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Social Comparison Exploratory Research

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Objectives

Instagram's investment in teen well-being is expanding to encompass social comparison, focusing first on appearance-based social comparison and its negative impact on teen girls' body image

WE CONDUCTED RESEARCH TO:

- Obtain a more detailed and nuanced understanding of social comparison, especially appearance-based comparisons,on Instagram among female Instagram users and how it impacts their body image
- Understand how female Instagram users think the app affects their tendency to compare themselves to others
- Receive initial feedback on social comparison product ideas

IN ORDER TO:

- Inform product teams how to best support teens in this space
- Inform outreach teams on how we might build meaningful and impactful campaigns in this space

Methodology

	In-person qualitative	Online Diary Study	In Depth Interviews
Sample size	15	10	7
Markets	San Ramon, USA	US	US
Recruitment	Regionally representative third-party panels	Nationally representative third-party panels	Participants from online diary study
Tasks	2-hour in-person focus groups (5 per group)	5-day diary study	30-minute VC conversation
Qualifications	Monthly Instagram user Age 13-21 Low body image, self-esteem	Monthly Instagram user	

Executive Summary

- **Body image comparisons are formed by a trifecta of factors**: body standards, flawless skin, and fashion. Other social comparisons include influencer "money for nothing" lifestyles, relationships (family and romantic), travel, experiences, and talents.
- **Social comparison journeys mimic the grief cycle.** Pre-existing moods are a precursor to a downward emotional spiral, encompassing a range of emotions from jealousy to self-proclaimed dysmorphia.
- **Confidence-building and inspiration** are rooted in the combination of reality, accessibility, and attainable aspiration.
- **Social comparison is worse on Instagram**. It is perceived as real life, but based on celebrity standards. Explore and profile stalking enables never-ending rabbit holes. **Celebrity content** is more frequent but **friends' content** is more impactful in terms of social comparison.
- **Other apps are shielded by fun filters.** TikTok is grounded in dance, fun. Snapchat is sheltered by the element of fun that keeps focus on the face and not the body. At the other extreme, VSCO is a detached dream that is 100% edited.

Executive Summary

- **We can help break the cycle of social comparison**: celebrate small but meaningful accomplishments; show progress toward a goal; customize and personalize Instagram experience; personalized time-out mindfulness breaks that break the spiral; surface body inclusive influencers and flip the switch from envy to inspiration
- We have opportunities to engage at **each step of the social comparison journey** by creating targeted product interventions specific to surface, content type and graph
- **Communications** in the realm of social comparison need to be validating, realistic, and sympathetic. The **source** needs to be someone perceived as imperfect but accepting their own flaws rather than someone portraying a perfect image.

Background

Why start with appearance comparison and body image in teen girls?

Why? Frequent social comparison is a key driver of subjective well-being and teens say IG makes this problem worse.

66%

of teen girls on IG experience negative social comparison (compared to 40% of teen boys)

52%

Of teen girls who experienced negative social comparison on Instagram, said it was caused by images related to beauty

32%

of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse

Sources in presenter notes

Background - Appearance Comparison

(Negative) Social Comparison

- **Definition:** When someone feels bad about themselves after comparing themselves with others
- **Includes:** Triggers range from appearance (appearance comparison) to socio-economic status

Body Image

- **Definition:** A person's perceptions or feelings about their body or physical appearance
- **Includes:** Body dissatisfaction, body dysmorphia and eating disorders. Can be triggered by appearance comparisons or health issues

This work examines the intersection of these two problems. Namely, how appearance comparisons on IG can worsen teen girls body image

Background - Appearance Comparison

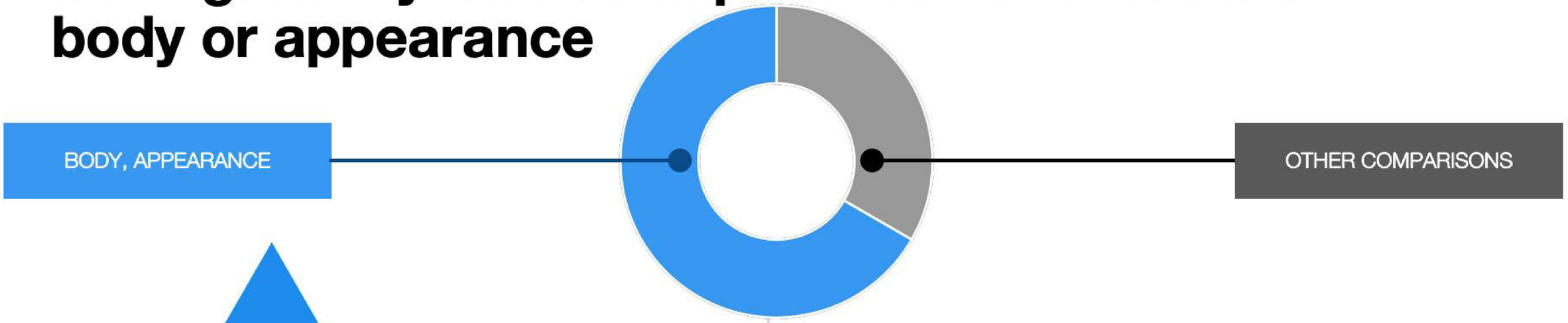
(Positive) Social Comparison

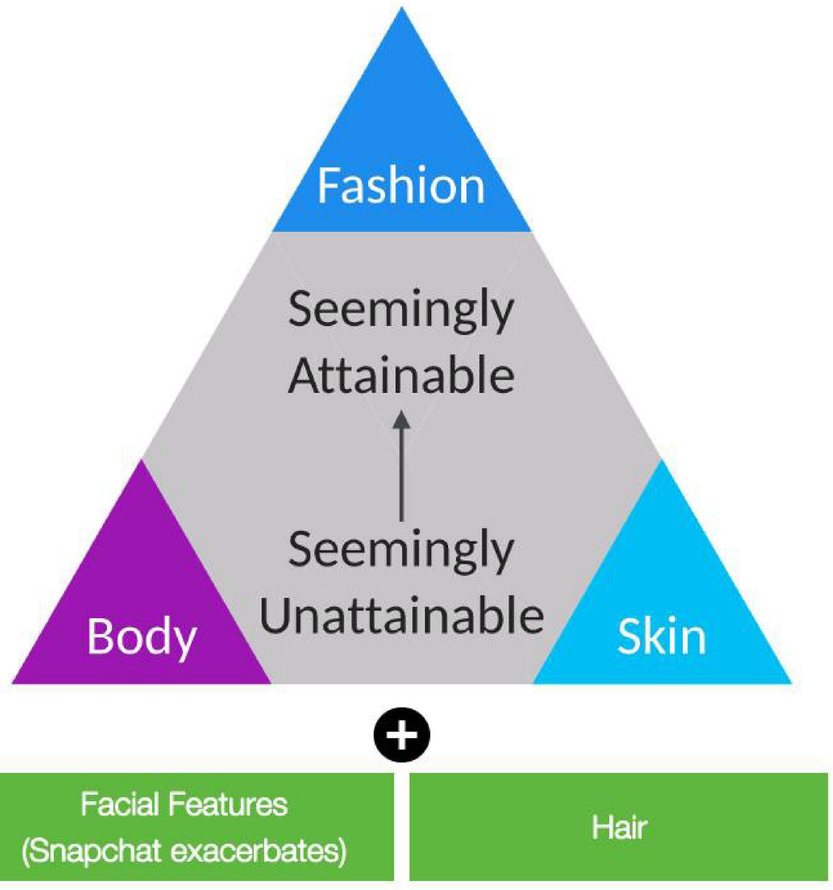
- **Definition:** When someone feels inspired/ motivated after comparing themselves with others
- **Includes:** Similar to negative social comparison, there can be wide range of triggers

