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Influenced and unfulfilled? A study on the effects of Instagram use on materialistic values and well-being

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION

Dissertation

**INFLUENCED AND UNFULFILLED?
A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF INSTAGRAM USE
ON MATERIALISTIC VALUES AND WELL-BEING**

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my partner Jan, my wonderful parents Wichai and Nusra, and my sister Farsai.

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Completing this dissertation has been a journey filled with moments of challenge, discovery, and growth, and I am deeply grateful to the many people who have supported me along the way. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Denis Wu, whose guidance, patience, and encouragement helped shape this work from its earliest ideas to its final form. Your insightful feedback and belief in my potential kept me moving forward. I am also grateful to my committee members, James Shanahan, Chris Su, and Kathryn Coduto, for your valuable perspectives, thoughtful critiques, and ongoing support throughout this process.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between Instagram use, materialism, and psychological well-being, focusing in particular on life satisfaction and spiritual well-being, through the lens of cultivation theory. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 619 participants. I employed regression analyses, including mediation and path models, to examine how various forms of Instagram engagement and genre-specific content exposure relate to materialistic values and well-being outcomes. Contrary to traditional cultivation assumptions, general Instagram use was not a significant predictor of materialism. Instead, consumption-oriented Instagram behaviors and exposure to fashion and violent content emerged as key predictors, particularly among users with high social comparison tendencies. Social comparison partially mediated the relationship between consumption-oriented engagement and materialism, underscoring its role as a central psychological mechanism. My findings challenge the total applicability of cultivation theory to the social media environment, where the effects on users appear fragmented and contingent on their agency, content curation, and algorithmic exposure. In contrast, the study supports the relevance of selective exposure and social comparison

theory in explaining how digital content engagement shapes values. Additionally, spirituality and age were protective factors against materialism, while general Instagram use was unexpectedly associated with higher spiritual well-being. Methodologically, this study contributes to cultivation research by using a content-informed framework based on participants' genre exposure and self-reports. Overall, these findings underscore the need for longitudinal and content-sensitive approaches to better understand how social media environments influence values and well-being in a personalized, algorithm-driven media landscape.

Keywords: cultivation theory; Instagram engagement; materialism; well-being; social comparison; life satisfaction

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 Social Media Use and Its Societal Impact

Social media has become deeply embedded into everyday life, transforming how people connect, consume information, and express themselves. According to Dixon (2024), the average daily time spent on social media among internet users worldwide rose from 90 minutes in 2012 to 147 minutes in 2022, a strong indicator of its growing presence in daily routines. This increase is especially pronounced among younger users. Pew Research Center (Gottfried, 2024) reports that 78% of U.S. adults aged 18 to 29 use Instagram, compared to just 15% of those aged 65 and older. Similar generational divides are evident across platforms like Snapchat and TikTok, which are now dominated by adults under 30. These patterns highlight both the widespread use of social media and the demographic differences that shape platform engagement.

The large-scale, long-term use of social media today resembles the patterns of media consumption that George Gerbner observed with television, raising important questions about the cultivation of recurrent and accentuated content. Although some research has examined the psychological and sociocultural effects of social media usage, the unique nature of these platforms demands further investigation. While social media offers opportunities for connection, studies have also identified a range of negative outcomes associated with excessive use. Overuse has been linked to lower work performance (Xanidis & Brignell, 2016), poorer quality of social relationships (Müller et al., 2016), sleep disturbances (Koc & Gulyagci, 2013; Wolniczak et al., 2013), reduced life satisfaction (Blachnio et al., 2016; Hawi & Samaha, 2016), and heightened feelings

of jealousy, anxiety, and depression (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Pantic, 2014). To better understand these wide-ranging effects, scholars have turned to established media theories, though many of these were originally developed with traditional media in mind.

1.2 Theoretical Background and Cultivation Theory

Researchers have employed a range of theoretical frameworks to examine media effects, including the spiral of silence (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015), uses and gratifications (Bae et al., 2021), cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1978), and priming (Doyle & Lee, 2016). However, most of these models, including cultivation theory, were originally developed to explain the influence of traditional mass media like television in a pre-digital era. Many distinctive affordances of social media, such as interactivity, short-form video formats, and the seamless blending of personal connection with product promotion, remain insufficiently addressed by these earlier frameworks.

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner and colleagues in the 1960s, posits that long-term, heavy exposure to recurring television messages contributes to the formation of shared beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1978). Television, as a centralized "storyteller," disseminated consistent symbolic content that was largely unavoidable for heavy viewers. While originally focused on the portrayal of violence, cultivation research has since expanded to include perceptions of body image, gender roles, race, and materialism (Hermann et al., 2021).

Today, however, platforms like Instagram represent an entirely different media environment defined by algorithmic personalization, niche communities, and fragmented content. These affordances align with features on other platforms like TikTok, which also

promotes short-form video content and algorithmic virality, and Facebook, which similarly integrates images and targeted advertisements. However, Instagram's emphasis on highly curated, aesthetic imagery differentiates it, creating a distinct environment for cultivating materialistic values. Understanding these affordances and cross-platform similarities helps situate Instagram within the broader social media landscape, highlighting both the platform-specific and generalizable aspects of the findings.

Instagram use is highly selective and individualized (Intravia et al., 2017), raising an important question: Can cultivation theory, which is grounded in the assumption of uniform media exposure, still be applied in this context? Gerbner (1969) argued that television conveyed consistent symbolic content to mass audiences, cultivating shared values and worldviews regardless of the specific programs' individuals watched. This was possible, in part, because television viewing was largely non-selective; audiences tended to watch whatever was on at a given time. When the theory was developed in the 1960s, much of television consumption was appointment-based and limited to a few major broadcast networks. As a result, viewers were exposed to a relatively homogeneous media diet, reinforcing the idea that shared and repetitive content could cultivate common perceptions of social reality. In contrast, Instagram delivers algorithmically curated content that varies widely from user to user, challenging the theory's foundational assumption that audiences are exposed to similar symbolic environments.

Despite critiques of its applicability, some scholars have extended cultivation theory to social media research, often using generalized exposure measures such as time spent on social networking sites (SNS) to examine outcomes like materialism (e.g., Ho et

al., 2017). Research has shown that materialistic values among young people have been rising over recent decades (Richins, 2017; Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Notably, Twenge and Kasser (2013) found that Millennials scored higher on materialism measures than any previous generation. This generational trend has coincided with the increasing commercialization of digital media, raising concerns about the potential influence of social media content on the development of materialistic values. Over the past decade, social media platforms have become significantly more commercialized. In Germany, for instance, the use of affiliate links in YouTube videos more than tripled between 2009 and 2017 (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018), while the number of brand-sponsored influencer posts surged between 2016 and 2020 (Statista, 2020). These developments underscore the expanding role of social media as a channel for promoting materialistic ideals.

Prior studies have linked social media usage and intensity with elevated levels of materialism (Kamal et al., 2013; Thoumrungroje, 2018). Supporting this perspective, Hwang and Jeong (2020) found that Instagram use exerts a cultivation effect, gradually shaping users' materialistic beliefs over time. However, the directionality of this relationship remains contested. It is still unclear whether social media fosters materialism, or whether individuals with higher materialistic tendencies are more likely to engage with SNSs. Chu et al. (2016), for example, argued that materialistic individuals are more likely to use social media due to their heightened tendency toward social comparison.

Beyond these findings, materialism has been widely recognized as a threat to psychological well-being. A substantial body of research has examined the impact of

materialistic values on individuals' quality of life (Sirgy, 1998). Compelling evidence shows that those who strongly prioritize material possessions report lower levels of life satisfaction (Richins & Dawson, 1992). This negative association extends across multiple domains of well-being, including satisfaction with family, friendships, leisure, income, and overall life satisfaction (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Diener et al., 2002; Sirgy, 1998; Speck & Roy, 2008). As such, materialism is often described as the “dark side” of consumer behavior (Hirschman, 1991).

1.3 Research Objectives and Guiding Questions

Yet the link between social media, materialism, and life satisfaction remains relatively underexplored. Prior studies have rarely investigated the specific nature of the content being consumed. Responding to Gerbner's (1990) assertion that cultivation effects must be grounded in systematic content analysis, the present study adopts a more content-aware approach. This study also examines whether frequent exposure to distinct Instagram content genres, rather than total time spent on the platform, predicts materialistic attitudes. While this genre-specific focus departs from Gerbner's original emphasis on uniform, mass-mediated messaging, it provides a framework for investigating whether symbolic patterns can still emerge within highly personalized media environments. By assessing both general Instagram usage and frequency of exposure to particular content types, my study explores whether Instagram, despite its algorithmically tailored feeds, continues to transmit dominant values capable of shaping collective attitudes and perceptions.

Beyond contributing to theoretical debates about the applicability of cultivation theory in digital contexts, this research offers practical insights into the cognitive effects of social media marketing strategies and their influence on consumer behavior. Given the well-documented negative consequences of materialism for individual well-being, understanding how social media fosters materialistic values is essential. By also examining potential protective factors, such as spirituality, the study lays a groundwork for promoting healthier digital environments and mitigating the psychological harms associated with social media use.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, originally developed by George Gerbner and colleagues in the 1960s, was conceptualized to investigate how television viewing shapes audiences' perceptions of reality, particularly regarding societal violence. Unlike earlier media effects theories, which focused on short-term, message-specific impacts (e.g., attitude or behavior change immediately following media exposure), cultivation theory examined the long-term influence of sustained exposure to a system of symbolic content. Gerbner emphasized that television was not merely a source of entertainment, but a central storyteller in modern society—one that defined dominant worldviews, norms, values, roles, and relationships (Gerbner, 1990). According to cultivation theory, repeated and consistent portrayals on television contribute to the formation of shared beliefs and assumptions, a process that can lead to what Gerbner described as “mainstreaming”: the homogenization of perspectives across diverse social groups (Gerbner et al., 1980).

A key distinction within cultivation theory is between first-order effects, which involve perceptions of real-world prevalence (e.g., how common crime or violence is), and second-order effects, which reflect more abstract personal beliefs and values (e.g., materialism, fear, trust) (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982; Potter, 1991; Van Mierlo & Van den Bulck, 2004). The theory's central hypothesis posits that heavy viewers of television will hold views of the world more closely aligned with televised representations than those of lighter viewers, even after controlling for demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and income (Gerbner et al., 2002; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Although cultivation theory was developed around television as the dominant mass storytelling medium, researchers have extended its application to other media forms, including newspapers (Arendt, 2010), films (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008), video games (Williams, 2006), and most recently, social media. These applications recognize that the core mechanism of cultivation, which involves the slow shaping of perceptions through repeated exposure to symbolic content, may apply to any medium capable of widespread storytelling. However, applying cultivation theory to social media introduces new theoretical challenges that should be examined first.

2.2 Cultivation in the Age of Instagram

Unlike television, which in Gerbner's era offered a limited set of programs with highly complementary messages, today's social media environment, particularly platforms like Instagram, is algorithmically personalized and content fragmented. Digital culture merges different scales of expression, with Instagram feeds often juxtaposing an evening news clip next to a neighbor's cat. Instagram users engage with highly individualized feeds curated by platform algorithms, resulting in selective exposure based on prior behavior, interests, and social networks (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). This personalization raises questions about the relevance of cultivation theory's foundational assumption that media audiences are uniformly exposed to the same symbolic environment. To the best of the author's knowledge, no systematic, quantitative content analysis of the content universe existing in Instagram during any time-frame of the platform's history has been conducted; neither have the genres or symbolic messages that dominate Instagram users' home feeds been unveiled. The lack of this baseline

information makes it difficult for researchers to determine whether dominant symbolic patterns exist that could cultivate shared beliefs and values, as cultivation theory assumes repeated exposure to such patterns shapes viewers' worldviews. By examining self-reported frequencies of exposure to consumerist and aspirational content, this study explores whether cultivation-like effects persist despite this individualized media environment and highlights the need for future research to systematically map Instagram's feed content to better ground theoretical applications.

Some researchers suggest that even in these personalized environments, dominant symbolic patterns may emerge—especially if certain types of content (e.g., luxury lifestyles, beauty ideals, influencer marketing) are consistently amplified by the platform's algorithms. As algorithms have become increasingly central to digital life, concerns about the power they exert have grown. Algorithms, defined as computer programs that organize data and produce outcomes (Gillespie, 2014), now shape much of what users see and experience online. As people shop, browse, watch, and interact on digital platforms, they leave behind data trails that algorithms process to make decisions on their behalf. These decisions often rest on underlying processes of classification and categorization. For example, visiting certain websites might be algorithmically interpreted as a signal of a user's gender (Cheney-Lippold, 2011), shaping what products or content are subsequently shown to them.

