with users they knew instead (Trieu & Baym, 2020). When the story was set as a private setting, users were less worried about the content of the story being posted and had lower expectations of the types of responses received on their story (Trieu & Baym, 2020). As well, relational maintenance was preferred when engaging with Stories because it allowed for attention and interest of the story that would lead to a relationship (Trieu & Baym, 2020). On the other hand, Johnson and Ranzini (2018) investigate self-presentation through three

motives which included: actual-self, ideal-self, and ought-self, and how it influences the behaviour to selectively share film and music preferences on social media. Ideal-self is broken down into own-ideal self and other-ideal self. It has been found that individuals that reflected their own-ideal selves would express less unique music and movie preferences (Johnson & Ranzini, 2018). This means that users who are motivated to seek belongingness with the consensus opinion may deviate from providing unique preferences over mass media content (Johnson & Ranzini, 2018). As such, exercising self-presentation allows users to be conscious of what they post on social media as well as having a preference over a certain opinion.

The research on self-presentation informs our research by allowing us to investigate the motivation behind why a user posts certain types of content on social media. As well, it will highlight the impact that social conformity has on how a user decides what is appropriate to share with their followers and what should be kept private. In terms of informing our research questions, self-presentation illustrates that in the public domain of social media, users are likely to craft their responses and posts in accordance with popular opinion. On the other hand, in the private domain of social media, users are likely to voice a different opinion and express themselves honestly with known followers. However, there is a lack of research that does not take into consideration conforming to different opinions. Instead, the research heavily focused on posts, stories and likes. As well, the research inadequately explained the aspect of labelling and the fear that could consume a user if they were to deviate from the consensus opinion or post. Thus, self-presentation is a crucial process that social media users engage in. They use self-presentation as a motivation to reflect on how to craft the best image of themselves online without deviating from the consensus opinion.

To conclude, this was the overview of the relevant literature that contributed to this area of research. Conformity posited that individuals are likely to socially conform to the general other so as to not be excluded from the majority population. On the other hand, individuality posited that individuals are likely to voice their thoughts and opinions without fear of deviating from the majority. As well, individuals are driven to acquire many strong-tie and weak-tie relationships on social media to enhance their sense of belonging on these platforms. Lastly, individuals on social media are likely to employ self-presentation techniques in order to either fit in or stand out from the online majority.

Theoretical Frameworks

Social Conformity

The underlying assumptions to Asch's social conformity paradigm was that people may be easily suggestible to ideas and opinions without question or critique, regardless of the merit of those ideas and opinions, due to powerful social pressures (Asch, 1955). He focused on how individual opinions, and even personal values, may change without adequate knowledge or judgment on the subject matter (Asch, 1955). Furthermore, he wanted to explore the extent to which social influences were restricting and/or manipulating individuals' feelings and opinions during a time when technological advancements in communication were expanding (Asch, 1955). Asch's description of conformity, and his interest in its ties to technological communication, were parallel to the types of questions we were studying (Asch, 1955).

Social media is highly accessible and provides instant access to information; news can reach millions of people in a matter of minutes. As a result, various opinions and narratives can be created with little or false information simply due to online peer influence or influence from authority-related sources (Asch, 1955). Misinformation, polarization, and cyberbullying due to varying opinions have all been negative consequences stemming from the rise of social media. It has changed the way we communicate with others, how we receive our information, and thus, how we may form opinions. Asch (1955) expressed his concern over technological advancements in communication and how it played a role in the formation of individual opinion.

Asch's (1955) original work focused on authority figures and large groups of people and their impact on individuals' opinions. Specifically, he asked a group of people, primarily college students, to give their opinion on different subjects (Asch, 1955). He proceeded to ask the same participants their opinion again, however, the second time they were also provided false information about how other people responded (Asch, 1955). Specifically, they were provided manufactured responses from experts and a large group of their friends (Asch, 1955). After encountering false information about others' opinions, most students changed their initial opinion to fit more in line with their peers or authority figures (Asch, 1955).

Asch's social conformity was beneficial to our study because it took into consideration the role of perception (Asch, 1955). Specifically, how individuals perceive information that is believed to be coming from a group of peers or from someone who has authority, and how that affects their thinking and actions (Asch, 1955). This was a crucial aspect of our research topic because social media platforms are universal, and millions of people utilize them, including politicians, celebrities, and peer groups. If online information or trends are perceived to be acceptable among the majority or by someone in a position of power, then an individual may shift their ideas, perceptions, or opinions to fit the perceived norm (Asch, 1955).

Groupthink

The theory of groupthink was proposed by social psychologist Irving Janis after the 1986 Challenger disaster in which a space shuttle exploded after being launched due to poor decision-making amongst the commission in charge of its assessment and readiness (Janis, 2008). Groupthink can be understood as a "concurrence-seeking tendency" in which people aim for cohesion and unanimity amongst their in-group when making decisions and forming opinions (Janis, 2008, p. 237). A requirement of groupthink is the strong desire to maintain solidarity and relationships within one's in-group at all costs (Janis, 2008). While it can be argued that higher cohesiveness within a group can lead to higher efficacy in achieving common goals, Janis also argues that this determination to remain highly cohesive and unanimous can cause the individual members' mental processes to get stuck. In this way, groupthink can replace critical thinking and analysis (Janis, 2008).

There are 8 conditions that can signify that a group is experiencing a groupthink mentality (Janis, 2008). The first is the "Illusion of Invulnerability," in which a group's cohesiveness can make them feel "special" or invulnerable to bad outcomes (Janis, 2008, p. 238). "Belief in Inherent Morality of the Group," and "Collective Rationalization," are the second and third symptoms, which signify the assumed correctness of beliefs, actions,

and decisions of the group (Janis, 2008, p. 239). The fourth is, “Out-group stereotypes,” in which the closely knit in-group displays a tendency to look down on outsiders in the group (Janis, 2008, p. 239). Symptoms five and six are “Self-Censorship,” and “Illusion of Unanimity,” which refer to group members censoring their opinions if they disagree or are unsure about the group’s decisions or opinions, and their assumed silence is interpreted as agreement resulting in the illusion of unanimity within the group (Janis, 2008, p. 239). The final two symptoms are, “Direct Pressure on Dissenters,” and “Self-Appointed Mindguards;” when essentially, dissenters are unwelcome and pressure is put on them to conform to the group’s decisions to prevent “troublesome ideas” from entering the group and disrupting harmony (Janis, 2008, p. 238-239).

Groupthink was relevant to our study of online social conformity as it helped describe the impact in-groups formed over social media platforms have on individual thought and opinion. Since social media allows for a wider outreach, it may be easier for many individuals to find groups they feel that they belong to; in finding these in-groups, they may experience groupthink and thus, conform to the groups’ opinions, decisions, and behaviours. These online niches can display many of the symptoms of groupthink mentioned above, and throughout our paper, we draw upon this theory in our analysis of how and why social conformity is promoted online.

Labelling Theory

Labelling theory is a sociological theory relating to deviance within society (Plummer, 2001). While labelling theory can be tied back to Frank Tannenbaum in the early 20th century, the key labelling theorists during the rise of labelling theory in the 1960s were American sociologists Howard S. Becker and Edwin Lemert (Plummer, 2001). Labelling theory examines the effect of labels on promoting deviant behaviour and can also be viewed through the lens of how fear of being labelled may deter individuals from deviating in the first place. Becker insinuated that social groups tend to elicit deviance by making rules and labelling those who break the rules as “outsiders” (Becker, 1963, as cited in Plummer, 2001, p. 191). Further, he states, “deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather, a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender’” (Becker, 1963, as cited in Plummer, 2001, p. 191). This understanding of labelling theory signifies how the impact of others’ rules, norms, and decisions can result in negative labels and stereotypes placed upon individuals, which can create further deviance.

Within our study, we utilized labelling theory to understand the impact that being labelled has on conformity, and whether those that are considered to be deviant would maintain their label or feel pressure to conform under scrutiny, to rid themselves of the label. Within the context of Becker & Lemert’s labelling theory, it is presumed that those who are deviant may continue to maintain that label whether they desire to or not, as seen within “cancel culture,” where people are essentially shunned online for their deviance regardless of showing a change in their opinions or actions that got them “cancelled” in the first place. Finally, and most importantly, labelling theory is relevant to our study’s broader focus on how social media promotes conformity and individuality, and whether there is more of a desire to be a “leader” or a “follower” online. Further, we examined the tendency to conform for the sake of avoiding labels in the first place, whether the labels in question have positive or negative connotations to them. For instance, the label of

“leader” can be positive or negative, depending on how it is perceived and what kind of characteristics are attributed to being a “leader.” Some may refrain from resonating with the label of “leader” if they perceive it to be an egocentric, excessive label, whereas others may proudly consider themselves fit for a leadership title.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is not one single theory, but rather, a composition of multiple theories attempting to infer the cause of certain behaviours and whether they are more likely to be concerned with self-perception or other perceptions (Kelley & Michela, 1980). The study of attribution theory can be tied back to an experiment done by John Thibault & Henry Riecken in 1955 (Kelley & Michela, 1980). In this experiment, a subject interacted with both a person of higher status than them and a person of lower status. The goal of the interaction was to try to receive help from each person, and both the individual of higher status and lower status complied with the request for help. These two subjects were then asked why they decided to comply; was it due to internal or external pressures to assist the first subject? This study illuminated the idea of attributions for behaviours and actions and whether they are more likely to be attributed to situational or dispositional factors (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Dispositional attributions refer to internal reason and characteristics causing behaviour whereas situational attributions refer to external reason and situational factors causing behaviour (Clancy, 2020).

Attribution theory was relevant to our study as we aimed to figure out when social media elicits conformity and if this conformity is more likely to be attributed to situational/external pressure, or dispositional/internal factors. In terms of dispositional factors, we looked at how users are motivated to implement certain impression management techniques such as presenting either an actual-self or idealized-self on various social media platforms. As well, the venue of social media as a catalyst for cyberbullying may have been a primary situational factor that may have explained why users were wary to engage with it.

Dramaturgical Theory

Founded by Erving Goffman, dramaturgical theory refers to the idea that human interactions are much like a grand play (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Goffman (1959) was interested in analyzing the micro-level interactions between people through the lens of dramaturgy and suggested that people essentially treat their world like a stage (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Each individual is an actor and an audience member, in a sense; we are all actors on the stage of life and other individuals with whom we interact are our audience members (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). In Goffman's book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), he describes the “performance” that all individuals put on to the “audience” around them as a means of conveying their perception of reality outward and creating a “new reality” for the audience (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007, p. 298). Goffman argues that the idea of the “self” is merely formed from one's performed character and does not exist outside of that character (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). This implies that individuals are not autonomous, and their character is always concerning their social sphere.