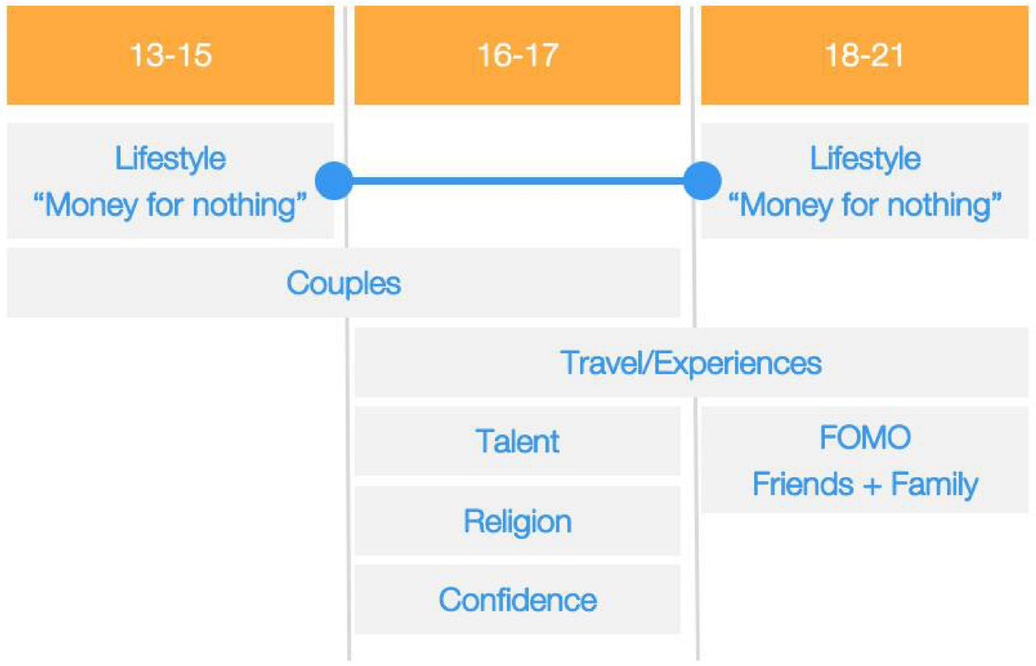
Triggers

What are the common triggers of social comparison for teen girls?
When do they feel bad about themselves vs. inspired or motivated as a result of these comparisons?