These algorithmic classifications are not neutral. The engineers who design them are embedded within broader social, cultural, and economic contexts (Just & Latzer, 2017). As Kitchin and Dodge (2011) explain, engineers "place a particular philosophical

frame on the world that renders it amenable to the work of code and algorithms" (p. 247). In operationalizing ideas like content that users "care about the most" (Instagram, 2016) or "meaningful interactions" (Zuckerberg, 2018), platform algorithms inevitably encode specific values and assumptions (Willson, 2017). As algorithms reason and act on users' behalf, they not only structure social relations (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011) but also help produce the social realities users come to inhabit (Cheney-Lippold, 2011).

2.3 Influencer Culture and the Attention Economy

Commercial content, defined as posts intended to sell or advertise products, businesses, or services, is continuously and subtly woven into users' social media feeds, frequently disseminated by popular influencers (Hogsnes, Grønli, & Hansen, 2023). Social media influencers are individuals who use these platforms to foster online connections and gain social capital, often with the intent to convert that capital into compensation from those seeking to leverage their persuasive influence (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). To remain visible in these algorithmically curated environments, influencers must master the platform-specific mechanisms that determine visibility and reach. Influencer marketing operates on the premise that these individuals can shape their followers' beliefs and behaviors, provided they are able to capture and sustain attention (Hearn, 2010; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015).

Social media platforms further incentivize this attention-driven logic by offering feedback through engagement metrics such as "likes," comments, and follower counts, which directly impact a user's visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2010). Therefore, engagement serves both as a marker of influence and a mechanism for validating social

status and accumulating social capital within the so-called “attention economy” (Marwick, 2015). The centrality of engagement in this ecosystem encourages influencers to use data-driven approaches to self-branding, shaping content strategies that promote products in ways optimized to generate further engagement (Carah, 2017). Given their mass followings and frequent promotion of sponsored content, celebrities and influencers wield significant power on social media, making capitalist messaging pervasive and often unavoidable for users.

While previous studies have often linked general social media use to materialism (e.g., Ho et al., 2017; Hwang & Jeong, 2020; Otto & Thies, 2024), they do not examine the specific types of content that users engage with. Nor do they account for the behavioral aspects of use, such as how individuals navigate the platform, whether by browsing their personal feed, exploring the public Explore page, or engaging in consumption-driven interactions. This study aims to address these gaps by applying cultivation theory to examine the relationship between Instagram use and both first-order effects (e.g., perceptions of affluence) and second-order effects (e.g., materialistic values and life satisfaction). More importantly, I move beyond general usage metrics that prior studies relied on by asking participants to self-report the genres they most frequently encounter on Instagram, as well as their exposure to specific content categories outlined by Hallinan et al. (2021)—including fashion and beauty, cooking, violent content, and outdoor travel. I also assess engagement behaviors such as browsing the Instagram Explore page (i.e., a public feed of algorithmically recommended content based on users’ interests) and interacting with promotional content either directly featured on social

media or indirectly embedded via external links. In doing so, the aim is to better understand the holistic environment of Instagram and how it may convey recurring messages that contribute to shared worldviews.

Additionally, this research considers several mediators and various outcomes of cultivation via Instagram. Specifically, I examine whether users' comparison tendency mediates the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism, and whether the spirituality individuals hold may buffer against the materialistic values promoted and permeated through Instagram content. By integrating content exposure, behavioral patterns, and psychological variables, my study offers a content-aware, media-relevant extension of cultivation theory in the digital age.

2.4 Affluence Perceptions and Instagram

Social media platforms have become integral spaces for self-presentation and identity construction, with numerous studies documenting their impact on users' body image and self-perception (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Stronge et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Among these platforms, Instagram distinguishes itself by prioritizing visual content over text-based communication, making it particularly influential in shaping how users perceive others and themselves via visual presentations (Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014; Marengo et al., 2018). Beyond self-presentation, social media also functions as a digital marketplace where consumer culture is both expressed and amplified. Consumerist values are embedded within the Instagram content users share, as people frequently post images of fashion, food, luxury goods, exclusive experiences, and aspirational lifestyles (Greene, 2012; Hu et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2018),

transforming the platform into a curated display of wealth, luxury, and consumption. This raises important questions about the psychological and cultural effects of such content on the average user, particularly as it relates to perceptions of standard societal affluence.

The portrayal of affluence as a cultural norm is not unique to social media. Decades of cultivation research have demonstrated television's powerful role in the consumer socialization process and in reinforcing capitalist ideologies (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Shrum et al., 2005). Gerbner et al. (1986) argued that television functions as the "mainstream of the cultural process," upholding dominant societal values, including those of capitalism. Television content has historically overrepresented affluent lifestyles and high-income occupations, while underrepresenting working-class realities (Lichter et al., 1994; Gerbner et al., 1982). Although early study findings (Fox & Philliber, 1978; Carlson, 1993) show mixed evidence linking television exposure to perceptions of affluence, later studies provided stronger support for this relationship (Shrum, 1999; Potter, 1991). Heavy television viewers were more likely to believe that luxury products and affluent lifestyles were commonplace, and perceived a higher prevalence of high-income, white-collar occupations, expensive goods, and exclusive services (Shrum et al., 2005).

Despite key differences between television and social media, cultivation theory has increasingly been applied to social networking sites (SNSs), revealing their ability to shape user perceptions and behaviors in similarly powerful ways (Hermann et al., 2023). For example, Facebook use has been shown to influence perceptions of diversity and privacy norms (Tsay-Vogel et al., 2018; Hermann et al., 2023), while Instagram browsing

can distort perceptions of physical attractiveness and contribute to disordered eating (Stein et al., 2019). Hwang and Jeong (2020) found a positive correlation between Instagram use and affluence perceptions in Koreans, the latter defined as individuals' subjective evaluations of how prevalent high-status goods and lifestyles are in society (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997). Further, Ho et al. (2017) found that perceptions of peer spending fully accounted for the effect of consumption-oriented SNS use on young users' materialism.

Although research on the cultivation of affluence perceptions on SNS's remains limited, there is growing evidence that Instagram has fostered an environment conducive to such perceptions. Instagram is not only an online space for peer-to-peer interaction but also a tool for marketing and product discovery. Young consumers often turn to the platform to learn about brands, products, and services through their peers' curated content (Chen, 2017; Stephen, 2015). These posts, usually aspirational and polished, create powerful impressions of others' lifestyles and consumption levels (Cramer et al., 2016; Lip et al., 2015).

Instagram amplifies portrayals of affluence and glamor through images of luxury homes, private jets, designer clothing, and lavish experiences (Hwang, 2020). Influencer accounts and pages like "Rich Kids of Instagram" intensify this effect, promoting an exaggerated version of elite lifestyles. Even outside of elite circles, regular users often post idealized content, selectively highlighting their most aesthetically pleasing and materially successful moments (Vermeulen et al., 2018; Sykes & Zimmerman, 2014). This visual emphasis, combined with Instagram's algorithmic promotion of high-

engagement posts, may contribute to a distorted perception that wealth and consumption are more common than they truly are. In line with cultivation theory, repeated exposure to these representations may cultivate users' perceptions of societal affluence. Just as heavy television viewers were found to overestimate the prevalence of luxury goods and affluent lifestyles, heavy Instagram users may come to believe that such lifestyles are the norm. Given Instagram's visual-centric design and cultural emphasis on curated, consumption-driven content, it is reasonable to expect a positive association between Instagram use and societal affluence perceptions.

H1. Increased Instagram use is positively associated with higher perceptions of societal affluence.

2.5 Materialism as a Cultivated Value

In addition to shaping perceptions of societal affluence, media exposure can also influence individuals' personal values. Within the framework of cultivation theory, these shifts are considered second-order effects, which refer to the internalization of attitudes and worldviews shaped by prolonged exposure to symbolic media environments (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982; Potter, 1991). One value system that has received considerable attention in media effects research is materialism or the belief that possessions and their acquisition are central to happiness and success.

Richins and Dawson (1992) conceptualize materialism as comprising three distinct dimensions: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. Acquisition centrality refers to the extent to which individuals place the pursuit of material goods at the core of their lives, allowing it to

shape their goals and identity. Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness reflects the belief that material possessions are essential to personal satisfaction and emotional well-being. Possession-defined success captures the tendency to evaluate one's own and others' achievements based on material ownership, rather than on deeper personal or relational qualities. As Bredemeier and Toby (1960) argue, for some materialists who worship products, the pursuit of material goods can serve as a substitute for traditional systems of meaning, such as religion.

Numerous studies have explored how prolonged exposure to television content may be linked to increased materialistic values. Churchill and Moschis (1979) found a moderate but significant association between the amount of television watched and the belief that material possessions lead to happiness, especially among those who perceived television advertising as realistic (Richins, 1987). Ward and Wackman (1971) similarly observed that adolescents with higher television exposure were more likely to value money and possessions as measures of social and personal progress. Other researchers found links between viewing entertainment programs and materialistic values across various cultural contexts, including Sweden (Reimer & Rosengren, 1990), China, and Australia (Sirgy et al., 1998). However, there are notable exceptions. Some studies (e.g., O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997) report no significant relationship between television exposure and materialism in certain demographic groups, suggesting that the cultivation of materialistic values may depend on content type, audience characteristics, or cultural context.

More recent research has begun examining the cultivation effects of social media,

particularly platforms like Instagram, which differ markedly from television in format and use. Instagram, compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook or X, is highly visual, personalized, and often aspirational. These qualities may make it especially potent in cultivating materialistic worldviews. A survey of 530 Korean adults found that Instagram use was positively associated with materialistic values (Hwang & Jeong, 2020). Ho and colleagues (2017), drawing on cultivation theory, found that both time spent on SNSs and consumption-oriented SNS engagement were associated with materialism among young adults. More important, these effects remained significant even after controlling for demographics and other media use. Ho attributed this to users' heightened perceptions of their peers' spending and consumption, reinforcing the idea that symbolic media environments influence how people interpret their social realities. In an online experiment, researchers have also found that those who used Instagram as their main social media platform demonstrated higher materialistic values than users of other platforms (Otto & Thies, 2024).

Compared to television, Instagram may exert a more powerful influence on materialism due to its unique affordances. Instagram users are not merely passive viewers but active participants, shaping and reinforcing a culture in which success, happiness, and identity are intertwined with material possessions. Furthermore, this interactivity is compounded by the platform's emphasis on self-presentation and luxury imagery, amplified by influencers and advertisers showcasing expensive lifestyles, high fashion, and premium consumer products (Hwang, 2020). This interaction-rich, highly visual

environment creates an ideal context for the cultivation of materialistic values, particularly among impressionable users seeking aspirational lifestyles.

Given these factors, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Instagram use is positively associated with materialism, specifically increasing level of (a) acquisition centrality, (b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and (c) possession-defined success.

2.6 Mechanisms Behind Second-Order Cultivation Effects

Cultivation theory distinguishes between two levels of media effects: first-order beliefs, which involve factual judgments about the world (e.g., perceptions of crime rates or occupational distributions), and second-order beliefs, which refer to more abstract, value-laden attitudes, such as beliefs about privacy or materialism (Gerbner et al., 1980; Van Mierlo & Van den Bulck, 2004). While both are shaped by prolonged media exposure, the mechanisms driving first- and second-order cultivation effects differ considerably.

First-order cultivation effects are generally explained through the accessibility model (Shrum et al., 2011), which posits that frequent exposure to specific media content increases the accessibility of related constructs in memory. When individuals are later prompted to make judgments, such as estimating how common luxury lifestyles are in society, they may rely on the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), assuming that easily recalled examples are more prevalent. More importantly, this process is memory-based and externally triggered, meaning individuals do not

necessarily make these judgments while viewing media, but only when asked to recall information afterward.

In contrast, second-order cultivation effects, such as trust towards strangers or materialistic values, are thought to operate through attitudinal formation processes that occur during media exposure itself. According to Shrum et al. (2005), these value-based judgments emerge as viewers internalize symbolic meanings and emotionally salient themes over time. This process aligns with the central route of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which suggests that persuasion—and by extension, value adoption—is stronger when individuals are motivated and able to process the content they encounter.

Studies have shown that attention plays a significant moderating role in second-order effects. For example, Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch (2005) found that television's influence on values was significantly stronger among individuals who reported paying greater attention while viewing. Similarly, Shrum et al. (2010) demonstrated that viewers who were more attentive to television programming internalized the conveyed materialistic messages more readily than those who were less engaged. As these values are shaped during encoding, rather than recalled afterward, factors that enhance users' attention can also enhance cultivation effects.

Applying these insights yielded from television to social media, Instagram may also foster second-order effects like materialism through similar mechanisms. Given Instagram's immersive, image-driven format and its emphasis on aspirational content, users who pay more attention while scrolling may be more likely to internalize

consumerist values. As with television, attentiveness may determine the extent to which symbolic messages about wealth, lifestyle, and success are encoded and later reflected in users' value systems. Therefore, building on cultivation theory and the elaboration likelihood model, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Attention to Instagram content will moderate the relationship between Instagram use and materialism, with the association being stronger among individuals who report higher attention.

