Following individuals on Instagram: Their meaning-making of a mediatized world

A qualitative study on individuals' experiences and meaning making on Instagram

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Abstract

Objectives: Today's society is becoming intertwined with digital media in such a way that many daily practices are performed online or in a digital environment. This is said to 'change' humans to become dependent on and adapted to media, which is a key indicator of what has been termed mediatization. To analyze this phenomenon of an individual level, this study focuses on individuals' experiences and their perception of mediatization by means of their Instagram usage in everyday life.

Methodology: To achieve the stated objectives, a total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. By snowball and convenience sampling, 12 females and 8 males between 18 and 25 years old were found. To find relevant patters and outcomes, the concepts mediatization, self-presentation, digital- and self- identity and meaning making were measured. The data was analyzed by a mixture of open coding and codes derived from the theoretical framework.

Findings: The study's findings show that individuals recognize the increasing influence of media on society and have mixed feelings about these developments. They perceive mediatization as beneficial when performing actions, however, they fear to become dependent on media. The findings regarding meaning making and mediatization showed, that individuals have established friendships or relationships online and that mediatization supports their identity formation by providing much content that inspires them.

Implications: This study confirms that Instagram is mainly used for self-presentation and self-expression and extends existing research about meaning making on Instagram by explaining how and when Instagram is important in individuals' daily life. Further, with the findings of this study, developers of social media apps can better understand what users expect from and

prefer on social media. For example, being transparent about private data and algorithms or to stand out with unique functions of the platform.

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1. Introduction

"The embedding of technologically based means of communication in the practices of everyday life is a long-term process that deepened dramatically over the past 150 years. This is what we mean by mediatization" (Hepp et al., 2018: 134).

Today's society is becoming intertwined with digital media in such a way that many daily practices are transformed to an online or digital setting because of the ongoing developments of technology and media. Becoming intertwined with digital media is said to 'change' humans to become dependent on and adapted to media, which is a key indicator of what has been termed mediatization (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Mediatization can be defined as a process in which everyday practices and social relations are adapted to technology and media (Livingstone, 2009). It describes the dominance of media in society due to its convenience, affordability and dynamic, resulting in changing human interactions because of new ways of communication (Nie et al., 2014). As the quote of Hepp et al. (2018) also indicates, mediatization is a process which changes over time. Currently, the importance and influence of media in society grows exponentially, since people connect and communicate via different media channels (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Connection is a core societal value in individuals' public and private life and the development of mediatization allows individuals to be connected every time and everywhere over their smartphones, tablets, or laptops (Livingstone, 2014). However, the perspectives and opinions about being connected everywhere and always are varied. For example, researchers found that being connected is beneficial to develop social skills and improve reading, information sharing and creativity. Therefore, in this regard, disconnection is labelled as a negative thing because it limits individuals in their opportunities (Livingstone, 2014). On the other hand, individuals also tend to be disconnected, because they feel distracted, stressed, or anxious and need to slow down by not being connected (Treré et al., 2020). Thus, there are

both advantages and disadvantages of being digitally connected or disconnected. The Covid-19 pandemic forced most activities that were normally performed offline to an online setting, which intensifies the amount of being online and connected. The internet connection became a social need and a public utility, which might cause that disconnection is seen as more crucial and as an escape from the online world, compared to what it was before the pandemic (Treré et al., 2020).

An ever-present connectivity is facilitated by social media platforms, for example, where individuals can message and share their daily lives with others around the world. These platforms have many different features to send and post pictures, videos, or texts, for instance by posting stories that disappear after 24 hours or post pictures that are directly saved in one's profile (Celik & Schoreels, 2014). There are multiple studies about the advantages and disadvantages of social media use, whether their features are beneficial for one's social life or rather not. On the one hand, social media offers an ever-present connection with other people around the world which positively influences one's social relationships (Beer, as cited in Lupinacci, 2020), but on the other hand people feel overwhelmed by the features of being connected and need a balance between the two (Nguyen, 2021). The conflict between being online or offline increases and creates an urgent challenge to find out how individuals experience the tensions between connectivity and disconnectivity. In this sense, it is also important to research what meaning individuals give social media platforms. Meaning making is explained as the sense making of a certain situation, people, or behavior to find out what they stand for and what relation they have to oneself (Langlois, 2014). Hence, this research brings novel aspects to the literature.

Current research has focused on giving meaning in the context of using social media platform. The study of Boczkowski et al. (2018) studied the role of meaning making on the platforms WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their findings for meaning making

on Instagram were that the platform creates a space for self-presentation to upload pictures of oneself that are without any flaws. The authors explained that Instagram is full of perfect visuals of individuals, that are posted for earning compliments and likes that strengthen their self-awareness. An additional study by Valdivia (2021) found out, that the meaning making of Instagram roots in the options of self-expression and self-documentation, two interwoven concepts. One of the most frequent actions on Instagram is sharing content through stories or posts, which is how individuals express and document themselves and their activities.

This study focuses on individuals' experiences and their perception of mediatization by means of their Instagram usage in everyday life. To investigate individuals' experiences and perceptions, relevant concepts as mediatization, self-presentation, self-identity and meaning making are explained.

Especially individuals between 18 and 25 years, the generation Z, experience the capabilities of connection, because this generation has not experienced life before the internet. Therefore, they were raised in an era in which technology is easily accessible at a young age (Prensky as cited in Turner, 2015. This generation was raised in a world that is 'always online by interacting and communicating', which makes them uniquely diverse in their use of technology. Generation Z is the first generation that demonstrated how proficient and comfortable it is with technology at an early stage (Palley, 2012). Therefore, individuals between 18 and 25 years old were chosen as target group for this study.

Additionally, the focus of the study lies on Instagram since it is one of the most popular social networking sites with around one billion active users. Individuals can share visual content on their personal profiles as well as comment and interact with others via the "following" activity (Jennewein et al., 2020). Further, the app of Instagram is most often used on mobile phones meaning that individuals have insights into others personal life every time through stories or posts of others from everywhere. It offers various features to exchange

content, such as posting stories, reacting to stories, or following the content one is interested in. Also, the platform is not only used by individuals, but also by organizations, which offers the opportunity to follow one's interests in an organization online in real time, regardless of where the organization is headquartered (Huang & Su, 2018). Unlike Facebook or Twitter, text-only content cannot be created on Instagram, their focus lies on the simplicity and creativity of photos (Lee et al., 2015). Furthermore, Instagram is created for smartphones to be able to access the platform at every time from everywhere. And, while TikTok is mainly used for self-documentation and entertainment, Instagram is used for self-expression, creativity, and self-presentation, thus the self is in the foreground (Masciantonio et al., 2021). When researching individuals' meaning and experiences on social media, Instagram is a suitable platform, since the main activities are focused on oneself, which makes the meaning making aspect valuable and the experiences unique.

Since existing literature already states that mediatization has an influence on society and daily practices, this study focuses on the experiences and meaning making of Instagram in the context of mediatization, which demonstrates how intertwined individuals are with social media platforms, such as Instagram. Thus, this study focuses more on the individual level, whereas existing literature focused on mediatization more generally. Also, this research focuses on meaning making within relationships with others on Instagram. Current research dealt with meaning making on Instagram more generally, for example, that the focus was on the functions and benefits of Instagram as a social media platform and less that it can have multiple different influences on relationships between people. Therefore, the following research question was chosen:

How do individuals between 18 and 25 years perceive and experience the extent of mediatization by means of their Instagram usage in everyday life?

Two sub questions were chosen to investigate the relationships between individuals' experiences and their sense of self, as well as their meaning making. The sub questions are:

What are the dynamics between individuals' sense of self and their experience of using Instagram in everyday life?

And: *How do individuals give meaning to the role of Instagram in their everyday life experienced within their relationships with others?*

This research contributes to the existing literature since it focuses on individuals' experiences and perspectives on mediatization and extends the field of meaning making on social media platforms with the case of Instagram. It adds to the existing literature about self-presentation and self-identity since it focuses on individuals' self-development and social contact with others on Instagram within the context of mediatization. The qualitative approach of this study gives new insights into the perspectives of individuals on mediatization, how they cope with being connected to anyone in the world at any time and how they find meaning within their relationships with others online.

The remainder of this thesis is as followed: First, a theoretical framework elaborates on the relevant concepts mediatization, self-presentation, digital identity and meaning making. Second, the method section explains how 20 interviews with individuals between 18 and 25 were conducted and later analyzed. Afterwards, the findings of the analysis are presented with the focus on frequencies and connections of codes from the codebook, as well as on statements of participants that are relevant to the context of the study. The last section discusses and reflects on the main findings, the theoretical and practical implications, limitations and ends with implications and recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

To analyze the experiences associated with mediatization and which meaning individuals give the platform Instagram, existing literature gives a clearer picture to understand the background of social media usage within the field of media and communication studies as well as sociology.

2.1 Mediatization in society

Within media and communication studies, the three concepts *media, mediation* and *mediatization* are crucial to research society and its relation to media to better understand the multifaceted relationship between the three. The study of Mattoni and Treré (2014) defined *media* with two relevant meanings: First, media as both objects and messages and second, "the media people that produce media messages on a regular basis from within specific media organizations and institutions" (p. 259). Media objects are associated with technological devices within individuals' everyday lives, whereas media people refer to those individuals that interact with the media, because they produce media messages, as for example, journalists. Next, *mediation* is defined by Mattoni and Treré (2014) as "a social process in which media supports the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in societies" (p. 260). Mediation processes are circular since they are intertwined with social practices and activities and combines the creators and the users of media. Mediation describes communication processes by means of a medium within a specific context. And thirdly, *mediatization* is defined by the authors as a long-lasting process, in which social and cultural institutions are modified by the growing influence of media. Changes caused by mediatization are made within communication and media itself, as well as in culture and society.

The concept of mediatization is rising in popularity because it can be used to understand media logics in society. It is defined by Mazzoleni (2008, as cited in Mazzoleni, 2017) as "a concept which indicates the extension of the influence of media (…) into all spheres of society

and social life" (p. 136). Individuals' social practices and lives in general become intertwined with media, due to its increasing reliance, which is a key indicator for mediatization (Jansson, as cited in Bengtsson et al., 2020). Regarding Livingstone and Lunt (2014), mediatization can be characterized by two crucial features. First, that it concerns the effects of media on a specific field in society that is historically different and second, that these effects work in a complex manner of time. This means that mediatization differs per field in society and time frame and therefore, needs to be researched specifically. Thus, the concept of mediatization is part of a shift within the media and communication research (Hepp et al., 2015).