Teen girls say most comparisons are related to body or appearance







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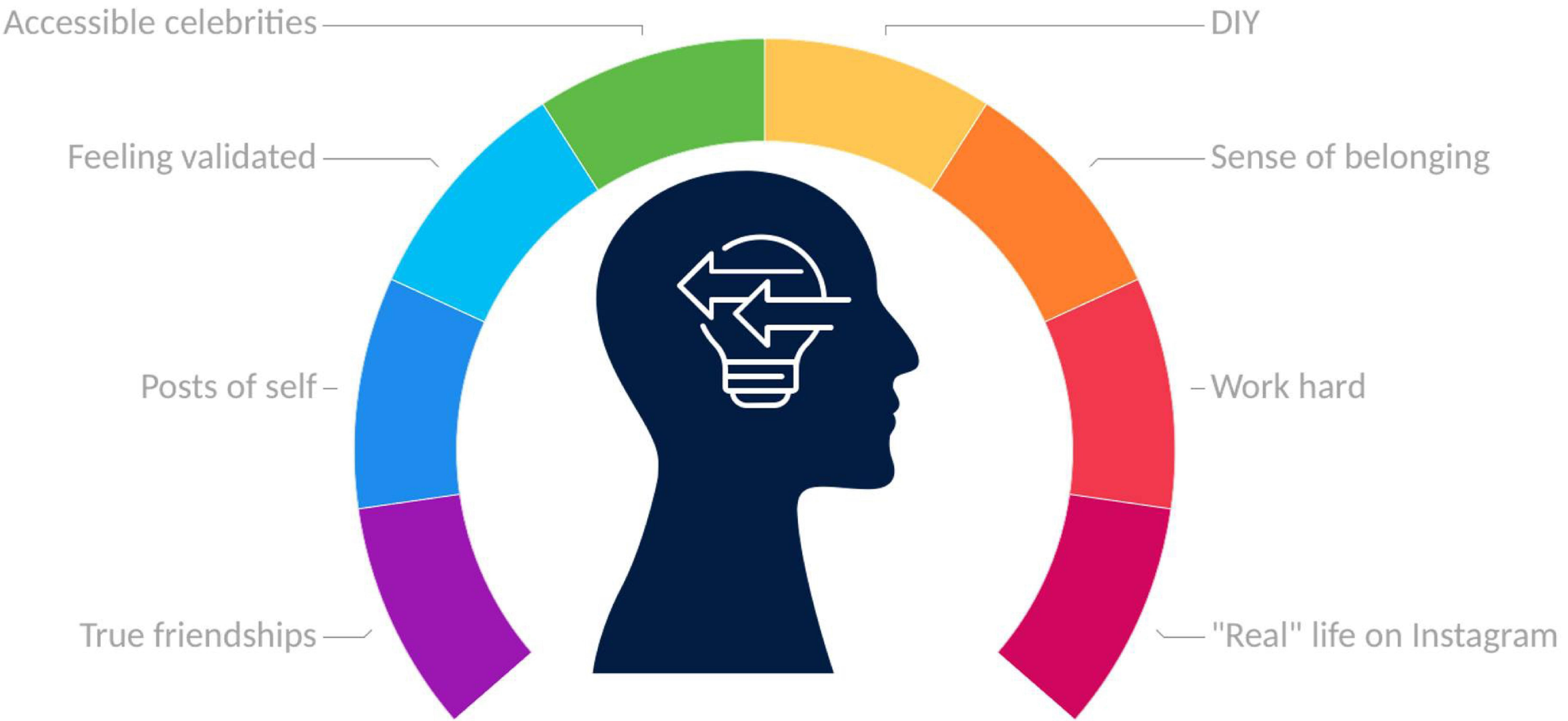
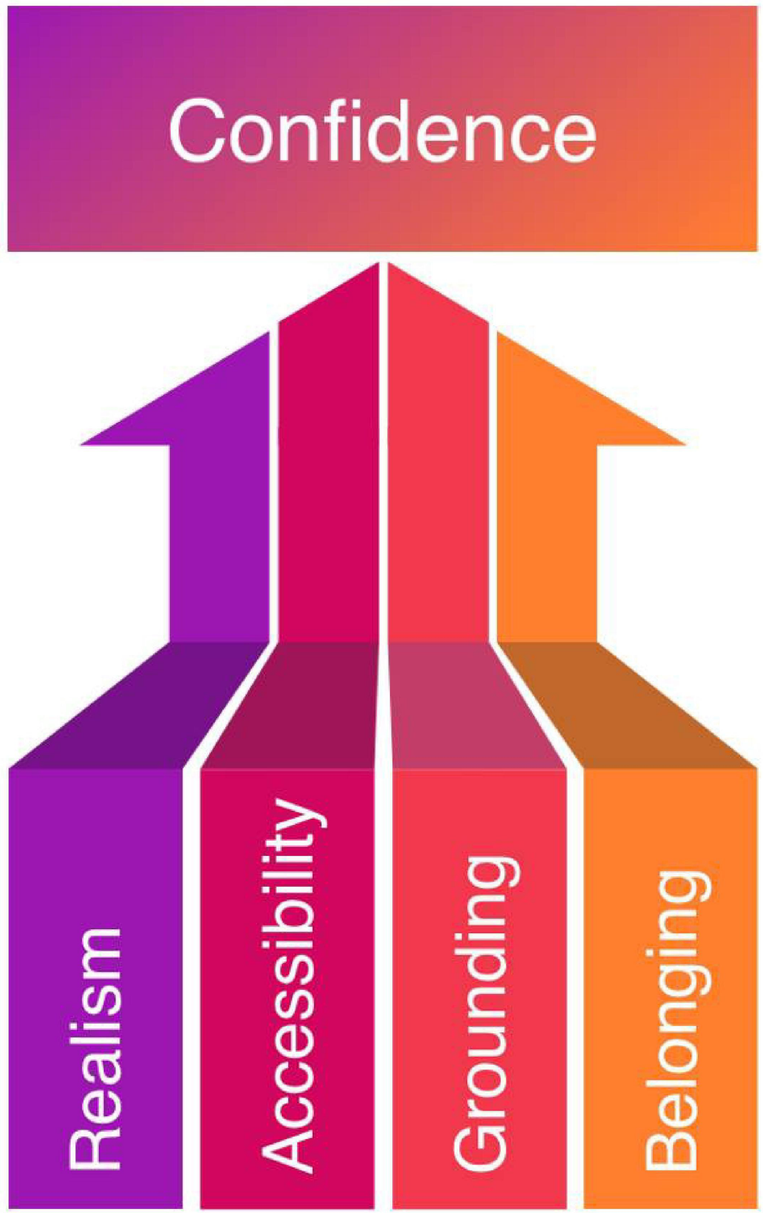
Envy can be triggered by any number of factors, from celebrities to feeling untalented

While inspiration is triggered by accessible celebrities, “real” life on Instagram, and feeling validated



Inspiration is triggered by confidence and motivation



What flips the switch?

When does content about body and appearance trigger envy/depression and when does it trigger inspiration?

Images related to body and appearance can trigger inspiration instead of envy

Envy/ Anger

What flips the switch?

Inspirational + Motivating

Certain kinds of content only trigger envy

1. Lack of context
   - Not knowing how someone got to the point they did
   - Focus on outcome instead of journey
2. Fixation on body or parts of body
   - Focus on perfect body parts instead of value beyond it
3. Exclusionary and fixed standards
   - Size 0 models, Diet tea ads
3. Dishonesty
   - Using hashtags like no-filter but actually using filters

Even if not like them, moment of relatability makes big difference

1. Attainability – Seeing how far someone's come
   - They have worked hard
   - They have been me (feel insecure, jealous)
2. Value beyond body, relatability, contextualization
   - Beautiful woman on a beach, sunny, happy, positive glasses
   - Models working hard, passionate, successful beyond looks
   - Image informational, interesting
3. Inclusive (curvy, bigger) beauty standards
   - Body positivity, made them feel seen/ appreciated
3. Vulnerability and sharing the journey
   - Personal stories of vulnerability and sharing the journey
5. Fitness content that is informative

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Images related to body and appearance can trigger inspiration instead of envy

Envy/ Jealousy

What flips the switch?

Inspirational + Motivating

"What cuts deepest is no filter filters, #no filter, where the acne is edited, they are lying and pretending they have no blemishes and saying I'm perfect"
- US 14 yo Female

"What changes things and inspires me is when people show their flaws, they're vulnerable, like their stretch marks or the stories about what they're dealing with because everyone's going through stuff
-US 16 yo Female

"Envy turns to inspiration when I look at someone bettering themselves, like if there's a picture of a model but she's working hard and she has passion and that's what leads to her success"
-US 14 yo Female

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Mindfulness Breaks that prompt reflection can break the spiral

"Reflecting back, you realize that Instagram is not really real, it is meant to be creative and fun and not meant to make people sad"
-US 16 yo Female

Reflection = Power/Control/Responsibility

- Learned helplessness is replaced with responsibility/control
- Awareness provides perspective.
  "I didn't realize it is a THING in my life", "Why do I care?"
- Turns external focus inward
  "Why not focus on myself and my confidence and being my best self", "I can change my thought patterns"
- Solidifies Instagram as Creative vs. Real life