2.7 Genre-Specific Cultivation and User Behavior

A central debate in contemporary media research concerns the extent to which cultivation theory, originally developed during the television era, can be effectively applied to modern interactive media such as social networking sites. Critics have questioned whether the theory's foundational assumptions hold in the social media landscape, where content is not broadcast to a mass audience but is instead personalized and algorithmically curated (Intravia et al., 2017).

Traditional cultivation theory assumes that viewers engage with media non-selectively, guided by scheduled programming rather than personal preference (Intravia et al., 2017). It also assumes that heavy viewers are exposed to similar content featuring repetitive themes designed to appeal to broadly diverse audiences. In contrast, social media platforms like Instagram are defined by highly selective and individualized use. While users may share a common platform, the content they encounter varies widely, shaped by both user preferences and algorithmic targeting. Even though cultivation theory traditionally emphasizes the homogenizing effects of shared media exposure,

subsequent scholarship has challenged this premise by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of media content (e.g., Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Critics argue that Gerbner's original formulation underestimated the diversity of messages across genres and platforms. This critique has given rise to genre-specific cultivation research, which examines how distinct content types, such as crime dramas, reality television, and news, produce varied cultivation effects depending on thematic emphasis and audience engagement (e.g., Romer et al., 2003; Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Nabi et al., 2003; Shrum, 2009). Extending this logic, scholars have suggested that social media environments, with their algorithmic personalization and user-generated content, may further amplify content fragmentation and foster the development of differentiated worldviews among users.

In response to these shifts, the present study examines both user behaviors on Instagram and the types of content users are exposed to or actively choose to engage with. On Instagram, individuals curate their feeds by selecting whom to follow, and the platform's algorithm responds by promoting similar content, reinforcing existing preferences. Of particular interest are consumption-oriented engagement behaviors, which may play a meaningful role in shaping materialistic values by encouraging comparison-based thinking. Ho et al. (2017) define this construct as users' active interaction with content focused on goods, spending, and consumption whether through peer communication (e.g., sharing luxury purchases, commenting on friends' shopping habits) or engagement with brand messaging (e.g., following company accounts, liking advertisements). Their findings suggest that, even after controlling for demographics and

other media use variables, consumption-oriented social media engagement is positively associated with materialism among young people—a group Ho et al. (2017) specifically focused on due to their higher levels of platform use.

Consumption-oriented Instagram use reflects the behavioral dimension of social media environments: users are not merely passive recipients of mediated messages, but active participants who produce and circulate materialistic content. As Beukeboom et al. (2015) emphasize, social media platforms function both as interpersonal communication tools and as marketing channels. Users often engage with, create, and reinforce consumption-related messages as part of their daily routines. This perspective aligns with more recent extensions of cultivation theory into the realm of social media. For example, Tsay-Vogel et al. (2018) found that the sharing of personal information on Facebook cultivates perceptions of privacy norms not solely through explicit content, but through the accumulation of observable user activity. They propose that “content that resides outside of tangible message features” and “observable activities in an environment” can jointly contribute to mediated reality (p. 143). These findings support the notion that user behaviors, such as what individuals post, like, and share, become embedded within the symbolic system that shapes attitudes and beliefs. Building on these insights, the present study examines whether consumption-oriented Instagram engagement is positively associated with materialistic values. Given Instagram’s aspirational tone, it is hypothesized that:

H4. Consumption-oriented Instagram engagement will be positively associated with users’ materialism levels.

In addition to examining behavioral engagement, my study extends genre-specific cultivation research by analyzing the types of content users encounter in their Instagram feeds. As explained above, scholars have argued that the heterogeneous nature of media content challenges Gerbner's original conception of cultivation theory. This has led to the emergence of genre-specific cultivation research that recognizes and examines different types of content such as crime dramas, reality television, or news (e.g., Romer et al., 2003; Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Nabi et al., 2003; Shrum, 2009). These studies discovered distinct cultivation effects due to content themes and their audiences. Certain television genres, particularly those featuring aspirational or dramatic themes, are more closely associated with materialism and affluence perceptions. For instance, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes (1981) found that viewers of daytime soap operas were more likely to perceive the world in line with the exaggerated realities depicted in those programs. Hayward (1997) similarly highlighted how serial dramas emphasize glamor and wealth, subtly promoting materialist values. Harmon et al. (2019) examined differences between news and entertainment programming, finding that reality television in particular heightened materialistic tendencies, while news consumption was linked to lower consumerist values. These findings suggest that audiences' selectivity may actually play a critical role in shaping how media content affects viewers' beliefs and values.

Yet genres on social media are not easily defined in the structured, ritualized ways common in legacy media. The rapid flow of user-generated content, algorithmically promoted posts, and commercial messages blurs traditional boundaries between amateur and professional content, personal and public communication, and even entertainment

and advertising (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Giltrow & Stein, 2009). As a result, social media users encounter highly heterogeneous feeds and genre-fractured feeds where multiple symbolic environments coexist, often within a single scroll.

Despite the algorithmic fluidity of social media, recognizable patterns of content engagement on social media do emerge. On platforms like Instagram, advertisements and sponsored posts are seamlessly embedded within users' feeds, often appearing between posts and reflecting users' interests such as fashion, fitness, or home decor. These ads frequently associate material possessions with positive emotions like happiness and joy, portraying them as essential to a fulfilling life (Nairn & Oprea, 2021). Cross-sectional studies have consistently found a positive relationship between materialism and exposure to advertising content (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Jiang & Chia, 2009; Nairn & Oprea, 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2022). Although Instagram content is highly personalized, certain themes, particularly aspirational and consumer-centric, tend to recur across users' experiences. This raises an important question: can consistent symbolic messages emerge within these individualized environments, and if so, how might they shape users' materialistic values?

Hallinan and colleagues (2021) identified 29 distinct content genres across social platforms. These categories range from Animals and Politics to Ads & Promotions and Horror based on how users in five countries described and engaged with online content. Their framework introduces the concept of a transnational social media genre imaginary, referring to the shared ways in which users interpret and navigate recurring content themes across platforms (Hallinan et al., 2021). While this work provides a valuable

foundation for understanding genre on social media, its direct application to Instagram remains limited. It is important to recognize that Instagram users are frequently exposed to overlapping and dynamic combinations of content, such as fashion and beauty, travel, influencer lifestyles, and branded promotions, which often defy neat classification (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). As a result, it remains a challenge to conduct a comprehensive content analysis of its universe or to categorize content genre, much less to gauge users' exposure to feeds with precision.

To address this, I adopt a user-centered approach, asking participants to self-report the top three genres they most often encounter on their Instagram feeds, followed by frequency ratings for each genre based on Hallinan et al.'s (2021) established categories. This approach offers insight into the symbolic environments users are immersed in and allows for an initial examination of whether consistent narrative themes emerge across personalized content. Together, these dimensions provide a more nuanced understanding of how Instagram may contribute to the cultivation of materialistic worldviews.

RQ1. How does users' exposure to different Instagram content genres impact their materialism levels?

2.8 Platform Navigation and Materialistic Values

Social media platforms offer a wide range of affordances that enable users to post, interact, and engage with content in diverse ways. One such feature, Instagram's Explore page, presents algorithmically curated content from influencers, celebrities, and strangers, exposing users to a steady stream of consumer- and advertising-driven imagery (Stein et

al., 2019). Unlike the personal feed, which highlights posts from friends and followed accounts, the Explore page immerses users in a broader, often more aspirational visual environment. Stein et al. (2019) found that frequent browsing of this page is associated with distorted perceptions of others' appearance and behavior, as well as increased disordered eating and body dissatisfaction. Notably, these effects were linked not to overall time spent on Instagram, but to specific navigation patterns.

Although Stein and colleagues focused on body image, their findings suggest broader implications for how algorithmic environments may reinforce consumerist and idealized values. The Explore page's emphasis on fashion, luxury, branded content, and celebrity culture closely aligns with materialistic themes. Repeated exposure to this symbolic content may influence users' perceptions of success and happiness, promoting affluence and consumption as cultural ideals. Building on this perspective, the present study investigates whether frequent browsing of Instagram's Explore page predicts materialistic values. This hypothesis extends traditional cultivation theory by focusing on user behaviors within social networking sites. Specifically, whether frequent browsing of algorithmically curated content from strangers' accounts can function as a symbolic environment that cultivates materialistic worldviews. This leads to my fifth hypothesis: *H5. Browsing Instagram's public Explore content will be positively associated with materialism.*

2.9 Social Comparison as a Mediating Mechanism

Social networking sites (SNSs) are powerful facilitators of social comparison. A growing body of literature suggests that online environments differ substantially from

offline interactions in how they shape comparisons, in part because users can carefully curate and selectively present positive or socially desirable aspects of their lives (Chou & Edge, 2012; Ellison et al., 2006; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). These idealized self-presentations increase the likelihood of upward social comparisons, in which individuals compare themselves to others perceived as better off in some domain—such as appearance, lifestyle, or material success (Feinstein et al., 2013; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Lee, 2014). Unlike offline interactions, where comparisons are often more random, varied, and contextual, social media offers distorted and selective vignettes of others' lives, frequently emphasizing glamor, success, and consumption. Repeated exposure to upward comparisons has been linked to negative psychological outcomes, including reduced self-esteem (Kalpidou et al., 2011; Vogel et al., 2014), increased depressive symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2013), and lower well-being (Kross et al., 2013).

Instagram, in particular, may intensify these effects due to its affordance that not only enables users to showcase idealized lifestyles, but also provides continuous access to high-status individuals such as influencers and celebrities. Prior research has demonstrated that frequent exposure to celebrity-related content can heighten feelings of relative deprivation and lower life satisfaction among young women due to social comparison (Lup et al., 2015; Seo & Hyun, 2018). Similarly, Lewallen et al. (2016) argue that celebrity-focused media consumption fosters consumerist values. Extending this line of research, Ho et al. (2017) found that perceived peer spending mediated the relationship between consumption-oriented SNS use and materialism, underscoring the powerful role

of social comparison in shaping materialistic attitudes. Previous work has also identified social comparison as a key psychological mechanism linking social media use to materialistic values (e.g., Jiang & Ngien, 2020). For instance, Dávila and Casabayó (2024) found that frequent Instagram use predicts higher materialistic values through increased social comparison, which is often associated with feelings of insecurity and stronger identification with influencers. Users who actively engage with Instagram are more likely to compare themselves to others and internalize the aspirational lifestyles portrayed by influencers, both of which contribute to heightened materialistic tendencies.

However, the directionality of this relationship remains contested. It is unclear whether individuals with materialistic values are more drawn to social networking sites (SNS) due to their proclivity for social comparison, or whether SNS usage itself cultivates materialism. Chu et al. (2016), for example, suggest that individuals high in materialism may be more inclined to use SNS precisely because these platforms facilitate social comparison and status-oriented behaviors.

While social comparison has been proposed as a mediator of the relationship between social media use and materialism, further empirical evidence is needed. Building on this perspective, I examine social comparison tendency both as a direct predictor of materialism and as a potential mediator between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialistic values.

H6. Social comparison tendency will be positively associated with materialism levels.

RQ2. Does social comparison tendency mediate the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism?

2.10 Instagram, Materialism, and Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is a core dimension of subjective well-being that reflects an individual's overall evaluation of their life as a whole, based on personally important standards and values (Diener et al., 1985). Unlike temporary emotional states such as happiness or mood, life satisfaction is more stable and rooted in broader cognitive appraisals of life circumstances. It has been widely used as a psychological indicator of mental wellness and quality of life. This study considers life satisfaction as a key outcome variable because it captures not just momentary reactions to media, but deeper, more sustained effects on users' sense of well-being.

Many studies show that materialism is negatively associated with life satisfaction. Individuals who place high importance on acquiring material possessions tend to report lower overall well-being (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Christopher et al., 2009; Froh et al., 2011; Richins & Dawson, 1992). This relationship has been especially well-documented in the context of television consumption. For example, Yang and Oliver (2010) found that heavy TV viewers reported higher levels of materialism, overestimated others' wealth, and perceived wider socioeconomic gaps which led to decreased life satisfaction. Similarly, Yang, Ramasubramanian, and Oliver (2008) found that in both South Korea and India, viewers of U.S. reality television expressed greater dissatisfaction with their lives and societal conditions, driven by distorted perceptions of affluence and success.

Kasser (2002) theorized that materialism may mediate the relationship between media exposure and life satisfaction, arguing that mass media often promotes extrinsic

ideals like wealth, beauty, and status, at the expense of intrinsic values like personal growth and community. As these extrinsic goals are internalized, life satisfaction tends to decline. While this pathway has been extensively studied in television contexts, it remains less clear whether similar mechanisms operate on social media platforms like Instagram. Emerging evidence suggests that users often process others' curated self-presentations or "highlight reels" through upward social comparison and envy, with negative consequences for mental health and life satisfaction (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; de Vries et al., 2018).