Mediatization as such can, arguably, be detected in many different spheres of society, for example, within culture, politics, economics, or education, which is why its attention and therefore, also importance, has increased in the past years. According to Mazzoleni (2017) the entire human ecosystem is dependent on and affected by media-driven dynamics because they are so intertwined within the media environment. This argument is in line with the research by Bengtsson et al. (2020), which states that younger people use the digital environment for all kinds of mundane practices in everyday life and adapt new forms of media quickly to fulfill the desire of independence. Hereby, it is important to distinguish between being 'media-centric' and 'media centered' as emphasized by Hepp et al. (2015). Livingstone (2010), as cited in Hepp et al. (2015) defined 'media-centric' as an "one-sided approach to understanding the interplay between media, communications, culture, and society" (p. 3). On the contrary, 'media-centered' is defined as an "holistic understanding of the various intersecting social forces at work at the same time as we allow ourselves to have a particular perspective and emphasis on the role of media in these processes" (p. 3). According to Hepp et al. (2015), mediatization is a media-centered concept including all kind of interrelating influences of media and communications in different social and cultural domains. Current research is still discussing whether mediatization can be seen as a process of change, meaning that the reliance on media

is exponentially growing (Bengtsson et al., 2020). There are fewer and fewer areas in society and daily life that are not influenced by digital media. Especially since the digitalization has shifted society to a new stage of mediatization, the social world is intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures, identified as 'deep mediatization' (Hepp, 2020). Deep mediatization is experienced by everybody at some point in his or her everyday live whereby technology transforms communication more and more to an online setting (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021). Mediatization is associated with several transformations in society, as the transformation of human and social practices, the transformation of media itself and the transformation of communication. Within these transformations, media is dominant and shapes society's abilities, behavior, and communication. Media itself increased in its ability and accessibility, developing towards an increasing proliferation of media in society (Hepp, 2020). Current research is dealing with the influences of media on a societal level, thus, to contribute insights into the field of what is known about mediatization from an individual's perspective, this study is aiming at finding out how individuals recognize the developments of media and how they perceive deep mediatization in their everyday life. These insights help to understand to what extent mediatization has an influence on individuals, as well as that they explain the nature of online relationships and individual's behavior on social media.

2.2 Self-presentation

Furthermore, to understand people's behavior and actions on Instagram it is crucial to analyze the causes for individuals' self-presentation within social interactions on social media platforms in the context of 'deep mediatization'. Society's communication has shifted to social media, which is why much communication has also been shifted to social media. Because of these shifts, individuals put more effort on their online profile, thus how their profile is being seen

by others on social media. Therefore, it is interesting to understand the concept of self-presentation in the context of 'deep mediatization'.

The sociologist Erving Goffman focused on the individual being a creator of social reality rather than being a victim of it. Apart from traditional perspectives, his focus is something different, unusual, and unexplored (Posner, 1978). He proposes that individuals are social and reflexive, meaning that individuals aim to present themselves most favorably by having valuable social relations and interactions. These assumptions represent an 'egocentric' model of social interactions, explaining the relationship between the individual and society (Posner, 1978). In addition, Goffman studied how stigmas influenced social interactions. He found out that individuals try to keep their favorable self-image by neutralizing their stigmas with different strategies as e.g., hiding or covering it. Those reactions and patterns of behavior are created by the society itself as a protection medium for individuals' self-image (Posner, 1978). These patterns can also be seen in human behavior on web pages on the Internet, where individuals present themselves in a favorable context which is not always reality (Miller, 1995). Also, by following a certain content and users, individuals represent their interests and values, which does not always have to be true. To state it like Goffman (1959), individuals behave like actors on a stage when they interact with someone and present themselves to others as they hope and want to be perceived. Because society is not homogenous, individuals must adapt their appearance and manners to the given situation. However, there is also a backstage, where individuals are not interacting with someone and where they can drop their social roles and identities to be their true self (Goffman, 1959).

From a media-related perspective, social presence on social media is often staged and not realistic at all. As Goffman (1959) stated that social interactions could be seen as a stage for people where they present themselves differently as they are, the same procedure can be

seen on social media. Instagram provides a world full of pictures and videos of perfect bodies, lives, and relationships (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). These pictures and videos can trigger individuals since they may desire to live the same perfect life as it is represented on Instagram. These perfect lives that are represented on Instagram evoke jealousy and frustration, as individuals think that their own life is less worthy because it is not like those shown on Instagram. This frustration mainly derives from the human nature of comparing oneself to another. Social comparison is the natural process for self-evaluation, where individuals strive to be like the targets of the comparison (Festinger, 1954). There are two types of comparison, the upward social comparison where one perceives him or herself to be superior to the compared target and the downward social comparison where one perceives him or herself to be inferior to the compared target (Festinger, 1954). Both types are common in social media use, where individuals compare themselves to people presenting themselves in a seemingly perfect, but unrealistic setting, with the outcome of being frustrated of one's own life and envious of the life of the other. Within this study, the theory of social comparison is used to explain how individuals perceive themselves on social media and what they experience based on how they present themselves. The fact that individuals compare themselves to others on social media and often feel worse afterwards raises the question why they still use Instagram when it makes them feel less worthy. An answer to that question can be given when looking closer to what impact 'deep mediatization' has on individuals, thus, to represent individual's perceptions and experiences of 'deep mediatization'.

Furthermore, the study of Jackson and Luchner (2018) analyzed how individuals emotionally respond to imagined positive and negative Instagram feedback depending on their personality and self-presentation on the platform among 18-30 years old. Their findings show how essential the role of self-presentation is in understanding the relationship between self-criticism and emotional response to reactions on Instagram. Thus, interpersonal reactions on

Instagram may be perceived as "more rewarding or threatening when individuals are preoccupied with connecting with others" (p. 3) as well as when maintaining interpersonal relationships. Additionally, self-critical individuals may interpret fewer likes than expected on a post or following someone and not being followed back as a threat to their self-worth, because of the implied failure or criticism from others (Besser & Priel, 2011; Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003, as cited in Jackson & Luchner, 2018). These findings are influencing the extent to which individuals are willing to present themselves on social media. Within this study, it is important to find out how individuals present themselves online and what feedback they receive from others. The reaction of others to posts or shares, influences their willingness to post or share on Instagram again. Thus, their experiences with others are dependent on how much they are interacting with others on Instagram. The extent to which individuals are presenting themselves is also dependent on how much meaning they give to the platform. Therefore, self-presentation is also an important concept when analyzing the meaning making aspect of this study.

Another relevant theory to consider for explaining behavior on social media and the pressure behind social media is the theory of the fear of missing out (FOMO). As described by Przybylski et al. (2013), FOMO is "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (p. 1). Such a deficit in psychological needs may therefore increase individual's awareness and sensitivity towards the fear that he or she is missing out on something going on without him or her. This fear exists also on social media which then leads the individual to be more active on certain platform to not miss out anything relevant or exiting. Rosen et al. (2013) found evidence that people feel anxious when they are not able to use their wireless mobile device. It is suggested that FOMO is related to perceived stress, meaning that the more anxiety symptoms coming from FOMO the higher the levels of stress adolescents experience (Beyens et al., 2016). Within this research, the focus lies on how

individuals perceive mediatization on Instagram, as well as how they give meaning on the platform within their relationships to others. Therefore, it is necessary to consider individuals' self-presentation in combination with FOMO, to find out if they also give Instagram itself a meaning or if they underlie the pressure of FOMO. It might be that individuals post or share on Instagram, because they feel the need to do so due to the fear to miss out on social presence if they would not. Hence, FOMO should be considered as a factor that influences individual's interactions with others and social self-presentation on Instagram.

2.3 Identity on social media platforms

Over the last decade, social media continues to grow in popularity, since it tends to offer space to connect and build on relationships with others, as well as bringing together individuals with similar interests. Further, the digital age offers new forms of identity-building and self-presentation within social media (Mayer et al., 2020). Therefore, when speaking of identity building on the internet, literature refers to the theory of digital identity. Within this study, the theory of identity building on social media in the context of mediatization is important to consider, since it helps to understand what impact mediatization has on one's sense of self, self-development and social environment. Also, it can explain how individuals give meaning to the platform, since it offers a space to discover one's interests and to connect with others easily. Digital identity includes the development of oneself, meaning one's own attitudes, values, and norms, within a digital environment and using an electronic device (Gündüz, 2017). There is a difference in generation when it comes to the formation of a digital identity. Generation Z is often more familiar with the digital environment because they grew up with computers and the internet (Gündüz, 2017). According to Pan et al. (2017) individuals develop a social identity as well as a relational identity online. Based on the social identity, individuals feel connected to a specific group that shares the same interests or beliefs. On the other hand,

the relational identity focuses on "members' perceived social or emotional connections to particular members on the site" (p. 77). Thus, the two identities may coexist, where the individual is connected within groups as well as to individual users at the same time. The study of Mayer et al. (2020) investigated how different generations behave regarding identity formation on their smart phones and the internet. Within their study they did not include generation Z, but their outcomes are relevant for this research to understand peoples' behavior on the internet. According to the authors, "identity formation has become more than just a developmental step—it is a valuable resource needed for coping with the demands of individualization in a successful life" (p. 2). The development of social media impacts peoples' identity in two ways. First, to build a stable and healthy identity, relationships with others are needed. However, relationships build via social media are more time-consuming and less reliable, thus this pressure forces people to transform their identity into a more open and experimental self. Second, the connection via social media with others becomes part of people's identity, it is included in their daily life and part of their habits (Mayer et al., 2020). Hereby, in online relationships, real and valuable human interactions are lacking. Because of mediatization and digitalization, individuals grow up in a digitalized and mediatized world, which shifts societal practices into a digital environment. Therefore, relationships, friendships and one's self-identity are more often developed online.