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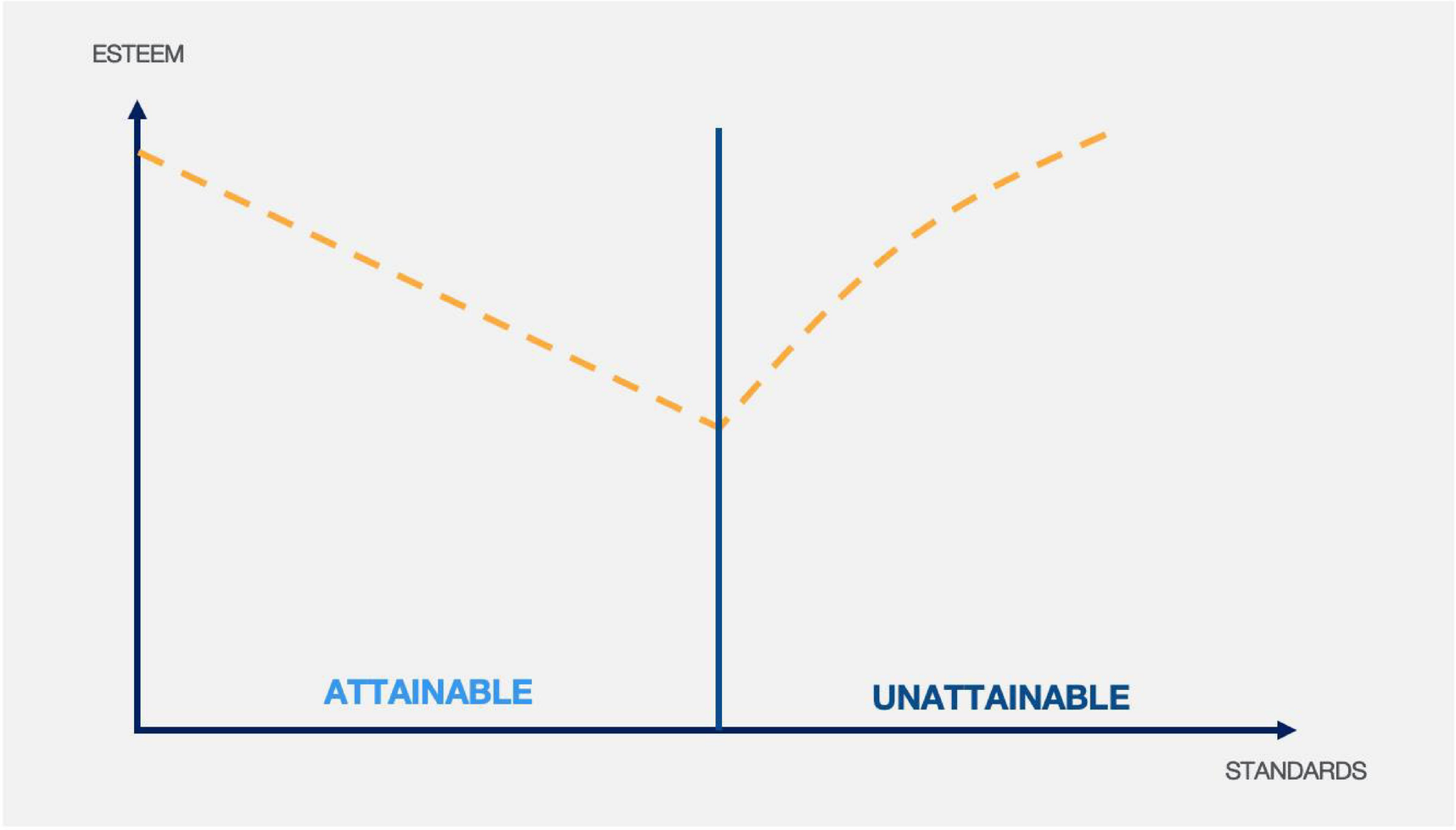
User Journey

What happens emotionally when teen girls see content that triggers appearance comparison?
What does the journey from social comparison to negative outcomes (like stress, anxiety or depression) look like?

Higher standards decrease self-esteem, until they're recognized as being unattainable



