#selfie
A self-reflective venture into the realms of Instagram

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Abstract

The autoethnographic research project #selfie investigates the effects of the social media platform Instagram on the well-being of users aged 15–28 years. It focuses on the physical, psychological and psychosocial aspects of this user group’s behaviours, thoughts, and feelings.

A review of current research shows that while Instagram usage can enhance short-term well-being by triggering positive emotional responses, the long-term consequences can include information overload and stress phenomena, which can lead to a decreased ability or even inability to focus on one specific thing or moment. The present thesis examines the effect of this decreased or lacking ability on individuals’ competence of reflective thinking and “mindfulness,” a competence which can be linked to living a lifestyle of sustainability. Without reflective thinking, individuals are unable to determine their own standpoint when it comes to issues related to sustainability.

The review of current research is juxtaposed with excerpts from interviews and conversations with the investigated user group, as well as autoethnographic investigation and reflective illustrations based on the author’s own experience with Instagram. Through this, the actuality of prevailing opinions in current literature is discussed critically. This research suggests that design can and should bring issues such as extensive Instagram usage and its possible effects to public attention by offering an approach that can be as informative as appealing, making it attractive to commit to reflective thinking and encouraging the audience to broaden their horizon on the issue.

The design proposal of this project consists of an illustrated graphic story which combines comics, illustration and text in the form of a zine which opens up a platform for dialogue on Instagram usage, therefore challenging readers to reflect on their own experiences and guiding them on their way to mindful social media use.

Key words

Instagram, autoethnography, collaborative research, illustration
Acknowledgments

Writing this Master’s thesis would not have been possible without the help of all my amazing participants, interview partners, and all the people who engaged in creative dialogue. They turned this project into what I’d intended it to be, a collaborative research process, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

There are a number of people who supported me throughout the process and contributed their knowledge and experience. I’d like to thank our coordinators Zeenath and Mikael, who took the weight of organising this whole semester off our shoulders so that we could focus on our projects. Eric, who pointed out that every coin has two sides. Ola, who reminded me to trust in my writing. Amelie, Jens, and Sofia, who helped out a non-native speaker with their adjustments and advice. Nadja, who managed to read my paper even before it made sense, and offered emotional support whenever it was needed. Verena and Christina, thank you for believing in me and reminding me to keep going! Bowen, for hanging out in the studio with me, each day, and putting up with my frustration as well as my incomprehensible sudden outbreaks of positivity. Lennart, without whom I’d possibly still be sitting staring at the first chapter. And, finally, Chris, for being there through it all, even throughout the parts you most definitely didn’t sign up for, and for reading my mind.
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A review of current research shows that while Instagram usage can enhance short-term well-being by triggering positive emotional responses, the long-term consequences can include information overload and stress phenomena, which can lead to a decreased ability or even inability to focus on one specific thing or moment. The present thesis examines the effect of this decreased or lacking ability on individuals’ competence of reflective thinking and “mindfulness,” a competence which can be linked to living a lifestyle of sustainability. Without reflective thinking, individuals are unable to determine their own standpoint when it comes to issues related to sustainability.

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The origin of this paper lies somewhere deep within the nature of creativity on a professional level and its need for appreciation by others. Working as a designer and an illustrator, I have made it my daily habit to record my surroundings in the form of drawings, and to then discuss the outcomes of this process with the people around me. Since it is my goal to make a living with this work, it has also been tempting to make these images accessible to a wider audience, and my medium of choice turned out to be Instagram. To me, uploading my work on Instagram initially meant that people from all over the world were able to access and react to it—but I soon realised that there were other things connected to it, side effects that manifested themselves soon after I had started to use the app. It became clear that, even though I enjoyed using Instagram and mostly still do, its usage had begun to affect my life as a whole. I spend a lot of time browsing the app on my phone, but that is only one part of the picture: I actually spend a lot more time thinking about the app even when I am not actively using it: It is both remarkable and, at times, scary.

If I try to describe the effect that Instagram has on me as a designer and an individual, I have to note that while on one hand, it raises my productivity due to my increased motivation to generate illustrations and upload them to my account, on the other hand it decreases my effectiveness when it comes to all tasks that don’t come as naturally as drawing. And even more importantly, it alters my lived reality to such an extent that I have experienced troubles when I was trying to focus on what was in front of me, my priorities in life and relationships, and my long term goals: I have transitioned from a state of being mindful and self-aware to a state where the thought of checking my phone for Instagram notifications lingers constantly in the back of my mind. This is not coincidental. I am well aware of the fact that like most other social media, Instagram is designed to trigger these kinds of responses from its users. The transition happened gradually and went almost unnoticed, even though I practise a lifestyle of regular self-reflection and evaluation of my own actions. As I was in the process of finding an interesting topic for the final report of my Master’s thesis in Design, I began to suspect two things: First, that there were others out there, people who were possibly less used to reflect upon their thoughts and actions, who were dealing with similar occurrences. And secondly, that there was no conscious discussion or dialogue about it happening amongst me and my peers.
At the same time as I started to engage my peers in such discussions, I began to look for ways of research that differ from the format of a typical thesis report: A method that would not only allow me to treat my illustrations as part of the research process, but would also enable me to incorporate and tell my own story of how Instagram usage influenced my daily life and my mindful state. I soon turned to autoethnography as a method of enquiry, because of its way of investigation that allows researchers to “embrace vulnerability as a way to understand emotions and improve social life” and to “make research accessible to multiple audiences.” (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 36) This method is not common across all academic disciplines, but it perfectly aligns with my understanding that design can—and should be—focused on the individual, the emotional and the intuitive rather than on bleak data and statistics. Design is organic and inclusive towards all people who are affected by it, a point of view which I seek to display the voices of people who are often not considered or reduced to mere data sources in traditional quantitative research—and I also seek to reply to those voices and engage in a creative dialogue. In order to achieve this, I have conducted numerous conversations with my peers as well as five detailed interviews or “open dialogues.” Such dialogues, according to Rose (in Gibson, Rose, and Fincher, 2015), should be understood as the “intersubjective exchanges of ideas, stories, empathy, imagery, and much more.” (p. 127) Empowering these voices from the margins of the traditional research sphere presents for me an approach to make research itself more democratic and thus socially sustainable.

This enquiry results in the integration of illustration design, reflective illustration as a way of “thinking” with my hands, voices from current literature as well as the voices of my peers into a thesis project which I reflect upon by weaving in my own experiences with the matter. I have therefore named my project #selfie, but instead of offering but a brief glimpse into another person’s life, I want to invite the readers of this thesis to join me in the prolonged process of critically reflecting upon their own Instagram habits through the lens of my findings.