However, findings derived from this line of studies are mixed. A study of television viewing in developing countries found that it increased viewers' empathy and motivation to work hard to emulate those in the developed world (Lerner, 1964). Recently studies have shown that passive exposure to others' posts on Instagram can also elicit feelings of inspiration (Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Ouwerkerk & Johnson, 2016; Rieger & Klimmt, 2019a). Inspiration is a motivational state triggered by novel or aesthetically engaging stimuli (Thrash et al., 2014), and while it may arise from upward comparisons, it is often associated with positive psychological outcomes, including a sense of possibility and enhanced life satisfaction (Belzak et al., 2017; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Given these conflicting findings, this study clarifies the psychological and behavioral correlates of life satisfaction among Instagram users. Specifically, it examines whether variables such as social comparison tendency, materialism, usage frequency, and consumption-oriented engagement are significant predictors of life satisfaction.

RQ3. *Among Instagram users, what are the a) psychological or b) behavioral factors that can predict their life satisfaction?*

2.11 Spirituality and Digital Resilience

While much of previous literature on social media and well-being focuses on psychological outcomes such as life satisfaction, an emerging body of research calls for a more holistic view that includes spiritual well-being. Spirituality, often used interchangeably with spiritual well-being, emphasizes meaning, connection, and transcendence, offering a valuable framework for understanding the self in relation to consumption (Kale, 2004). This perspective is especially relevant in media studies, where the tension between materialistic values and intrinsic fulfillment remains a central concern.

Traditional measures of life satisfaction (e.g., Diener et al., 1985) tend to reflect individualistic and Western-centric conceptions of well-being, often overlooking the role of spirituality as a source of resilience and life meaning (Kjell et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2023). Scholars such as Wills (2009), Moberg (1979), and Ellison (1983) have argued that assessments of subjective well-being should extend beyond socio-psychological domains to include spiritual dimensions, which many individuals regard as vital to their quality of life. Previous empirical research supports the positive association between spirituality and well-being. For instance, individuals who identify themselves as spiritual consistently report greater happiness and higher life satisfaction, though the increase in life satisfaction is less pronounced compared to the increase in happiness (Ciarrochi & Deneke, 2005; Francis & Kaldor, 2002). These benefits may stem from internalized

beliefs about unconditional love, transcendence, or the meaning of life, which help individuals maintain a stable sense of self-worth that is not dependent on material success or external validation (Tillich, 1976). To better capture the multidimensional nature of spiritual well-being, Fisher's (2011) Four Domains Model offers a useful theoretical lens. It defines spiritual health as the affirmation of wholeness through relationships in four interconnected areas:

1. Personal – self-awareness, purpose, and inner peace;
2. Communal – deep interpersonal bonds rooted in compassion and justice;
3. Environmental – connection with nature and the physical world;
4. Transcendental – a relationship with God or a higher power (Gomez & Fisher, 2003; Ekşi & Kardaş, 2017).

A balanced integration of these domains is considered essential for spiritual resilience and well-being (Fisher, 2011). In the context of social media, where curated and algorithm-driven content often amplifies materialistic values and triggers social comparison, users' spirituality may function as a protective factor. Spiritually inclined users may be more mindful of their viewing behavior and derive their sense of self-worth and life meaning from alternative, non-material sources. Although few studies have extensively examined how Instagram use relates to spiritual well-being, the platform's emphasis on social validation and consumer culture may pose challenges to one's spiritual state, especially within the personal and communal domains (Fisher, 2011). At the same time, spiritual orientation may mitigate the effect of long-term Instagram

exposure by grounding users in intrinsic values rather than extrinsic rewards. Therefore, the present study investigates whether there is a relationship between Instagram use and spiritual well-being, and whether spirituality is also associated with materialism. These questions contribute to a deeper understanding of how intrinsic belief systems may mitigate the effects of social media use on individual values and well-being.

RQ4. What is the relationship between Instagram use and self-reported level of spirituality?

RQ5. What is the relationship between self-reported level of spirituality and materialism?

CHAPTER THREE: Survey Design

Participants and Procedure

A cross-sectional web-based survey was conducted using the Qualtrics platform to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. A total of 650 participants were invited to complete the survey in January 2025, and 619 fully completed responses were retained based on power considerations and cost-effectiveness. Participants were recruited nationwide via the Prolific platform, targeting individuals aged 18 and older. The survey had a median completion time of 15 minutes, and participants were compensated at a rate of \$12.00 per hour. Prolific provided diverse and demographically representative samples in the United States.

The ages of the 619 participants range from 18 to 84 years ($M = 46.14$, standard deviation [SD] = 16.11) with 48.8% males, 49.9% females, 1.3% other. Overall, the participants are slightly more mature than the general population, but they are equally representative of genders. The racial composition of the sample was 14.4% African American, 6.0% Asian American or Pacific Islander, 64.5% Caucasian, 9.5% Hispanic, 1.0% Native American, 4.7% other. The questionnaire (included in Appendix A) consisted of validated items designed to assess respondents' Instagram use, the frequency of specific genre consumption, perceptions of societal affluence, materialism values, social comparison tendency, life satisfaction, and spirituality, followed by demographic questions.

Measures

Instagram use was measured using procedures adapted from Shrum et al. (1998) to suit the Instagram platform. Participants reported the number of hours they used Instagram during an average weekday, as well as an average Saturday and Sunday, across three time periods: morning, afternoon, and evening. These responses were then combined to calculate a weighted estimate of daily Instagram use during a typical week, with weekday use weighted by a factor of five and weekend use by a factor of two.

Instagram engagement was assessed by asking participants to report their average daily screen time for the Instagram app, as recorded by the Screen Time feature on their iPhone. This objective measure offers a reliable indicator of usage duration, minimizing self-report bias and enhancing the accuracy of digital engagement assessment.

Instagram genre consumption was assessed using an adapted version of Hallinan et al.'s (2021) typology of Instagram content. Participants indicated how frequently they encountered specific content genres on Instagram. Example items included: "How often do you encounter fashion/beauty content (e.g., makeup tutorials, beauty reviews, and commentary) on Instagram?" and "How often do you encounter entertainment content (e.g., celebrity/influencer posts, celebrity news and gossip, TV/movie clips, and pop culture commentary) on Instagram?" Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very Often*). To supplement the closed-ended responses, participants were also asked to freely list the top three genres they most frequently encountered on their Instagram feeds. This open-ended item provided additional insight into the types of content participants perceived as most salient in their daily Instagram

use.

Consumption-oriented Instagram engagement was measured using the eight-item Consumption-Oriented SNS Engagement Scale developed by Ho and Ito (2019). The scale includes six items assessing peer-to-peer communication about consumption (e.g., posting, viewing, or commenting on shopping-related content) and two items assessing communication with marketers. Example items include: “How often do you post photos of goods or clothing that you have just purchased?” and “How often do you read friends’ posts about products, shopping, and spending?” Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*).

Social comparison tendency was assessed using the 11-item Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), which evaluates individuals’ tendency to compare themselves with others. A sample item includes: “I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.” Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a greater tendency to engage in social comparison.

Viewing attention was assessed using an adapted version of the five-item Viewing Attention Scale developed by Rubin, Perse, and Taylor (1988). This scale measures the degree of cognitive focus participants exhibit while using Instagram. Example items include: “I pay close attention to each post when I am on Instagram,” “I listen carefully to each video post when I am on Instagram,” and “My mind often wanders when I am on Instagram.” Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly*

disagree) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Perceptions of societal affluence were assessed using items adapted from prior cultivation studies (Shrum, 2006) that examine beliefs about the prevalence of products and behaviors typically associated with affluence. Participants estimated the percentage of U.S. citizens who possess or engage in various affluence-related indicators. Example items include: “Estimate the percentage of U.S. citizens who own a swimming pool,” “...own a private tennis court,” “...belong to a country club,” and “...have traveled to at least five other countries.” Responses were recorded using categorical percentage ranges: 0–24% (none to less than a quarter), 25–49% (a quarter to less than half), 50–74% (half to less than three quarters), and 75–100% (three quarters to all).

Materialism was assessed using the 18-item Material Values Scale (MVS; Richins & Dawson, 1992), which measures three dimensions of materialism: the centrality of material possessions in one’s life, the use of possessions as a measure of success, and the belief that possessions are essential to personal happiness. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of materialistic values.

Acquisition centrality. This dimension was measured using seven items that reflect the extent to which individuals place material possessions at the center of their lives. Items captured beliefs about the utilitarian, emotional, and sensory benefits of owning and using material goods, as well as preferences for luxury over simplicity. Example items include: “I usually buy only the things I need” and “I like a lot of luxury products in my life.”

Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness. Five items assessed the extent to which individuals seek happiness through material acquisition. These items reflect feelings of inadequacy, fulfillment, and emotional dependency on material possessions. Example items include: “My life would be better if I owned certain things I don’t have” and “I wouldn’t be any happier if I owned more luxurious things.”

Possession-defined success. This subscale included six items that assess beliefs linking material goods to social status and life success. The items focus on admiration for wealth and the symbolic meaning of possessions. Example items include: “I admire people who own expensive cars” and “The things I own say a lot about how well I’m doing in life.”

Life satisfaction was assessed using the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), which measures individuals’ global cognitive judgments of life satisfaction, rather than affective states. Participants indicated their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Example items include: “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” and “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.”

Spiritual well-being was measured using the 20-item Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire (SWBQ; Gomez & Fisher, 2003), which assesses four domains based on Fisher’s (1998) multidimensional model: personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental well-being. Participants rated how well each statement reflected their experiences over the past six months. Example items include: “Developing a love of other people,” “Developing harmony with the environment,” and “Developing meaning

in life.” Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Very low*) to 5 (*Very high*).

CHAPTER FOUR Survey Results

A total of 619 participants were included in the final analysis ($M_{age} = 46.14$, $SD = 16.11$; 49.9% female, 48.8% male, 1.3% other). Of these, 348 participants reported using iPhones and provided objective Instagram screen time data. On average, participants reported moderate Instagram use frequency ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 0.89$). Overall materialism scores averaged 2.66 ($SD = 0.72$). Instagram screen time among iPhone users averaged 3.49 hours per day ($SD = 3.70$). All key variables were approximately normally distributed.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1 H1: Instagram Use and Perceived Affluence

To test H1, a Pearson correlation was conducted examining the relationship between Instagram use frequency and perceptions of affluence. Results indicated a significant positive correlation, $r(617) = .31$, $p < .001$, suggesting that more frequent Instagram use was associated with perceiving higher levels of societal affluence. A separate Pearson correlation examined participants' daily Instagram screen time (measured via iPhone Screen Time data among iPhone users) and their affluence perceptions. This also revealed a positive association, $r(347) = .14$, $p = .009$.

Additionally, a multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether Instagram use behaviors, content genre exposure, and psychological traits predicted perceptions of societal affluence (see Table 1). The overall model was significant, $F(29, 589) = 6.82$, $p < .001$, explaining 25% of the variance in affluence perceptions ($R^2 = .25$).

Based on the standardized coefficients of general Instagram use and consumption-oriented engagement (.25 and .18, respectively), the cultivation effect of people's Instagram use on their affluence perception is, therefore, supported.

General Instagram use emerged as a strong positive predictor ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), indicating that greater overall time spent on Instagram was associated with perceiving society as wealthier. Consumption-oriented Instagram engagement also predicted higher affluence perceptions ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). Among content genres, music video exposure ($\beta = .14, p = .007$) and animal abuse content exposure ($\beta = .09, p = .045$) were positively associated with affluence perceptions. Additionally, spirituality emerged as a positive predictor ($\beta = .13, p = .004$). Gender was also a significant predictor ($\beta = .14, p = .003$), indicating that men (coded as 1) perceived greater societal affluence compared to women (coded as -1) and participants identifying as another gender (coded as 0). No other variables, including age, education, household income, social comparison tendency, purchasing tendency, attention level, or other content genres, reached significance in the model.

Table 1

Predicting affluence perceptions by Instagram content exposure, demographics, and Instagram use behaviors

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>
General Instagram Use	.10 (.02)	.25***	4.81
Consumption-oriented IG engagement	.07 (.02)	.18***	3.31
Music video exposure	.036 (.013)	.14**	2.70
Animal abuse exposure	.042 (.021)	.09*	2.01
Spirituality	.047 (.016)	.13**	2.91
Gender	.049 (.017)	.14**	2.96

Note. Only statistically significant predictors from the final regression model are shown.

$R^2 = .25$, Adjusted $R^2 = .22$, $F(29, 589) = 6.82$, $p < .001$.