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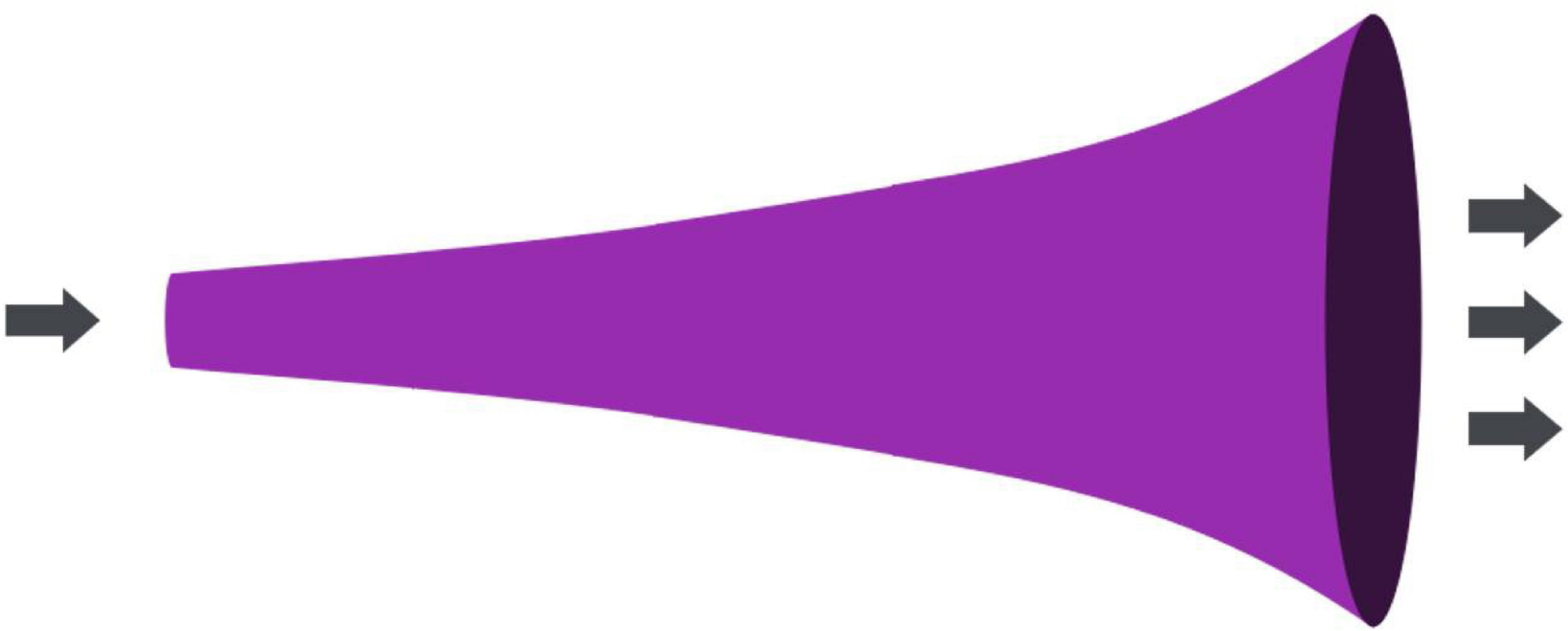
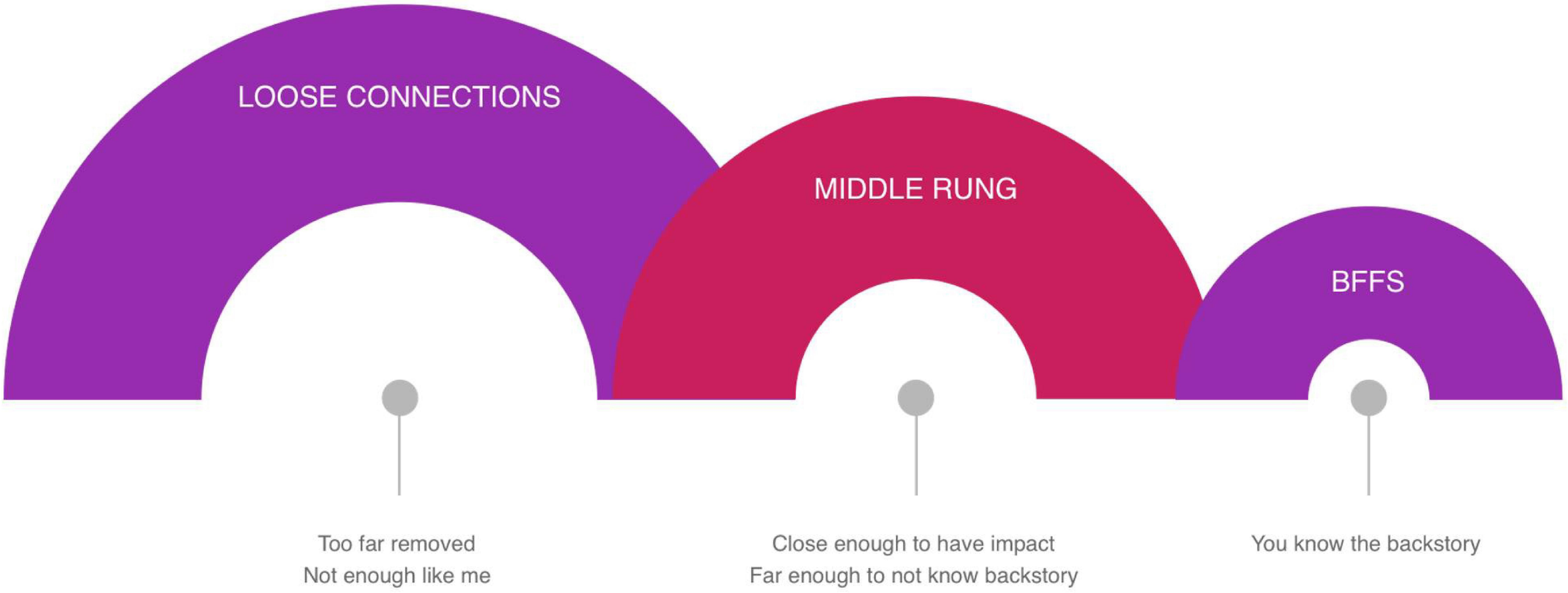
The impact of celebrity content is amplified by mimicry and frequency

- Each individual post or story from a celebrity or influencer has a small impact on users.
- However, users report seeing multiple pieces of content from many celebrities and influencers in each app session, amplifying their effect.
- In addition, their friends mimic celebrities' beauty and fashion standards, further compounding the effect of any one piece of content.

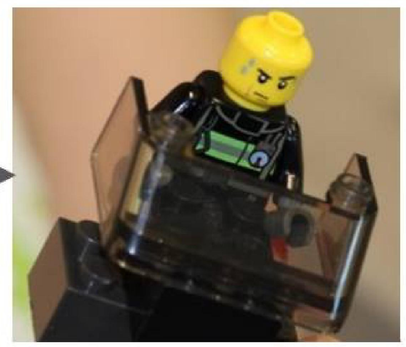
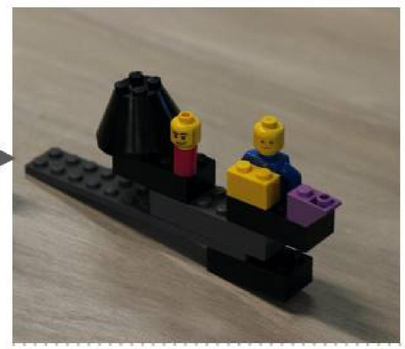


Content from the middle rung of friendships engender the most social comparison

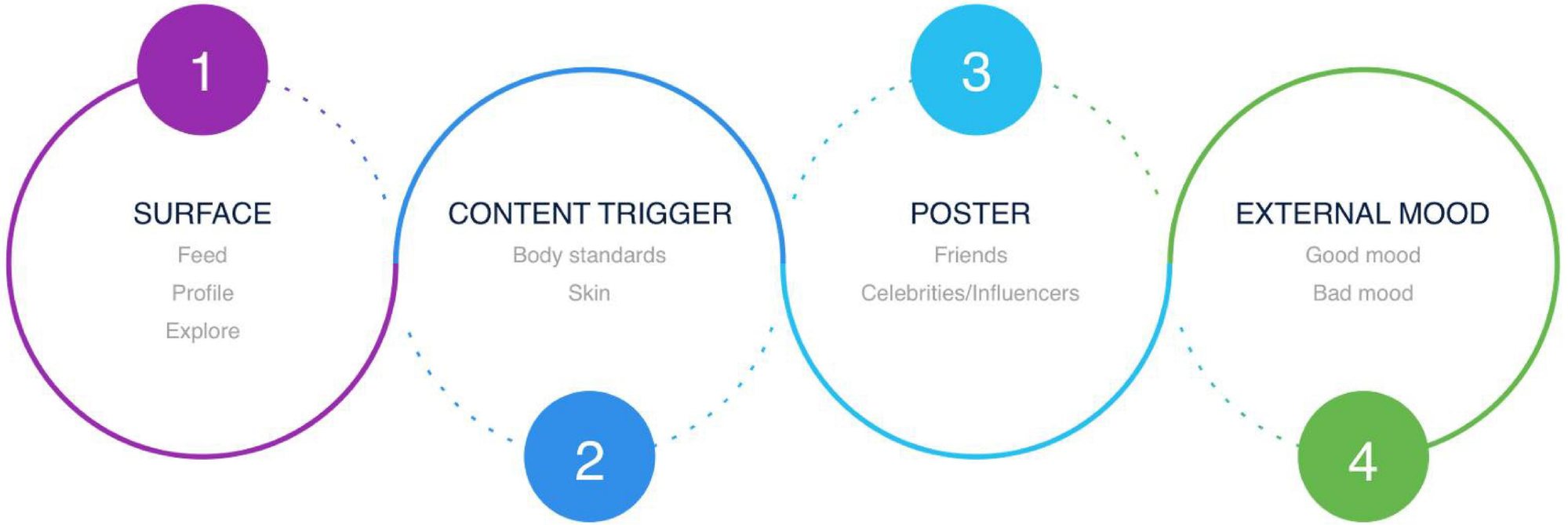
Middle rung friends aren't BFFs but are more than just classmates