Furthermore, identity consists of a twofold nature, with a social identity and a personal identity. Personal identity is built upon one's own experience and is therefore unique, whereas social identity is "built on affiliations and relationships with the social environment" (Mayer et al., 2020, p. 2). The study by Pan et al. (2017) found that self-identity focuses on characteristics of the individuals that separates her/him from others. Further, they found that the social self-identity is formed by the feeling of being socially or emotionally attached to members within society. Each identity is different and has its compatibilities and

incompatibilities. Social media creates diversity within society, because individuals can develop their digital identity regardless the identity the individual has in real life (Gündüz, 2017). Also, social media brings cultures all around the world closer together, which can also influence one's identity. Thus, the development of mediatization influences one's identity formation process and outcome, which might underpin a shift in the values and characteristics of society. Within this research, the background of identity formation is an important concept, since it can explain people's behavior, the content they follow as well as their reaction to content on social media. Depending on their perception of mediatization in society, individuals might have a different identity or interests online than offline. Also, it is relevant for understanding why Instagram might be important to someone and how they give meaning on Instagram within their relationships to others.

2.4 Meaning making of online social life

Another relevant concept for this study is the concept of meaning making in relation to social media usage. Meaning making of online relationships is dependent on how individuals perceive mediatization on social media, because if they are aware of mediatization as a process and accept it as such, individuals can use their knowledge and perform all kinds of online communication practices in their daily lives. This concept is relevant for this study, since it explains how mediatization and the online environment is important to individuals. Further, it shows when individuals benefit from mediatization and how their perception and experience of mediatization is reflected within their actions and behavior online. According to Zittoun and Brinkmann (2012), meaning making is the process of interpretation of situations or events based on their previous knowledge and experience. Hence, this process varies between individuals and is unique in their outcome. It can also be referred to as "actively engaging in making sense of a situation" (p. 106). Meaning in life is an important factor that contributes to

one's mental health and overall wellbeing, increasing life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2014). Hence, the more people are searching for meaning in their life, the more likely they are to experience life satisfaction and positive affect (Chen et al., 2022). Within the field of social media use, it is crucial to understand what meaning individuals give their experiences and feelings when using Instagram. The study of Boczkowski et al. (2018) analyzed different social media platforms in terms of individual's meaning to them. Their outcome related to Instagram is, that the sense of the platform is mainly "to post careful and stylized constructed visual portraits of everyday life" (p. 255). Since this study was conducted in 2018, it is necessary to analyze how the increase of media reliance has changed the perception of the meaning of Instagram. Furthermore, the concept of "meaning" derives from texts, is shaped by culture and circumstances in everyday life as well as it can be seen as result of the cognitive process during an interaction (Lomborg, 2015). For some people, social media is an entertainment tool, for some it is virtual reality and for others it is an escape from reality. The meaning a person gives to social media is dependent on a person's values and characteristics developed during the identity formation process (Gündüz, 2017). When searching for meaning, people open up to others and try to be recognized and heard by others as well as they try to recognize and hear the other too. Thus, social and emotional support are relevant meaning making concepts as well as building and improving relationships which derives from the recognition of others (Langlois, 2014). The fact that mediatization brings new opportunities for communication with others, results in more space for improving and building on online relationships. Hence, online platforms are a space for meaning making within relationships with others. Additionally, creativity, positive thinking, inspiration, and a feeling of belonging are relevant meaning making aspects, because they allow the self-and-other understanding to grow resulting in living a meaningful life (Langlois, 2014; Chen et al., 2022). Over time, meaning reoccurs in specific interpretations, from which a pattern of communication can evolve. Since Instagram is a

network of communication practices, meaning is made and shared by individuals. Therefore, it is crucial to ask these individuals about their understanding, practices, and experiences of social media.

Overall, current research has focused on the developments of mediatization and its influences on society, however this study is focusing on mediatization from the perspectives of individuals. Further, it analyzes how individuals perceive themselves in an online environment by focusing on individuals' self-identity and self-presentation on Instagram. Within the field of meaning making, current research focused on meaning making of social media platforms themselves, whereas this study contributes to field of meaning making within relationships with others in the case of Instagram. By collecting qualitative data, individuals' own experiences and perceptions of mediatization, their self-development and their relationships online in the context of mediatization are in the center of this research.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

For this study, the method of semi-structured interviews was chosen to find detailed insights into individuals' perceptions and experiences of mediatization on Instagram, how they perceive themselves online and how they give meaning to the platform in everyday life. This method was selected, because it is often used in qualitative research to understand individuals' behavior, perception and experiences (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). The participants were free to decide how much and how open they would like to answer the interview questions, which added to the richness of the data, since more details were mentioned. This leaded a more accurate assessment of the experiences on Instagram, since there were no pre-defined answers and participants could express their unique perspective. Quotes of the interviews are included in this study to display the nature of the perspectives and experiences of the participants (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow the researcher to ask relevant follow-up and probing questions, which enhances the depth of the data (Boeije, 2010). Dependent on the answers or the general situation of the interview, the questions were adapted during this study. Hereby, more insight into the perspective of the participant was ensured and new thoughts or answers were supported. Overall, for all interviews the same interview guideline was used, which ensures that all the participants dealt with the same main topics.

3.2 Sampling procedure and participants

For this study, two different non-probability sampling methods were used to invite participants. Non-probability sampling is a technique where the participants are purposively selected by the researcher or through a self-selection process done by participants (Vehovar et al., 2016). A

combination of convenience and snowball sampling was chosen to decrease the probability that the participants belong to the same social group. By combining convenience and snowball sampling, the variety of the participants in the sample, in terms of age, gender, social group and origin, was increased.

First, convenience sampling was used to ask friends, family members or other acquaintances (Boeije, 2010). However, to overcome any biases, family members and close friends were not asked. The researcher asked friends or acquaintances she knows of that they spent a lot of time online and therefore can give valuable insights about the topic. Second, snowball sampling was also used to find suitable participants. The researcher asked friends, fellow students, or the participants after the interviews if they can think of someone else to participate in the study (Boeije, 2010). This method was favorable for the study, since the researcher got access to participant of the age between 18 and 20, as well as to participants she did not know before.

Overall, the sample consisted of 20 participants and included adolescents between 18 to 25 years with different education and occupations to gather varied insights in their everyday life. Table 1 displays the most important characteristics of the sample. A sample with varied characteristics gave the opportunity for a broader and more reliable perspective on Instagram users, since otherwise participants could have had a similar pattern of how they use Instagram. The interviews were conducted in German and English, since 12 participants were German due to the snowball sampling. This would not bias any results since the focus of this study lies not within a cultural comparison. By living in similar cultures and internet accesses, the numbers of intensive social media users do not differ significantly (Boer et al., 2020). Additionally, one criterion was that the participants should use Instagram regularly, at least 5 times a week, to collect valuable data of participants that have had enough experiences on Instagram recently.

Table 1

Characteristics of the sample

	Number of participants (N=20)
Age	
Range	18-25
Average	23.2
Gender	
Diverse/non-binary	N=0
Female	N=12
Male	N=8
No Gender	N=0
Occupational status	
Student (high school)	N=5
Student (university)	N=9
Full-time	N=6

3.3 Instrument and procedure

The interview guideline and questions were developed by the researcher based on the concepts described within the theoretical framework. Therefore, the interview questions are structured similarly as those concepts. The interview questions were divided into four main topics: '*Mediatization in general', 'Mediatization an Instagram', 'Experiences on Instagram'* and '*Meaning making on Instagram'. 'Mediatization in general'* includes questions such as *"Do you think or feel that online media is changing and developing? How do you experience this?"*. '*Mediatization on Instagram'* consists of questions like "*Has Instagram changed since you*

started using it? How has it changed?". Further, *'Experiences on Instagram'* asks questions like *"Why do you share something on Instagram?".* And last, the category of *"Meaning making on Instagram"* consists of questions such as *"How important is social exchange on Instagram for you?".* These topics were developed with several questions that were asked during the session and extended with follow-up questions such as: *"Why do you feel like this?".* The follow-up questions were asked to receive more in-depth answers or explanations to better understand the perception of the participant. The semi-structured interview form can be found in Appendix C.

Before the interviews started, each participant was provided with the informed consent form as well as with a short introduction about the study. When the participants agreed to the informed consent and to be voice recorded, the researcher invited them to do the interview online or in person. An online option was offered for the participants not living nearby or because of the Covid-19 virus. 11 out of 20 interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams and the other 9 interviews were held in person. All the provided material was written in English and in German, as well as the interviews were held in English and in German. All the German material was translated in English for the analysis. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix B. The participant was informed about the sensitivity of the topic and the possibility to always opt-out of the study whenever he or she feels uncomfortable. Additionally, the researcher informed every participant that he or she can skip any question if he or she feels uncomfortable to answer or does not know the answer. As the voice of a participant can lead to identifying them, the recordings are kept confidential and were only be heard by the researcher of this study. Right after the study was finished, the voice recordings were deleted.

Because the questions are personal and intimate about individuals' online experiences, it is important to consider any biases, for example that participants might avoid speaking about

sensitive topics about themselves or that they might avoid opening up and show negative experiences or perceptions of Instagram. To overcome these biases, each participant was informed transparently about the data collection and processing. They were assured that their data would be treated confidentially and anonymously, and that it would be stored securely. By informing the participants about their anonymity, one can assume that they are more detailed and open when reporting about their daily experiences on Instagram and their meaning making of Instagram, especially when asking how participants behave online within relationships or friendships with others.

Furthermore, the interview form consists of general questions about the demographics of the participants. Questions about their age, gender, time spent on Instagram and internet skills were asked at the end of the interview. This data was collected to create an overview of the sample and to ensure that the participants meet the pre-defined criteria as described in section 3.2. After the interview, the researcher answered questions related to the study, if participants had any. The session was closed by thanking the participant. The duration of the interviews ranged between 43 minutes to one hour and 36 minutes and the average interview took one hour. After 20 interviews, enough valuable data was collected, and the answers of the participants started to get repetitive. At that point, the researcher knew that the data was saturated, and no additional interviews were needed.

3.4 Pre-test

To test the quality of the interview questions, six individuals were asked to participate in pre-tests. The pre-tests were conducted to improve and elaborate the interview questions with the objective to gather the most insights into individuals' experiences with mediatization and Instagram. The participants of the pre-tests followed the same criteria as the participants for the interviews.