The concept of roles is important in Goffman's dramaturgy; these roles are the reality and image that individuals want to convey as actors to their audience (Kivisto & Pittman,

2007). Moreover, there are distinct features in a play that can be applied to the performance of everyday life, according to Goffman. For instance, the division of stages in a play is applicable in this context (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). There is a “front stage” and “backstage” in life just as there is in a play; the “front stage” is what is presented to the audience, depicting the reality the actor desires to display, whereas the “backstage” is where individual actors are free from the public eye (Kivisto & Pitman, 2007, p. 306). Goffman (1959, p. 113) states that a key characteristic of the backstage and its function is that it, “will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude.” For example, in houses, more private areas like bedrooms and bathrooms with locks can be viewed as “backstage” whereas public areas where others are meant to see you are considered “front stages” (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007).

In this way, dramaturgical theory shines a light on how appearances and the projection of the desired self publicly are ever-present in society through social media today. As Goffman (1959) compares everyday life to a performance on the stage that is the world, social media use can be seen through the lens of a stage in which “actors” post or interact with one another’s posts as performances delivered to audience members as well. The “front stage” can be seen as what is posted and intended to be viewed by followers, friends, and others (the audience), and “backstage” can be viewed as the individual actor’s life and interactions offline/behind the screen which few to no others see. Much like movies and plays have a “behind the scenes,” people can have a “behind the screens” reality. Thus, social media can be viewed as a tool that assists in putting on a show and enhances the actors’ ability to project their reality and desired selves to the world.

Summary of Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks discussed provided fundamental knowledge to our research, allowing for a deeper analysis of our results and better understanding of the theories as they pertain to technological advancements. As these theories have existed long before the reign of social media, the applicability of them in such contexts is relevant and necessary. Asch’s social conformity laid the foundation for our research questions, and we were better able to understand and elaborate on the significance of his theory and findings in a more modern context. Within his work on social conformity, Asch alluded to technological advancements playing an important role in individual decisions to conform with majority opinion, and this was a key component in our study. Social conformity worked in tandem with Janis’ theory of groupthink. Asch’s (1955) focus on how environmental circumstances could alter the mindset of an individual, as opposed to solely focusing on in-person group pressures, was in line with our research inquiry as social media is usually an act that is partaken in alone, and therefore, pressure stemming from a physical group of people is technically non-existent (Asch, 1955, pp. 2-5). Although, social media can make an individual feel as though they are a part of a group, as you can experience the pressures of group dynamics online. Both groupthink theory and Asch’s (1955) conformity experiments focus on in-person group pressures and unanimity rule, however, Asch’s (1955) specific research aimed to explore “group pressure upon the minds of individuals” (Asch, 1955, p. 2). Janis’ groupthink outlined how social conformity can exist in group settings as a means of avoiding becoming a part of the “out-group” in such social contexts (Janis, 2008). These two frameworks were compatible with labelling theory as it pertains to our study. Labelling theory provided

further insight into avoidance of the “out-group” by way of highlighting that an ostracizing label, like that of an “outsider,” is enough to affect one’s likelihood of deviating or conforming from majority opinions. We incorporated attribution theory as a means of explaining the factors, whether situational or dispositional, affecting conformity online. Finally, Goffman’s dramaturgy provided an excellent understanding and analogy of the presentation of self to broader society. The applicability of dramaturgy to online social settings assisted us in our description of why one might be more inclined to present a certain way online as compared to in-person. All five of the theories provided were essential to our discussion and interpretation of results.

Methodology

Development of Survey

The research methodology that this study will employ is a quantitative design that involves the use of an anonymous online survey on MREB-certified software called LimeSurvey. The research was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB#: 0327). This was a password-protected software that only the designers of a survey could access. No third-party users could gain access to the data or manipulate the survey design. The major advantage of using an anonymous survey was that participants were more likely to disclose sensitive information in an environment that does not link this information to any participant identity markers. As such, higher disclosure rates can be interpreted as the results being more accurate than a non-anonymous survey. Thus, this study employed the technique of quantitative analysis using LimeSurvey to conduct an online anonymous survey.

Ethical Concerns

Importantly, the study did include risks that may have deterred participants. However, the research posed no risks greater than those in everyday life. These included psychological and social risks. To begin, the psychological risks included potential feelings of discomfort, worry, and embarrassment when participants answered the questions during and/or after the survey. This may have been due to the survey questions invoking triggering thoughts or resurfacing past trauma that could have hindered the participant’s ability to complete the survey. Next, the main social risks included loss of privacy, status, or reputation when participating in the research. In terms of loss of privacy, there was a chance that the participant may have been in a space with other non-participants who could have viewed the private survey responses on the participant’s device, which could have caused discomfort for the individual working through the survey. In terms of status and reputation, affiliations that the participant had with other people could have affected their current status and reputation, which may have hindered their relationships. This could lead to a negative change in reputation and status that the participant would have to experience. Thus, these were the primary risks that participants were informed of prior to the commencement of the survey.

We had put strategies in place to manage and minimize the potential risks to participants. In terms of psychological risks, participants could withdraw from the survey at any point in time before submitting. This allows the participant to exit the survey should they feel any discomfort or embarrassment while responding to the questions. Another way to alleviate psychological risks is by engaging with the supportive resources that were

provided on a separate page once the survey has been submitted. This information was also included in the letter of information. This can allow the participant to speak with a mental health and wellness specialist to alleviate any negative feelings or emotions that may arise during the anonymous survey.

In addition to the psychological risks, there were some strategies to alleviate possible social risks associated with the study. The first strategy being implemented was that the survey is completely anonymous and online. As such, the results of the survey cannot connect any identity markers to the participants. The results were completely anonymous to the student investigators when data analysis was conducted. A measure that the research team had put into place for the study is that they had allowed participants to take the survey at the time and place of their choosing. Participants were encouraged to find a safe and private space that they deemed comfortable to take the survey at their leisure. This was to ensure that strangers and individuals they may know do not watch or judge the participants while they completed the survey, to minimize status or reputation harm. Thus, these are some measures that had been put into place by the research team to ensure participant safety, comfort, and privacy, which would have increased the likelihood of a well-rounded, successful experience.

Recruitment

There was one main recruitment strategy that we used to gain participants. The strategy involved reaching out to 44 McMaster Student Union-approved clubs and societies across campus. The 44 clubs included: Social Psychology Society, McMaster Geeks, Human Behaviour Society, McMaster Sociology Society, McMaster Humanities Society, McMaster Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour Society, Black Student Association, Muslim Students' Association, Health, Aging, and Society Student Association (HASSA), McMaster Society of Off-Campus Students (SOCS), MacHollywood, Girl Up McMaster, Women & Gender Equity Network (WGEN), McMaster Sports Community, McMaster Biology Society, McMaster BioPsych Society, McMaster Neuroscience Society, McMaster Sign Language Club, Filipino McMaster Student Association, Artists at McMaster, Bollywood at Mac, McMaster Anthropology Society, First Gen McMaster, McMaster Activist Theatre, McMaster Political Science Students Association, McMaster Debating Society, Social Work Student Collective, McMaster Economics Society, McMaster Golden Z, McMaster Social Science Society, ACE McMaster, COPE- A Mental Health Initiative, Humanity First McMaster, MacNutrition, Desi Students at McMaster, McMaster Japanese Connection, McMaster Egyptian Students Association, McMaster Indian Association, McMaster Iranian Student Association (MISA) McMaster Korean Pop Culture Club, McMaster Italian Cultural Club, McMaster Punjabi Association, McMaster Sikh Students Association, and the McMaster Vietnamese Students Association.

All student investigators were a part of the recruitment team. However, each investigator was assigned to recruit from clubs and societies that they had no relations with in order to reduce bias and conflict of interest. Afterwards, each member was tasked to email a list of specified clubs that we wished to reach out to, using one of our approved recruitment scripts alongside a supervisor-approved graphic. This was so that they broadcasted it on their social media pages, which would then attract undergraduate participants to voluntarily complete our survey. As well, the student investigators directly

messaging all 44 clubs and societies on Instagram and Facebook using one of the approved recruitment scripts with the graphic and link attached to the message. Thus, emailing and direct messaging MSU-approved societies and clubs was our primary method for participant recruitment.

Survey Procedure

The next process of this study was for participants to voluntarily complete our online anonymous survey on LimeSurvey. The survey would seek to answer three research questions:

1. Does social media promote conformity?
2. Can social media also promote individuality?
3. Does the fear of being labelled affect self-expression?

Prior to starting the survey, the participant would have read the letter of information. The content included undergraduate student investigator details, principal investigator details, the purpose of the study and procedure involved in the research, potential harms, risks, and discomforts, potential benefits, confidentiality and the right to withdraw, and finally, information on how to obtain the study results. After reading the letter of information, the participant would then have to decide whether to agree to participate or not. By agreeing to participate and take part in the study, the participant provided their implied consent. The participant could then begin the survey. The survey contained 30 questions, 5 of which pertained to demographics, and the remaining 25 focused on the influence of conformity, individuality, and labelling when it comes to social media use. Most questions would employ a Likert scale ranging from most unlikely to most likely. The participant had the right to withdraw from the survey at any point up until submitting the survey and could skip any questions in the survey other than the consent page. Afterwards, a new page would appear at the end of the survey indicating that they are encouraged to reach out to the McMaster Student Wellness Centre if completing the survey made them uncomfortable and/or they want someone to talk to. Lastly, the participant may close the survey link and their device. This would mark the completion of the survey process.

Data Collection

In addition, the survey was opened from November 25th, 2022, and closed on February 17th, 2023. The participants were informed that the survey would take approximately 10-15 minutes to fully complete. It could be done at any time and location of their choosing, provided they had Internet access. The goal of the survey was to reach 75 participants to complete the survey. However, on the closing day, the survey consisted of 157 responses, 119 of which were partial responses and 38 fully completed responses on the survey. Once the survey had closed, it saved all the participant data securely. That marked the end of our data collection procedure.

Challenges to Data Collection

There were a few challenges in collecting data for our study. The first of these challenges was in participant recruitment through various McMaster clubs and societies.

Many of the clubs and societies we asked to advertise our survey on their social media accounts either declined to do so due to their policies against such advertisement on their social media platforms or did not respond altogether. This significantly reduced the number of participants we were able to gather. Furthermore, the handful of accounts that did agree to post may have audiences with certain demographics that skewed our survey results.

Time constraint was another issue we had encountered. The timeline of our research study spanned across two academic semesters only; because of this, we were not able to further research the causes and effects of our study in greater detail. Moreover, many of the groups that did decide to promote our survey responded to us within the last few weeks or so of our participant recruitment. We experienced a slow start to advertisement of our survey and, due to the already limited window of time we had for participant recruitment, did not have as much time for many students to engage with our survey. Our results will only encompass what we were able to gather and analyze over these months.

Another challenge we faced in our data collection was the number of incomplete surveys; out of 157 surveys, 119 were partial and 38 were complete. However, all 119 of the partially completed survey did not respond past the consent to participate. Moreover, 1 of the 38 complete surveys had inconclusive responses that we could not use in our research, leaving us with a total of 37 responses total.