Comparisons on Instagram can change how young women view and describe themselves

THE ME IN REAL LIFE		THE ME ON INSTAGRAM
MULTI-DIMENSIONAL Dynamic shape Unique Colorful	→ 	ONE-DIMENSIONAL Boxed in (small box) Not in control Dark
HIGH Raised up High esteem Confident	→ 	LOW Alone Pulled down Low esteem
CENTERED Stability, animals, nature Slide, ladder People	→	CHAINED TO THOUGHTS Rabbit hole Anxious Overthinking

The effect of any piece of content is a combination of four key factors



Good moods enable to process to start anew.

Bad moods often tip the scale to emotional spiral.

Once on a spiral, teens work through a series of emotions that in many ways mimic stages of grief

Bargaining
Questioning why I don't have
Wondering what I need to do to get
Judgment about other people
Analysis of current habits

Insecurity
Feeling "less than"
Small
Alone
Misrepresented

Self-described dysmorphia
Mirror, see myself "wrongly", pick out insecurities
See issues through magnifying glass
Obsess over small things

Anger
Mad
Edgy
Short-tempered

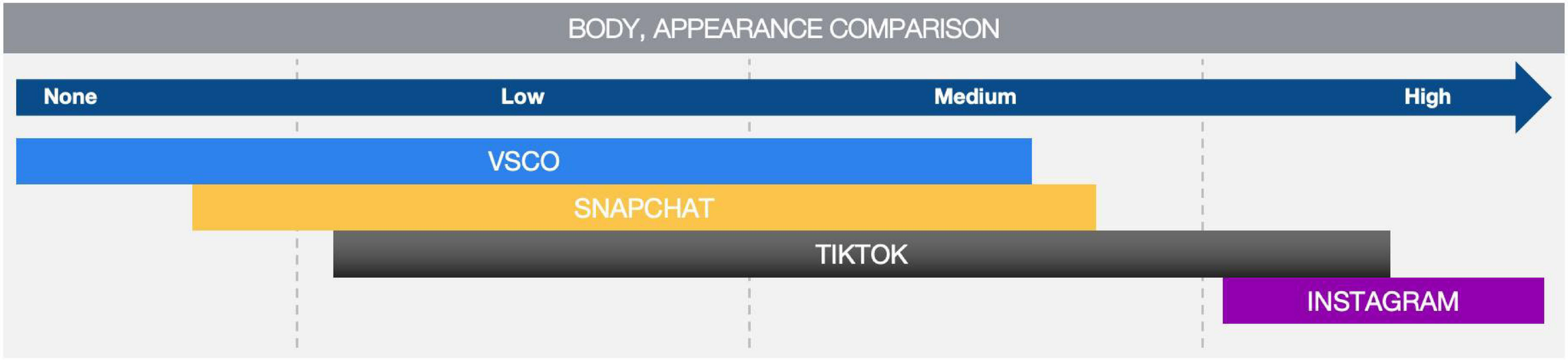
Paralysis
Busy with school/work
Put off changes to later

Withdrawal
Give up
Stay home
Distractions

Role of Social Media

What role does Instagram play in this journey?
What role do our competitors play?
Is Instagram better/worse than Snap, Twitter or Tiktok? Why, Why not?

Instagram is seen as having the highest impact, although TikTok and Snapchat aren't far behind



Dream, Not Reality

VSCO

- Unachievable
- Removed from reality

F4 Layers

Snapchat

- Friends, but..
  - Fun
  - Filter
  - Face (vs. body)

Shifting, Increased Usage, Talent to Aesthetic

TikTok

- Just like me
- Fun, joking, dancing
- Talent over aesthetic, but switching
- Popular influencers are thin/ attractive
- Spend 4+ hr/day

Celebrity Standards of "Reality"

Instagram

- Forget it's a highlight, reel vs. real
- Product mechanics (addicting)
- Explore, discover, stalk (down the rabbit hole)
- Sport – 1 hour to edit image/caption, then monitor "likes"

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Apps' contributions to social comparison lie on two axes -- perceived reality and formality

Perceived reality

High realism +
Low formality =
Medium comparison

YouTube

Tik Tok

High realism +
High formality =
High comparison

Low realism +
Low formality =
Low comparison

VSCO

Low realism +
High formality =
Medium comparison

Perceived formality

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On Instagram, Explore, Feed, and Stories contribute to social comparison but in different ways

IMPACT

EXPLORE

- Tons of body image triggers
- Intimidating

FEED + PROFILES

- Standards, aesthetic, game
- Hours for perfect post
- Sport – game of likes
- Best of best “to be seen”
- One upping
- Rabbit hole of discovery, stalking
- Friends closer to home but infrequent have high impact
- Celebs also have impact, high frequency compounding