Overall, there were two rounds of pre-testing. In the first round, four of the six participants were individually asked following the interview guideline. During the interviews, the researcher made notes about improvements, for example which question needed to be changed into a more detailed question to be understood by the participant or were a follow up question was missing. After the interview the participants were asked to give general feedback about the interview, for example that they perceived the interview flow as convenient or that they perceived the questions to be hard to answer. The interview questions were improved after each interview, after the fourth interview the questions were also improved so that the second round could start. The second round of pre-testing consisted of the other two participants. It was the same procedure as in the first round of pre-testing. One important aspect to consider is that no results from the pre-tests were included in the study results. Some questions were adjusted in such a way that they were easier to be understood by the participants. Often, follow up questions were added, to receive more detailed answers of the participants.

3.5 Data analysis

After all interview sessions were conducted, the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews, without any personal information that could lead to identifying the participant. To quote the participants later in the result section, they were randomly assigned to a number.

Next, the transcripts were coded by a mixture of coding with the codebook based on the literature and openly, dependent on the content of the interview. Open coding is a process where the data is broken into smaller parts that are deeply analyzed to find a suitable code with description to explain the phenomena described in that part (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). For this study, the codes were derived directly from the data using descriptions that are close to the data (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Hence, the coding process started by using the codes based on the

literature and whenever the content was not coherent with the description of these codes, a new code was developed. During the analyses, the new codes were used multiple times, thus the code was not only developed for one interview transcript, but for additional content as well. With the objective to evaluate the outcomes of the interviews, the interview transcripts were coded by using Atlas.ti, a software developed for analyzing a large amount of data in the form of text, audio or video data.

Overall, different codes were used for each research questions. The codes of *mediatization in general* and *mediatization and Instagram* were used for the main research question, as they explain how individuals experience and perceive mediatization in their everyday life. The codes of *self-presentation* and *self-identity* were used for the first sub question since they help to understand the dynamics between the individuals' sense of self and their experiences of using Instagram. The second sub question was analyzed with the codes of *meaning-making*, as they illustrate how individuals give meaning to the role of Instagram in their everyday life and within their relationships with others. Each code group is explained in the next section.

3.6.1 Codebook

The codes were divided into four groups: codes for mediatization in general, mediatization and Instagram, self-presentation and self-identity, and meaning making. The whole codebook can be found in Appendix A. In total, 1.104 sections were coded, ranging from 50 to 67 sections per interview transcript. The code *online media skills* was used as a descriptive code. It was divided into *confident with online media, neutral with online media* and *not confident with online media.* The following sections describe the codes per code group.

3.6.1.1 Mediatization in general

The codes developed for mediatization represent how individuals experience mediatization in their daily life. Research by Hepp (2020) explains how and where mediatization plays a role in society. The codes *transformation of social practices, transformation of digital media, variety of digital media, transformation of communication, accessibility of digital media,* and *increasing proliferation of digital media* describe the role of deep mediatization in society. The code *increasing proliferation of digital media* is split into positive, neutral, and negative point of view to find out how individuals think of intertwined practices with media caused by mediatization. How individuals perceive mediatization might affect their experiences and meaning making of Instagram, therefore it is a relevant code group to analyze. During open coding, additional codes were added. Some of them were more generic: *Online activities, perception of social media, behavior when there is no internet connection, privacy concerns, while others were specified on the content of the interviews: favorite platform, participant prefers online or offline, amount of communication (online vs offline)* and *using media is routine & normalized.*

3.6.1.2 Mediatization and Instagram

These codes were used to display how individuals perceive mediatization during their Instagram use and how the app has developed in the past years. The development of Instagram led to changes and updates on the function and the interface on the app, which influences the behavior and communication of individuals on Instagram. The codes of mediatization in general were adapted to the platform Instagram. Thus, the codes are *Transformation of Instagram, transformation of communication in Instagram, time spent on Instagram high/neutral/low, variety of content on Instagram.* During the coding process, the codes

frequency of posts/stories, Instagram use in the morning/evening/afternoon or during the day, time spent on Instagram has increased since updates/few years, Instagram is routine/automatic process, time when account was created, Instagram is distraction from offline world, Instagram can/cannot be replaced, advantages/disadvantages of Instagram, feeling after long use and *feeling after no/short use* were added.

3.6.1.3 Self-identity and self-presentation on Instagram

The codes for self-identity and self-presentation were also derived partly from the theoretical framework and partly during the coding process. The experiences individuals collect on Instagram are dependent on their behavior, interests, and self-presentation on Instagram, as discussed in the theory. Based on the theory, the codes for self-presentation were *upward social comparison* and *downward social comparison*. During the coding process, the codes *positive feeling towards social media presence, negative feeling towards social media presence, individuals' presentation on Instagram* and *participants' feeling when not being involved in post/story* were added. For self-identity the codes, *ability to learn, ability to share, pressure, fear of missing out, adaption, different interests online vs offline* and *online relationships* were derived from the theory. During the coding process the code *individual's identity expression on Instagram* was added.

3.6.1.4 Meaning making on Instagram

As explained in the theoretical framework, experiences of social support are one relevant aspect to consider when investigating meaning of individuals. Social support can be found in relationships, which is why relationships are considered as an important aspect of a meaningful life (Debats, as cited in van Zyl et al., 2020). Therefore, the codes *emotional support from friends/family, improved relationships online, feeling of belonging* and *social support* were

derived from the research by van Zyl et al. (2020). In addition, the study by Chen et al. (2022) found meaning in *positive thinking* and *inspiration* for achieving personal goals. During the coding process the code *social contact* was added.

3.6.2 Reliability and validity

To ensure the consistency and reliability of the codebook, the intercoder reliability had to be checked. Intercoder reliability can be defined as "[...] the extent to which two or more independent coders agree on the coding of the content" (Lavrakas, 2008, p.1). Thus, 20% of the corpus was assessed coding by a different researcher to ensure that codes were not subjectively assigned. Subsequently, the Cohen's Kappa was calculated for each code (see Table 2) resulting in a total Cohen's kappa of 0.73. Since a Kappa higher than .65 can be interpreted as sufficient (Strahl et al., 2019), the codebook (Table 1) is reliable. The Cohen's Kappa for the experiences and meaning making are somewhat lower than the Cohen's Kappa of the other code groups, because there was some disagreement about the codes *ability to share, ability to learn, social support* and *social contact.* The disagreement between the codes can be explained by the fact they had a similar code description. After discussing and adapting the description, the second coder understood the difference between the two codes. Therefore, the codes are sufficient to analyze the interview transcripts since the description of the codes was written in more detail.

The validity of the study was ensured by looking at defiant cases, for example, if a participant answered something unusual or something that did not fit into the context of the interview. Within this study, there were no such defiant cases, thus the interview questions and setup of the study are validated. Also, the relationships between the theoretical concepts and the interview questions support the validity, since the interview questions are based on the theory which ensures that the objective of this study is in focus. The sample did fit in the pre-

defined criteria of the study, which were also based on the literature, as for example that the participants needed to be between 18 and 25 years old. This means that the selected sample of this study is in line with the literature findings and suits the aim of this study. These arguments provide the validity of this study.

Table 2

Intercoder reliability for each code group

Code group	Cohen's Kappa
Demographics	1
Mediatization in general	.71
Mediatization in Instagram	.70
Experiences on Instagram	.42
Meaning making	.58
Total	.73

4. Results

4.1 Mediatization in society

The findings of the interviews show that all participants recognize that society is intertwined with media and digitality. For example, participants noticed that they would not leave the house without their phone, because they fear that they are not attainable or connected to others. A few participants also answered that they could not imagine living without the internet, as for example participant 4 (male, 19 years old, confident with online media) said: *"The internet is important to me; I like talking to other people and that's why it's very important to me. I definitely need my mobile phone every day, I couldn't do without it. I like to exchange information and ask others how they are doing, so that connection is very important to me."* This quote presents how individuals feel the need of their mobile phone and the constant connection to others.

Overall, all participants use social media daily, however, 14 of 20 participants stated to be not satisfied with their social media use. This is because multiple participants do not like how all social media platforms became more and more similar in the past few years. Participant 16 (female, 23, confident with online media) explained: "*I thought it was much more interesting in the past, that it was different, that you had different things. And now it's all really the same and you have the feeling that you see the same things everywhere*". Especially the similarity between the functions of the social media platforms, as for example the story feature or the creation of short videos, was mentioned multiple times by the interviewees. On the other hand, 6 of 20 participants stated to like the options of social media, that they can connect with others, that they can find much content about their interests and that they can stay updated through newspapers on social media.

4.1.1 Individuals' perception of mediatization

The participants had two general perspectives on their time spent on digital media. One, that the amount of time they spent online was perceived as too high and two, that the amount of time was normal for them. Most of the participants perceived their online consumption as too high. They explained that they spent more time online than they should, because they often used their mobile phone and the internet to procrastinate. For example, participant 15 (female, 23-years-old, confident with online media) said: *"I would say I spend a lot of time online. Just because I also tend to procrastinate a lot and my go to procrastination thing to do is just chill on my phone and, like, be online"*. Overall, digital media was mainly used to stay updated about friends and family, predominantly by looking at what they uploaded online and sometimes by actively communicating with them. The fact that participants rather look at what has been uploaded than actively reaching out to people was explained by participant 2 (female, 23-year-old, confident with online media):

> *But otherwise, you open your phone and scroll through a bit and see what's happening in the world and what your friends are doing. I feel like I know what everyone is doing, even though I don't really have anything to do with them now. This is easier and more efficient than texting them or something.*

Thus, just by checking social media platforms individuals are informed enough about the other person and think it is more time consuming to communicate directly.

Another situation where mediatization was recognized by participants was that it is rather rare to know somebody that has no phone, does not use the internet, or has no social media. For example, participant 13 (female, 22-years-old, confident with online media) indicated:

I notice that people take a lot of things for granted, especially with social media and Google. It's very rare for my generation to go to the library to borrow books. They do it all online and take it for granted. But if the internet were to go down, many people wouldn't be able to cope.

This quote represents how daily practices have been shifted to an online environment and how dependent on the internet the younger generations have become.