Finally, despite curating a list of survey questions specifically pertaining to our study, we did not have control over whether the participants answered honestly. The chance of participants dishonest answers may unfortunately skew our results and the interpretation of them on a larger scale.

Data Analysis

Lastly, our quantitative data was analyzed using the Jamovi program and our qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. To start, we utilized both descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics described certain features of the data by generating a summary of the data set. In order to run a descriptive analysis on the data, every data variable had to be re-labelled with appropriate names for easy indication. Afterwards, the data had to be re-coded to allow for the inferential and descriptive statistics to be computed. Next, several related variables were computed in order to produce a mean between them. Finally, the mean data set had to be transformed to show the distinction between each response in the data set. Once these changes were made, descriptive analysis was conducted on all of the data variables. The analysis produced a numeric frequency table that displayed the quantity of each response set. Afterwards, inferential statistics was performed based on the descriptive analyses.

Inferential statistics helped us make inferences about our population through making predictions from our sample size and allowed us to arrive at a conclusion about our data. The main inferential statistics tests that were run included t-tests, correlation matrices and chi-squared statistics. Firstly, correlation matrices were run on certain variables that allowed us to indicate if a measure was statistically significant and if the correlation was positive or negative. The correlation matrices produced a table with the appropriate quantities to illustrate either a positive or negative correlation coefficient (r-value) and a p-value result, which noted if a value was less than .05 to be determined as statistically significant across the variables. Secondly, the t-tests informed our understanding of the

data by comparing the means of two grouping variables. The analysis produced a detailed account of whether or not the results/difference were significant. Lastly, chi-squared analysis was conducted to illustrate if two variables in the data were statistically significant. The analysis produced a table that illustrated the differences between the expected and observed frequencies between variables as well as a p-value. Afterwards, the research team took these values and generated the quantitative formula that depicted the analysis. In doing so, these tests of significance provided a quantitative outlook in order to reach a conclusion about a correlation between our measures. Thus, Jamovi was used as our primary software to analyze the data that we collected.

Moreover, for the second research question, we conducted thematic analysis on three open-ended survey questions. The open-ended survey questions were questions 8, 11 and 17. For each question, we read each anonymous response and grouped them into themes based on a common pattern. Afterwards, we looked at the anonymous responses to see if the same individuals answered all three open-ended questions. It was discovered that of the 9 participants that answered the open-ended questions, 1 participant only answered one question, 4 participants answered 2 of the three open-ended questions and the remaining 4 completed all of them. Lastly, we created a table that highlighted the different themes for each question and the number of responses for each theme.

Therefore, the study used LimeSurvey to conduct an anonymous online survey. We recruited participants from 44 McMaster University clubs and societies to voluntarily do the survey. Once the survey closed, we analyzed the data using the Jamovi program and thematic analysis to interpret the results of our survey.

Results

Sociodemographics

Our study was composed of 37 McMaster University undergraduate students (n=37). The last 5 items in our survey were demographic questions that related to age, faculty, year of study, ethnicity, and gender. Of our 37 participants, 3 responded that they were 18 years old (8.6%), 10 were 19 years old (28.6%), 8 responded with 20 years old (22.9%), 12 responded with 21 years old (34.3%), 2 responded that they were 23 years old (5.7%), and 2 responded that they were 25+ (5.4%). Most of our participants were from the Faculty of Social Sciences, with 23 people having selected that response (62.2%); 6 participants were from the Faculty of Science (16.2%), 4 participants were from the Faculty of Humanities (10.8%), 1 participant was from the Faculty of Engineering (2.7%), 1 participant was from the Faculty of Health Sciences (2.7%), and finally, 2 participants preferred not to answer (5.4%). 11 of the participants were in their 2nd year (29.7%), 9 were in their 3rd year (24.3%), 9 were in their 4th year (24.3%), 4 were in their 1st year (10.8%), 2 were in their 5th year or higher (5.4%), and 2 participants preferred not to answer (5.4%).

For our last two demographic questions, we left them open-ended, whereby the participant was asked to type out the ethnicity and gender they identified with. For ethnic identities, 19 participants said they identified as White/Caucasian/European (51.3%), 7 participants identified as South Asian (18.9%), 3 participants responded East Asian/Southeast Asian (8.1%), 2 participants responded Middle Eastern (5.4%), 1 participant responded Black/African (2.7%), 1 participant responded Latinx (2.7%), 3 participants identified with more than one ethnicity (8.1%), and 1 participant preferred not

to answer (2.7%). 28 of our participants self-identified as female (75.6%), 5 participants responded that they identified as male (13.5%), 2 participants identified as non-binary (5.4%), and 1 participant preferred not to answer (2.7%).

As previously mentioned in our challenges to data collection, we found that a lot of our demographic information was skewed or lacked plurality. It was not applicable to our findings on factors affecting social conformity, individuality, and the effect of labelling theory when using social media. While our demographic questions were included in our results to display the sample characteristics of our population, they were excluded from any discussion, as they lack relevance to our research questions.

Social Media Usage

We asked participants to select the number of hours they estimate that they spend on social media sites. The frequency table in Figure 1 illustrates that most people answered that they use social media for 3-4 hours a day, with 16 participants selecting that response (43.2%). 11 participants indicated they used social media for 5-6 hours a day (29.7%), 8 participants selected 1-2 hours a day (21.6%), 1 participant selected 7+ hours a day (2.7%), and finally, 1 participant answered that they use social media for less than an hour per day (2.7%). The results indicated that most participants use social media for more than 3 hours per day.

Figure 1

Frequency of Social Media Use

Frequency of Social Media Use	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
1-2 hours per day	8	21.6%	21.6%
3-4 hours per day	16	43.2%	64.9%
5-6 hours per day	11	29.7%	94.6%
7+ hours per day	1	2.7%	97.3%
Less than an hour per day	1	2.7%	100.0%

Does social media promote conformity?

Participants were asked to select how likely, or unlikely, they were to follow the online opinion of other users on social media platforms. In Figure 2, this frequency chart illustrated that the majority of participants were likely to follow the opinions of other users as 48.6% selected that option.

This correlation matrix (Figure 3) measures the correlation between time spent using social media and the likelihood of following online opinions. The p-value is greater than .05, and therefore, the correlation is statistically insignificant. This indicated that the time spent on social media did not affect the participant's likelihood of following online opinions.

The bar plot in Figure 4 was created to describe two variables. The first variable asked participants if they had a desire to either fit in or stand out when in an in-person group setting. The second variable asked participants if this same desire existed when in an online group setting, with the response options being "yes," "no," "maybe," and "other". Results showed most participants answered "maybe" to their desire to fit in or stand out

Figure 2
Following Online Opinions

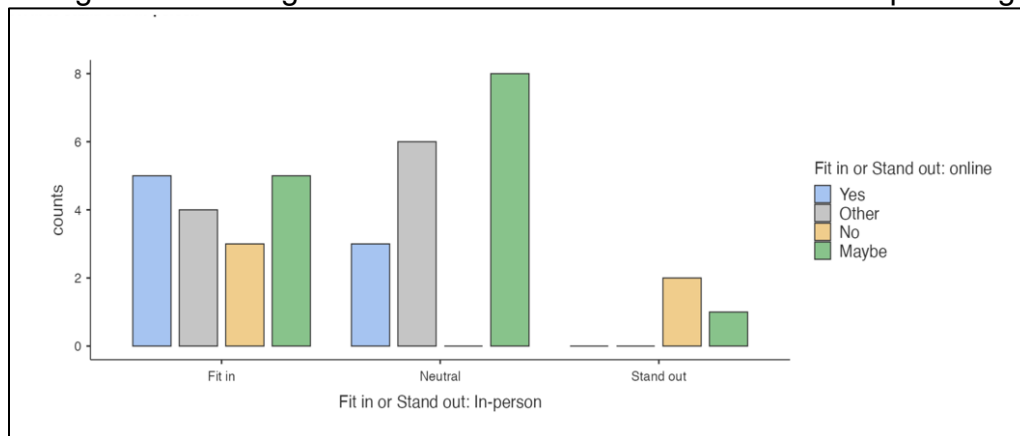
Recoded following online opinions	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Likely	18	48.6%	48.6%
Unlikely	6	16.2%	64.9%
Very unlikely	6	16.2%	81.1%
Neutral	6	16.2%	97.3%
Very likely	1	2.7%	100.0%

Figure 3
Likelihood of Following Online Opinions

Likelihood of Following Online Opinions		Frequency
Likelihood of Following Online Opinions	Pearson's r	—
	p-value	—
Frequency	Pearson's r	-0.136
	p-value	0.421

remaining the same both in-person and online. The bar plot displayed that the majority who were neutral to the idea of standing out or fitting in when in-person were indifferent to standing out or fitting in online. Further, results displayed that the majority of those who indicated a preference to fit in in-person also answered “yes” and “maybe” to having the same desire to fit in online. Finally, most of the participants who answered that they preferred to stand out in-person did not possess the same desire to stand out online.

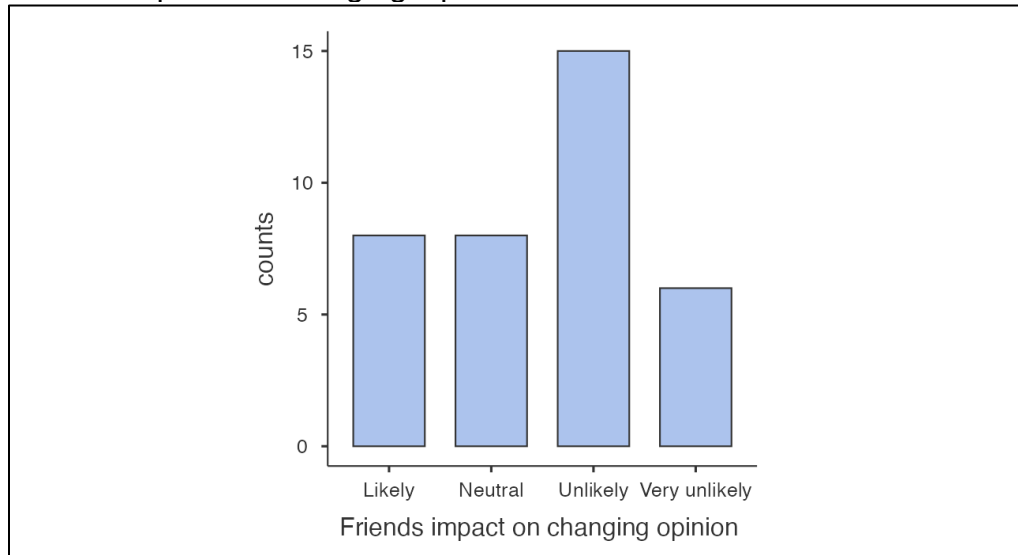
Figure 4
Fitting in or Standing Out Within In-Person versus Online Group Setting



Participants were asked how likely, or unlikely they were to change their opinion if a close friend or colleague commented on an opinion. In Figure 5, the bar plot illustrated that the majority indicated that they were unlikely to change their opinion as 40.5%