When reflecting upon Instagram and the effects that it can have on oneself, it is important to put it in the broader context of digitisation, worldwide connectivity, the around-the-clock availability of content and smartphones in general, which can be regarded as the cornerstones that our modern civilisation is built upon. Our society has become increasingly fast-paced, and online content is constantly being updated or replaced in the blink of an eye. And the devices that enable us to participate in this process—our smartphones—are seldom further away than our own pants pockets, handbags, or bedside tables.

There are innumerable smartphone applications, or “apps,” designed to connect and entertain people, and Instagram is but one of them. With 800 million active users as of September 2017 (Statista, 2018), Instagram represents one of the biggest social media platforms and is amongst those by far the biggest image-based one. Its functions, which I will explain in more detail in Chapter 02, can be roughly described as enabling subscribers to upload photographs, to “like,” and to comment on the photographs of other subscribers. Research indicates that Instagram is especially popular amongst younger age groups, and that nowadays, teenagers tend to prefer it over Facebook. (Dunbar, 2016) Mia, one of my interviewees from this particular age group, confirms this and reviews Facebook as “extremely uninteresting” and “basically dead.” Through the interviews I have conducted for this project I have also tried to determine why Instagram is so popular amongst younger users, who are often referred to as the Generations Y and Z—the latter also called the “digital natives” (e.g., Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017)—, and how they deal with effects like the ones I am experiencing myself.

One of the most noticeable side effects that Instagram has had on me turns out to be decreased mindfulness. This connects to a constant longing for appreciation and attention that the app creates, as well as a visual information overload caused by my habit of extensively browsing the app. Mindfulness, as I see it, is a mental training technique that can help me to focus on the moment and what is right before me—instead of what I see on my smartphone screen. Because mindful living can lead to higher awareness of one’s own personal values, even if they are abstract concepts, research has repeatedly connected it to sustainability. (e.g. Ericson, Kjenstad, & Barstad, 2014, and Siqueira & Pitassi, 2016) Through the interviews and conversations conducted as part of my research, and also through reflective illustrating, this thesis presents my qualitative research approach to investigating the following questions: How do people aged 15–28 (myself included) use Instagram, in what ways does the app influence their lives, and what are their reflections on possible side effects such as decreased mindfulness?
When researching Instagram, one has to acknowledge that the social media platform consists of users from diverse social groups and from all over the globe. Manovich (2017) admits that ‘Instagram is used in hundreds of different ways by its hundreds of millions of users, so any single answer to the question ‘what is it’ will be insufficient.' (p. 11) I therefore want to emphasise that I am by no means attempting to offer such an answer, because it is simply impossible. Like others, this project can only give a glimpse into the sphere of Instagram. When one tries to look at a part of it closely, the lens will enable a researcher to only look at one relatively small aspect at a time. In order to conduct meaningful research I have chosen one particularly small aspect—my own experience—and have used it to initiate a process of autoethnographic enquiry or 'reflexivity' (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 2) and ensuing dialogue. Even if this project enabled me to look closely at the behaviours of only a small numbers of users, the insight I have gained is much more detailed and in itself valuable.

Apart from opening up a dialogue on Instagram and how it can affect people's daily lives, this thesis project has enabled me not only to draw on research methodologies taken from different academic disciplines, but also to incorporate the results of my research in a transdisciplinary design project drawing on various creative techniques.

I have briefly touched upon my goal to democratise research by making the results of my project accessible to wider audiences than those of "traditional, esoteric academic articles from journals that often sit on people's shelves or are skimmed quickly online, their impact and potential to create change in people's lives lost because of their lack of availability and accessibility." (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 41) Writing autoethnography is one way of doing this, but as a designer and illustrator I also believe in the power of stories that are being told through images. And as Instagram proves, images can also be the starting point for discussion and dialogue. Through my reflective illustrations, I am telling the story of my research in another version which will be published in the form of a magazine, together with statements from my interviewees as well as a brief summary of this paper. This strategy enables me to reach out to potential readers who might recoil at the sight of a "traditional" academic paper. Especially younger individuals such as teenagers may find an illustrated graphic story more accessible.

Other authors/illustrators have followed a similar approach, for example Liv Strömquist ("Kunskapens frukt", 2014) and Reinhard Kleist ("Castro", 2010). Furthermore, as a result of reading and engaging with the illustrated graphic story, readers' awareness of Instagram's possible side effects will be heightened and can guide them on their way to a more conscious and mindful usage themselves.

Interestingly, the most renowned authors who have published texts about Instagram, social media usage and digitisation are generally very critical, often openly reprimanding people with differing opinions. In contrast, I intend to represent all voices in this text evenly, by juxtaposing the positions of technophobes and technophiles. Moreover, I use the current literature to give a general understanding of Instagram, online social media and their connection to mindfulness, well-being and sustainability as seen from the researchers' perspective. In Chapter 03, a preliminary survey, conducted on Instagram itself, offers some initial insight into how users feel about the platform and about spending time on it. Apart from this, my project focuses on qualitative research in the form of interviews and conversations with other users. Those were held in the form of open dialogues to establish a two-way process resembling classical co-design processes.
The global spread of digitisation has been virtually unstoppable ever since the World Wide Web was opened to wider audiences in the early 1990s. While at first it was widely viewed as a facilitating service because it brought different ends of the world closer together, it has also turned the lives of people increasingly more complex. Technological changes have influenced both work and recreational routines. Thorpe (2007) describes a "worldwide network that is always on, flooding us with more information than we can digest, creating higher expectations for how fast work can be done, and taking away any time for reflection," (p. 154) and concludes that this accelerated pace of living "causes disconnection—from real places, from our internal thoughts, and from long-term considerations—and weakens cultural sustainability." (p. 154)

One technological innovation that has led to greater intensification of such processes was the introduction of smartphones. A smartphone allows its owner to comfortably connect to the Internet around the clock, a development which has been widely received with positive responses. I personally value the possibility to check in with my friends’ activities or look at their social media posts whenever I want to, but I would also like to mention the criticism uttered by authors such as Crary (2013):

[...] the effectiveness of 24/7 lies in the incompatibility it lays bare, in the discrepancy between a human life-world and the evocation of a switched-on universe for which no off-switch exists. Of course, no individual can ever be shopping, gaming, working, blogging, downloading, or texting 24/7. However, since no moment, place, or situation now exists in which one can not shop, consume, or exploit networked resources, there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life. (p. 30)

To me it seems as if my smartphone usage forces me to juggle the online and offline part of my life at the same time—two parts which require different, yet similar capabilities of me as a user, and which overlap at times. However, it is often unclear how much and where I further assume that this struggle derives from the fact that I am a late adopter of smartphones and maybe digital technologies in general. Even though I was introduced to them at a rather young age, I never made regular use of them before I started
my design career. Therefore, I am not a digital native, but I am not a member of a generation of "digital immigrants," as I would like to call them, either. During one of my conversations, a friend stated that while we can always look back on our smartphone-free childhood days and argue that the world was a better place back then, individuals who grew up with those technologies might never experience these kinds of feelings. From the perspective of authors such as Crary, on the other hand, one can relate to his looking at these developments with particular scepticism, and he might even be excused for not wanting to take on a different point of view when walking down memory lane.