Further, the participants explained how they feel about mediatization. The participants that stated to spent too much time online had mixed feelings about it. They perceived the developments in many situations effective, easier, and quicker, however, they were also insecure where the developments are leading society to. Participant 3 (female, 22-years-old, confident with online media) explained that she is very curious about the development in the field of the metaverse and how that is going to affect the communication between people. The participant feared that meetings with friends will be in virtual spaces instead of in real life in the future. The participant explains it: "Because in the end, it divides people and makes them less social, because the algorithm on the internet is not acting in the best manner for us users." This participant is aware that media is very time-consuming and distracting from real life, however, she also likes the options and possibilities and could not miss it.

The participants that stated that they perceive their online consumption as normal, do not want to spend more time online, since it distracted them from the offline world. They were actively trying to minimize their time online so that they are less likely to become dependent on their mobile phone or the internet. For example, participant 20 (male, 18-years-old, confident with online media) explained:

Rather little time I think, because I often feel stressed by my mobile phone, so I like to

put it away or have it off. I really enjoy the time without my mobile phone and use it as

little as possible, so it's rather little time.

This quote shows how the ever-present connectivity of social media stresses individuals, resulting in being less online or turning the phone off. They also stated that they prefer offline communication and spend time rather with others offline than online. These participants were also asked how they feel about mediatization. They answered that they perceive the developments as negative, because people are often more focused on how they are presented on social media, instead of in real life. The same goes for communication, as participant 20 (male, 18-years-old, confident with online media) said:

Everyone only looks at their mobile phones, whether on the bus or in the doctor's

waiting room. As a result, people hardly talk to each other and seem like robots.

Communication suffers totally and people become more and more restricted in the way

they talk to others.

This quote shows that he dislikes the developments and interconnectedness between society and online media. Other participants stated the same reasoning.

4.1.2 Mediatization and Instagram

When asking the participants about their perception of mediatization on Instagram, most of the interviewees recognized mediatization, because they spent so much time on Instagram. They explained that they spent between one and four hours on Instagram, because it is easy to swipe through the different posts and because there is so much content. Also, the algorithm is programmed in such a way that it is automatically suggesting interesting content to the user. Participant 9 (male, 19-years-old, confident with online media) explained, that Instagram is

adapting to one's interests and suggests content that you will like. This results in getting lazier and reducing one's attention and concentration span. Therefore, participants get lost and forget the time easily when being on the app. The majority prefers Instagram because it offers many different functions, such as the regular posts, the stories, the reels, and the messages function. It includes the short video function of TikTok, the messenger function of WhatsApp and the unique photo gallery function of Instagram itself. Additionally, Instagram has "the biggest amount of people I know there" and "offers content for each interest or topic one can imagine" and is therefore the favorite platform of many.

However, participants noticed that the communication with others has changed because of mediatization. Due to the direct messages function, *"you can discuss posts privately and don't have to comment beneath the post"* (participant 5). Thus, instead of commenting on posts, individuals rather send the post to others to communicate about it there. Furthermore, the function of liking a message was often used to end a conversation or to show that one enjoys the message without texting back. For example, participant 5 explained that you just hit the like button and do have to end a conversation, which makes it easier and quicker to react to a message. Also, the conversations on Instagram have changed into superficial conversations, without any deeper context behind it. Participant 5 (female, 22-years-old, confident with online media) describes it as follows:

> *Maybe that you don't consciously reach out to people but send them stuff unconsciously. If we just send each other posts then something we don't even text with each other but just like the posts. It kind of is not a proper conversation.*

This can be explained by the variety of content on Instagram, since individuals encounter a high amount of content, resulting in sending more content to others, which leads to less deep conversations. According to the participants, digitalization and mediatization changed the app

into a modern, user-friendly platform, that offers a variety of updated functions on which individuals can learn, connect, and express themselves.

4.2 The importance of the variety of content on Instagram

Further, the variety of content was mentioned as a development and change on Instagram. Due to the variety of content, individuals stay informed and get knowledge about each topic they like, which makes the platform very popular and favorable. Some participants (N=6) recognized that their time spent on the app has been increased because of the variety of content, as for example mentioned by participant 13: *"Yes, you consume it longer because there is more content now. Before, you only looked at the feed and now you also look at the reels and the stories."* This represents how participants recognize how Instagram attracts them with a variety of content and new features to spend more time on the platform.

Because of the platform's variety of content and its easy accessibility, individuals can explore their interests without being public or paying any money for it, as explained by participant 9, who found the interest of stocks and finances on Instagram, that helped develop his identity in terms of his career interests:

> *It was very easy and quick to start with it online. With the basic knowledge, I could then talk to people in real life about it. Offline I would have had to start from zero and through Instagram I already had some knowledge.*

Therefore, Instagram is supporting individuals in the development and expression of their identity, as mentioned by the participants (N=11) in different contexts. For example, within education, as participant 11 elaborates: *"Yes, definitely. Instagram is very informative, and you can learn a lot. You can see topics in other people's stories that you haven't really dealt with yet. You can then inform yourself further."* Thus, the variety of content offers an easy, quick,

and cheap option to inform, educate or entertain oneself without much effort. It helps individuals to get in touch with new topics, people, or content that they did not know of before. Therefore, the variety of content on Instagram has grown in importance for individuals, because they can use it to develop their interests and social groups.

4.3 The social self

Generally, when sharing something on Instagram, participants have either a negative feeling or a positive feeling towards their social media presence. The negative feeling tends to be linked to perceived pressure about uploading a perfect picture or story that has as much likes as possible. Two participants also answered that if they have not enough Likes after 24 hours that they would delete the picture, because it is "*not good enough*" or "*not worth enough to be posted*". Also, every participant said that they would rather post a story than a picture on the feed, because a story disappears after 24 hours and is less commitment than posting a picture on the feed, as elaborated on by participant 10:

> *"Yes, first I used it for looking at other people's posts, because I didn't feel confident to post my pictures there. But since it has stories that disappears after 24 hours, I feel more confident to put stuff into my stories. Especially, with the close friends feature I can manage who can see my stories, so that is also more comfortable for me."*

This finding shows that as soon as individuals do not feel supported enough, they become insecure and less confident about their post. However, the story function gives individuals the opportunity to upload a picture that evokes less pressure or commitment, since it will be deleted after 24 hours automatically by Instagram.

Furthermore, participants have a positive feeling towards their social media presence when developing their identity, because it supports them finding new interests and being more

self-confident, because they can be themselves. For example, participant 1 elaborates on her body image after seeing inspirational content on Instagram:

> *Yes, I have an influencer on Instagram who shows her body as it is with all the flaws that exist, and that already gives me some confidence about my body. Because she shows how photos can be staged, I know about it and don't believe everything I see. That already plays a big role for me. It makes me feel better and more relaxed about my body.*

This shows how the content on Instagram can influence individuals' self-perception, in this case, resulting in a more positive body image. Hereby, individuals feel generally more positive about themselves, meaning that they can express themselves online without being afraid that it might not be accepted by others on the platform. This supports individual's self-awareness and their self-confidence.

Social comparison. Overall, every participant answered that they are comparing themselves with others on Instagram in such a way that they feel less worth and that the other is prettier, richer, or more successful. This upward social comparison was mentioned a few times in combination with pressure. Often participants experience pressure when they see on Instagram, especially in stories, what others are doing or what they have achieved in life and then have the feeling that they need to do something social, more exciting or achieve similar milestones in life, too. Participant 15 explained it as follows:

> *"Yes, somehow, that others somehow use their time better. Also, that you think, why am I not somewhere at the lake chilling or doing something cool, why do only others always do that and not me. I want to be there myself, so, I think they are having a great time and not me."*

Other participants mentioned as well that they have experienced this social comparison regarding achievements. As a result, they feel pressure to be more successful in life, to travel more or to do obtain a certain education to keep up with other people they follow on Instagram.

Mediatization has influenced society in such a way that individuals are posting relevant events, situation, or happenings on social media to show others what are doing, where they are traveling or what they have achieved in life. Because of this influence, individuals experience pressure to post something similar to keep up with others and to show others that they also achieved something, are socially active or travelled somewhere. Thus, mediatization has shifted society to becoming competitive in what to share online, for example where to travel or where to going out.

The fear of missing out. In general, many participants (N=15) explained that they made an Instagram account in the first place out of peer pressure, because others had told them to do so, because they used the app, too. For example, participant 15 said: "*I initially created the account because everyone had Instagram. So, I also wanted to have Instagram just to see what the other people are doing as well.*" Often participants mentioned in this regard, that they made and use the account, because they fear to miss out on information or updates of friends. FOMO was most often mentioned in combination with the content on Instagram, as for example when a friend posts a picture or a story of a night out and the participant was not on that picture or story. It was also often mentioned in combination with pressure, meaning that the participant is pressured to be active on Instagram to not miss anything. This was explained by participant 2:

> "*I just have the feeling that I might miss something, so I make sure that I consciously open the app 5 times or so every day. So that I know what's going on and what friends and acquaintances are doing and so that I don't miss anything. Yes, I just feel that I*

could miss something, like someone having a baby or something, that I could miss that

if I don't watch regularly."

This quote represents the popularity of Instagram among their users and that the more individuals use Instagram, the more will make an account out of peer pressure. Instagram is routine and an automatic process for many users, they open the app unconsciously, out of fear that they would miss something if they do not regularly open the app.

4.4 Meaning making on Instagram

Many participants (N= 18) stated that they think that friendships or relationships can be influenced or improved by the usage of Instagram. For example, participant 2 explained, that if you meet someone new, the first thing one does afterwards, is searching for them on Instagram to get to know the other better. Through their Instagram profile, individuals can see the other's interests and have something to talk about with him or her, the next time they see each other. This quote shows how friendships can be established based on one's Instagram profile. If individuals do not like the profile of the other, they are less likely to make an effort for a friendship. However, Instagram can also have a negative influence on friendships or relationships, as mentioned by participant 4:

Yes, if the other person hasn't sent anything for a while and you wonder why they

haven't sent anything. Or when girls post pictures and then argue with each other

because one of them didn't agree [...].

Thus, Instagram can have both positive and negative influences on friendships or relationships, also depending on how often individuals have contact via the platform and how close they are offline.

Although, many participants answered that Instagram is rather less important to them and distracting them from the offline world, they are not willing to delete the app, because it is very helpful to find information, to be updated and to be connected to friends and family members. This is supported by the statement of participant 5:

I mean I wouldn't delete it, because otherwise I would have already done it. If it gets too much, I might delete it, but everyone has an account, so you might miss out some stuff. I would still like to watch pictures or videos.