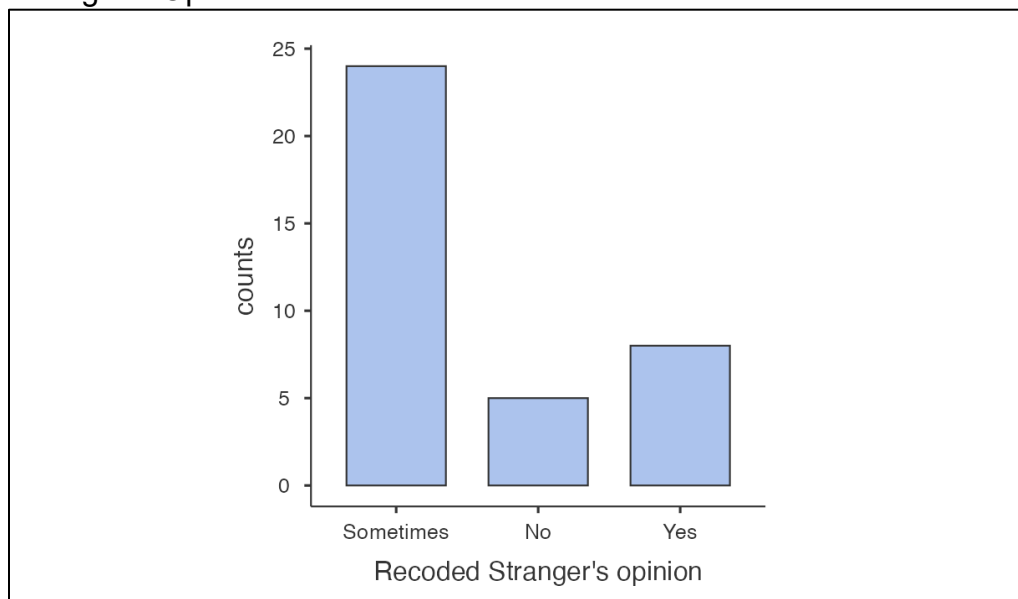
selected that option. This was followed by 21.6% of participants responding likely and neutral to changing their opinion.

Figure 5
Friends Impact on Changing Opinion



Participants were asked if they valued a stranger's opinion regardless of whether it was in-person or online interaction. The bar plot in Figure 6 showed that the majority of participants indicated that they would sometimes value the opinion of strangers, with 64.9% selecting it. This was followed by 21.6% of participants who answered 'yes' to valuing a stranger's opinion and only 13.5% indicated 'no' to valuing a stranger's opinion.

Figure 6
Stranger's Opinion



This correlation matrix in Figure 7 illustrated that the p-value was statistically insignificant, as $p = 0.934$ ($p > 0.05$). The correlation was positive and strong ($r = 0.014$).

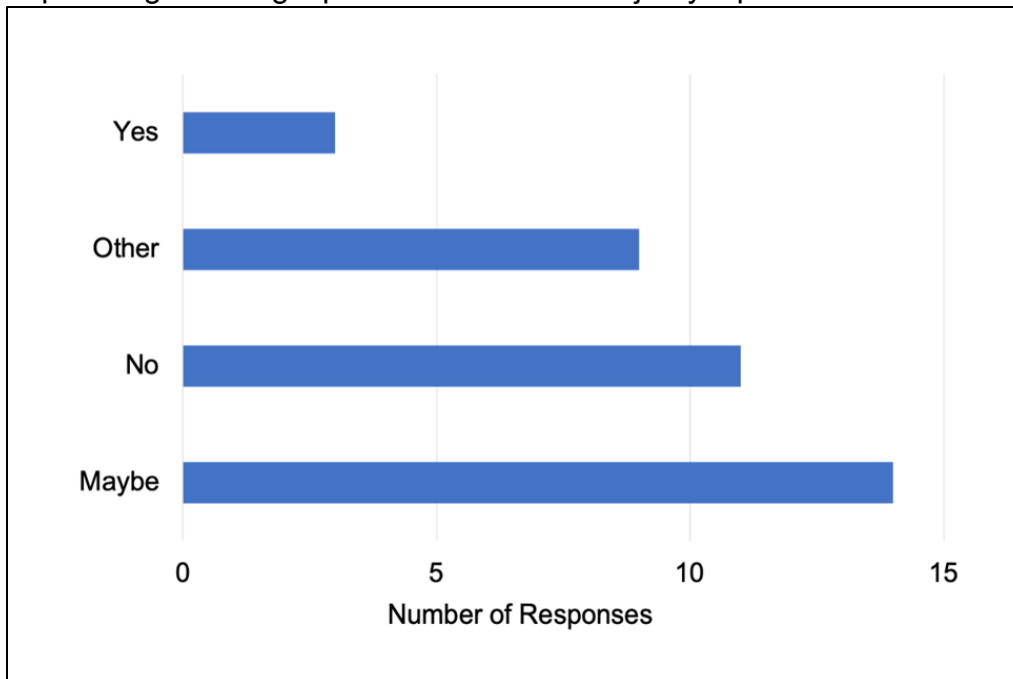
Figure 7
Fear of Being Cancelled Online

		Fear of being cancelled online	Blindly agreeing with an online trend 2
Fear of being cancelled online	Pearson's r	—	—
	p-value	—	—
Blindly agreeing with an online trend 2	Pearson's r	0.014	—
	p-value	0.934	—

Can social media also promote individuality?

In Figure 8, participants were asked if they would express an opinion that differs from the online majority opinion. This graph illustrated that 37.5% of participants were indifferent about expressing an opinion that differed from the online majority opinion. This was followed by 29.7% who indicated they would not express an opinion that differed from the majority. As well, 24.3% described other reasons for expressing a differing opinion from the majority. Lastly, 8.1% indicated they would express an opinion that differed from the online majority.

Figure 8
Expressing Differing Opinion from Online Majority Opinion



Participants were asked how likely they were to change their opinion after seeing another user’s opinion on a post. This frequency chart (Figure 9) illustrated that 37.8% of participants noted that they were unlikely to change an online opinion that they held after witnessing another user’s opinion online. This was followed by 35.1% who responded

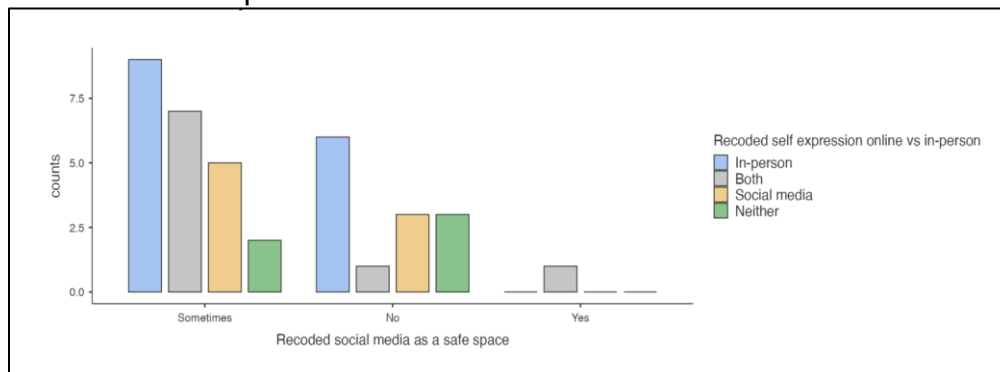
that they were likely to change their opinion and 21.6% who responded to being indifferent towards changing their opinion. Lastly, 2.7% of participants were both very likely and very unlikely to change their online opinion.

Figure 9
Likelihood to Change Online Opinion

Likelihood to change online opinion	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Likely	13	35.1%	35.1%
Neutral	8	21.6%	56.8%
Unlikely	14	37.8%	94.6%
Very likely	1	2.7%	97.3%
Very unlikely	1	2.7%	100.0%

This bar plot in Figure 10 combined two variables. The first variable asked participants if they viewed social media as a safe space to share a thought. The second variable asked participants which way they preferred to freely express their thoughts. This bar plot showcased that the majority of participants selected that they sometimes perceived social media to be a safe space. Of those participants, 24.3% indicated they were more likely to freely express their opinion in person. In addition, 16.2% of participants who did not feel that social media was a safe space were likely to express themselves in person as well. There were very limited responses for the option that regarded social media as a safe space. Only 2.7% who indicated social media was a safe space were also likely to express themselves in both options and there was 0% for in-person, social media and neither.

Figure 10
Recoded Self Expression Online versus In-Person



The chart of qualitative data (Figure 11) reported 3 notable themes pertaining to self-expressing oneself if they held a different opinion from the online majority.

In Figure 12, the chart of qualitative data reported 3 notable themes pertaining to whether a participant felt comfortable aligning themselves as either fitting in or standing out when in an online group setting.

Figure 11

Survey Question 8: Would you express (in the form of a post or comment) an opinion that differs from the online majority opinion? [Other]

Theme	Responses (n=9)
1. Not worth the time (don't care about it)	1. N = 4 (44.4%)
2. Don't want to share personal information/matter	2. N = 3 (33.3%)
3. Quality over quantity (my opinion matters more than what the majority think)	3. N = 2 (22.2%)

Figure 12

Survey Question 11: Based on your response to the last question, does this same desire exist when in ONLINE group settings? [Other]

Theme	Responses
1. Likes to stand out and express opinion	1. N = 6 (66.7%)
2. Uses it for entertainment	2. N = 1 (11.1%)
3. Keeping opinion to oneself	3. N = 2 (22.2%)

This chart of qualitative data in Figure 13 reported 1 notable theme when participants were instructed to describe a past moment where they held a different online opinion from the majority and their feelings behind it.

Figure 13

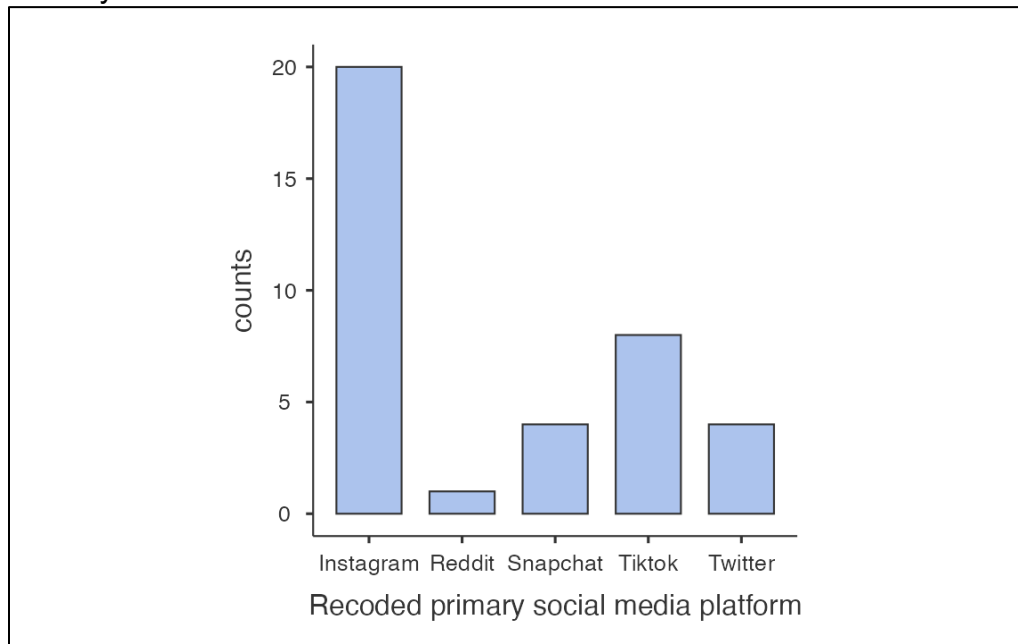
Survey Question 17: Has there been a moment in the past, online, where you had a different opinion from the majority? [Other]

Theme	Responses
1. Yes (held a different opinion from the majority in domains like jokes, opinions on LGBTQ, Chinese politics, Johnny Depp trial, and fake news)	1. N = 9 (100.0%)

Does a fear of being labelled affect self-expression?