When reviewing literature on the matter, it becomes obvious that most authors and scholars who write about digitisation and the rise of smartphone technologies are digital immigrants, and as such mostly take a critical stance against them. At the same time, the digital natives I engaged with during conversations and interviews—some of them still teenagers—have much less inhibitions and act more confidently, especially when it comes to Instagram. I position myself somewhere in between those two standpoints insofar as while I am aware of the benefits that Instagram and my smartphone can offer me, I also have to admit that my strategies of coping with and/or avoiding online stress (Bradley, 2006) generally lack sophistication. Especially in situations when I don’t want to deal with my offline life, I find myself retreating to my comfortable Instagram bubble. And I am not only referring to situations of stress and pressure, but also to situations when I’m simply bored or impatient, for example while standing in a supermarket queue or waiting for the bus. Julia, a young woman whom I interviewed about Instagram consumption from the viewpoint of sustainable living mentions that she has turned off her notifications and also sets a timer which restricts her daily social media use in general. What seems simple to her is almost unimaginable to accomplish for me. As I have noted earlier, the availability of immense amounts of content whenever and wherever, combined with the increasingly fast pace of our society, can lead to Internet users’, or Instagram users’ especially, decreased ability of focussing on the present moment. Moreover, the amount of content that our brains are flooded with, and flood themselves with, makes it hard for an individual to differentiate between those things that are important for them and those things that are not: Bradley (2006) describes how extensive consumption can lead to different stress phenomena such as ‘information overload, […] demands for availability, lack of organizational filters, and difficulty of separating “noise” from essentials, changing level of expectations and an altered perception of time and space in general.’ (p. 391)

While this may appear intimidating, based on my experience there are strategies that users can follow to tackle these stress phenomena. One of them is mindful living. As Ericson, Kjønstad, and Barstad (2014) define it:

Mindfulness is a mental training technique that promotes awareness and a more mindful way of living. It has been subject to an increasing number of scientific studies, and we believe that the reported effects on individuals, such as increased well-being, value clarification, awareness, empathy, and compassion, could be helpful in supporting a transition toward sustainability. (p. 74)

To sum it up it has to be stated that while digitisation is undeniably spreading and we increasingly have to deal with phenomena like, for example, information overload, we have the responsibility to explore ways of countering them. This development should be facilitated by design.
Instagram was introduced by its founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 and released on the iOS App Store on July 16, 2010. Approximately two years later, on April 3, 2012 it became available for Android phones and was downloaded more than one million times already on the first day. (Blagdon, 2012) Instagram was sold to Facebook within the same year. Today, it is available on Android, Windows, and iOS phones and also via a desktop browser interface. With its more than 800 million active users, it is one of the biggest online social media. Its popularity can be traced back to the fact that it is intended to be a platform for sharing snapshots. For most people, as Schroeder (2013) argues, “snapshots mean something because they preserve a memory, capture a moment, or depict a friend, family member or loved one,” (pa. 22) so in this way, Instagram hits this nail—the need of connecting to friends and loved ones and their moments—right on the head. To me, it is on top of that a platform for inspiration and creative input that allows me to look at the works of designers, artists and illustrators from all over the world—all of that combined in one device, the constant companion of billions of people today (eMarketer, 2018): the smartphone.

Each smartphone holds the possibility for its user to create, distribute and consume images. To quote Manovich (2017), “[c]amera, photo paper, a darkroom, exhibition spaces such as galleries, and publication venues such as magazines exist together in one hand-held device.” (p. 11) In this context, Instagram can function as all of the above, since it allows the user to control the phone camera, produce and process the photographs taken, as well as to edit, exhibit, archive and distribute them to a worldwide online network that is constantly expanding: On an average day, about 52 million new images are uploaded to Instagram. (Statisticbrain, 2018) As mentioned above, and as Instagram’s co-founder would have put it: what is Instagram?

Interaction on Instagram happens between users who follow or send direct messages to each other through the app’s interface, as well as when users like or comment on other’s posts. Moreover, it is common to “tag” another user in the comment section of a post that is deemed interesting. Interestingly, it is also possible to get insights into other users’ accounts without following them, if they haven’t set their account to “private.” This setting allows users to sort the requests of potential followers and to admit only those the user feels comfortable sharing content with. It is possible to change this setting if one so desires. As for me, I have set my account to “public,” which allows everyone on Instagram to view my posts and has resulted in quite a diverse group of followers. Sometimes, other accounts start to follow me and then, after realising that I’m not following “back,” they “unfollow” me again. I write “other accounts” because it is sometimes impossible to determine who the person behind the account is, or even if it is an actual person at all. This can be annoying up to a level of frustration, but since I am not using my account to post personal content, I have so far not experienced any negative consequences. When talking about this phenomenon, my interviewee Mia concluded laconically: “I always find it super annoying, but that’s just the kind of spam you have to deal with on the Internet.”