B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

4.2.2 H2: Instagram Use and Materialism

H2. *Instagram use is positively associated with materialism, specifically at increased levels of (a) acquisition centrality, (b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and (c) possession-defined success.*

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between Instagram use frequency and overall materialism, $r(617) = .29$, $p < .001$, suggesting that individuals who use Instagram more frequently tend to endorse stronger materialistic values.

Further analyses of the three subdimensions of materialism supported this pattern: Instagram use was positively correlated with acquisition centrality ($r(617) = .23$, $p < .001$), possession-defined success ($r(617) = .27$, $p < .001$), and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness ($r(617) = .22$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that frequent Instagram use

is associated with a wide range of materialistic orientations.

Similarly, Instagram engagement—as measured by average daily screen time among iPhone users—was positively correlated with overall materialism, $r(347) = .21, p < .001$, further reinforcing this relationship.

However, when controlling for additional psychological and behavioral variables in a multiple regression model (see Table 2), Instagram use was no longer a significant predictor of materialism. This shift suggests that the bivariate associations between general Instagram use and materialistic values may be accounted for by more specific mechanisms, such as social comparison tendency and consumption-oriented Instagram engagement.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while general Instagram use is associated with materialism at the correlational level, it does not uniquely predict materialistic values once more targeted predictors are considered. This reinforces the importance of examining more nuanced patterns of engagement beyond overall use frequency.

4.2.3 H4: Consumption-Oriented Instagram Engagement and Materialism

A multiple linear regression (OLS) was conducted to examine the extent to which Instagram-related behaviors, content genre exposure, demographics, and psychological variables predict materialistic values. Predictor variables included:

- **Instagram-related behaviors:** Instagram use frequency, consumption-oriented engagement, browsing the public Explore page, browsing the personal news feed, browsing stories, and attention level during use.

- **Content genre exposure:** Frequency of exposure to video game gameplay, advertisements, fashion/beauty content, violent content, cooking content, music videos, TV/movie clips, pranks, celebrity/influencer news and gossip, influencer marketing, and motivational/wellness content.
- **Psychological and demographic variables:** Social comparison tendency, spirituality, purchasing tendency, age, gender, income, and education.

This regression model tested three hypotheses (H4, H5, and H6) and addressed one exploratory research question (RQ1) related to the influence of genre-specific content exposure on materialism.

Table 2

Predicting materialism by Instagram content exposure, demographics, and Instagram use behaviors

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>
<i>Instagram Genre Exposure</i>			
Violence Footage	0.08 (.03)**	0.11	2.97
Fashion/Beauty Content	0.07 (.02)**	0.13	2.72
<i>Instagram Use</i>			
<i>Behavior & Traits</i>			
Comparison Tendency	0.34 (.03)***	0.38	10.37
Spirituality	-0.17 (.03)***	-0.22	-5.75
Consumption-oriented IG Engagement	0.15 (.04)***	0.19	3.92
Browsing Public Explore page	0.05 (.02)*	0.09	2.04
<i>Demographics</i>			
Age	-0.00 (.00)*	-0.09	-2.20

Note. Only statistically significant predictors from the final regression model are shown. $R^2 = .40$, Adjusted $R^2 = .37$, $F(24, 594) = 16.19$, $p < .001$. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

H4: *Consumption-oriented Instagram engagement will be positively associated with materialism.*

My preliminary Pearson correlation analysis revealed a positive association between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism ($r(617) = .35, p < .001$). Follow-up linear regression as shown in Table 2 confirmed that consumption-oriented Instagram engagement significantly predicted higher materialism scores ($B = 0.15, SE = 0.04, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 4. These findings suggest that individuals who engage more with consumption-related content on Instagram tend to endorse stronger materialistic values.

4.2.4 H6: Social Comparison Tendency and Materialism

H6: *Social comparison tendency will be positively associated with materialism levels.*

Regression results (See Table 2) indicated that participants' social comparison tendency was the strongest predictor of their materialistic attitude ($B = 0.34, SE = 0.04, p < .001$). This finding suggests that users who engage in higher levels of social comparison on Instagram are more likely to hold materialistic values. A multiple linear regression was also conducted to examine whether the three subdimensions of materialism—possession-defined success, acquisition centrality, and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness—predict individuals' tendency to engage in social comparison. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 615) = 78.34, p < .001$, and explained approximately 27.6% of the variance in social comparison tendency ($R^2 = .28$). Possession-defined success was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), followed by acquisition as the pursuit of happiness ($\beta = .16, p < .001$) and acquisition centrality ($\beta =$

.11, $p = .008$). These results suggest that individuals who associate success or happiness with material possessions, or who prioritize acquiring goods, are more likely to engage in upward social comparisons. All of this offer strong support for Hypothesis 6.

4.2.5 RQ1: Content Genre Exposure and Materialism

To assess potential content-specific influences on materialistic attitudes, a correlation analysis was conducted. Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients for Instagram content genre exposure variables (e.g., fashion/beauty, luxury, lifestyle) and materialism scores.

Table 3

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between Instagram content genre exposure and materialism

<i>Content Genre</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>r</i>
Celebrity/Influencer News and Gossip	2.67	1.33	0.24***
Fashion/Beauty Content	2.77	1.42	0.23***
Violence Footage	1.78	0.96	0.21***
Influencer Marketing	2.69	1.33	0.21***
Video Game Gameplay	2.37	1.30	0.18***
TV/Movie Clips	3.11	1.20	0.17***
Pranks	2.37	1.24	0.15***
Music Videos	2.77	1.30	0.11**
Motivational/Wellness Content	3.03	1.32	0.09*
Cooking Content	3.31	1.32	0.09*
Advertisements	3.58	1.22	0.08*
Political Commentary and Debate	3.01	1.31	0.04
Outdoor/Travel Content	3.27	1.21	0.04
Animal Abuse Footage	1.34	0.71	0.04
Pet Content	3.47	1.28	-0.01
Sports Clips and Highlights	2.65	1.43	0.00

Note. $F(16, 602) = 6.04, p < .001$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Regression Analysis Predicting Materialism by Instagram content genre exposure

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>b (SE)</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Violence Footage	0.15(.04)***	0.20	4.12
Fashion/Beauty	0.09(.03)***	0.18	3.52
Advertisements	-0.04 (.03)	-0.07	-1.44
Influencer Marketing	0.04 (.04)	0.07	1.10
Celebrity/Influencer News Gossip	0.08(.03)**	0.16	2.49
Video Game Gameplay	0.07(.03)**	0.13	2.97
Cooking Content	-0.02(.03)	-0.04	-0.81
Music Videos	-0.02 (.03)	-0.04	-0.70
TV/Movie Clips	0.04 (.03)	0.07	1.33
Pranks	0.00 (.03)	0.00	-0.01
Motivational/Wellness	-0.03 (.03)	-0.06	-1.29
Sports Highlights	0.00 (.02)	0.00	0.01
Political Content	-0.03 (.02)	-0.06	-1.38
Pet Content	-0.01 (.03)	-0.01	-0.23
Animal Abuse	-0.13(.05)**	-0.13	-2.83
Outdoor Travel	-0.04 (.03)	-0.06	-1.28

Note. Violence and fashion/beauty content remained significant in the final model after accounting for demographics and Instagram use behaviors.
 $R^2 = .14$, Adjusted $R^2 = .12$, $F(16, 602) = 6.04$, $p < .001$. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error.

4.2.5.1 Bivariate Correlation

Pearson correlations revealed positive associations between materialism and several Instagram content genres (see Table 3). The strongest correlations were observed for celebrity/influencer news and gossip ($r = .24$, $p < .001$), fashion/beauty content ($r = .23$, $p < .001$), and violence footage ($r = .21$, $p < .001$). Exposure to influencer marketing ($r = .21$, $p < .001$), video game gameplay ($r = .18$, $p < .001$), TV/movie clips ($r = .17$, $p < .001$), pranks ($r = .15$, $p < .001$), and music videos ($r = .11$, $p = .005$) also showed moderate positive relationships with materialism. Smaller but statistically significant

associations were found for motivational/wellness content ($r = .09, p = .022$), cooking content ($r = .09, p = .027$), and advertisements ($r = .08, p = .038$). Conversely, no significant correlations were found for exposure to sports highlights, political content, pet content, animal abuse footage, or outdoor/travel content.

4.2.5.2 Multiple Regression With All Genres

A multiple regression was conducted to examine whether self-reported exposure to 16 Instagram content genres predicted materialism (see Table 4). The overall model was significant, $F(16, 602) = 6.04, p < .001, R^2 = .14$. Significant positive predictors of materialism included exposure to violent content ($B = 0.15, \beta = .20, p < .001$), fashion/beauty content ($B = 0.09, \beta = .18, p < .001$), video game gameplay ($B = 0.07, \beta = .13, p = .003$), and celebrity/influencer news and gossip ($B = 0.08, \beta = .16, p = .013$). In contrast, exposure to animal abuse content was a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.13, \beta = -.13, p = .005$). Other genres—including advertisements, music videos, motivational/wellness content, and sports clips—were not significant predictors in the full model.

4.2.5.3 Regression With Demographic Controls

When demographic controls (e.g., age, gender, income), Instagram use behaviors, and psychological variables were included along with significant genres in the regression model, only fashion/beauty content exposure ($B = 0.07, p = .007$) and violence footage exposure ($B = 0.08, p = .003$) remained significant predictors (see Table 2). This suggests that these two content genres are robust contributors to materialism, independent of individual differences and broader usage patterns.

4.2.6 H5: Explore Page Use and Materialism

A linear regression analysis (see Table 2) revealed that browsing Instagram's public Explore page predicted higher levels of materialism ($B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .042$), supporting Hypothesis 5. This suggests that exposure to algorithmically curated content from strangers on the platform may reinforce materialistic values. In contrast, browsing Instagram Stories or one's personal news feed did not predict materialism.

4.2.7 Additional Predictors of Materialism

Two predictors were negatively associated with materialism in the full regression model (see Table 2). Spirituality was a strong negative predictor, $B = -0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$, indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of spirituality tended to score lower on materialism. Age also showed a modest negative association with materialism, $B = -0.00$, $SE = 0.00$, $p = .028$, suggesting that older participants generally reported lower materialism scores.

To explore whether the effect sizes and significance remained consistent in a simpler model, a second regression analysis was conducted including only the significant predictors identified in the full model. All variables remained significant. This trimmed model explained 38% of the variance in materialism (Adjusted $R^2 = .38$), only slightly lower than the full model (Adjusted $R^2 = .39$), suggesting that the retained predictors captured most of the explanatory power.

4.2.7.1 Non-Significant Predictors

Table 5
Non-significant predictors of materialism

<i>Variables</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P-Value</i>
Instagram Use	0.02 (.04)	0.03	0.59	0.55
Gender	-0.01 (.03)	-0.01	-0.23	0.82
Attention Level	0.02 (.03)	0.02	0.66	0.51
Education Level	0.00 (.02)	0.00	0.05	0.96
Household Income	0.00 (.01)	0.01	0.34	0.74
Purchasing Tendency	0.06 (.05)	0.06	1.34	0.18
Browsing Stories Feature	-0.01 (.03)	-0.01	-0.18	0.85
Browsing Personal Feed	-0.01 (.02)	-0.02	-0.47	0.64
Advertisements	-0.02 (.02)	-0.04	-1.04	0.30
Influencer Marketing	-0.03 (.03)	-0.06	-1.16	0.25
Celebrity/Influencer News Gossip	0.02 (.03)	0.05	0.85	0.40
Video Game Gameplay	-0.01 (.02)	-0.01	-0.31	0.76
Cooking Content	-0.03 (.02)	-0.05	-1.18	0.24
Music Videos	0.01 (.03)	0.02	0.39	0.70
TV/Movie Clips	-0.02 (.03)	-0.03	-0.74	0.46
Pranks	0.01 (.03)	0.01	0.26	0.80
Motivational/Wellness	-0.01 (.02)	-0.03	-0.57	0.57

Note. All predictors were included in a multiple regression model, $F(24,594)=16.19$ $F(24, 594)=16.19$, $p < .001$, $R^2=.40$. The dependent variable was materialism score. Predictors listed in this table were not statistically significant at the $p<.05$. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error.

4.2.8 H3: Moderation by Attention to Instagram Content

H3. *Attention to Instagram content will moderate the relationship between Instagram use and materialism, with the association being stronger among individuals who report higher attention.*

To test this hypothesis, a moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1; Hayes, 2022), with Instagram use as the predictor, materialism as the outcome, and attention to Instagram content as the moderator. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(3, 615) = 19.32, p < .001$, accounting for approximately 9% of the variance in materialism ($R^2 = .09$).

However, the interaction term between Instagram use and attention was not significant ($b = -0.01, SE = 0.03, t = -0.16, p = .873, 95\% CI [-0.07, 0.06]$). The change in explained variance due to the interaction was negligible ($\Delta R^2 = .00$), $F(1, 615) = 0.03, p = .873$. These results indicate that attention to Instagram content does not moderate the relationship between general Instagram use and materialism. Therefore, H3 is not supported.