This bar graph (Figure 14) illustrated the question of which social media platforms participants used primarily. It was found that 54.1% of participants used Instagram as their primary social media platform. This was followed by 21.6% who used TikTok, 10.8% who used Snapchat and Twitter, and lastly, 8.1% used Reddit as their primary social media platform. The bar graph indicated that the majority of participants favoured Instagram.

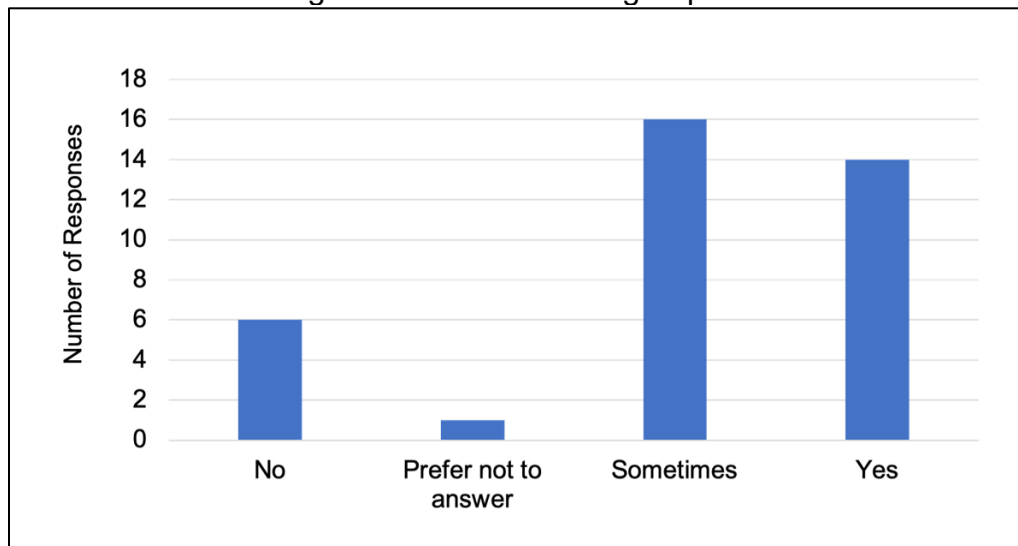
Figure 14
Primary Social Media Platform



This bar graph in Figure 15 indicated that 43.2% of participants reported that they sometimes experienced an emotional response when faced with the idea of being an “outsider”. This was followed by 37.8% of participants that indicated that they experienced an emotional response and 16.2% indicated they did not experience an emotional response. Lastly, 2.7% indicated that they prefer not to answer the question.

Figure 15

Does the idea of being an “outsider” from a group elicit an emotional response?



Participants were asked to select the option of leader or follower that best describes them. In Figure 16, this frequency chart indicated that the majority of participants chose

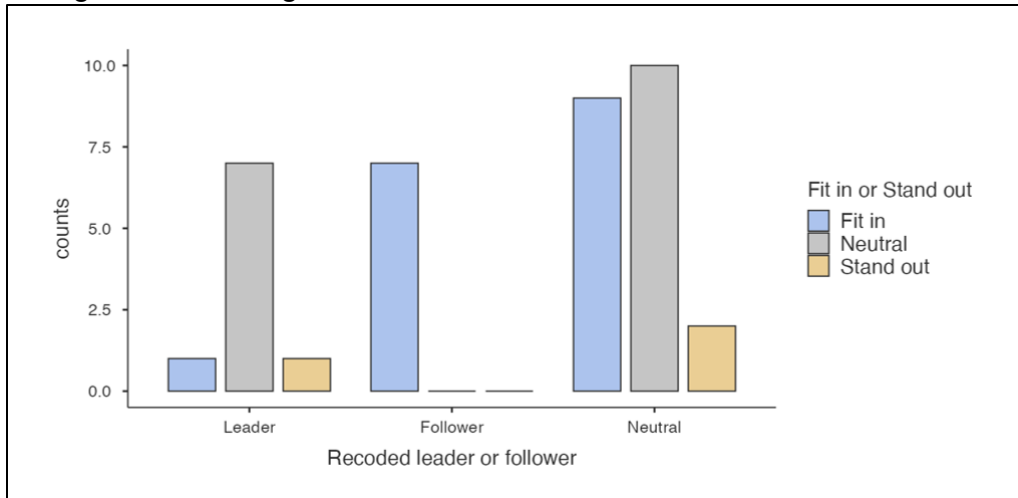
neutral as 56.8% selected this option. As well, 24.3% chose leader and 18.9% chose follower.

Figure 16
Leader or Follower

Recoded leader or follower	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Leader	9	24.3%	24.3%
Follower	7	18.9%	43.2%
Neutral	21	56.8%	100.0%

This bar plot (Figure 17) combined two variables. The first variable asked participants to select which label of “leader” or “follower” best described them as a person. The second variable asked participants whether they more closely align with a desire to either fit in or stand out. The bar plot indicated that 18.9% of participants that selected the “follower” label had a desire to fit in and 18.9% of participants that selected the “leader” label was neutral in terms of fitting in or standing out. Also, 24.3% of participants that selected neither “leader” or “follower” had a desire to fit in, while 27% that selected neither label was also neutral in terms of fitting in or standing out.

Figure 17
Fitting In or Standing Out as a Leader or a Follower



In Figure 18, this t-test was conducted between two variables, specifically frequency of social media use and whether being labelled an “outsider” from a group elicited an emotional response. It suggested that the correlation was statistically significant with $p < 0.001$ for the first variable. As well, a p-value of 0.017 for the second variable showcased statistical significance. Therefore, emotional response and frequency do influence each other.

Figure 18

The Frequent Use of Social Media and Emotional Response When Labelled “Outsider”

		Statistic	df	p
Frequency	Student's t	4.12	35	< .001
Emotional response	Student's t	2.51 ^a	35	0.017

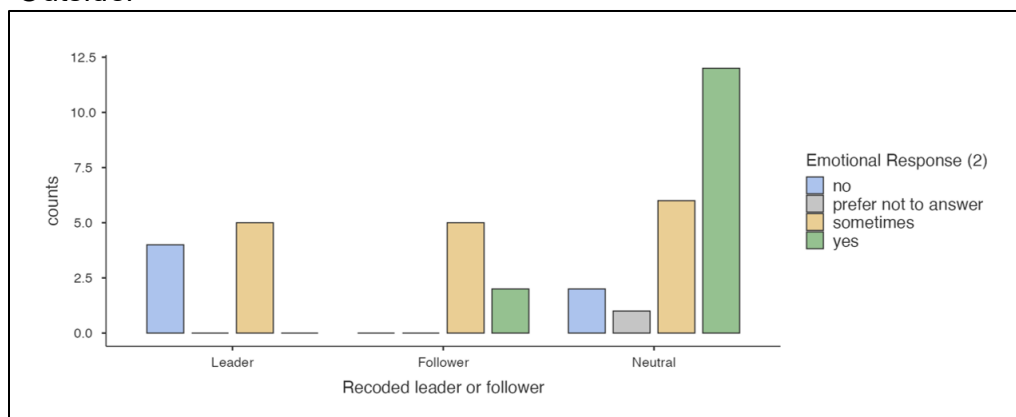
Note. $H_a \mu_{Dom} \neq \mu_{Intl}$

^a Levene's test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the assumption of equal variances

This bar plot in Figure 19 combined two variables. The first variable asked participants to select which option best described them as a person. The second variable asked participants if the idea of being labelled as an “outsider” could elicit an emotional response. For example, the bar plot indicated that 32.4% of participants that chose the “neutral” label had an emotional response to the “outsider” label and 16.2% of participants that selected the “neutral” label sometimes had an emotional response to the label of an “outsider”.

Figure 19

Being Described as a Leader or Follower and Emotional Response When Labelled “Outsider”



Discussion

Research Question 1: Does social media promote conformity?

Frequency of social media use and conformity.

To begin, we took into consideration whether frequency of social media use significantly impacted the likelihood of social conformity online. A study by Floros and Siomos (2014) applied the Five Factor Model (FFM) to measure patterns between excessive internet use and scores of the different personality traits depicted in this model. According to this study, excessive internet use is connected to higher scores of traits like neuroticism and lower extraversion (Floros & Siomos, 2014). From these results, it can

be extrapolated that individuals higher in neuroticism experience greater levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem or confidence. In the same way, those with lower scores in extraversion are less likely to “take center stage” or partake in self-expression (Floros & Siomos, 2014, p. 21).

It should be noted, however, that in their analysis, Floros & Siomos discuss how excessive internet use also results in low scores in traits like conscientiousness and agreeableness. This can potentially counter the effects of high neuroticism and low extraversion, as those who score low in conscientiousness and agreeableness are less motivated by societal expectations and may lack regard for falling in line with the norm (Floros & Siomos, 2014).

Taking all of this into consideration, we measured the possibility of a correlation between the two variables. From our understanding, it would make sense that the more time an individual spends on social media, the more likely they are to engage and align with majority opinions they see online as their neuroticism and extraversion is likely impacted by heavy internet use.

Our results indicated that most participants used social media for 3 or more hours a day, with the highest response being 3–4 hours per day, and the second highest being 5–6 hours per day. While it can be subjective what constitutes “excessive” social media use, as some may perceive 3 hours as average while others may perceive it as immoderate, we considered these on the moderate-to-higher end of social media use given the scale of our options which are shown in Figure 1. We then looked at the survey item that measured participants’ likelihood of conforming with an online opinion; almost half of our participants (48.6%) indicated that they were likely to follow along with other users’ opinions on social media platforms (see Figure 2). Inputting these two variables into a correlation matrix yielded results that were statistically insignificant, indicating that the amount of time spent on social media did not affect the participant’s likelihood of following online opinions. This was contrary to what we would expect and could be due to a few of the limitations noted further on in our research paper. Linking this back to the article by Floros & Siomos (2014), it could also be the case that the respondents who do excessively use social media may have low scores in conscientiousness and agreeableness that counter the effects of social media lowering extraversion and increasing neuroticism. That is to say, perhaps these participants who spent a lot of time on social media may use it frequently, but more passively, to where they do not necessarily self-express, but they do not significantly experience the need to conform.