STORIES

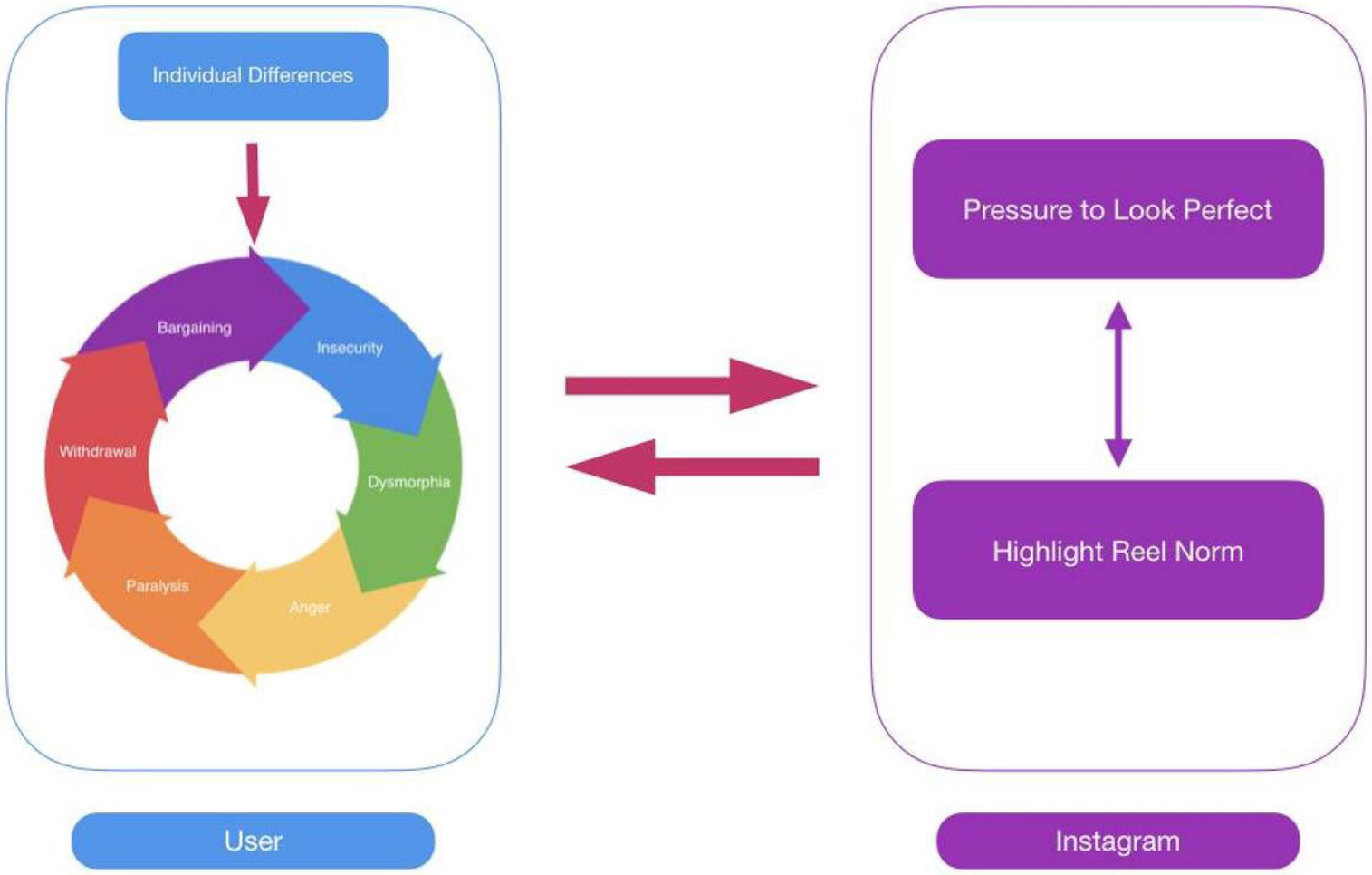
See celebs 1st, but…
Less Body …

- Reposts
- Boomerang
- Places

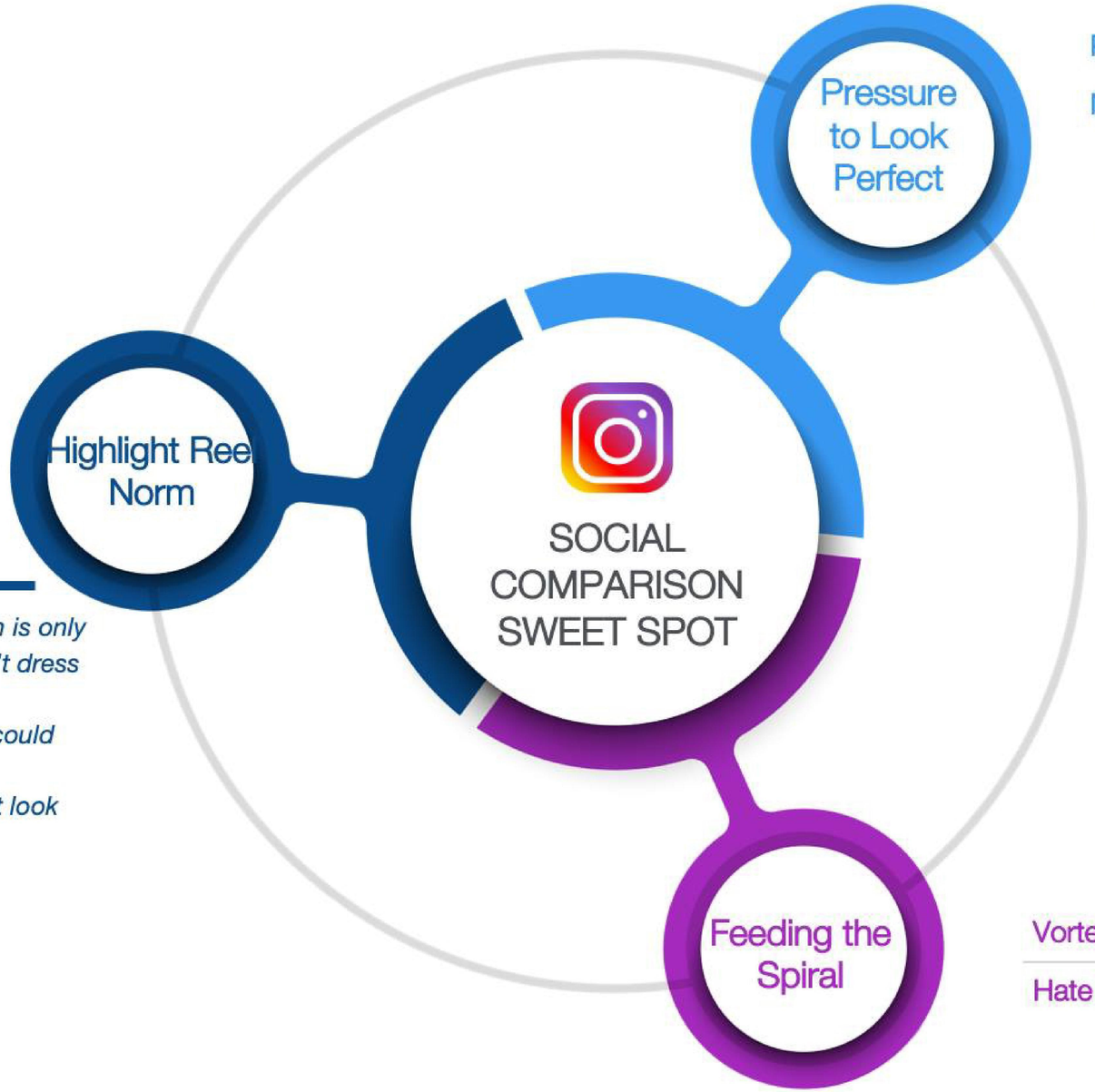
Formal to be seen
Broadcast
Face, body, celebrities!