As Bradley (2006) describes, the goals of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should include, amongst others, “[w]ellbeing and quality of life for all”, “[e]nrichment in the social contact between people”, and “[s]ustainability in a broad sense (the environment, economy, and human side).” (p.392) Instagram, being a part of ICT, does not necessarily meet these standards. In fact, previous research on Instagram suggests that often the opposite is the case, for example when it comes to the question of social contact and human interaction. Researchers claim that when Instagram users follow others, they are often especially interested in their lifestyle—quite commonly represented by depictions of
Kevin Systrom (2013) puts it on his blog, it is a tool for “producing photos on the go, in the real world, in realtime,” which means that it is intended to be used as an all-in-one photo generator, with no other devices or applications being needed. Of course, while many “Instagrammers” use the application in this way, professional photographers, designers, companies, bloggers, and other enthusiasts have found their own means to work around these restrictions and use professional equipment and software to create their images, which are transferred to their accounts only after they have been finalised. (Manovich, 2017) My interviewee Lars, for example, uses the app mainly to post nature photography in a semi-professional context. He explains how he edits his images in Adobe Lightroom or even Adobe Photoshop and then exports them back to his phone, in order to obtain elaborately altered images that wouldn’t be possible with Instagram’s built-in image filters. But even though users with a rather professional content that people can identify themselves with, content from normal life, is not being valued at all anymore. People run after bloggers carrying around Gucci bags that no normal school girl could ever afford, and they start to daydream instead of looking for someone they could actually identify themselves with. I think this is what’s being lost in this selfie world. […] when you look at those bloggers who have millions of likes or followers—they are travelling around the globe, they are jetsetters— it has nothing to do with normal life anymore. And that’s what, a few years ago, the models on the [magazine] covers used to be. Now it’s the bloggers on Instagram. They’re enacting something other than the everyday. And that’s what I think is going wrong, because the younger a girl is, the less she understands what’s going on.

Sarah continues that she is not intending to be like those bloggers anymore, because in the last months she has increasingly realised that it’s not her “thing.” She had found herself trapped in a loop of pressure after each new upload:

This photo has received 2,000 likes, so the next one has to go down at least as well. I don’t want the people to think things like, oh, she’s actually not that pretty, or, oh, she’s in fact fatter than I thought. I mean, of course you have thoughts like these [as a blogger]. […] First of all, it has nothing to do with real life, and then there’s this pressure that you put on yourself, that’s what bugged me.

She explains that she feels uncomfortable talking about her Instagram account when she meets new people, out of fear for being judged when they discover the size of her follower community. She repeatedly states that “just because one has 100,000 followers it doesn’t mean that one’s special.”

I concluded this particular interview with mixed feelings of guilt and embarrassment, because I, too, had been making preliminary assumptions on Sarah’s character before I was able to talk to her, simply based on her Instagram account. During the interview we discussed how these prejudices occur and reoccur even if one is trying to open a conscious debate about Instagram and consume it more mindfully, as in my case, or if one has previously been subjected to such prejudice, as in her case. It feels unfair that people should judge Sarah for presenting herself in a certain way, “even though that’s what everyone does on Instagram,” as she promptly reminded me. And while being embarrassed that I forgot this in the first place, it makes me wonder yet again how others perceive this. My interviewee Mia, who uses her Instagram account as a diary, states that she does follow certain celebrities such as, for example, Kim Kardashian, but has no particular interest in her or her life: An indicator

According to Manovich (2017), “the neologism “Instagram” itself cleverly combines names of earlier technological media of representation and communication: instant camera and telegram.” (p. 112) The name sums up what Systrom and Krieger had intended their app to become: A platform for snapshots out of the moment and direct user-to-user messaging. Apart from its image manipulation and distribution functions, Instagram is mainly used for its social network aspects. Each user’s account consists of the own feed, where the content uploaded by
that digital natives do indeed use Instagram more naturally or have a better understanding of its underlying mechanisms? My youngest interviewee, Tom, 15 years old and an active Instagram user since the age of 12—the official age limit to creating an Instagram account is 13—, brings in another interesting aspect: He explains that when he and his friends first started using the app, it was tempting because all the “cool people we were following on YouTube at that time were on the platform. To us it felt as if we could be in direct contact with the person, because we were able to comment underneath their pictures.” Tom also states that Instagram, in general, makes him “feel more connected with the world” and explains that through Instagram, he has also found many friends he would never have met otherwise. With this development, new mixed friendship forms evolve. Mia states: “I actually spend a lot of time with my friends while we each independently grind Instagram on our phones.” Teenagers sitting together, each browsing their own phone, might bewilder parents on the one hand, but is on the other hand a new way of living a friendship that Instagram has brought in its wake.

Particularly when looking at Instagram from the perspective of my younger interviewees, it shows that for them it is mainly a tool for connecting with friends, be they offline or online contacts. As Mia states, to her the platform means a gate into the world that allows her to glimpse into others’ lives.

This compares to how earlier generations, myself included in my early teenage years, used youth magazines or TV to keep themselves current on what activities people of their interest were engaged in. Furthermore, in a study with 432 undergraduates, Pittman (2015) found that “as students’ affinity for […] Instagram increased, their self-reported loneliness decreased. Similarly, the more they both created and consumed content within […] Instagram, the more reported loneliness decreased.” (p. 67)

Apparently, while parents or older generations in general might be especially sceptical about this aspect, the benefits of digital connectivity are what young users gain the most from.
Another interesting aspect that I discussed with my interviewees and conversation participants was the way that we construct our Instagram feeds in relation to the feelings we want to gain from using the platform. Researchers such as Pariser (2011) mainly criticise the algorithms of structures based on big data, such as Google, which construct "filter bubbles" that enable users to see exactly the content the algorithm presumes they would like or find relevant. At the same time, those bubbles prevent them from seeing anything unexpected or uncomfortable.

On Instagram, users pre-select what they want displayed on their feed by choosing which other accounts to follow. They construct their own "bubble" according to their personal interests and preferences, by creating an assortment of other Instagrammers whose content they find appealing. This assortment is then refined by Instagram’s built-in algorithms in a very non-transparent way that almost all of my participants find annoying or unintelligible. This was repeatedly stated as response to the question what they don’t like about Instagram. Mia even remarks that she feels "monitored," a suspicion that I definitely share. Theoretically it looks like each user is able to consciously choose what or whom to see on Instagram, which includes the possibility for them to reflect upon their “bubble” creation and to actively change or expand it according to their preferences. But this possibility is being diminished by the way Instagram itself is structured. Furthermore, as I have experienced myself, one can grow too lazy or too comfortable in one’s own bubble to actively seek its expansion and to maybe make room for content related to complex or problematic issues such as environmental concerns and politics. And even if they try, the services provided might just be disappointing, as the following quote from Lars demonstrates:

Recently I also started to follow major news papers, to see what kind of news are up there, because I realised I’m on Instagram so often that I might as well use it to [...] find out about what’s going on in the world. […] I don’t think it really works, because I feel like even [major news accounts] are posting a lot of posts to make them visually attractive, and attractive to a younger audience, rather than actually share what’s going on. [...] Just a couple weeks ago there was this

In order to open up a dialogue about Instagram usage that goes beyond the reach of my personal network of friends and contacts, I decided to conduct a short survey on Instagram itself early on in the research process. Instagram Stories allows a user to pose simple questions with two answering possibilities. However, the survey function has several restrictions in addition to the limited choice of answers. First, since most users flick through the stories rather quickly, it is necessary to formulate the question in a short and concise way, which doesn't leave much room for detailed enquiry. For the same reason I also decided to limit the extent of the survey to just four questions, the fourth being subsequent to the third. Secondly, it is very hard to gather demographic data or other details on the people participating in the survey: The only insight on their background, such as age, gender, or social group can be taken from the user’s Instagram profile, but Instagram users don’t have to disclose any of this information. I have therefore only a vague understanding of the participants’ nationalities or social groups. While age group and gender are easier to determine with the help of the pictures that the participants post on their accounts, this is extremely time-consuming as it has to be done by reviewing each user profile. However, since Instagram is after all a social network, it is possible to draw some conclusions about at least the part of the followers one is personally acquainted with.