Ultimately, the time spent on social media appears not to be a high predictor of social conformity in our study. Putting together the two variables of frequency of social media use and likelihood of following an opinion online yielded insignificant results in our attempt to answer whether or not social media promotes conformity.

In-person vs. online social conformity.

Within our survey, we asked participants if they aligned more with the desire to “fit in” or “stand out” for both in-person and online contexts and put together the responses for each question in a descriptive bar plot (see Figure 4). Most of the results are evidently neutral and did not allow for a direct answer as to whether social media platforms cultivated conformity more than in-person settings. However, based on the fact that all of the respondents who indicated that they preferred to stand out in-person said either “no”

or “maybe” to having the same desire to stand out online, one can infer that it is considered more intimidating to stand out online than it is in-person. We conducted a test of significance of these two variables in our survey, however, the results yielded statistical insignificance ($p > 0.60$). This suggested that the desire to fit in and stand out, either in-person or online, may be independent of one another. Despite this, we extrapolated that none of the participants who felt confident and comfortable standing out in-person felt that same comfortability or confidence to stand out online.

We further investigated the difference in willingness to conform when interacting with users online as compared to when around friends or peers that the person is familiar with. Referring back to Figure 2, 46.8% of the participants stated that they would likely follow the opinion of other social media users. However, 40.5% of participants stated that they would be unlikely to change their opinion if they were to see that their friends had a different opinion on a post (see Figure 5). Figure 6 asked participants if they would value a stranger's opinion regardless of if it was in person or online, to which 64.9% of participants stated that they would value a stranger's opinion sometimes, followed by 21.6% who answered yes. Furthermore, 37.5% of participants stated that they would maybe express an opinion that was in contrast to the majority opinion followed by 29.7% that said they would not express an opinion that went against the majority opinion (see Figure 8).

This would suggest that social media users highly value strangers' opinions and are more willing to conform to anonymous social media users rather than members of their own social network. Participants' indecisiveness in whether they would express an opinion that differs from the majority showcases the complexity of online interactions.

Through the use of Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959), we can begin to understand how and why participants would choose to take on the opinion of a stranger as opposed to an opinion from someone close to them. Goffman suggested that individuals treat their world like a stage, where the individual is an actor performing their perception of reality to an audience, ultimately creating a “new reality” for their audience (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007, p. 298). In this case, the participants can be seen as actors performing on virtual stages to a virtual audience that is comprised of peers and anonymous social media users (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007, p. 298). Goffman further argued that the individual “self” is merely a character that is constructed and portrayed during interactions, and that the self does not exist once the performance is over (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007).

This could suggest that participants construct and portray an online persona or self on social media, however, the character may only exist while the participants are online, and they may perform different characters for different audiences in various settings (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Goffman coined the term “front stage” to depict the reality an individual wants to display to their audience whereas “backstage” refers to when the individual is not in character or performing and is away from their audience (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007, p. 306).

Figure 7 indicated that users who followed online trends that they did not agree with more often were influenced by the fear of being “cancelled” online. Participants' willingness to change their opinions to fit strangers' opinions online could be attributed to Goffman's “front stage” theory as participants may be attempting to portray a different character or reality to their virtual audience (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). By changing their opinion, they are essentially conforming to the reality of other social media users despite

whether they truly believe in that reality (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). This is in line with Asch's discourse on social conformity and how individuals are swayed by information with a lack of personal understanding and knowledge of the matter at hand (Asch, 1955). By conforming to strangers' opinions online, they can avoid conflict, create a socially acceptable image of themselves, and can leave the discussion without any consequences or repercussions. Furthermore, when they go "backstage" or offline and away from the public eye, they can continue to hold their true opinions without any repercussions and without their anonymous social media audience knowing (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). "Front stage", in a sense, could be an impression management strategy and safety tool that participants utilize to avoid being cyber bullied or attacked online (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Political divisiveness and cancel culture can make the virtual environment on social media platforms extremely hostile, and potentially life altering, as one comment or share that does not align with majority opinion can ruin an individual's life. This could potentially lead to a virtual environment where users feel forced or are coerced into playing a character that does not align with their personal, or backstage self, to remain safe (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007).

Since participants stated that they are likely to follow the opinion of an anonymous social media user or users as opposed to their social network, this could also be attributed to "backstage" behaviour as individuals are more likely to show their authentic self, and remain true to their authentic selves, when they feel safe or are in close relationships (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Friendship or close relationships, in this sense, may elicit authentic behaviours because individuals do not feel like they must put on a performance when they are in the company of close friends or close relationships (Kivisto & Pittman, 2007).

Groupthink, on the other hand, plays a more complex role on social media as anonymous online groups, and their influence, could impact conforming behaviours (Janis, 2008). Because most participants were willing to follow the opinion of a stranger online, this could suggest that they would most likely follow the opinion of a virtual "in-group" as they may encounter and feel the impact of in-group pressures online (Janis, 2008). Furthermore, the symptoms of groupthink "Belief in Inherent Morality of the Group" and "Collective Rationalization", which assume that a group's beliefs, ideas, and decisions are correct, could be a reason as to why 37.5% of participants stated that they would be indifferent in expressing an opinion that goes against the majority opinion followed by 29.7% who said they would not (Janis, 2008; See Figure 8). Participants may be under the false pretense that the opinions of virtual "in-groups" must be correct, especially if the opinion being stated is an opinion that is held by most group members (Janis, 2008). In online settings especially, it is easier to witness the masses following an opinion or political stance. The majority can look like an intimidatingly large "in-group," and thus, groupthink could apply in such a context.

Furthermore, the participants who said they would not express an opinion that differs from the majority may also fall victim to "Self-Censorship" where their silence is mistaken for agreement (Janis, 2008). Therefore, participants may feel obligated to follow or remain silent, so they do not disrupt the cohesiveness of the "in group" and risk potentially being seen as a member of the "out-group" (Janis, 2008). By conforming, participants can avoid being seen as a member of the out-group to the online community and thus avoid the stereotypes and labels that may come with that association (Janis, 2008).

Research Question 2: Can social media also promote individuality?***Social media appears less likely to promote individuality than conformity.***

Based on the descriptive statistics, the overall results indicated that social media may not appear to promote individuality or self-expression. According to Figure 9, participants noted that they are unlikely to change their opinion after witnessing another user's online opinion. This suggested that participants are reluctant to change their opinion despite knowing that a particular opinion is being hailed by the majority. This illustrates that one's individuality is still maintained by the user to some degree. However, it doesn't show expression of individuality because witnessing one user's opinion on a post is not enough for another user to warrant a change in their opinion unless every single user under a post comments on the same opinion. Despite these results, previous research suggested that the theory of the spiral of silence informed the fear that users had when going against the majority online opinion (Lee & Chun, 2016). It seemed that users on social media tended to not convey their own opinion when they believed that not everyone held the same opinion as them (Hampton et al., 2014).

On the other hand, according to Figure 8, most of the participants indicated that they were indifferent about expressing an opinion that differed from the online majority. As well, 29.7% of participants indicated that they would not express a different opinion. This suggested that although they would not change their opinion after seeing another user's post, they would not express an opinion that differed from the majority. This feeling can be attributed to dispositional factors. One dispositional factor that can be attributed to the participants may be that some experience rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Those that are high in rejection sensitivity try to avoid situations that may put them at risk of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). This means that social media is not an appropriate ground to safely express one's opinion due to a perceived fear of rejection from others. In fact, in Figure 10, only 2.7% of participants indicated that they believed social media was a safe place. Because of the safety surrounding social media, participants perceive it as an unsafe space to voice an opinion. This is a situational factor that affects self-expression. One reason for this perception is that social media is a prime venue for cyberbullying (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Witnessing aggressive online comments on social media can lead to cyberbullying victimization which in turn can influence how users perceive social media as a place of self-expression (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015).

The overall theme of the thematic analysis suggested that there are contradictions between the three variables. One of the main themes of the analysis between Figure 11 and Figure 13 suggested that all participants stated they held a different opinion from the online majority, but most were reluctant to voice it on social media. All of the participants held a different opinion from the majority on a wide range of topics such as humour, politics, LGBTQ+ issues, and fake news. With this in mind, one might expect that these participants would freely express themselves online. However, this was not the case as suggested by the analysis. We found that 44% of participants did not care to express their opinions and that they did not want to share any personal opinions. Only 22% of participants indicated that their opinion mattered the most out of the majority. One reason for this hesitancy could be attributed to groupthink.

Participants may have been motivated to want to maintain an online solidarity between users in order to achieve a common goal of being relatable (Janis, 2008). This motivation

is likely to be maintained to avoid being a victim of cyberbullying, in which the user is likely to be subjected to ridicule for their deviated opinion (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Another reason for this hesitancy could be attributed to participants being motivated to present a carefully curated online identity. In this case, participants who indicated that they held a different opinion from the majority were demonstrating an actual-self identity (Johnson & Ranzini, 2018). Users who demonstrated an actual-self identity online were being their true self and demonstrating their actual opinion on a range of topics including controversial ones such as LGBTQ+ issues. On the other hand, participants who indicated that they were reluctant to express a different opinion from the online majority were expressing an ideal-motivated self-identity (Johnson & Ranzini, 2018). These participants were not truthful of their identity online and, instead, employed impression management techniques to create a carefully constructed image to be portrayed online (Johnson & Ranzini, 2018). Despite them holding a different opinion from the majority, they were not inclined to share that deviating opinion with other users which resulted in participants being less likely to display their true selves online.

Users who are motivated to present an ideal-self on social media do so in order to seek belongingness from the in-group and voice a similar opinion that the majority held (Johnson & Ranzini, 2018). Lastly, participants may have exercised dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1959). In this case, participants were presenting a “backstage” that consisted of differing opinions on common topics (Goffman, 1959). However, when it came time to express those opinions to other users in the form of a post or comment, many were reluctant to do so. This indicated that participants needed to preserve their “front stage” appearance so as to not let their audience be aware of their true opinion and character, which could compromise how their audience sees them (Goffman, 1959). This suggests that users are not free to act in autonomous ways and that their actions are guided by their social spheres. This showcased that users are forced to act and speak in ways that socially benefit them but have minimal intrinsic benefit. Thus, with the help of previous literature and theory, they help shed light on the reasons why participants held a different opinion from the majority but did not express it online.