Further, when talking about meaning making of Instagram, the most relevant findings were about *emotional support* and *inspiration*. Connecting and chatting with friends or family members or just seeing what others are doing through stories or posts gives the feeling of staying in contact. However, emotional support was found when a friend or a family member uploaded a post that was directly addressed to the individual. For example, participant 5 explained:

My sister once edited this video for me on my birthday with lots of photos from me and her. She uploaded it and tagged me in it, wishing me a happy birthday. Years later, I am sometimes still watching this video, because it means so much to me that she shows others our time together and that she is proud to have me as a sister.

Because of this post, the individual feels loved and had the feeling that she and her sister had a closer relationship during that time. By posting the video, her sister showed everyone that she and her sister have a close relationship, which showed the participant that she is proud to be her sister. Hence, the participant found meaning in the emotional support of her sister, she gave to her on Instagram.

Individuals also found meaning in inspiration on Instagram, as for example for finding new interests, as participant 12 stated:

> *The beginning of fitness means a lot to me. Since then, my life has changed more positively, and I think without Instagram that would have been more difficult. So, on Instagram I found the inspiration and motivation to start with fitness and health. I also found a community there, which really helped me.*

This participant has changed her eating behavior, fitness, and perspective on life, because of what she saw on Instagram. The content there gave her ideas for recipes and fitness tips, as well as that it educated her about her body and health.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research is to find out how individuals experience mediatization in their daily life by means of their Instagram usage, what the dynamics are between individual's self and their experiences on Instagram and how individuals give meaning to the role of Instagram in their daily life. The findings showed that mediatization is perceived by individuals as a process that makes them less socially active, less focused on the offline world and that it has reduced their attention and concentration span. However, within Instagram, mediatization has given a space for individuals where they can connect, communicate, be entertained and find any information they need.

5.1 Main findings

5.1.1 The perception of mediatization

One of the most important findings is that individuals perceive mediatization as both positive and negative. Positive is, that it offers an extensive opportunity to be educated, informed and to follow one's interests. In addition, digital media is fast living and always adapted to society's needs, which makes life in many situations easier. In line with the literature by Bengtsson et al. (2020), the participants, young adults, use online media for all kind of practices, adapt to new forms of media quickly, and feel confident in the digital environment. However, they were also insecure where the developments of mediatization are leading society to, because they perceive that the influence of media on communication processes makes interactions with others less social. Participants recognized the growing influence of mediatization mainly for communication practices, since they rather text someone on social media or like a post instead of actively contacting someone personally. By referring to less social communication, participants mean that communication will be less personal, so less face-to-face in real life, in the future. Therefore, individuals are more socially active online instead of offline and thus,

miss human interaction or physical contact. Existing literature about mediatization shows the influence of media on society over time and explains how social practices transformed into media-based practices. However, research on mediatization and society from the perspective of an individuals is rather scarce. Therefore, this study adds to the existing literature about individual's perception on mediatization.

Overall, existing literature discusses the growing influence of media that modifies social and cultural institutions (Mattoni & Treré, 2014), as well as that individuals' social practices and social lives become intertwined with media (Mazzoleni, 2017). The findings show that individuals perceive the influence of media also as growing and they think that it will be growing in the upcoming years. Furthermore, one finding was that individuals perceive to be dependent on media for many practices in daily life, which is in line with the study of Bengtsson et al. (2020). The dependence and the adaption to media is a key indicator of what has been termed mediatization (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Their study dealt with the question if mediatization can be seen as a process in society or that it has much influence to make society reliant on media. Participants stated that they think that being dependent on media makes them lazy, since they do not have put any effort into searching for information, because they can easily look it up on the internet. The fact that individuals can easily watch a tutorial on YouTube instead of asking someone to explain it to them, makes it easier and quicker, but also reduces the face-to-face communication between two people and makes individuals used to the feeling that it so easy to get information. As soon as they are used to this, individuals are more likely to become overwhelmed when practices are not that easy. Thus, mediatization is shifting society into a society that is becoming reliant to media and therefore is less willing to make an effort for practices as soon as it cannot be handled through digital media. Because of this, mediatization has also been recognized to reduce individual's attention and concentration span, because it facilitates many daily and social practices. When participants watched a video on

YouTube, they decided within the first ten seconds if they continue to watch it or they dislike it. Because there is so much content on the internet, individuals' attention needs to be caught within the first ten seconds, since they would otherwise just watch another video that is more interesting. Therefore, a lot of good content on the internet does not get the attention it deserves, and for individuals the amount of content resulted in being less attentive and concentrated when watching content.

5.1.2 The sense of self on Instagram

The most important findings about the sense of self on Instagram were about social comparison and identity development. Due to the influence of mediatization, pressure to post relevant achievements or social activities online to show these to others has developed. Because of this pressure, participants believed that they need to be socially active and post this on social media. Thus, a new form of social comparison has developed on social media, that unconsciously pressure individuals to share what they have done on social media.

Furthermore, the study found evidence that due to the variety and the extensive amount of content on Instagram, individuals can develop and express their interests, values and opinions. As Mayer et al. (2020) explained in the literature, the personal identity is based on one's own experiences, characteristics and values, whereas the social identity is based on the connections and relationships with others, that share one's interests. Through the process of developing and expressing participant's interests, values and opinions on Instagram, a part of participant's self-identity is also being developed. Further, by being tagged in posts or by receiving and sending content to others, individuals are able to build their social identity and find other with similar interests. Thus, Instagram is supporting the development of individual's self-identity and social identity.

Additionally, one of the findings was that participants more often have a positive feeling towards social media presence than a negative. This can be explained by the fact that they can show others on Instagram what they have achieved, what they are currently doing in their life or to which friend group they belong. As the literature by Posner (1978) explained, individuals favor to show themselves positively to others, meaning that they only share something positive on Instagram to others because that makes them feel good in society. This can be the reason why the participants of the study more often experienced a positive feeling towards social media presence than a negative.

Moreover, individuals often expressed criticism towards Instagram for saving personal data, that the platform is a distraction from real life or that they experience too much social pressure to share something. Although participants often mentioned arguments like these against the social media platform, they would not deinstall the app or delete their account. This paradox can be explained by the theory of FOMO, that individuals fear to miss out on important information when not being online (Beyens et al., 2016). The participants stated to be stressed out by social media platforms such as Instagram, because they feel to need to open the app to be constantly updated about the latest information. This goes in line with the study of Beyens et al. (2016) that explained how higher levels of stress were perceived when experiencing FOMO. Although some participants stated that Instagram is not important to them and that it could be replaced by other platforms based on its functions, they were not willing and could not imagine deleting their account or the app.

5.1.3 Meaning making on Instagram

One relevant finding about meaning making on Instagram is that in some cases the inspiration found on Instagram had a larger effect on an individuals' life. As participants explained within

the study, the inspiration they found on Instagram had such an effect on their thinking and behavior that they changed their health and fitness routine. Their meaning on Instagram is based on the content they see and use to gain knowledge about a topic that supports them in changing their behavior. As the study by Steger et al. (2014) explained, living a meaningful life contributes to individuals' mental health and overall wellbeing, which increases life satisfaction. Thus, Instagram contributes to the life satisfaction of individuals by supporting them with a variety of (personalized) content that inspires them in such a way, that they change their lifestyle and thinking about their self.

Additionally, the findings show that participants found meaning in the friendships and relationships with others on Instagram. Especially, when friends or family members like a post or story or if someone else comments on a post or story, participants feel to be emotionally and socially supported and accepted. Emotional support was also found when friends or family members share a post that is directly addressed to the individual. Hereby, one shares personal and emotional information to others, that has meaning to the individual. By sharing this meaningful information, the friend or family member knows that others will see the post as well, which represents that they have a close relationship and like this relationship to be visible to others. As a result, relationships are strengthened and supported, because the individuals like to get attention from others in form of getting likes or comments on that post. As social and emotional support are relevant meaning making concepts as well as building and improving relationships which derives from the recognition of others (Langlois, 2014), the findings of the study support the existing literature in this field.

5.2 Practical implications

The results are relevant for software developers and the user experience field, because participants explained that they do not prefer to use social media platforms that have similar

functions and looks. During the interviews, the participants were asked how they perceived the changes and developments of the platform Instagram. Here, some participants made clear that social media apps are all having the same functions, e.g., that Facebook copied the function of stories from Instagram and that Instagram copied the function of reels from TikTok. Additionally, they stated that new information only comes in nuances, meaning that their feed sometimes shows them a lot of new information within a short amount of time, but that that information stayed there for two days, without anything new. Certainly, this is dependent on the algorithm, however, for users' experience and comfortability it is rather inconvenient.

Furthermore, according to the participants, the most important disadvantage to consider is the algorithm, since it provokes privacy concerns because participants fear how much knowledge the algorithm has about them and suggests content that lies within their interests. Because of the algorithm, participants see a lot of content on Instagram with which they interact, which causes that they spend more time on the platform. Thus, individuals fear to become addicted to the app, resulting in feeling stressed when using the platform. For software developers or researchers within the field of user experience these findings give insights into how users feel and experience the algorithm, which they can evaluate and use to design an algorithm for their software or platform. By developing a more transparent algorithm that informs users about the tracking and suggestions of content, users would be less insecure and inconvenient when using Instagram. Further, based on this finding, to support transparency and the preferences of individuals, an algorithm of which users can always opt-out if they like, is a relevant option to consider implementing.

In addition, the study found out what individuals perceive as advantages. The advantage that is most important is that users can hide the likes of a post. Participants explained that they are not interested in the number of likes they have and that they feel better when hiding them, because then they experience less pressure. Thus, for software developers and designers it is

important to know, that having the option of hiding one's like on a post is a preferred function and should not be removed. Social media platforms that do not have this option might consider adding it, since users perceived it as very convenient.