Although Instagram use was a predictor of materialism in this moderation model ($b = 0.22, p < .001$), its influence was not significant in the full regression model (see Table 2) that included more specific psychological and behavioral variables, such as social comparison tendency and consumption-oriented Instagram engagement. This pattern suggests that general Instagram use may be too broad a construct to meaningfully predict materialistic values—either on its own or in interaction with attention—and reinforces the need to examine more nuanced forms of platform engagement.

4.2.9 RQ2: Mediation by Social Comparison Tendency

RQ2. *Does social comparison tendency mediate the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism?*

To examine whether social comparison tendency mediates the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism, a mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4; Hayes, 2022), controlling for age. Results showed that consumption-oriented Instagram engagement significantly predicted social comparison tendency ($B = 0.26$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), which in turn predicted materialism ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of consumption-oriented Instagram engagement on materialism remained significant ($B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. The indirect effect via social comparison was significant ($B = 0.09$, $BootSE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.12]; $\beta = 0.12$), supporting social comparison as a psychological mechanism linking Instagram use and materialism (see Table 6 and Figure 1).

Table 6

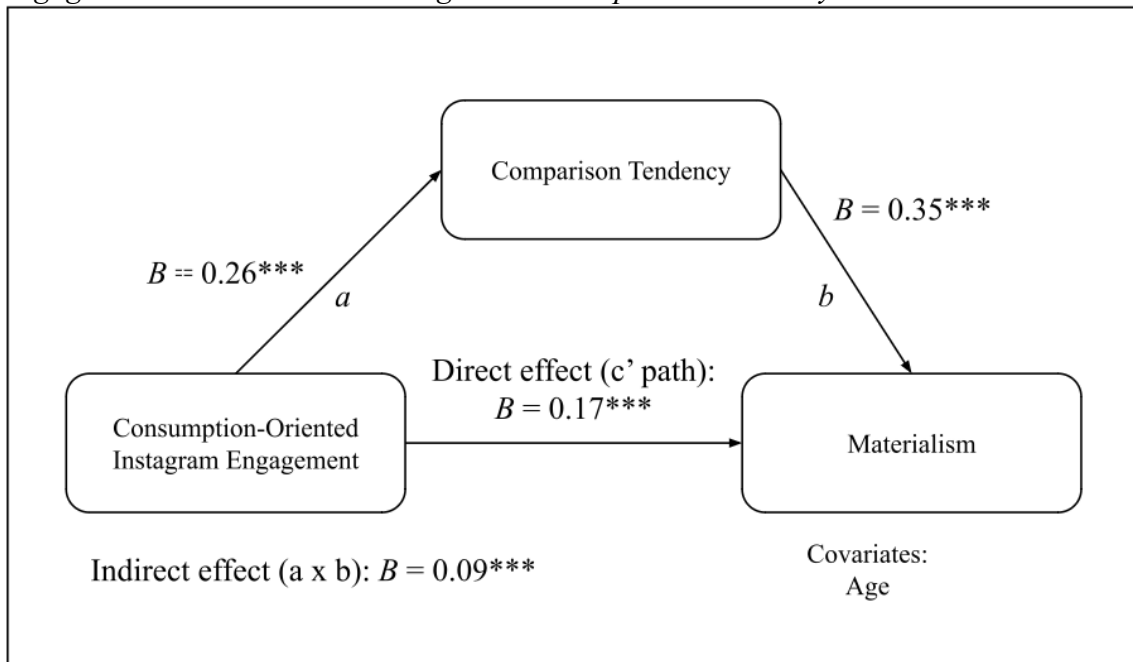
Mediation analysis of social comparison tendency in the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism

<i>Path</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
<i>Total Effect</i>			
Consumption-oriented IG engagement → Materialism	0.26***	0.03	[0.20, 0.32]
<i>Direct Effects</i>			
Consumption-oriented IG engagement → Comparison Tendency	0.26***	0.03	[0.20, 0.33]
Comparison Tendency → Materialism	0.35***	0.03	[0.28, 0.42]
Consumption-oriented IG engagement → Materialism	0.17***	0.03	[0.11, 0.22]
<i>Indirect Effects via Comparison tendency</i>			
Consumption-oriented IG engagement → Comparison Tendency → Materialism	0.09***	0.02	[0.06, 0.12]

Note. Mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Confidence intervals (CI) are bias-corrected and based on bootstrapped estimates. IG = Instagram. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1

Mediation model testing the indirect effect of consumption-oriented Instagram engagement on materialism through social comparison tendency

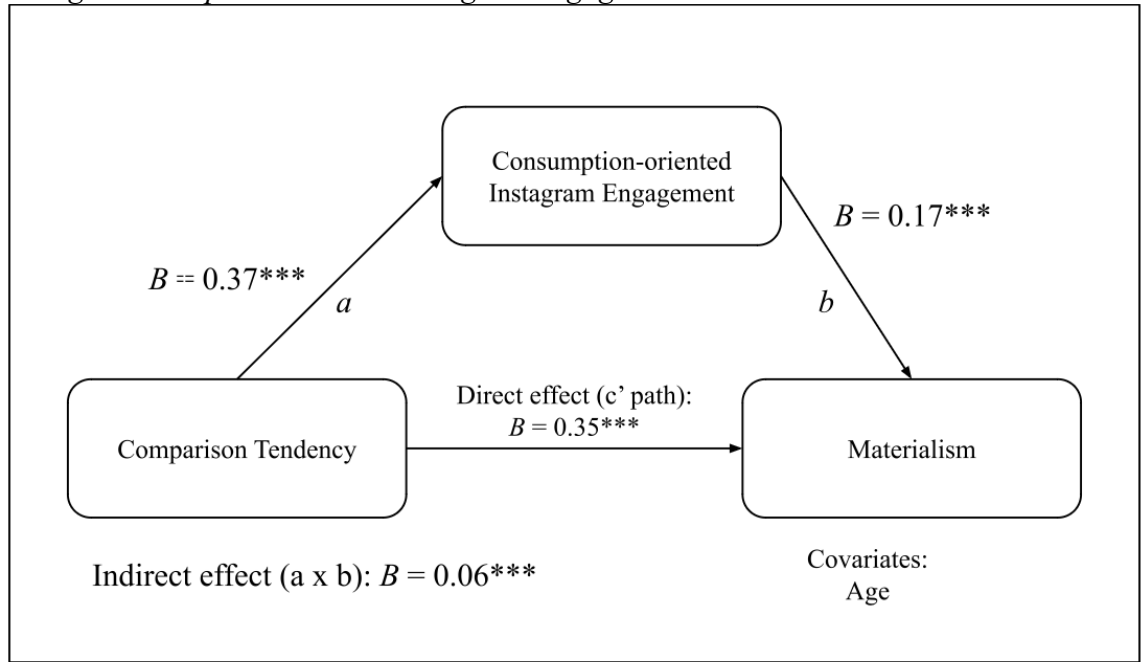


Note. Mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Confidence intervals (CIs) are bias-corrected and based on bootstrapped estimates. $^{***}p < .001$. Age was included as a covariate in the model.

Given the plausible bidirectionality of the relationship between comparison tendency and consumption-oriented Instagram engagement, a reversed mediation model was also tested, with social comparison as the predictor and consumption-oriented Instagram engagement as the mediator. The model was significant, $F(2, 616) = 36.84$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .11$. Social comparison predicted consumption-oriented Instagram use ($B = 0.37$, $p < .001$), suggesting a potential feedback loop wherein individuals predisposed to comparison are more likely to engage with consumption-heavy content, which may further reinforce materialistic attitudes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Mediation model testing the indirect effect of comparison tendency on materialism through consumption-oriented Instagram engagement



Note. Mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Confidence intervals (CIs) are bias-corrected and based on bootstrapped estimates. $***p < .001$. Age was included as a covariate in the model.

To further evaluate the plausibility of the hypothesized directional pathway, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to compare three models: (a) a hypothesized mediation model (Consumption-oriented Instagram use \rightarrow social comparison \rightarrow materialism), (b) a reversed mediation model (materialism \rightarrow social comparison \rightarrow Consumption-oriented Instagram use), and (c) a null model with no mediation paths. As shown in Table 7, the hypothesized model demonstrated the best fit based on AIC and BIC values and outperformed the null model in a chi-square difference test ($\Delta\chi^2(2) = 134.32, p < .001$). Although absolute fit indices (CFI = .694, TLI = .676) indicate room for model refinement, these results provide empirical support for the

proposed causal direction.

Table 7

Model Fit Indices for Hypothesized, Reversed, and Null Mediation Models

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	AIC	BIC
Hypothesized	4893.97	847	.088	.694	.676	66961.34	67354.72
Reversed	4914.85	847	.088	.692	.674	66982.22	67375.60
Null	5028.29	849	.090	.684	.666	67091.66	67476.20

Note. The hypothesized model assumes a directional pathway from consumption-oriented Instagram engagement to social comparison tendency to materialism. The reversed model assumes materialism predicts social comparison, which then predicts consumption-oriented Instagram use. The null model omits mediation paths. Lower AIC and BIC values indicate better model fit. RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index.

While statistical comparisons favored the hypothesized mediation model—where consumption-oriented Instagram use leads to greater social comparison, which in turn predicts materialistic values—the reversed model also demonstrated a significant indirect effect and comparable overall fit. This suggests the possibility of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. Individuals prone to social comparison may be more likely to engage with consumption-oriented content, which may then reinforce both their comparison tendencies and materialistic attitudes. Although the data most strongly support the hypothesized direction, future longitudinal or experimental research is needed to assess the temporal sequence of these effects and clarify the presence of any feedback loop.

4.2.10 RQ3: Predictors of Life Satisfaction

RQ3. *Among Instagram users, what are the a) psychological or b) behavioral factors that can predict their life satisfaction?*

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine psychological and behavioral predictors of life satisfaction. The results indicated that greater spirituality ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), higher household income ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), and lower levels of materialism ($\beta = -.30, p < .001$) were all positive predictors of life satisfaction. Social comparison tendency was not statistically significant ($p = .05$), but the effect approached significance and may suggest a potential negative association with life satisfaction. Other predictors, including consumption-oriented Instagram engagement, general Instagram use, and education level, did not predict life satisfaction.

Table 8

Life satisfaction regressed on Instagram use, materialism and social comparison tendency, demographics

Predictors	<i>B</i> (SE)	β	<i>t</i>
Materialism	-0.45*** (0.06)	-0.30	-7.39
Spirituality	0.40*** (0.04)	0.34	9.13
Household Income	0.09*** (0.01)	0.26	7.21
Social Comparison Tendency	-0.10 (0.05)	-0.08	-1.94
General IG Use	0.02 (0.05)	0.02	0.54
Consumption-Oriented IG Engagement	0.08 (0.05)	0.07	1.52
Education Level	0.03 (0.03)	0.05	1.29

Note. $R^2 = .34$, Adjusted $R^2 = .33$, $F(7, 611) = 44.57$, *** $p < .001$.

4.2.11 RQ4: Instagram Use and Spirituality

RQ4: *What is the relationship between Instagram use and self-reported spirituality?*

My Pearson correlation analysis revealed that self-reported Instagram use was positively associated with spiritual well-being, $r(617) = .18, p < .001$, suggesting that individuals who spend more time on the platform tend to report higher levels of spiritual well-being. Similarly, objective Instagram engagement, as measured by daily screen time

data from the iPhone Screen Time app, was also positively correlated with spiritual well-being, $r(347) = .12, p = .03$. Together, these findings indicate that both subjective and objective measures of Instagram use are modestly associated with greater self-perceived spiritual well-being.

4.2.12 RQ5: Spirituality and Materialism

RQ5: *What is the relationship between self-reported spirituality and materialism?*

My linear regression (see Table 2) showed that self-reported spirituality strongly predicted lower materialism ($B = -0.17, SE = 0.03, p < .001$), indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of spirituality tended to score lower on materialism. This prediction remained statistically significant after controlling for Instagram use and demographic variables.

CHAPTER 5 Discussion

5.1 Revisiting Cultivation Theory in Digital Contexts

Initially guided by cultivation theory, this study examined the relationships between Instagram use, materialism, and psychological well-being (i.e., life satisfaction and spirituality) using correlation, regression, and mediation analyses. I also tested whether attentional focus moderated the relationship between Instagram use and materialism, and whether social comparison tendency mediated the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialistic values.

The findings yielded from this study showed partial support for cultivation theory. General Instagram use was associated with heightened perceptions of societal affluence (first-order cultivation effects), suggesting that greater exposure to Instagram may shape perceptions of how much wealth exists within society. However, general Instagram use was not a significant predictor of materialism (a second-order effect) when controlling for variables such as age, education, gender, income, genre exposure, psychological tendencies, and browsing behaviors. Instead, consumption-oriented Instagram engagement emerged as a significant predictor of materialistic values.