Moreover, another general theme that came from the thematic analysis between Figure 11 and Figure 12 was that 66.6% of participants stated that they wanted to stand out and express their opinion when placed in an online group setting. This suggested that the majority of participants wanted to be true to themselves and have their opinions heard by other people. This is related to the theory of individuality, which looks at how individuals are able to freely express themselves without conforming to others. By being true to oneself, users feel better psychologically, emotionally and feel less pressured to engage with social media norms (Bailey et al., 2020). As well, the desire to maintain this fake idealized self online can cause an inner conflict within a user since that is not their authentic identity (Bailey et al., 2020). The inner conflict could be expressed through frustration, negative affect, and overall decreased well-being (Bailey et al., 2020). This sheds light on the reason why most of the participants indicated that they wanted to stand out in online group settings and voice their true opinions.

Although most participants indicated they wanted to stand out and freely express themselves, only 22% of participants said they would express an opinion that differed from the majority. This shows that participants wanted to remain their authentic self but at the same time, did not want to deviate from the majority. One reason for this inconsistency

lies in the maintenance of one's self-presentation. Trieu and Baym (2020) found that users who had a high following consisting of weak-tie relations were more likely to carefully curate posts, comments and content that did not express their authentic views. However, users who shared posts, content, and comments with a small group of users who they had strong ties with were more likely to express themselves authentically without the fear of deviating from the online social norms (Trieu & Baym, 2020).

When in an intimate group of strong-tie relationships, an individual is more likely to express their thoughts without the fear of being criticized. This broadly suggests that social media may not be a space for promoting individuality because users are not able to freely express themselves without fear. Even though participants want to stand out and be their authentic self, they are cautious and particular about their presentation to their large following of weak-tie relationships. Thus, social media does promote individuality at a very surface level that consists of sharing some aspects of themselves online but still hiding particular views that deviate from the majority online opinion.

Research Question 3: Does a fear of being labelled affect self-expression?

Labels prevent self-expression online

Our results suggested that a fear of being labelled by others prevented participants from engaging in self-expression online. These findings were consistent throughout the quantitative data and statistical tests conducted pertaining to our third research question: "does a fear of being labelled affect self-expression?" Figure 14 displayed a bar graph that pertained to the primary social media platform of participants, which was very telling, as the majority of individuals (54.1%) reported Instagram as having been their main social media app of choice.

Past literature has discussed how, within this highly visual, photo-based platform, users engaged in meticulous management of their presentation of self, so as to have increased the likelihood of approval from fellow users (Yau & Reich, 2018). In order to avoid negative self-presentations, users engaged with sites like Instagram in ways that allowed them to "appear interesting", "appear likeable", and "appear attractive" (Yau & Reich, 2018, pp. 201-202). They were deeply concerned with how the virtual audience perceived them, which led to attempts to display themselves in a favourable manner and avoid negative consequences such as labelling (Yau & Reich, 2018). The term "appear" (Yau & Reich, 2018, pp. 201-202) implied that these presentations of self were not wholly accurate or representative of one's true self, which confirmed our research question that individuals would not fully express themselves, as a preventative measure against labelling.

This finding effectively set the stage for our additional results, which can be supported by labelling theory (Becker, 1963). By assessing how common Instagram was among our participants and understanding the lack of authentic self-expression that past research examined on this social media platform, a groundwork was laid as to why our findings suggested a hesitancy to self-express out of a fear of labelling.

Figure 15 displayed the responses of participants when asked about whether being associated with the label of "outsider" elicited an emotional response. Notably, 43.2% answered "sometimes" and 37.8% answered "yes" (see Figure 15). When these two responses were combined, that meant 81% of those who responded to the question either at times or for certain experienced an emotional response to being considered an outsider, which was quite a significant finding.

Becker (1963) examined how individuals who defied norms and rules were often labelled as “outsiders”, a label with historically negative connotations. Our findings in Figure 15 showed that simply having read this loaded label resulted in a response that signified discomfort and unease with the label. Perhaps our respondents were exhibiting an awareness of “out-group stereotypes” that arise when in-group members engage in negatively perceiving those deemed to be outsiders (Janis, 2008). A large percentage of our survey participants reported responding emotionally to this label of “outsider”, as previously mentioned, which suggested a commonly held belief that failure to conform to in-group behaviours and norms signified a form of deviance (Becker, 1963). This was an important question to ask participants, as it explained why many displayed a tendency to engage with social media in a way that favoured conformity over self-expression, in an effort to minimize negative emotional responses to labels that were othering.

When asked about more closely identifying with the label of “leader” or “follower”, Figure 16 interestingly reflected that the majority of respondents (56.8%) selected “neutral” instead. Initially, we were unsure of how to effectively analyze this finding, as participants seemingly avoided associating themselves with either label. However, providing them with a neutral option proved to be quite telling, as it was apparent that most were drawn to the idea of not running the risk of being attached to either “leader” or “follower”, out of fear of how this sign of self-expression would be perceived by others.

As previously mentioned in regard to labelling theory (Becker, 1963), a major element of the fear that comes with being associated with a particular label are the negative or positive connotations attached to it. For instance, Hopton et al. (2012) elaborated on the negative connotations tied to the label of “follower”. They noted that those who were given this label by either others or oneself were discovered to experience diminished positive affect due to harmful stereotypes of being considered a follower, such as lack of strength and abilities (Hopton et al., 2012). Similarly, Chua and Murray (2015) discussed negative connotations associated with the “leader” label, which could have contributed to our participants shying away from it. They described “the toxic leader” as a narcissistic, power-hungry individual, resulting in an environment of toxicity around them (Chua & Murray, 2015, pp. 293-294).

Our findings, in conjunction with past research on this subject matter, could be interpreted as individuals opting to reject both labels and, instead, favoured neutrality, in order to protect their self-image and sacrifice self-expression, in our context, within social media settings. This finding was also made clear after examining Figure 17. This bar plot presented a combination of variables, including one’s tendency to align with the label of either “leader” or “follower”, and their desire to stand out or fit in. These results were closely related to Figure 16, in that most respondents who considered themselves “neutral” when it came to associating with one of the two labels were also inclined to describe themselves as wanting to fit in (24.3%) or remained neutral (27%), far more than standing out. Seemingly motivated by self-presentation and an avoidance of being negatively labelled by others, these participants who rejected both labels entirely also displayed a desire to conform as opposed to engaging in self-expression.

In order to present oneself to the masses in ways that did not garner negative, unwanted attention or judgment, these findings suggested that while on social media platforms such as Instagram, these individuals would closely monitor their self-presentation as a means of fitting in with their peers (Yau & Reich, 2018). Instead of

prioritizing the expression of one's authentic, unfiltered self, participants seemingly wanted to be perceived by their peers as norm-abiding through the maintenance of a "favourable image" (Yau & Reich, 2018, p. 196).

After conducting a t-test to compare the two variables of frequency of social media use and emotional response to an "outsider" label (see Figure 18), statistical significance was revealed ($p < .05$), which meant that both variables influenced one another. This made clear that there was a relationship between one's usage of social media platforms and their tendency to express an emotional response to being labelled an "outsider". This was consistent with research findings within existing literature, specifically as it pertained to "excessive Internet use (EIU)" and personality traits of individuals (Floros & Siomos, 2014, p. 19). Those who recorded greater levels of EIU were found to score higher in neuroticism, which involved poor regulation of emotions, worsened self-esteem, and anxiousness, in addition to being lower in extraversion, common in those who avoided self-expression, displayed passiveness, and disliked attention (Floros & Siomos, 2014).

Our survey results could also be correlated with the findings of Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020), which suggested that social media use can be considered excessive and problematic when over two hours per day are spent on these platforms. According to our participants' responses, 43.2% reported three to four hours of use each day, 29.7% reported five to six hours each day, and 2.7% indicated over seven hours of use per day (see Figure 1). When combined, this meant that 75.6% of respondents utilized social media sites for more than two hours daily, which has been deemed excessive. The relationship between the variables displayed in Figure 18 not only represented statistical significance, but also shed light on the connection between the majority of our respondents' frequent use of social media and their emotional responses to being perceived as an "outsider". As detailed in the work of Floros and Siomos (2014), this could have been tied to the personality traits of our participants who accessed social media platforms frequently, as a lack of self-esteem, feelings of anxiety, avoidance of self-expression, and discomfort associated with receiving attention go hand-in-hand with a fear of being negatively labelled (Becker, 1963).

Finally, Figure 19 assessed the variable of individuals identifying more closely with the label of "leader" or "follower" and whether being labelled as an "outsider" elicited an emotional response. Figure 19 displayed the quantitative data in a bar plot. A chi-square test was then conducted combining the same variables as in Figure 19. It noted that $\chi^2(6) = 15.2, p > 0.019$. This meant that the p-value was indicative of statistical significance, which suggested that these two categorical variables were dependent, with a relationship existing between them. Once the presence of a relationship was solidified following testing, perhaps the most intriguing discovery here was the connection between those who remained neutral when given the option of "leader" versus "follower" and their tendency to experience an emotional response when the prospect of being given the label of "outsider" arose.

Figure 19, as well as the chi-square test, made it clear that 32.4% of respondents who aligned themselves with neither label and opted for neutrality, indicated "yes" in regard to emotional response. Additionally, 16.2% of survey participants who selected "neutral" also indicated "sometimes" in regard to emotional response. Together, this accounted for 48.6% of respondents, nearly half of all responses, which was quite a significant result. In accordance with labelling theory (Becker, 1963) and past research on the negative

connotations associated with particular labels (Chua & Murray, 2015; Hopton et al., 2012), our findings suggested that individuals who avoided the labels of “leader” or “follower” entirely were also more commonly found to have reported an emotional response to being associated with an “outsider” label. The relationship between these two variables signified to us an overwhelming sense of fear and discomfort when confronted with the possibility of being harshly labelled (Becker, 1963).

Therefore, in an effort to maintain in-group status, as proposed by Irving Janis (2008), our participants may have engaged in “Self-Censorship” (p. 239) through a censoring of their authentic feelings towards the labels of “leader” and “follower”, as most remained neutral due to negative societal attitudes towards both (Chua & Murray, 2015; Hopton et al., 2012). Within a social media context, this emotional response to being perceived as an “outsider” may have been attributed to a fear of being “cancelled” online (see Figure 7), resulting in further labelling, backlash, and potential relegation to the out-group (Janis, 2008).

Broader Significance of the Research

As social psychologist Solomon E. Asch posited: “we should be concerned with studying the ways in which human beings form their opinions and the role that social conditions play” (Asch, 1955, p. 31). Our research assessed the factors that affect the formation and expression of opinions in an online setting. As social media use increases, so does the amount of social conditions placed on self-expression. Identifying these more recent social conditions can help to frame how individuals interact with their online social worlds in modern society. This research can contribute to the future literature on the social psychological processes surrounding conformity and individuality.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Upon analyzing our results, the conclusion we have come to for our first research question is that social media appears to promote social conformity to some degree. To answer our first research question on whether social media tends to promote conformity, we considered time spent using social media and how this factors into social conformity online specifically. Further, we measured social conformity both online and in-person, to get an idea of whether participants were more inclined to conform in one setting compared to the other. Our findings also indicated that social conformity online was not necessarily dependent upon the opinions of those that the participants knew personally. On the contrary, we found that a stranger’s online opinion was considerably valued and ultimately, people cared what strangers thought about them online which was enough to elicit social conformity.