Fun, social entertain
Closest friends. comfort
Face only, no bodies
No celebs

Users experience of downward spiral is exacerbated by our platform



Aspects of Instagram exacerbate each other to create a perfect storm



Posting "For the Gram"

Not filter for fun (like Snap)

"I felt like I should try a little bit harder to look cute more often and post cute photos"
"I felt like I had to fight to be considered pretty or even visible"

Monetizing face + body

Regular people look special

"(I felt worse) and realized, Instagram is only a highlight reel and a lot people don't dress up and put a ton of effort into their appearance in day to day life that it could just be "for the gram"
"Instagram is strictly for pictures that look good."

"I keep scrolling through her posts (and go to her profile) to see more. She tagged another person so I click and look at them. An hour later I am like, I just spent an hour looking at these beautiful people and I am still in bed."

Vortex of Feed + Profile and Explore

Hate to love

Mental health outcomes related to this can be severe

Eating Disorders

"I keep looking at these images (spiralling). (After getting off IG) I don't know, sometimes I just don't eat or try to eat less."

Body Dysmorphia

"I wish I had the money to get my nose/(other body parts) fixed."

Body Dissatisfaction

"(when I keep looking at these pictures) I feel like I am too big and not pretty enough"
"It makes me feel insecure about my body even though I know I am skinny."

Depression

"The constant judgement and jealousy can take you to a dark place."
"Some times (after spiralling) I just close my phone and lie on the bed."

Loneliness

"I feel like maybe (because I look like this) I don't have a boyfriend."
"I saw this kid with acne and he had friends! I didn't realize that was possible."

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External factors impact whether users go down healthy or unhealthy path

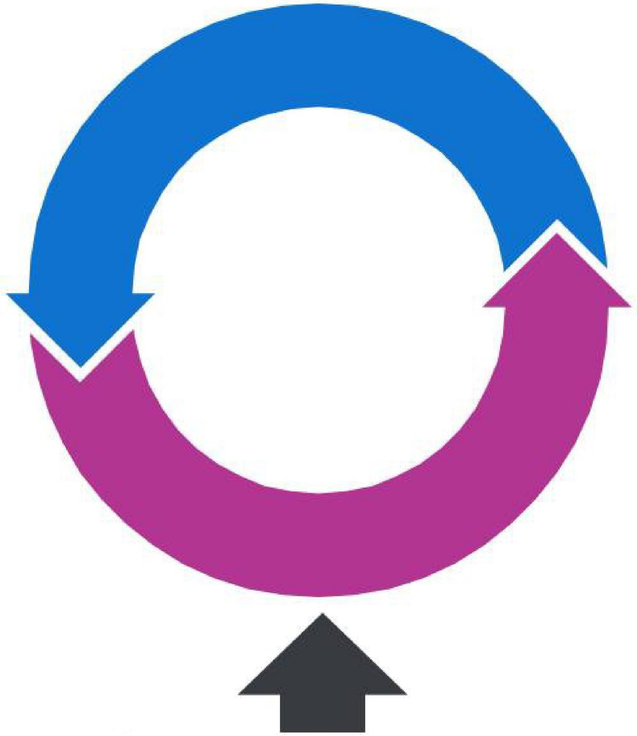
HEALTHY

Work on internal confidence
(self talk)
- I am good enough, focus on what makes you valued and unique

Companionship
- Be with friends who love me

Inspirational Quotes
- Away from what we don't have and toward what we have
- "Comparison is the thief of joy"

Get off phone
- Walk, bike, be with family and friends



TWO External forces play a part:

#1 **Bad mood** - life events, physical and mental health

#2 **Maturity** = perspective + confidence

UNHEALTHY

Dysmorphia
- Pick out bad things in mirror

Emotional isolation
- Comparison and loneliness go hand-in-hand
  - Acne = people don't want to be around me
  - Body image = not worthy of a boyfriend/girlfriend

Emotional exhaustion
- Stay home, sleep

Anger, irritability followed by feeling BAD not MAD

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Coordinated product and outreach efforts can help flip the switch from negative to positive social comparison

Changing norms around sharing

Flipping the switch to Inspiration

Highlight body positive and inclusive influencers

Encouraging realistic sharing

Showing people how far they have come

Showcase journeys of real teens with realistic starting points

Breaking the spiral

More control over what they see

Empathetic and validating comms

Spring Cleaning Feed events

Conclusion

Key take-aways and what this means for product development

Conclusion

- **Body image comparisons are formed by a trifecta of factors**: body standards, flawless skin, and fashion. Other social comparisons include influencer “money for nothing” lifestyles, relationships (family and romantic), travel, experiences, and talents.
- **Social comparison journeys mimic the grief cycle.** Pre-existing moods are a precursor to a downward emotional spiral, encompassing a range of emotions from jealousy to self-proclaimed dysmorphia.
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- **Other apps are shielded by fun filters.** TikTok is grounded in dance, fun. Snapchat is sheltered by the element of fun that keeps focus on the face and not the body and sharing with close friends. At the other extreme, VSCO is a detached dream that is 100% edited.

Targeted Interventions

- **Celebrate small but meaningful accomplishments** to show users their lives are moving forward.
- **Show progress toward a goal** showing the journey rather than just the destination highlights the work in progress that is life.
- **Customize and personalize Instagram experience**: allow users to easily show dislike for types of content to customize the algorithm on Explore. Allow for easier graph trimming, both for who they follow and who follows them.
- **Personalized time-out mindfulness breaks** help people remember that Instagram isn't real life.
- **Surface body inclusive influencers** to make teens feel validated and included.
- **Flip the switch from envy to inspiration** through concerted effort to change norms around sharing and surfacing highlights that are inspiring but not triggering.
- **Surface "fun" filters** rather than filters designed around beautification.

Targeted interventions

- **Lean into current time spent tools** to remind teens to take a break from Instagram.
- **Communications should be empathetic but realistic**; often it's as simple as validating the experience of teens and telling them it's OK.
- **Showcase body inclusive influencers** in campaigns to help teens feel included and validated. Celebrities that accept and poke fun at themselves have most positive impact than influencers who present ideal lifestyles.
- **Highlight transformation journeys**, especially those with realistic starting points, rather than celebrating end points.

Relevant Research

- Social Comparison on Instagram
- Defining Body Image Issues
- What we know about Body Image
- Authenticity and Self Expression on Instagram

OTHER

- Teen Mental Health Deep Dive
- Hard Life Moments - Subjective Well-being on Instagram
- Upward Social Comparison Treatment Approaches
- Defining a vision and strategy for Social Comparison