These findings challenge cultivation theory's central hypothesis that general media exposure cultivates internalized beliefs and values and instead highlight the importance of content specificity and user engagement patterns. This aligns more closely with selective exposure and social comparison theories, which emphasize the active role users play in curating their media environments and the algorithmic nature of Instagram

that tailors content to users' existing preferences and psychological dispositions.

5.2 Key Materialism Predictors and the Role of Genre

Interactions with fashion/beauty content and violent imagery emerged as significant predictors of materialism, while other genres such as influencer gossip, advertisements, sports highlights, and travel content did not. This underscores that Instagram's influence may be content-dependent, with content that aligns with users' offline interests or emotional vulnerabilities—such as fashion or fear—more powerfully reinforcing consumerist ideals. In this way, the study adds meaningful nuances to prior research results that link social media use and materialism (e.g., Ho et al., 2017; Hwang, 2020), many of which relied on broader measures of SNS use. By focusing specifically on Instagram, a highly visual and algorithmically curated platform, this study highlights the importance of platform specificity in better understanding digital media effects.

The study results also support the finding that consumption-oriented Instagram engagement, including activities like posting about purchases or interacting with peers' shopping-related content, was positively associated with materialism. This is consistent with findings from Ho and Ito (2019). These patterns may reflect a process of self-selection, wherein individuals with stronger materialistic values are drawn to content-rich environments that align with their pre-existing interests, such as fashion or consumer-focused accounts. Although the results did not support traditional cultivation effects, genre-specific patterns may still be interpreted through the lens of resonance, which suggests media messages have greater influence when they align with users' lived

experience. For example, individuals already invested in fashion may be more likely to follow fashion-related content, and through repeated exposure, these consumerist messages may be reinforced. In this way, resonance may help explain why certain content types (e.g., fashion or beauty) more strongly predict materialistic values, even in the absence of generalized cultivation effects.

The relationship between users' exposure to violent content on Instagram and their level of materialism remains less clear. One possibility for this link is that their exposure to violent imagery may evoke psychological insecurity or fear, which individuals may compensate for through material acquisition—aligning with the compensatory consumption hypothesis (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Past research has shown that individuals experiencing low power are more likely to engage in status-related consumption, particularly when products signal prestige or control. I also found that browsing Instagram's public Explore page was associated with materialism, echoing research by Stein et al. (2019) showing that strangers' social media content may more strongly distort self-perception and influence values than exposure to known peers. This pattern can be interpreted through the lens of social comparison theory, given that social comparison tendency emerged as the strongest overall predictor of materialism. While peer networks may reflect similar socioeconomic backgrounds, the algorithmic nature of the Explore page often exposes users to aspirational lifestyles and strangers of higher perceived status which amplifies upward comparisons. Prior research has shown that social media encourages curated self-presentation and idealized imagery (Chou & Edge, 2012; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), creating environments that overrepresent glamor,

wealth, and worldly success. These repeated upward comparisons have been linked to reduced self-esteem, increased depressive symptoms, and greater material aspirations (Feinstein et al., 2013; Lewallen et al., 2016).

5.3 Social Comparison as a Mediator

The findings also revealed that social comparison tendency partially mediated the relationship between consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and materialism. Individuals who engaged more frequently in consumption-focused Instagram behaviors, such as viewing, posting, or interacting with shopping-related content, were also more likely to compare themselves to others, which in turn predicted stronger materialistic values. While the direct path remained significant, the presence of a significant indirect effect highlights social comparison as a key psychological mechanism in this relationship. These findings build on and extend prior work by Ho et al. (2017), who found that perceived peer spending fully mediated the relationship of consumption-oriented SNS use and materialism. To assess the robustness of this mediation pathway, a reverse mediation analysis was conducted, testing whether consumption-oriented Instagram engagement mediates the relationship between social comparison tendency and materialism. While this alternative model was also statistically significant, my results provided stronger support for the originally hypothesized direction. Specifically, the original model—where consumption-oriented Instagram engagement predicts social comparison, which in turn predicts materialism—yielded a stronger indirect effect ($B = .09$, 95% CI [.06, .12]) and explained a greater proportion of variance in the mediator (R^2

= .20), compared to the reverse model ($B = .06$, 95% CI [.04, .09]; $R^2 = .11$). Even though the original moderating model seems to make more sense, the weaker effect in the reverse model still indicates the presence of a bidirectional or feedback loop, rather than an alternative primary causal mechanism. It is important to note that these analyses are based on cross-sectional data and therefore cannot definitively establish causality. While theoretical and statistical evidence support the proposed direction of effects, experimental or longitudinal investigations would be necessary to confirm causal relationships and disentangle the temporal ordering of people's demographics, psychological and media-use processes.

5.4 Spirituality as a Protective Factor

Interestingly, both spirituality and age emerged as significant protective factors against materialism and the influence of social media's cultivation effects. Older individuals and those reporting higher levels of spiritual well-being were significantly less likely to endorse materialistic values. This finding is consistent with prior work by Tillich (1976), who argued that intrinsic values and a sense of existential meaning can buffer individuals against the need for external validation through consumption. The age factor is also intriguing; age was positively correlated with spirituality, suggesting that older individuals may be more likely to develop or prioritize spiritual well-being. This could reflect greater life experience, a deeper understanding of vital values, or accumulated wisdom.

Another important and unexpected finding was the positive association between

general Instagram use and spiritual well-being. While counterintuitive, this result suggests that under certain conditions, Instagram may function as a source of emotional or even spiritual support. For instance, Yang (2016) found that browsing and interacting on Instagram were linked to lower levels of loneliness, whereas broadcasting behaviors (e.g., posting selfies) were associated with higher loneliness. This parallel finding echoes what the mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988) indicated a few decades earlier. This distinction points to the potential emotional benefits of community-oriented engagement, in contrast to more self-promotional use.

One possible explanation lies in the concept of social capital—the value derived from one’s social relationships, including feelings of belonging and connectedness (Verduyn et al., 2017). Research has shown that different patterns of social media use yield divergent outcomes: active engagement (e.g., posting, liking, commenting) is typically associated with greater social capital and psychological benefits, while passive consumption is often linked to negative effects. These active forms of interaction may foster a greater sense of community, self-worth, and emotional support. Given that spiritual well-being often encompasses a communal dimension, such as forming deep bonds rooted in empathy, compassion, and shared meaning, Instagram may offer a space for cultivating such connections that are rewarding for participants. It is also possible that users who report higher spiritual well-being are more likely to follow close friends, family, or known others rather than influencers or strangers, which may create a more authentic, supportive digital environment. As a platform where users frequently share personal stories and emotions, Instagram could, in certain contexts, serve as a medium for

nurturing spiritual and emotional enrichment. More investigation into the specific space, genres of content, and user engagement is merited.

However, with respect to life satisfaction, my results confirmed that materialism was negatively associated with well-being, reinforcing a robust body of literature on its detrimental psychological effects (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Christopher et al., 2009). In contrast, both spirituality and income positively predicted life satisfaction, while Instagram-related variables like general use and consumption-oriented engagement were not directly associated with well-being. This suggests that Instagram, as a platform, does not consistently promote a unifying narrative that is inherently materialistic or detrimental to well-being. While certain types of engagement may foster materialistic values, general platform use does not appear to shape values or well-being in a singular or predictable direction. Instead, users exercise agency in curating their content exposure. Results suggest that individuals have the ability to choose whether to engage with marketing-driven or community-oriented content. This challenges the assumptions of traditional cultivation theory, particularly as articulated by Gerbner, who argued that prolonged media exposure embeds users in a coherent narrative system that fosters shared worldviews. In contrast, my findings reflect a fragmented, user-driven media environment in which effects depend more on individual patterns of engagement than on uniform exposure.

5.5 Implications for Media Psychology and Well-being

More broadly, this study contributes to research on social media, consumer psychology, and digital well-being by emphasizing the content-specific and user-contingent nature of media influence. General Instagram use was associated with heightened perceptions of societal affluence (a first-order cultivation effect), highlighting how social media can shape users' perceptions of reality itself, even if it does not directly influence their internalized values. These perceptual shifts may influence well-being indirectly, for instance by fostering upward social comparisons or unrealistic expectations of success.

Beyond these general patterns, understanding how attentional focus and engagement behaviors shape media effects provides further insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying these outcomes. Research suggests that first-order effects, such as perceptions of societal affluence, may operate through heuristic processing, with lower attention enhancing cultivation because viewers passively absorb frequent content cues without critical analysis (Shrum, 1995). In contrast, second-order effects, such as materialistic values, involve deeper attitudinal formation processes that rely on systematic, effortful processing. According to Shrum et al. (2005), these value-based judgments emerge as individuals internalize symbolic meanings and emotionally salient themes during exposure. This aligns with the central route of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), suggesting that persuasion—and by extension, value adoption—is stronger when users are motivated and attentive.

In this study, participants were asked about their attention levels while using Instagram and their active engagement behaviors, such as browsing, liking, and commenting. While attentional focus did not moderate the relationship between Instagram use and materialism, it is possible that prompting participants to reflect on these behaviors increased cognitive elaboration and reduced heuristic processing, which could attenuate first-order cultivation effects. However, general Instagram use still predicted heightened perceptions of societal affluence, suggesting that heuristic processing was sufficient for first-order effects in this context. For second-order effects like materialistic values, greater cognitive elaboration is theorized to enhance cultivation, but this was not observed in the current data, indicating that other factors, such as content specificity or individual motivations, may play a more substantial role in shaping internalized values on social media.

Future research should further investigate how attentional focus, active engagement, content type, and cognitive processing styles interact to shape cultivation effects in social media environments. Understanding these dynamics will clarify the conditions under which media exposure influences both perceptions of reality and internalized values.

Specific patterns of engagement, such as browsing public content, interacting with branded material, or comparing oneself to others, emerged as stronger predictors of materialism than general use alone. From a practical standpoint, these insights have wide-ranging implications for users, platform designers, and policymakers. Users may benefit from increased awareness of how different content affects their values, psychological

well-being, and self-perception. Platform designers and engineers might consider tools that encourage more diverse, prosocial, or wellness-oriented content.

Finally, mental health professionals and educators should continue promoting digital literacy and mindful engagement as strategies to mitigate the psychological risks of consumerist social media environments. Rather than painting social media as inherently harmful or beneficial, this study underscores that its effects are multifaceted and contingent, shaped by how, why, and what users engage with online. Instagram's influence lies not in the platform itself but in the dynamic interplay of content exposure, algorithmic curation, and individual psychological traits.

CHAPTER 6 Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers meaningful insights into the relationship between Instagram use, materialism, and psychological well-being, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, its cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Although mediation and path analyses were conducted, the directionality of relationships cannot be definitively established. Gerbner was particularly concerned with the long-term effects of media exposure, emphasizing how sustained patterns of symbolic content shape collective consciousness and cultural norms. In this spirit, future cultivation research on social media should explore how attitudes and values develop in response to prolonged exposure to specific types of content.

Accordingly, longitudinal or experimental designs would allow researchers to examine how Instagram use and psychological factors influence one another over time. To better assess cultivation effects, studies could investigate how repeated exposure to particular genres shapes beliefs—either by following the same individuals across multiple time points or by comparing different cohorts at different stages in time.

Currently, there is no systematic content analysis of Instagram's home feed environment, leaving us without empirical knowledge about the relative prevalence of content genres such as advertisement or consumerist imagery. While this study measured self-reported frequency of exposure to content types, these subjective estimates may not necessarily reflect the actual distribution of content genres platform wide. Future research should aim to conduct systematic content analyses of aggregated Instagram feeds, potentially combining user screenshot data with automated coding approaches, to

establish the dominant symbolic environment cultivated by Instagram's algorithms. Such research would provide a stronger empirical basis for applying cultivation theory to social media contexts.

Another limitation is the exclusive reliance on self-report measures, which are susceptible to social desirability bias, recall inaccuracies, and subjective interpretations of behaviors. This may be particularly salient in areas like "consumption-oriented engagement," where participants may vary in how they define or perceive their actions. To enhance ecological validity and gain a more accurate understanding of user behavior, future research could incorporate behavioral data, such as digital trace analysis or passive tracking of Instagram activity. Although participants were asked to report their daily Instagram screen time, only about half of the sample used iPhones and were able to access this data directly from the app, resulting in incomplete screen time data. Future studies could build on this by collecting more robust behavioral indicators, such as the frequency of public Explore page browsing, interactions with branded content, or like/comment ratios across different content genres. These measures would offer a more granular and objective view of engagement patterns, helping to validate and deepen interpretations of social media's psychological effects.