Likewise, social media promoted individuality to some degree. Most participants stated they held a different opinion from the majority, but most were reluctant to voice it on social media. Users self-express on a range of topics at a very surface level due to the fear of receiving criticisms from the online majority. It appeared that participants employed self-presentation techniques to help construct a specific online identity that allowed them to self-express to a small, intimate group as opposed to a majority that consisted of strangers. This suggests that participants do not have autonomy over their online identity.

They are constantly working to curate a specific image of themselves to present without it causing a psychological conflict.

Finally, the results and findings associated with our third research question made clear that individuals displayed a tendency to avoid engaging in means of self-expression that would cause them to be negatively labelled. The mere threat of being labelled or deemed an “outsider” by members of the online majority resulted in a tendency to shy away from expressing oneself authentically within these settings. The negative connotations associated with certain labels caused many participants to avoid them entirely. This fear of being tied to a label that threatened the maintenance of a positive self-image often elicited an emotional response. In sum, the prospect of being labelled prevented many individuals from exhibiting a real, unfiltered presentation of the self.

Limitations

While our study presented important findings that may be used to support current and future research on the topic of social media use, limitations were made clear. There were three primary limitations to our research, including a lack of generalizability due to skewed sociodemographic variables, small sample size, and the impact of potential biases.

Due to our sampling method being convenience sampling, our data lacks replicability, as our already small sample size was considerably skewed in terms of diversity in survey responses. For example, the results of our demographic survey questions revealed that the vast majority of participants self-identified as female (75.6%), meaning that our findings would not be representative of the thoughts and opinions of other gender identities. Also, most participants reported having been from the Faculty of Social Sciences (62.2%), which reflected a further lack of diversity. Additionally, due to the nature of the study and its involvement of solely undergraduate students who attended McMaster University, our survey findings were skewed towards the experiences of young adult social media users, which meant that we dealt with a highly specific demographic that, again, would not be representative of the general population.

Having such a small sample size meant that the results were inevitably going to be skewed due to such limited responses and little demographic diversity, which made it challenging to ensure that our findings were both reliable and valid. Initially, we sought to reach at least 75 survey participants, but in the end, our sample size unfortunately did not meet this goal, which proved to be another major limitation. Our low sample size also became difficult when we worked through data analysis and assessed potential correlations between variables. Because of the small number of participants, it was challenging having to distinguish between true findings and effects, and relationships that presented themselves as a result of chance.

Our final limitation dealt with the impact of bias that potentially came into play when our participants were completing the survey. An example of this is moderacy bias, when participants favoured midpoints of scales or leaned more towards neutral responses as a way of avoiding extremes, possibly displaying a lack of opinion. After assessing the results of our survey questions, many respondents displayed a tendency to select answers such as “maybe”, “sometimes”, and “neutral”, which may have been a sign of moderacy bias in effect, offering too many response options, or flawed wording of our questions that led individuals to answer more moderately as a result of indecision, for instance.

Lastly, social desirability bias could also have played a role in how participants formulated their responses, further skewing the results. In an effort to respond to survey questions in a more socially acceptable, appropriate manner, our respondents may have fallen victim to this bias. If this was the case, this would have posed a threat to the validity of our findings, as well as harmed the integrity and accuracy of our results. We are committed to learning from these limitations and will continually work to address them in our future research endeavours.

Significant Insights and Contributions

In regard to significant insights that our research has provided, a major aspect would be the ability to better grasp the complexities and intricacies of social media that the typical user may have failed to consider. More specifically, through an analysis of individuals' social media use, we were able to correlate these findings with their tendency to either conform online or not. The concepts of social conformity and individuality are both highly relevant within the area of social psychology, so our findings will allow for further insights to be made within this research area, particularly pertaining to online behaviour and interactions.

Considering the incredibly widespread nature of social media use among young adults today, we believe our findings will contribute to societal understandings of this increasingly relevant form of media and its potential effects on users, both from a short-term and long-term perspective. These insightful findings added to existing research on these social psychological themes. In an increasingly digital world, it is essential that we commit to understanding the serious impact that usage of these platforms is having on peoples' ways of thinking, attitudes, behaviour, and opinions. Overall, we are confident that our study has offered useful insights into this subject matter and future research to come.

Final Thoughts

To conclude, it is hoped that this research will expand upon the existing breadth of literature on the role of social media and its impact on individuals' behaviours and emotions. This may be in terms of forming preconceived opinions, following trends, as well as engaging with popular posts and the reasons behind doing so. Although the sample population is not generalizable to the broader population, our area of research can provide valuable insight into how young adults respond to the content displayed on their social media platforms and how likely they are to implement online habits into their daily lives. We hope that our research can provide a clear picture of the ways in which young adults are generally affected by this media that they consume, in terms of socially conforming or embracing individuality.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr. Sarah Clancy for her valuable guidance, feedback, and unwavering support throughout this research project and the Honours Social Psychology Program for its commitment to our success. Additionally, we would like to thank the MSU clubs and societies for their engagement in our research, as well as the survey participants for their willingness and cooperation.

References

- Abi-Jaoude, E., Treurnicht Naylor, K., & Pignatiello, A. (2020). Smartphones, social media use and youth mental health. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 192(6), 136-141. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.190434>
- Asch, S. E. (1955). Opinions and social pressure. *Scientific American*, 193(5), 31-35. <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1155-31>
- Bailey, E. R., Matz, S. C., Youyou, W., & Iyengar, S. S. (2020). Authentic self-expression on social media is associated with greater subjective well-being. *Nature communications*, 11(1), 4889. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-18539-w>
- Barker, V., Dozier, D. M., Weiss, A. S., & Borden, D. L. (2013). Facebook “friends”: Effects of social networking site intensity, social capital affinity, and flow on reported knowledge-gain. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 2(2).
- Chua, S. M. Y., & Murray, D.W. (2015). How toxic leaders are perceived: Gender and information-processing. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 36(3), 292-307. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-06-2013-0076>
- Clancy, S. (2020, February). *Social Perception and Cognition*. [PowerPoint]. Avenue2Learn.
- Colliander, J. (2019). “This is fake news”: Investigating the role of conformity to other users’ views when commenting on and spreading disinformation in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 97, 202–215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.03.032>
- Downey, G., & Feldman, S. I. (1996). Implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 70(6), 1327. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.6.1327>
- Farmer, Y., Bissière, M., & Benkirane, A. (2018). Impacts of Authority and Unanimity on Social Conformity in Online Chats about Climate Change. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 43(2), 265–279. <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2018v43n2a3206>
- Floros, G., & Siomos, K. (2014). Excessive Internet use and personality traits. *Current Behavioral Neuroscience Reports*, 1, 19-26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40473-014-0006-1>
- Fox, J., & Warber, K. M. (2015). Queer Identity Management and Political Self-Expression on Social Networking Sites: A Co-Cultural Approach to the Spiral of Silence. *Journal of Communication*, 65(1), 79–100. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12137>
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Grimm, P. (2010). Social desirability bias. *Wiley International Encyclopedia of Marketing*.
- Hampton, K. N., Rainie, H., Lu, W., Dwyer, M., Shin, I., & Purcell, K. (2014). *Social media and the spiral of silence* (pp. 143-146). Washington, DC, USA: PewResearchCenter
- Hoption, C., Christie, A., & Barling, J. (2012). Submitting to the follower label. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 220(4), 221-230. <https://doi.org/10.1027/2151-2604/a000116>
- Janis, E. L. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Janis, I. L. (2008). Groupthink. *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, 36(1), 36.

- Johnson, B. K., & Ranzini, G. (2018). Click here to look clever: Self-presentation via selective sharing of music and film on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 82, 148-158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.01.008>
- Julien, C. (2015). Bourdieu, social capital and online interaction. *Sociology*, 49(2), 356-373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514535862>
- Kameda, T., & Sugimori, S. (1993). Psychological entrapment in group decision making: An assigned decision rule and a groupthink phenomenon. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(2), 282-292. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.2.282>
- Kelley, H. H., & Michela, J. L. (1980). Attribution Theory and Research. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 31(1), 457-501.
- Kelly, M., Ngo, L., Chituc, V., Huettel, S., & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2017). Moral conformity in online interactions: rational justifications increase influence of peer opinions on moral judgments. *Social Influence*, 12(2/3), 57-68. doi:10.1080/15534510.2017.1323007
- Kivisto, P., & Pittman, D. (2007). Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology. *Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited*, 271-290.
- Lee, M. J., & Chun, J. W. (2016). Reading others' comments and public opinion poll results on social media: Social judgment and spiral of empowerment. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 65, 479-487. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.09.007>
- Ma, S., Zhang, H., & Chen, H. (2021). Opinion Expression Dynamics in Social Media Chat Groups: An Integrated Quasi-Experimental and Agent-Based Model Approach. *Complexity*, 2021, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/230475>
- Matusitz, J., & Breen, G.-M. (2012). An Examination of Pack Journalism as a Form of Groupthink: A Theoretical and Qualitative Analysis. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 22(7), 896-915. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2012.707933>
- Neubaum, G., Rösner, L., Ganster, T., Hambach, K., & Krämer, N. C. (2018). United in the name of justice: How conformity processes in social media may influence online vigilantism. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 7(2), 185-199. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000112>
- Orehek, E., & Human, L. J. (2017). Self-Expression on Social Media. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43(1), 60-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216675332>
- Packer, D. J. (2009). Avoiding Groupthink. *Psychological Science*, 20(5), 546-548. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02333.x>
- Phua, J., Jin, S. V., & Kim, J. J. (2017). Uses and gratifications of social networking sites for bridging and bonding social capital: A comparison of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. *Computers in human behavior*, 72, 115-122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.041>
- Plummer, K. (2001). Labeling Theory. *Encyclopedia of criminology and deviant behavior*, 1, 191-193.
- Trieu, P., & Baym, N. K. (2020, April). Private responses for public sharing: understanding self-presentation and relational maintenance via stories in social media. In *proceedings of the 2020 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 1-13). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376549>
- Turner, M. E., & Pratkanis, A. R. (1998). A Social Identity Maintenance Model of Groupthink. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73(2/3), 210-235. <https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.1998.2757>

- Whittaker, E., & Kowalski, R. M. (2015). Cyberbullying via social media. *Journal of school violence, 14*(1), 11-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2014.949377>
- Wijenayake, S., Hettiachchi, D., Hosio, S., Kostakos, V., & Goncalves, J. (2021). Effect of Conformity on Perceived Trustworthiness of News in Social Media. *IEEE Internet Computing., 25*(1), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MIC.2020.3032410>
- Yau, J. C., & Reich, S. M. (2019). “It’s just a lot of work”: Adolescents’ self-presentation norms and practices on Facebook and Instagram. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 29*(1), 196-209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12376>
- Zhu, H., & Huberman, B. A. (2014). To switch or not to switch. *American Behavioral Scientist, 58*(10), 1329-1344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764214527089>