I decided to conduct the survey with the help of a colleague who has a follower base of approximately 750 people, many of which are, according to said colleague, in the target age group of 15—28 with a considerable percentage being under 18 years old.
The detailed results of the survey are displayed in figure 01 and 02, with the first image depicting the replies of all participants and the second one depicting the replies of the participants who are under the age of 18. The last question, which was intended to be a follow-up question to the third, was interestingly answered by more people than expected, since 43 voted “yes” on the third question, but 53 chose to answer the fourth one. I found myself particularly interested in the responses of users who are younger than 18 years, which could be determined with the help of my colleague. The results show that most participants, irrespective of their age group, think that they gestures for accounts they might like to follow, but also personalized advertisements that are inserted into their feeds and Instagram stories.

Furthermore, research into the tactics of “mind-jacking” brings even more alarming results: Apps like Instagram are deliberately designed in ways that interaction with the app triggers dopamine release, resulting in users becoming addicted to it. (Robinson, 2018) Creating an irresistible product brings profit to its creators, and that is technically nothing new. Robinson (2018) continues to elaborate on addiction:

But addiction is never positive, an addiction is never something we should strive toward. Even an addiction to something seemingly healthy like jogging or apples is negative because your brain is restructured to NEED it, because if you ever find yourself in a situation that makes it difficult to obtain that apple, you will set aside your usual moral and ethical principles in order to obtain it. (pa. 7)

Of course, I think to myself, I would never commit a crime just because someone took my phone away while I was trying to check my Instagram notifications. But I do know that I have checked those notifications while sitting at the dinner table with friends and family, and I do know that I have checked them first thing after I woke up, before even saying so much as “Good morning” to my partner. I have set aside those “moral and ethical principles” and it certainly does not feel good. Even though I conduct active research on Instagram, I have not managed to stem this kind of behaviour. In fact, it seems that the more I use Instagram, the harder it is to resist and to direct my attention elsewhere. Lee (2017) paints a very dark picture of our society’s future: “If human attention is one of the only things that will still be valuable. There’s no way to increase the amount of attention per-capita. More and more of economy will revolve around collecting and controlling attention.” (pa. 6)

So there are two main phenomena that go hand in hand with Instagram usage and negatively influence mindfulness: the constant need for appreciation that manifests itself as the desire to check one’s notifications and the amount of pre-sorted, pre-approved content that I am flooded with.
The conversations with my colleagues, friends and peers throughout the course of my project proved to be one of the most valuable aspects of my research. As Adams et al. (2015) describe it, autoethnographic research places a great deal of value on all its contributors. They are invited “to engage in the unfolding story of identities, experiences, and worlds, to creatively work through—together—what these experiences show, tell, and can mean.” (pp. 34-35) To me, it seemed right to address and to keep coming back to a subject that repeatedly influenced the lives of the people who spoke to me. It was interesting to check up on how their usage of Instagram changed throughout the course of my project and whether

**mindfulness, responsibility and sustainability**

My research on Instagram and its side effects has shown that “Internet stress,” as Bradley (2006, p. 391) calls it, is a real and common condition that can be connected to extensive and unrestricted usage of Instagram. It can even go to such an extent that users busy themselves with online activities just to be occupied at all, to distract themselves from their own minds. Several of my interviewees describe using the app in situations where they are idle, for example on public transport, or waiting for something. Mia talks about a friend who she describes as an “extreme smartphone junkie.” While admitting that she sometimes finds her friend’s behaviour annoying, she also claims that “somehow she needs it as compensation, when she’s had a bad day or when she’s stressed about school.” She also talks about her own usage of Instagram:

I use it extremely much just to be busy. I mean, better than doing nothing. Well, of course, free thinking is also great, but ... it’s like when you open Netflix and you don’t have to do anything. You open the app, and then you just have to scroll and your brain is busy.

While Mia mainly views this as an advantage of Instagram, because it helps her to relax, Lars states:

[…] the con’s [of Instagram] are really that often it just takes too much of your time and when you should be focussing on something else but that task is too hard, you go to Instagram just because it’s easy on the brain. […] It’s kind of like a drug. […] if you don’t think about how you use it or how often you use it, it can be very dangerous just because it makes you lose focus on what you’re actually supposed to do. […] In that sense, it’s very bad because it’s very time-consuming and very easy to, too easy to use, I think.

Ericson et al. (2014) give an example that matches daytime smartphone usage when they claim that nowadays we “have to deal with the increasing availability of competing activities that offer an easy escape from the ‘here and now’, often associated with multi-tasking: television, internet, cellphones, etc.” (p. 77) According to Carrier, Rosen, Cheever, and Lim (2015), individuals who were told to focus on using a computer and watching TV at the same time “switched between the media at an extreme rate of more than four switches per minute.” (p. 65) Even though this scenario differs from handling a computer (and using it to get work done) at the same time as a smartphone, there are certain parallels that can and should be drawn.
our conversations affected their usage, but at the same time, how our conversations affected me, too. Using those conversations as a method, I started to distinguish between spontaneous and guided conversations, with the latter often being the preparation or follow-up of an interview. As they had great influence on the design and therefore the outcome of the interviews I conducted, I value these conversations as a co-design strategy where I widely drew on insight I gained from, and in collaboration with, my peers.

When taking a step back and thinking about these statements, I realise that I have been in countless situations like this in the past—and other people might recognise themselves in these situations as well. Usually though, with the accelerated pace of events that demands high alertness at all times, it is hard to take this step and reflect on one's own actions and behavioural patterns. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) claim that in our society, it is evermore relevant to always be active, to never be without something to do, as opposed to stability, which has become undesirable. Ericson et al. (2014) elaborate on the notion of wants and needs in modern societies and state that while needs are ‘relatively inflexible […]’, wants are more adaptable, as they are shaped by the perception of what is considered important, “normal” or valuable in a culture. (p. 74) When comparing these statements with the quotes from above, it seems that the want for stability which I have when I feel overwhelmed by all the tasks and tools that demand my attention is actively being replaced by the want for constant action.