Third, while this study focused specifically on Instagram, it did not account for overlapping platform use (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, YouTube) or consumption of other types of media (e.g., streaming service, news programming, or print media), which may confound the relationship between content exposure and psychological outcomes. Future research should explore multi-platform engagement to better capture how users curate

and internalize consumerist messages across their broader digital ecosystem. Even though this study extended cultivation theory by examining content genre exposure, it relied on self-categorized responses, which may not reflect the complexity of Instagram's algorithmically personalized feeds. The Explore page, in particular, is shaped by individual user behavior, yet the study did not directly analyze the actual content users were exposed to. Future research could employ visual content analysis, platform scraping, or participant-submitted screenshots to more accurately assess the framing, frequency, and aesthetic of materialistic cues.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the sample was primarily composed of U.S.-based users, which may limit generalizability. Given that each platform presents a unique user base across different countries, what has been found in this study may or may not be applicable to other countries. Future studies should aim for more diverse and cross-cultural samples, especially given that materialism and social media norms also vary significantly across cultures. Finally, this study identified social comparison as a key psychological mechanism underlying materialism on Instagram. However, other psychological constructs—such as self-esteem, fear of missing out (FoMO), or identity motives—may also play a role in shaping materialist attitudes. Future work could test multi-mediator models or examine interactions among psychological traits to provide a more comprehensive view of how users process and respond to aspirational or promotional social media content.

Further explorations should expand on the present findings by adopting multi-method, longitudinal, and culturally diverse approaches to improve generalizability and

to infer causality. By doing so, scholars can better understand not only how Instagram shapes materialistic values and well-being, but also how users might engage with these platforms in more mindful, self-protective, and meaningful ways.

CHAPTER 7 Conclusion

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Instagram use relates to materialism and psychological well-being. While initially guided by cultivation theory, my findings did not support the assumption that general platform use leads to internalized consumerist values. Instead, the results emphasize the importance of content-specific engagement and individual user tendencies, suggesting that Instagram's effects are not uniform but contingent on the nature of content and patterns of user interaction.

These findings underscore the need to move beyond broad usage metrics and instead examine how particular genres and user behaviors contribute to psychological outcomes. In the current study, consumption-oriented Instagram engagement and exposure to fashion and violent content emerged as key predictors of materialism, potentially due to their alignment with users' offline interests or underlying psychological vulnerabilities. Social comparison tendency was the strongest psychological predictor of materialism and partially mediated the link between consumption-oriented engagement and materialistic values, underscoring the role of internal comparison processes in shaping responses to digital environments.

Importantly, Instagram's influence was not entirely negative. Spirituality and age emerged as protective factors against materialism, and general platform use was positively associated with spiritual well-being. This suggests that, under certain conditions, Instagram may support emotional or even spiritual enrichment. These findings challenge one-dimensional narratives that position social media as inherently harmful and point instead to a complex interplay between content, algorithms, and user

agency.

My study also engages with key critiques of applying cultivation theory to social media. Gerbner and his colleagues (1990) emphasized the importance of systematic content analysis to identify coherent narrative systems capable of shaping user attitudes. However, many cultivation-based studies in the social media context have lacked a clear empirical basis for content exposure, often importing hypotheses from television research without questioning whether consistent symbolic messaging exists in algorithmically curated environments (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). In contrast, the current study adopted a more content-aware approach by asking participants to self-report the top three genres they most frequently encountered on Instagram, followed by structured frequency ratings based on Hallinan et al.'s (2021) genre framework. These responses consistently aligned with Hallinan's categories, offering reasonable construct validity and allowing for a more nuanced understanding of symbolic exposure. While my method does not constitute a formal content analysis, it marks a step toward addressing a core assumption of cultivation theory—namely, the need to empirically examine the narrative systems presumed to influence audience perceptions.

Going forward, social media cultivation research would benefit from complementary methods such as visual content analysis, screen tracking, or digital trace data to more fully capture the frequency and framing of content in personalized feeds. By moving toward a more empirically grounded and platform-sensitive methodology, researchers can begin to assess whether symbolic environments on social media are consistent for different users in meaningful ways. At the same time, my findings support

the absence of generalized cultivation effects, suggesting that platforms like Instagram do not operate as centralized storytelling systems. Instead, they reflect fragmented ecosystems where user agency, psychological dispositions, and algorithmic curation jointly shape media experiences. As others have suggested (e.g., Morgan & Shanahan, 2010), a revised or hybrid model of cultivation may be better suited to today's media environment—one that blends long-term symbolic influence with personalization, selective exposure, and internal comparison. This study contributes to this evolving paradigm by offering both empirical insights and a methodologically adaptive approach that engages critically with the assumptions of traditional cultivation research.

APPENDIX A: Survey Questionnaire

Social Media Use and Consumer Preferences Study

This appendix contains the full survey instrument administered to participants through Qualtrics. The survey measured Instagram usage habits, media exposure, consumer behaviors, materialistic values, social comparison tendencies, spiritual awareness, and demographic characteristics. Unless otherwise noted, participants responded using Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), or other categorical options as specified.

Section 1: Consent

- You are invited to participate in a study designed to learn about social media use habits. The study is overseen by Chawannuch Chaikulngamdee, a Ph.D. candidate at Boston University's Emerging Media Studies program.

ELIGIBILITY You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY Participating in this research study is voluntary. You will complete a questionnaire that measures your social media habits and practices. The questionnaire takes about 15 minutes to finish.

RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY This research presents no more than minimal risk. There are no direct risks to participating in this study. There is no direct benefit to taking part in this study. Your participation will greatly assist the researcher in learning how Americans use social media platforms. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality, which will be minimized by informing participants that they can withdraw at any time. No personally identifiable information (PII) will be collected, and all data will be stored on password-protected software and devices, accessible only to the researchers listed in this IRB and Prolific. Participants will be given contact details for the researchers and BU IRB for any questions.

CONFIDENTIALITY The research records from this study will be kept confidential. Your information will not be identifiable in any way. The information in this study will be used only for research purposes and in ways that

will not reveal who you are. You will not be identified in any publication from this study.

The following people or groups may review your study records for purposes such as quality control or safety:

- The Researcher and any member of their research team
- The Institutional Review Board at Boston University. The Institutional Review Board is a group of people who review human research studies for safety and protection of people who take part in the studies.
- Federal and state agencies that oversee or review research
- Central University Offices

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS For any questions or problems with this study, please contact Chawannuch Chaikulngamdee (fchai@bu.edu), a PhD doctoral student, or Denis Wu (hdw@bu.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any complaints or concerns and want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Boston University Charles River Campus IRB at 617-358-6115. The IRB Office webpage has information where you can learn more about being a participant in research, and you can also complete a Participant Feedback Survey.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with BU College of Communication.

By clicking ‘yes’ you agree to participate in this survey.

- Yes
 No

Section 2: Instagram Use

1. Estimate the number of hours that you use Instagram in the morning on a typical weekday.
 - I don't use Instagram in the morning on a weekday
 - 0 to less than 1 hour
 - 1 to less than 2 hours
 - 2 to less than 3 hours
 - 3 to less than 4 hours
 - 4+ hours

(Repeated for afternoon and evening, weekdays and weekends)

2. On average, how many hours per day do you spend consuming visual media (e.g., TV, streaming services, video games), excluding social media?
- I don't consume any type of visual media
 - 0 to less than 1 hour
 - 1 to less than 2 hours
 - 2 to less than 3 hours
 - 3 to less than 4 hours
 - 4+ hours

Section 3: Instagram Screen Time

- Do you use an iPhone?
- Record your daily average screen time for Instagram (hours and minutes)

Section 4: Materialism Scale

(Adapted from Richins & Dawson, 1992)

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements:

- I admire people who own expensive homes.
- Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.
- I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.
- The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.
- I like to own things that impress people.
- I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own.
- I admire people who own expensive cars.
- I admire people who own expensive clothes.
- I usually buy only the things I need.
- I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.
- The things I own aren't all that important to me.
- I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical.
- Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.
- I like a lot of luxury in my life.
- I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.
- I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.
- My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.
- I wouldn't be any happier if I owned more luxurious things.
- I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
- It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.

Section 5: Instagram Purchase Behavior

- How often do you view products that are advertised on Instagram?
 - Never
 - A few times per year
 - A few times a month
 - About once a week
 - Several times a week

- How often do you click on products that are tagged or advertised on Instagram?
 - Never
 - A few times per year
 - A few times a month
 - About once a week
 - Several times a week

- How often do you make purchases through Instagram Shop?
 - Never
 - A few times per year
 - A few times a month
 - About once a week
 - Several times a week

- How often do you make purchases from the brand's website after seeing a post on Instagram?
 - Never
 - A few times per year
 - A few times a month
 - About once a week
 - Several times a week

- How often do you make purchases offline?
 - Never
 - A few times per year
 - A few times a month
 - About once a week
 - Several times a week

- How often do you make purchases in a physical store based on content you saw on Instagram?
 - Never
 - A few times per year
 - A few times a month
 - About once a week
 - Several times a week

Section 6: Content Genre Exposure

- Please list the top three types of content you encounter most frequently on your Instagram page.
- Rate how often you encounter the following types of content:
 - Sports clips and highlights
 - Political commentary and debate
 - Advertisements
 - Pet photos and videos
 - Video game gameplay
 - Fashion/beauty content
 - Violence footage
 - How to cook and bake
 - Animal abuse
 - Music videos
 - TV/movie clips
 - Pranks
 - Outdoor/travel photos and videos
 - Celebrity/influencer news and gossip
 - Influencer marketing
 - Motivational/Wellness content

Section 7: Instagram Browsing and Engagement

- How often do you browse Instagram's Public Explore page, Stories, or your personal news feed?

Section 8: Social Comparison Scale

(Adapted from Gibbons & Buunk, 1999)

- I often compare how my loved ones (partner, family members etc.) are doing with how others are doing.

- I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.
- If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.
- I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g. social skills, popularity) with other people.
- I am not the type of person who compares often with others.
- I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life.
- I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences.
- I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.
- I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.
- If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it.
- I never consider my situation in life relative to that of other people.

Section 9: Consumer Engagement Behavior

- How often do you post photos of goods/clothing you've purchased?
- Post photos of goods or clothing that you like when you shop around.
- Forward ads or news about products, shopping, and spending to peers.
- Comment on friends' posts about products, shopping, and spending.
- Read friends' posts about products, shopping, and spending.
- Instant online chat with friends on topics about products, shopping, and spending.
- Read the posts shared from the brands that you like.
- Pay attention to ads and visit websites linked to those ads.

Section 10: Content Creator Status

- Do you consider yourself to be a content creator (someone who produces and/or shares material like videos, photos or articles on Instagram to engage an audience)?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Sometimes
- Do you consider yourself to be a content consumer (anyone who views or interacts with material like videos, posts, or articles created by others)?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Sometimes
- Are you a sponsored content creator (someone who collaborates with brands to produce posts, videos, or articles that promote products or services in exchange for compensation)?

- Yes
- No

Section 11: Life Satisfaction Scale

(Adapted from Diener et al., 1985)

- In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

Section 12: Spirituality

Indicate how you feel the following statements describe your own personal experience over the last 6 months.

- Developing a love of other people
- Developing a personal relationship with a higher power
- Developing forgiveness toward others
- Developing connection with nature
- Developing a sense of identity
- Developing worship of a higher power
- Developing awe at a breathtaking view
- Developing trust between individuals
- Developing self-awareness
- Developing oneness with nature
- Developing oneness with a higher power
- Developing harmony with the environment
- Developing peace with a higher power
- Developing joy in life
- Developing prayer in life
- Developing inner peace
- Developing respect for others
- Developing meaning in life
- Developing kindness towards other people
- Developing a sense of magic in the environment

Section 13: Attentional Focus on Instagram

Please assess to what extent you agree with the following statements:

- I pay close attention to each post when I am on Instagram.
- I listen carefully to each video post when I am on Instagram.
- My mind often wanders when I am on Instagram.

Section 14: Perceived Societal Affluence

- Estimate the percentage of U.S. citizens who own a swimming pool:
 - 0–24% (none to less than a quarter)
 - 25–49% (a quarter to less than half)
 - 50–74% (half to less than three quarters)
 - 75–100% (three quarters to all)

- Estimate the percentage of U.S. citizens who own a private tennis court:
 - 0–24% (none to less than a quarter)
 - 25–49% (a quarter to less than half)
 - 50–74% (half to less than three quarters)
 - 75–100% (three quarters to all)

- Estimate the percentage of U.S. citizens who belong to a country club:
 - 0–24% (none to less than a quarter)
 - 25–49% (a quarter to less than half)
 - 50–74% (half to less than three quarters)
 - 75–100% (three quarters to all)

- Estimate the percentage of U.S. citizens who have traveled to at least five countries:
 - 0–24% (none to less than a quarter)
 - 25–49% (a quarter to less than half)
 - 50–74% (half to less than three quarters)
 - 75–100% (three quarters to all)

Section 15: Demographic Information

Gender, age, race/ethnicity, political orientation, education, household income

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