5.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

The study of this thesis faced some limitations that need to be considered and improved in future research in the field of media and communication studies. First, the sample did not exist of an even number of females and male participants and did not include any other gender identities. Having the same number of males and females would give more accurate results, because females think and behave differently in self-presentation and self-expression than males. Although the study design includes all kinds of gender identities, this objective could not be achieved, because of the limited availability of participants that identify with any other gender. Therefore, the sample is slightly dominated by female participants. One reason for this limitation can be the sampling method of snowball and convenience sampling, since those limit the scope of participants because participants and researchers often suggest potential participants with similar social groups as themselves (Boeije, 2010). Although this limitation does not have a major influence or impair the findings of the study, it might be interesting to focus on a sample with an even number of participants from gender identities or to include a comparison between the different gender identities. Similarly, the sample consisted of an uneven number of participants between the age groups, e.g., that two 18-years-old were included, but four 23-years-old. Here, the same reason as described above can be used for an explanation.

Another limitation is that individuals have a different understanding and perception of digital media. Although the study and the topics were explained at the beginning of each interview, some participants considered Netflix and Spotify as digital media whereas others

did not. When the researcher asked the question about digital media differently, those who first did not mention Netflix or Spotify, did mention it the second time. However, since Netflix or Spotify were not their first thought, it can be that the follow up questions were biased. This limitation can be avoided in future research by asking the participant what exactly he or she perceives as digital media.

Furthermore, a comparison between mediatization now and mediatization five years from now would give relevant insights into the influence and the developments of mediatization in individual's everyday life. Since participants already stated that they think that the influences of media are growing even more in the future, it is necessary to research if there is evidence for these thoughts. The participants also mentioned that mediatization is a fast-living process, which means that technological developments or inventions are quickly adapted and used by society and that they can imagine that there will be many developments in the future that will influence society's practices even more.

The aim of this research was to analyze individuals' perception and experiences of mediatization in their daily life by means of their Instagram usage. The findings showed that mediatization is perceived by individuals as a process that makes them less socially active, less focused on the offline world and that it has reduced their attention and concentration span. However, within Instagram, mediatization has given a space for individuals where they can connect, communicate, be entertained, and find any information they need. Individuals can build and develop their self-identity because of the large amount and variety of content that Instagram provides. Individuals can find meaning on Instagram in inspiration and emotional support and use Instagram to improve their relationships with others and cultivate their contacts. This study gives relevant insights into the field of media and communication studies, since it represents that individuals experience mediatization in their everyday life and perceive it as making them less concentrated on the offline world. Additionally, Instagram provides a

platform to experience deep and meaningful situations similar to those offline. Thus, mediatization is on the one hand an innovative, futuristic and sustainable process that facilitates many practices in daily life and on the other hand, it is time consuming and limiting society in its actions, because digital media is taking over part of society's practices.

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8. Appendix

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Appendix A: Codebook

Table 1

Codebook

Code	Definition
Codes for mediatization	
Activity - boredom	Participant uses digital media to combat boredom.
Activity - communication	Participant uses digital media for communication.
Activity - entertainment	Participant uses digital media to entertain him/herself.
Activity - fun	Participant uses digital media to have fun.
Activity – information	Participant uses digital media to find information.
Activity - news	Participant uses digital media to stay informed and to look up the news.
Activity – updates about friends/family	Participants uses digital media to be stay updated about family and friends.
Favorite platform - LinkedIn	Participant's favorite platform is LinkedIn.
Favorite platform - YouTube	Participant's favorite platform is YouTube.
Favorite platform - WhatsApp	Participant's favorite platform is WhatsApp.
Favorite platform - Instagram	Participant's favorite platform is Instagram.
Favorite platform – TikTok	Participant's favorite platform is TikTok.
Transformation of social and human practices	Social and human practices are transformed by media's ability to mold and shape them into modernized practices (Hepp, 2020). This means that social and human practices are performed digitally or electronically.
Transformation of digital media	Media's ability is changing and developing over time (Hepp, 2020).
Variety of digital media	Possibilities to access media are increasing and media channels are developing (Hepp, 2020).
Transformation of communication	Communication practices shift from an offline environment to an online

	environment. Media supports variety of communication practices and channels (Hepp, 2020).
Accessibility of digital media	Media is accessible 24 hours a day and from everywhere. Also, there is a variety of devices that allow media to be accessible (Hepp, 2020).
Increasing proliferation of digital media (positive)	Media becomes more and more intertwined with society (Hepp, 2020). Positive argument/point of view (Participants agree and endorse this shift).
Increasing proliferation of digital media (neutral)	Media becomes more and more intertwined with society (Hepp, 2020). Neutral argument/point of view (Participants rather agree or disagree or are positive or negative about shift).
Increasing proliferation of digital media (negative)	Media becomes more and more intertwined with society (Hepp, 2020). Negative argument/point of view (participants agree and refuse shift.
Time spent (high)	Individual says that the time spent online is high
Time spent (neutral)	Individual says that time spent online is neutral
Time spent (low)	Individual says that time spent online is low
Participant cannot imagine living without internet or social media	When thinking about a life without the internet, the participant does not know what to do in certain situations, e.g., when he/she wants to know opening hours of a store.
Participant would search alternatives when no internet or social media	When thinking about a life without the internet, the participant would search for alternatives to do, e.g., when having no Netflix, he/she would watch television.
Participant can live without the internet or social media	The participant can imagine a life without the internet or social media and could live without it.
Participant communicates as much online as offline	Participant communicates as much online as offline in everyday life.
Participant communicates more online	Participant communicates more online than offline in everyday life.

Participant communicates more offline	Participant communicates more offline than online in everyday life.
Participant is not satisfied with social media options	Participant does not like the options of social media.
Participant likes the options of social media	Participant is satisfied with the options of social media and likes to use it.
Participant prefers online communication	Participant prefers to communicate in an online environment.
Participant prefers offline communication	Participant prefers to communicate in an offline environment.
Privacy (concerns)	Participant likes to have his/her privacy on the internet. Participant is (sometimes) concerned about the privacy settings.
Using media is routine and normal	The use of digital media has become routine and is a normal daily practice.
Codes for mediatization and Instagram	
Advantages of Instagram	What participant perceives as an advantage of Instagram.
Disadvantages of Instagram	What participant perceives as a disadvantage of Instagram.
Instagram can be replaced	The participant could also use other social media platforms, so that Instagram could be replaced.
Instagram cannot be replaced	The participant thinks that Instagram is rather unique and that it cannot be replaced by other social media platforms.
Transformation of communication in Instagram	Communication practices shift from an offline environment to an online environment. Instagram supports variety of communication practices.
Instagram use in the morning	Participant uses Instagram mainly in the morning
Instagram use in the afternoon	Participant uses Instagram mainly in the afternoon
Instagram use in the evening/night	Participant uses Instagram mainly in the evening/night
Instagram use during the day	Participant uses Instagram mainly during the day.

Time spent on Instagram (high)	Individual says that the time spent on Instagram is high
Time spent on Instagram (neutral)	Individual says that the time spent on Instagram is normal.
Time spent on Instagram (low)	Individual says that the time spent on Instagram is low.
Instagram is routine/automatic process	Participants use Instagram automatically, sometimes even without noticing that they opened the app.
Feeling after long use - bad	After spending a lot of time on Instagram, the participant feels bad.
Feeling after long use – loss of control	After spending a lot of time on Instagram, the participant thinks he/she has lost control over Instagram consumption.
Feeling after long use – normal	After spending a lot of time on Instagram, the participant feels normal.
Feeling after long use - unproductive	After spending a lot of time on Instagram, the participant feels unproductive.
Feeling after no use – bad	After spending no or less time on Instagram, the participant feels bad.
Feeling after no use – normal	After spending no or less time on Instagram, the participant feels normal.
Feeling after no use – good	After spending no or less time on Instagram, the participant feels good.
Feeling after no use - productive	After spending no or less time on Instagram, the participant feels productive.
Instagram installed at age between 15-18 years	Participants made an account on Instagram when they were between 15-18 years old.
Instagram installed at young age 9-14 years	Participants made an account on Instagram when they were between 9-14 years old.
Instagram is distraction from offline world	Participants are distracted by Instagram from their offline environment. Can be positive and negative.
Transformation of Instagram	Instagram's ability is changing and developing over time.
Instagram use has increased since few years/changes	Participant uses Instagram more frequently since Instagram has changed in the past few years.

Variety of content on Instagram	Instagram offers a great variety of content for users.
General feeling about Instagram use	Describes how the participants generally feel about their Instagram usage, as well as their feelings about being online or offline.
Participant posts in story/feed not at all	Participant is not posting actively on Instagram.
Participant posts on feed/story only for special occasions	Participant only posts for special occasions or when the picture is being 'worth' to be posted.
Participant does not post much on feed/story	Participant posts rather rarely on feed/story.
Participant posts on story regularly	Participant is posting on story regularly.
Participant posts on story/feed once a month	Participant is posting on feed/story once a month.
Codes for self-presentation	
Individual's presentation on Instagram	Describes what participants use Instagram for; how they present themselves.
Downward social comparison	Comparing yourself with another individual or group to be worse at something in order to feel better about their self or personal situation (Festinger, 1954).
Upward social comparison	Comparing attractiveness, success, possessions, etc. in a way that makes one feel badly about oneself; comparisons with a negative effect on the individual; thinking there is a better option that results in dissatisfaction with oneself or life, in jealousy, envy, or poor self-esteem (Festinger,1954).
Negative feeling towards social media presence	Anxiety about posts, social profile, or social media presence; anxiety about oversharing; insecurity due to social media presence (Shensa et al., 2021).
Positive or neutral feeling towards social media presence	Satisfied with posts, social profile, or social media presence; confident in sharing and social media presence (Shensa et al., 2021).
Participant does not care if he/she was in post/story	Participant has a neutral feeling towards a post or story where he/she was not included.
Participant feels excluded because of post/story	Participant feels excluded when he/she sees a post/story where he/she was not included.
Codes for self-identity	

Individuals' identity expression on Instagram	Describes how participants can express themselves and their interests.
Ability to learn	Being able to learn something about topics one is interested in or finding out what one's interests are
Ability to share	Being able to share your interests, values, or information with others. Not only to family and friends, but also that other people one has less contact can see it.
Pressure	Any kind of pressure, for example: Feeling pressure to post or share something because others do as well, feeling pressure to stay online because others do as well or other way around.
Fear of missing out	Experiencing that one is missing something important because of not being online (Shensa et al., 2021).
Adaption	Adapting to other users in terms of content, filters, and stickers. One might also adapt his posts to newest trends.
Different interest online vs offline	Individual has different interests online than it has offline. Media gives the opportunity to find interests quicker than in real life.
Online relationships	Relationship was built online, where there was no relationship before (Mayer et al., 2020).
Codes for meaning making	
Emotional support from family and friends	Perception that family and friends are available to talk or listen about problems to emotionally support one (van Zyl et al., 2020).
Social contact	Connect with others, be up to date and communicate about shared interests, also possible over longer distance (van Zyl et al., 2020).
Feeling of belonging	The feeling to be part of something or to belong to a group of people. This can be through interests, friend groups or work-related (van Zyl et al., 2020).
Friendship/relationship can be improved	Participant thinks/has experienced that a friendship or relationship has been improved because of the communication over Instagram.
Friendship/relationship can be worsened	Participant thinks/has experienced that a friendship or relationship has been worsened because of the communication over Instagram.