Contrasting the above is the call for more mindfulness and a usage of apps such as Instagram connected with an awareness of one’s own actions and consumption, a topic that I’ve discussed with my interviewees and conversation partners at length. Stability, from my point of view, should not be considered inaction, but a state that allows the world to persist in a sustainable way. Sustainability means the endurance of a system, process, or society, and for that to be possible, these systems, processes, or societies need stability. Thorpe (2005) describes sustainable development as “[d]evelopment that cultivates environmental and social conditions that will support human well-being indefinitely,” (p.7) which means, in a stable way. What are the consequences for sustainable living in a world where shifting one’s attention in and out of different media, in and out of the moment, and being constantly on the move, is what has become predominant? In a world where people keep their minds busy all the time it becomes difficult to keep track of one’s long term goals and abstract values, one of which can be sustainable living. I have experienced myself how easy it is to grow too complacent to take a step back and evaluate my actions as well as my ambitions.

But, as research on mindfulness is showing, it is possible to train and regain this capability. At first, I was sceptical about the concept of mindfulness—it sounded esoteric to me, to be honest. According to Germer (2004), “[m]indfulness is a skill that allows us to be less reactive to what is happening in the moment. It is a way of relating to all experience—positive, negative and neutral—such that […] our sense of well-being increases.” (p. 24) But when I started to further explore the topic and its possible connection to sustainability, I realised that I had already been trying to live mindfully for years, precisely as a means of countering processes such as hours-long browsing as procrastination—a thing I suspect is quite well-known to other professional creatives who find themselves waiting for inspiration.

Mindfulness is even more interesting from the perspective of sustainable design, since according to Ericson et al. (2014) it “can increase awareness and enable individuals to focus and continually refocus on their needs and well-being, which could give rise to new perspectives on how we can develop as individuals and societies.” (p. 74) They further state that its ‘reported effects on individuals, such as increased well-being, value clarification, awareness, empathy, and compassion, could be helpful in supporting a transition towards sustainability.” (p. 74) In my experience, mindfulness can also support the transition towards a more sustainable usage of Instagram and smartphones in general. With that in mind, the participants of my project and I have been reflecting upon our consumption of the app during the interviews and conversations.

When conducting the interviews, it was most important to me to meet my participants on an equal, respectful level, so they would feel comfortable and by no means think that I was merely using them to collect data. The measures I took to ensure this were, amongst others, to let them choose place, date, and time frame of the interview, and to also give them the possibility to ask me questions and to interrupt the session whenever they felt like it was needed. In this way, I designed the interviews more as a dialogue where either participant could lead or follow.
and where those roles could shift constantly. As Rose (in Gibson, Rose, & Fincher, 2015) emphasises, “[i]n open dialogue one holds one’s self available to be surprised, to be challenged, and to be changed.” (p. 130) She furthermore claims that such *openness is unlimited, since one always wants to try to understand others, and to listen with an open mind.* (p. 130) It is this open and flexible position that I strived to acquire throughout all my interviews.

The five interview participants were chosen according to their age, which had to fit into the required age group of 15–28 years, and according to their usage of Instagram. I either evaluated their accounts, or had known them before through previous conversations, and followed the impression that they had something to contribute to my project.

regulated way. Here I would like to include a quote from Sarah, who brings up another very interesting issue:

I sometimes realise that when I experience something beautiful, like, when I’m out and about and there’s a sunset, or when I’m at a concert [...], then the first thing I do is I take out my phone to capture the moment, to share it with other people. And that’s when I sometimes think, [...] why don’t you allow yourself to enjoy that moment just for yourself? Why don’t you leave your phone in your pocket [...]? [...] without thinking, could someone else be interested in this right now, or could I get a reaction to this online? [...] just enjoy the sunset without trying to take a good picture of it.

This reflection is very interesting because it shows how torn one can feel while trying to balance different moments, different audiences, different parts of life, which creates feelings of confusion and stress. Ericson et al. (2014) elaborate on how living under stressful conditions increases difficulties when it comes to taking “into account societal concerns such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, poverty, inequality, or racism” (p. 75)—the more time I spend with managing my own life and allocating my attention, the more I tend to block out such topics. Furthermore, all of these topics are dramatically under-represented on Instagram, as the earlier example of the news accounts has shown. Likes are Instagram’s most powerful currency, and most people will agree when I say that cute puppy snapshots are more likeable than documentary photography from an overflowing refugee camp.

Andersson and Öhman (2017), on the other hand, were able to prove that “[y]oung people’s conversations and meaning-making about political and moral issues increasingly take place in the various forms of social media” (p. 465) and claim that it is “reasonable to believe that environmental and sustainability issues dealing with political and moral concerns are also discussed and learned about in social media.” (p. 465) They do admit, though, that these circumstances are still under-researched. A way of enhancing these “conversations and meaning-making” could be connected back to mindfulness: Since each Instagram user has the power to curate the content that shows in their own feed, it is possible that users with more mindfulness and a better overview of our society’s situation might construct their feeds differently. Analogously, researchers Siqueira and Pitassi (2016) claim that “mindfulness may in fact make us more ethical.” (p. 1185)

In the end, two questions remain: How much of a difference can mindfulness actually make, and how can this difference be measured or evaluated? Siqueira and Pitassi (2016) conclude their paper quite prosaically, yet aptly:

We acknowledge that mindfulness cannot be promoted as a magical intervention. Reducing general consumption, improving social inclusion and promoting the economic development of the poor regions of the planet will not merely depend on a change in the cognition, attitudes and behavior of individuals in organizations. Sustainable economic development depends on political decisions that are highly reliant on socio-technical elements that privilege the values, beliefs and credos that take into account human societies and their relationship with the environment. (p. 1188)