Friendship/relationship cannot be improved	Participant thinks/has experienced that a friendship or relationship cannot be improved because of the communication over Instagram.
Friendship/relationship cannot be worsened	Participant thinks/has experienced that a friendship or relationship cannot be worsened because of the communication over Instagram.
Inspiration	Being inspired and motivated by the content others or oneself uploads to achieve one's goals (Chen et al., 2022).
Instagram is important	Instagram is an important platform to the individual.
Instagram is somewhat important	Instagram is somewhat important to the individual.
Instagram is rather less important	Instagram is rather less important to the individual.
Instagram is not important	Instagram is not an important platform to the individual.
Social support	Getting to know people that support your account or like your content. Can also occur when posting and others react to it or support you by sharing your content, e.g., reposting stories (van Zyl et al., 2020).
Positive thinking	Changing the way of thinking about personal issues or challenges to feel more positive and confident about them (Chen et al., 2022).
Improved relationships online	Relationship has improved, because of the online connection (Mayer et al., 2020).

Appendix B: Informed consent form

Informed consent form

Following individuals on Instagram: Their meaning-making of a mediatized world. A qualitative study on individuals' experiences and meaning of Instagram usage

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YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Henriette van den Born

Date:

The purpose of this research is to analyze individual's experiences and meaning making when using Instagram within the current stage of mediatization. Questions about your behavior and your experiences on Instagram will be asked, as well as questions about your feelings or reactions. Whenever you feel uncomfortable, you have always the opportunity to stop the interview or to take a break. The research project has been reviewed and approved by the BMS Ethics Committee of the University of Twente and your audio recordings will be deleted after transcribing the interview. By participating in this research, you contribute to the research about mediatization in combination with experiences and meaning making on the platform Instagram. The interviews are all held anonymously and confidentially, meaning that no names or identifiable data are asked and stored.

Please tick the appropriate boxes   **Yes**   **No**

Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated [DD/MM/YYYY], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. □   □

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason. □   □

I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview. I am aware that the researcher also might take some written notes. The recording will be destroyed after the interview has been transcribed. □   □

Risks associated with participating in the study

I understand that taking part in the study involves the following risks: mental discomfort or doubts and fears about using social media. □   □

Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used for a Master thesis and that the collected data is not shared for other purposes. □   □

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as [e.g. my name or where I live], will not be shared beyond the study team. □   □

Consent to be Audio/video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded. Yes/no □   □

Future use and reuse of the information by others

I give permission for the audio transcripts that I provide to be archived in essay.utwente.nl so it can be used for future research and learning. The audio transcripts are included in the appendix of the Master thesis.

☐   ☐

Signatures

_____   _____   _____

Name of participant   Signature   Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

_____   _____   _____

Researcher name   Signature   Date

Study contact details for further information: Henriette van den Born, h.b.vandenborn@student.utwente.nl

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee of the

Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente

by ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview form

<div align="center">Semi-structured interview form</div>

Introduction

Today's society is dependent on and adapted to media, caused by the technological developments around us. Within this interview, I am going to ask you questions about your general online media as well as your Instagram use and what you have experienced on the platform. Additionally, I am also interested in reasons why Instagram is important to you and what meaning it has for you. So, there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions, I am interested in your own experiences.

Participation in this study is voluntary and all your responses will be kept confidential. This means that your de-identified interview responses would not be shared and that any information I include in the thesis does not identify you as the respondent. The interview should take approximately one hour depending on how much information you would like to share. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview because I don't want to miss any of your comments and thoughts. The recording of this interview will be transcribed and analyzed in a later stage to find relevant results. After the transcription, the recording will be deleted. You may decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason. Additionally, I would like to ask you if I may cite you anonymously within the paper?

Are there any questions about what I have just explained?

Note: It might be that the questions will be asked slightly different or that a follow up question will be added depending on the current context.

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1. **Questions related to mediatization in general**

1.a How much time do you spent online? Would you say it is a lot of time, right amount of time or not much time? online media?

Note: Online media refers to any kind of media for which an internet connection is needed, as for example any website, app or similar. Online media might come in the form of advertisements, articles, videos, podcasts, audio, or texts → For questions about the perception of mediatization

1.b For which activities or in which situations do you use online media?

For example: For catching up with friends, for searching information, watching/reading the news

> **Follow up:** How would you execute these activities if it is not possible to do them online?

1.c How do you assess your skills when using online media for these activities?

1.d Do you think or feel that online media is changing and developing? How do you experience this?

> **Follow up:** Can you give examples where online media is changing and developing? What do you think and feel about these media developments?

1.e Do you think that the connectedness/bonding of online media and society has increased in the past years?

> **Follow up:** Why do you think so? If yes: Can you describe situations where you recognize this connectedness? How do you feel about this?

1.f Do you use social media daily?

> **Follow up:** How do you feel about this?

1.g How many social media accounts do you have?

Note: social media refers to any platform, e.g., YouTube, Facebook, or WhatsApp, where individuals can exchange information with others → For questions about the perception of mediatization in relation to social media in general

> **Follow up:** How often do you use every single one? How long do you use every single one? Which one is your favorite and why?

1.h In what way do you communicate within social media?

> **Follow up:** Do you recognize a difference between online and offline communication? If yes, which one?

2. Questions related to mediatization and Instagram

2.a Since when do you have an Instagram account? Why do you have an account?

2.b Since when have you installed the Instagram app on your mobile phone?

2.c How often per day do you consciously open the Instagram app?

> **Follow up:** Do you recognize that you open the app unconsciously? If yes, can you estimate how often per day this happens? How does it make you feel?

2.d At what time of the day do you use Instagram? Morning, afternoon, evening/night?

2.e Do you sometimes experience the situation where you would like to use Instagram, but have the feeling that you should do something else offline?

> **Follow up:** How does this situation look like? How do you feel during such situations?

2.f After what amount of time do you think you have spent too much time on Instagram? When do you realize this? For example: during your use or afterwards?

> **Follow up:** How do you feel in situations where you spent not much time on Instagram? How do you feel in situations where you spent too much time on Instagram?

2.g Has Instagram changed since you started using it? How has it changed? Do you think that these changes are beneficial for users or not?

> **Follow up:** Has the way you use Instagram also been changed? How?

2.h What do you perceive as advantages of Instagram? And why?

2.i What do you perceive as disadvantages of Instagram? And why?

3. Questions related to experiences on Instagram

3.a For which activities do you use Instagram?

> For example: just scrolling through the feed, texting with someone, making a story, uploading a post, etc.

3.b Which of the features do you think you use the most?

    Follow up: Why do you prefer …?

3.c What are the benefits of these activities? What are disadvantages of these activities?

3.d What content do you follow?

    For example: people you know or friends, Interior inspo, Sports, DIYs, Fashion, Influencers, organizations, brands, etc.

    Follow up: Can I see the suggestions page on your Instagram and make some notes/ screenshot? (The one where you can search for users)

3.e How frequently do you post something? → Regularly, every month, once in three months, once in 6 months, or not at all

3.f Have you ever found a new interest through Instagram?

    Follow up: Why did you find it on Instagram and not offline?

3.g When sharing something on Instagram, do you use filters or stickers?

    Follow up: Why do you use them/Why don't you use them?

3.h Why do you share something on Instagram?

3.i Is communication an important part of using Instagram? In what way?

    Follow up: Are sending posts to others to talk or text about? Are you also texting over Instagram without any relation to the content? Do you also talk about serious topics? Can you compare how often you communicate with others on Instagram, via other online channels and offline?

3.j Have you made friends on Instagram?

3.k Do you think using Instagram could improve (non-romantic) relationships and friendships? Why and how?

3.l Do you think using Instagram could worsen (non-romantic) relationships and friendships? Why and how?

3.m Do you think you have compared yourself with others based on what you saw on Instagram?

> **Follow up:** Can you describe how you have felt in this situation?

3.n Have you experienced that you saw a post online where you could have been included but weren't? For example: a friend posted a picture of an evening where you could not attend.

> **Follow up:** If yes, how did it make you feel?

3.o How did you feel the last time you saw a post that was already a few days old, and you missed it when it was new on Instagram?

3.p How do you feel after posting something on Instagram?

3.q How do you feel after spending much time on Instagram?

3.r How do you feel if you are not active on Instagram?

3.s Have you ever experienced any kind of pressure related to Instagram use?

Ask participant if they want to show me how they use Instagram and their activity, as well as their profile

4. Questions related to meaning making on Instagram

4.a Can you describe the role and value of Instagram in your life?
> For example: Entertainment, boredom, social exchange, inspiration or meaning?

4.b Why do you use Instagram for these activities?

4.c How important is Instagram for you?

Follow up: Would you delete your account and live without it? How would daily life be different? Would it be beneficial or not for you?

4.d How important is social exchange on Instagram for you?

4.d.1 How important is social exchange in the form of getting likes and reposting stories for you?

4.e Have you ever built a (non-romantic) relationship or friendship based on your communication over Instagram? If yes, how important has this been for you?

4.f Have you experienced that a (non-romantic) relationship or friendship has been improved because of your Instagram communication? If yes, can you describe how it has been improved?

4.g Can you give an example of a situation where you have found meaning on Instagram for your personal life? For example, when a family member posts a picture with you and writes a text beneath it that means something to you.

Follow up: How would you describe this meaning? Is this dependent on the platform/users/content?

4.h Have you ever experienced that the content on Instagram has changed your way of thinking? If yes, how? How has that influenced you as a person?

Conclusion

Is there anything else that you would like to comment on?

Thank you very much for your time and the information you shared today.