As much as I agree with this final statement, I should note that for me, mindfulness has had a significant effect on my ability to self-reflect and critically evaluate complex contexts from a broader point of view. It also needs to be pointed out that mindfulness is not a one-time thing, but a condition that I continuously tune in or out of, and practise to bring myself back into. Since the user group I am studying and performing research with are hopefully going to make political decisions in the future, it is in my opinion as crucial as it is beneficial to engage them in taking up a self-reflective stance and to establish a fruitful dialogue on active consideration of their user habits.
Reflexivity is a mode of writing distinctive of autoethnography. Adams et al. (2015) describe it as "deep and careful self-reflection" (p. 3) and as "turning back on our experiences, identities, and relationships in order to consider how they influence our present work." (p. 29) In that sense, I am not only evaluating the influence of experiences on my written work or my research work, but also on the design work and the reflective illustrations I have created in the course of this project. Autoethnography as a method of qualitative research acknowledges the position of the researcher and its relation to and influence on the subject of research. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), it "treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act." (p. 273, according to Adams and Holman Jones, 2008) And Douglas and Carless (2013) focus on "one of the unique opportunities that autoethnography provides: to learn about the general—the social, cultural and political—through an exploration of the personal." (pp. 84-85)

Autoethnography has helped me greatly to first understand my own position within the framework of my project and subsequently, from this vantage point, to approach other individuals whose voices—while relevant to this context—might not have been considered valuable input in a more "conventional" investigation. Therefore, this project means a lot to me, since it represents one more step on my way of transitioning from conventional design to design for change.
The design process underlying this project begins with the creation of my own Instagram account. It is not wrong to say that I started this account out of peer pressure, or, to say it in the words of a true digital native, out of FoMO, the “Fear of Missing Out.” It was the beginning of May 2017, and I had for months been noticing, albeit from the outside, that more and more of my colleagues and friends took on to Instagram to share whatever pictures they deemed worthy of sharing. To me, at that time, the app seemed like a big playground for hipsters to connect with other hipsters, and, quite cynically, I assumed that most other users were at least aspiring hipsters searching for inspiration and recognition. Aware of the fact that many of my designer colleagues used the platform to display their work, I decided that it might serve as a low-effort portfolio substitute, definitely less troublesome to manage than to create a dedicated webpage. I created my first account and was, quite frankly, taken aback by the suddenness with which the network had me under its spell: Before I knew it, I was one of those inspiration- and recognition-seekers. And that was just the beginning. Being sucked into Instagram’s world was easy. Many of my friends and designer colleagues were there, along with countless other designers and illustrators to explore and follow. Just by providing some basic information about myself and offering some of my own drawings to the public, I had gained entrance to an immense library of inspiration. In the first days, I spent hours scrolling through pictures with the hashtag #illustration to find content that excited me. The most compelling part was that for this, I didn’t even have to turn on my computer. I didn’t even have to leave the couch. At first slowly and reluctantly, I started building a network of my own, and got in touch with designers and illustrators from as far away as the other side of the world, in a friendly and hazard-free environment and still without having to leave the couch.

I wouldn’t normally consider myself a “couch potato,” so after a while I started noticing that Instagram had begun to affect my behaviour: I wanted to have my phone with me at all times, in the supermarket, on the bus, in the bathroom—precisely as the participants of my interviews describe their own conduct. Whenever I had an idle moment, even if I was just waiting for my partner to tie his shoelaces, I opened the app and checked my start page for new content. It didn’t actually matter if there was something there, I still re-opened Instagram at the next possible opportunity to check again. The occurrences of such situations tripled on days when I dared to post something myself: The thought of checking for new notifications—new likes!—was constantly in the back of my mind. Obviously I had trouble focusing on my work on such a day, even if I was working on something really exciting. Being distracted by Instagram was so compelling, and often in a positive way, that it took a long time to acknowledge how much it had already affected me.

After realising the extent to which Instagram had subconsciously altered my behaviour, I began to consciously alter my way of drawing and looking at others. When sketching, I no longer tried to seek out that one person without a phone in my surroundings, which I used to do because I felt it would make for a better picture. Instead, I started to sketch people with their phones in hand, and realised that I now had many more subjects to choose from, as well as subjects who were totally unaware of how awkward and uncomfortable some of their poses looked. Sometimes, to catch especially quick and transitioning poses, I took a snapshot with my phone to record the moment for when I had more time. Then, while reworking those images and the earlier sketches into more elaborate drawings, I kept pondering on what the people in my images had been doing on their phones, if they were on Instagram, and if it affected their life in a way similar to what I was experiencing. This thinking then greatly influenced the content of my writing, the dialogues I had with my peers, and was woven into the interviews with other users.

My interest in other people’s stories about Instagram continued to grow bigger and bigger. It was a frequent topic in my class’s studio, and became even more popular after it had become clear that I would focus my thesis project on the app and its side effects. I started to wonder whether Instagram’s impact on my life would be different if I weren’t a designer, who I consider more vulnerable than a person who uses Instagram “just for fun.” This is because to me, each “like” and each follower was a means to evaluate how much my work, a very important part of my life, was being valued by others. It amazed me how naturally younger Instagrammers in my environment seemed to use the application, and I asked myself what it meant to be a few years younger and on Instagram, or on the other hand, older. While conducting initial research for my thesis project, I realised that focusing on Instagram partly meant sabotaging myself, because it
When evaluating the results of my research, it becomes clear that there is a wide range of influences that Instagram can have on its users. While all the different people I've spoken to over the course of this project recognise themselves in some of the situations that I have experienced, they all use the app in slightly different ways, which in turn results in different consequences. The expectations one has of Instagram seem to determine the different effects it can have on a subscriber: Someone who uses it for fun and to connect with friends doesn't necessarily experience the pressure to deliver content in order to gain appreciation.

The interviews have also shown that side effects like information overload seem to be handled better by younger interviewees like Mia, who claim that they just put their phones aside or turn them off:

I notice when I use Instagram more than I want to, and sometimes I can really just put my phone away. I think the amount of time that I spend on Instagram is very much related to my own well-being. You usually work on yourself and plan to do stuff, to live healthier and to do more sports and so on, but sometimes you just don't give a fuck, so to say, because you experienced something that was shit and you just want to relax and do something easy, and then I really don't care.

Mia’s statement contradicts my own feelings towards the app to a wide extent. A feeling of being monitored by unfathomable algorithms always prevails, as does the pressure of competition. And I would also like to acknowledge that some of the symptoms that I’ve been experiencing, such as headaches or the inability to sleep, may in fact not be connected to extensive Instagram usage, but extensive smartphone usage in general. (Scott, Valley, & Simecka, 2017)

One factor that all the participants agree on is, though, that being mindful and using Instagram often contradict each other. Being a mindful Instagrammer requires a lot of effort, but with the right tools, such as self-reflection and openness for discussion, it can be achieved. Regular intervals of taking a step back and evaluating one-
self, one's behaviours, thoughts, and feelings is necessary in order to detect unwanted behavioural patterns, similar to the situation that I found myself in when I discovered that I had been judging another person by her Instagram account. For me, it has been an important step to continuously draw and write about my experiences and thoughts in order to gain this distance that enables me to self-reflect. Several of this project's participants have stated that they found it helpful to talk about their Instagram usage in order to learn about themselves, and that it was an important and interesting topic that they felt was lacking consideration in their social environment.

It is hard to link a lack of mindfulness directly to possible consequences on sustainability. What can be stated, though, is that a conscious and mindful usage of Instagram is in itself sustainable, because it helps people to evaluate their own actions and to detect when they are not acting according to their ethical and moral principles anymore.

With my smartphone almost always in my pocket, it is easy to overuse Instagram because of its addictive tendencies. My research has shown that many of my peers have made similar experiences, yet they evaluate them differently: While on one hand, Instagram can be distracting because it leads to users checking for new content or notifications all the time, on the other hand the new content or notifications about messages from friends can evoke positive emotions. Some users even appreciate Instagram especially for its distracting factor, because it helps them to relax.

In general it can be stated that the participants appreciated the possibility to talk about and share their experiences. For me, the project results in a more conscious usage of the app. While I've become less critical of the social aspects of Instagram, my scepticism towards its underlying mechanisms such as the monitoring by algorithms has increased.

This project has enabled me to conduct research on an eye-to-eye-level with all my participants and to explore various research techniques, such as drawing and self-reflective writing. I will continue the project by working on the magazine that collects users' experiences in illustrated form and am looking forward to engaging more participants in critical discussion on and evaluation of their mindful Instagram usage in the future.
author's notes

01. The names of all interview participants were changed in order to grant anonymity.

02. The excerpts from some of the interviews were translated from German by the author.


list of illustrations

figure 01 – Johanna Meier, 2018

figure 02 – Johanna Meier, 2018

figure 03 – Lennart Schmitz, 2018. [Instagram phone interface screenshot]
Since writing a Master thesis often involves a lot of time being spent sitting in front of the computer, I enjoyed being able to also work on the artwork aspects of my project right from the starting point. During the last four months, the recurring reminder to eventually bring my project into an exhibition format of some sort helped me to clarify my intentions with the design outcome. At the same time, it enabled me to refine my visual language and challenged me to question the decisions I had made instinctively. It was a big benefit to know that the audience at Konsthall would at least partly overlap with the audience I intended to write my thesis for, so I was able to ask "How can I best address those spectators?" right from the beginning.

Nevertheless, there was a lot of thought that went into the process of transforming my thesis into an exhibition piece, and this thought process started already in January. The advantage of my project is, in my opinion, that it was very much based on visual material from the very beginning, and thus naturally turned into an exhibition piece over time.

A lot of work went into the “fine-tuning” of the project and the question of how to tailor it to the exhibition, the circumstances of which had only become clear after I had completed the thesis project and the exhibition module had started. Luckily I found that the modular structure of the exhibition and the general theme of my thesis, self-empowerment and respecting everybody’s experiences and needs, went very well together. My project’s main criteria are accessibility, even for readers outside of the academic sphere, contemplation, inner peace, which enables people to open up for issues of sustainability, and addressing a complex issue by acknowledging different perspectives.

My exhibition piece reflects these criteria in its own ways. I deliberately chose to position it in the middle of the room, to make it accessible from all sides without any walls that block viewers out. The lightweight structure of the hanging pieces enhances this, because the different elements can turn freely, which also means that the appearance of the...
Mindfulness and sustainability are of course complex concepts that are hard to convey to an exhibition visitor within the limited amount of time that is being spent on each exhibit – one of the biggest challenges of a group show. This is the reason why I chose to offer visitors a space to slow down for a moment, take in the movement of the hanging pieces, and maybe contemplate what they’ve seen so far by sitting down beneath the exhibit. There is the possibility to take a closer look at the #selfie magazine which contains more images, comics, and detailed information. This standpoint also offers a good overview over the surrounding projects and enables visitors to reflect upon the relation between them. Throughout my research process, I have discovered that mindfulness and self-awareness often are the first steps on the way to a more sustainable life, and my exhibit shows my intent to help and guide people on this way, but to also let them make their own discoveries in their own time. In my experience, self-reflected and -motivated change is usually the most sustainable.
In addition to the installation at Konsthall, I also put up posters with my illustrations in Växjö's city centre. They broaden the audience of my exhibit in a very spontaneous way, albeit it isn't possible to measure the impact of the poster action. Ideally, these posters in town raise questions and make people take a literal step back. They can also change people’s perception and awareness of their own surroundings, which is an important goal of my whole thesis project.

To put my project in the context of the graduates' group show, I must acknowledge that it is not as self-explanatory as some of the other projects are. This is why I decided to help and guide the spectators by providing the floor text which says "Instagram Stories", and also the magazine can clarify the project's purpose. In my opinion, it shows a difference between Master and Bachelor projects in a way that the Master studies are strongly based on research and mostly address very abstract concepts that other people might not be familiar with, thus resulting in projects that are not completely clear right away. But there, my research goal of making the project outcome more accessible comes into play. Besides that, my project is a very personal one and contains the stories of many individuals, which I believe makes it very exciting to look at and truly invites spectators to dive deeply into those stories. Even right at the opening, several visitors addressed me directly and shared their own Instagram stories with me.

Since I worked with finding accessible research methods throughout my thesis, I also decided to offer a workshop on drawing as reflective practice, a method that helped me greatly while I worked on my project. It was interesting to see the very different takes on reflective drawing: While some of the participants chose to visualise stories that had happened to them, others went into a deep thought process while creating abstract illustrations. Even though those were incomprehensible to an outsider, they were proof that deep reflection was happening. This helped me to once again acknowledge that we all are different, we all think differently, but we can still work together on a common goal.
workshop pictures (used by permission of the participants)
more pictures
I like spending time with people, but I also need time for myself. I feel that I'm more outgoing and social when I'm with others. When I'm alone, I like to do things that I enjoy, such as reading or drawing. I also like to spend time with my family and friends when I can.

In terms of technology, I use my phone to stay connected with people. I enjoy taking selfies and sharing them on social media. I also use my phone to keep in touch with friends who live far away. It's great to be able to communicate with them and keep up with what they're doing.

I feel that technology has changed the way we interact with each other. It's easier to keep in touch with people, but at the same time, it can be challenging to maintain meaningful connections. I try to be mindful of how much time I spend on my phone and make an effort to connect with people in person.

I'm looking forward to exploring new things and learning more about myself and the world around me. I'm excited to see where this journey takes me.