

Youth and Instagram Use: An Analysis of Patterns, and Perspectives

Akhitha Shijo,
SDMIMD, Mysuru, Karnataka

Faiza Fazal E. A.,
University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Sandra Samuel,
K. E. College, Mannanam, Kerala

Malini R,
Union Christian College, Kerala

The present study aims to explore and understand the extent of Instagram use among youth as well as an analysis of their perspectives. It employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design with a quantitative phase to understand the extent of Instagram addiction (N=250) followed by a qualitative phase (interviews) on 15 participants for deeper exploration, from various regions in the state of Kerala. The Instagram Addiction Scale was used to identify the participants with different levels of Instagram use. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who scored moderate in the scale, and thematic analysis was used to interpret the data collected through interviews. This process generated 185 codes, leading to 24 sub-themes and 3 major themes. The key themes identified were student perspectives regarding the reasons for initiating Instagram use, reasons for continued use, and its effects on behaviour and well-being. The study revealed initial motivations for using Instagram indicating various personal and social reasons. More specific reasons were identified as resulting in sustaining Instagram use. Instagram use was found to impact behaviour and well-being in various ways, impacting personal and social life.

Keywords : Instagram usage, social media use, social media addiction, mixed methods research

Social media encompasses a range of websites and applications that facilitate communication, community engagement, interaction, content sharing, and collaboration (Lutkevich & Wigmore, 2021). Nearly 4.7 billion people, or around 60% of the global population, engage with social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (DataReportal, 2023). Experian's consumer study indicates that over 98% of college students use social media. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter have

become essential tools for students, offering opportunities for learning, staying connected with friends, networking, news updates, and general information. Social media and communication apps have become increasingly significant in contemporary society, serving as crucial resources for community building, relationship development, self-expression, and business marketing. Over the past decade, Instagram has emerged as one of the most popular social networking sites transforming how youth interact and present themselves. In

India, Instagram boasts the largest user base of any country, with projections indicating around 357.3 million users by 2023, representing 24.8% of the Indian population. Currently, the user base is predominantly male (65.8%), and nearly 70% are under the age of 34, making the platform particularly popular among young people (Pirkamali, S., & D'Souza, 2020). Users aged 18 to 24 are the largest demographic group, numbering around 140 million. As of 2023, Instagram is the leading social media network in India, with 516.92 million active users, and teenagers constitute a significant portion of its user base. Globally, Instagram continues to dominate usage trends among adolescents and young adults. According to Statista (2023), individuals aged 18–24 constitute the largest user base of the platform. In India, this pattern is mirrored, with Instagram being among the top social media apps used by urban youth (Kemp, 2023). With the proliferation of affordable smartphones and data plans, Indian youth increasingly inhabit digital spaces that influence their identity formation, social validation, and emotional well-being (Bansal & Choundhary, 2024). For youth who are in the period of significant developmental transition, such social networking platforms serve as means of self-perception and social comparison.

Several theories help us understand the increasing use of Instagram, notably the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959), and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which explain how individuals use the platform to meet psychological needs, manage impressions, and evaluate themselves against others. Recent research across the world indicates a significant association between excessive Instagram use and heightened symptoms of anxiety and depression among adolescents and young adults (D'Souza & Hemamalini, 2018; Foroughi, 2021). Factors contributing

to this include social comparison, cyberbullying, and the pressure to maintain idealized online personas, all of which can negatively impact mental well-being (Villanueva-Moya et al, 2023).

Given Instagram's profound influence on modern society, understanding the motivations behind its use is crucial. Instagram serves as a key platform for social interaction, self-expression, and communication, particularly among young adults. Analyzing these motivations helps in understanding how the platform affects identity formation, self-esteem, and mental health. It also sheds light on how Instagram influences social trends and consumer behaviour through the pervasive influencer culture. Insights into these motivations can assist educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers in developing digital literacy programmes, effective interventions, and platform features that address user needs. Ultimately, comprehending why people use Instagram is essential for managing the evolving social media landscape and ensuring a positive and balanced digital experience in our interconnected world. The reasons for using Instagram are as varied as its user base, ranging from self-expression and social connection to professional goals. While considerable research has been done in the context of identifying the prevalence and pattern of Instagram use as well as its relationship to psychological correlates (Moreton & Greenfield, 2022; Pathak & Jindal, 2022), very little research has been done in the context of understanding the subjective experience of Instagram users. Much of the existing literature is based on Euro-American populations, limiting its applicability to non-Western contexts. In India, cultural norms related to family, gender, and social respectability intersect with digital behaviour in ways that merit deeper investigation.

Objectives

1. To assess the level of Instagram use among youth and to identify individuals exhibiting moderate usage patterns.
2. To explore the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals with moderate Instagram use with a focus on the nature and context of their engagement.

Method

The study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed methods research design employing a quantitative phase aimed at identifying youth with levels of Instagram use. Participants for the qualitative phase of study were identified from among the moderate level of users employing purposive sampling method.

Participants

The participants in the study comprised of 250 college students (18 to 25 yrs) from across the state of Kerala (Males=81 and Females =169). From among the group, those identified as having moderate addiction were considered for the qualitative study. 15 students were therefore identified from the particular category through purposive sampling. Care was taken to ensure that the participants were selected from different economic, social and religious backgrounds.

Measures

Instagram Addiction Scale (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018)- The Instagram Addiction Scale comprising of 15 items was administered to screen the participants based on their level of Instagram use. The participants were thus categorized into four groups based on the scores obtained, viz., non-addicted (15–37), mildly addicted (38–58), moderately addicted (59–73), and severely addicted (over 73). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale ranges from 0.76 to 0.88 and the construct validity of the scale has been supported by factor analysis.

Semi-structured interview schedule - It consists of 15 open ended questions pertaining to various aspects related to Instagram use. The questions in the interview schedule were framed based on the reviewing existing literature about Instagram usage. The items in the schedule were prepared in consultation with experts in the field and consensus was reached among experts in finalising the items in the schedule. Expert validation ensured the relevance, clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions, thereby enhancing the content validity of the tool.

Procedure

Prior to the conduct of the study, the research proposal was submitted to the Institutional Ethics Committee and approval for the conduct of study was obtained. An informed consent was taken from the participants and social demographic details such as name, age, gender, education, and religion were also collected. Participants were asked whether they were willing to share their opinions, motives and experience related to Instagram usage. Participants in the qualitative study were informed that an interview will be held through telephone and they were supposed to present their viewpoints related to their motives behind Instagram usage. Prior to the interview, time slot was fixed for conducting interview. The participants could take slots according to their convenience. Confidentiality was ensured that no one except the researcher would listen to the audio notes. It was ensured that the recordings will be deleted once the research is over. Open-ended questions were asked to the participants and responses were recorded. The interview sessions lasted for an average of 30 minutes. All the participants were interviewed individually and this took about a month of time in total. The responses obtained from the participants were then transcribed and translated to English using language experts.

Open coding procedure was followed to find codes followed by sub themes and then major themes.

Data Analysis

Descriptive data analysis was done on the scores obtained in the Instagram addiction scale. Participants were categorized into non-addicted, mildly addicted, moderately addicted and severely addicted groups. Only those students who fell within the moderate addiction range were selected further for further qualitative exploration using interview method.

The data collected from in depth interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Themes are features of participant's accounts characterizing particular perceptions and/ or experiences that the researcher sees as relevant to the research question. After the interview were conducted, recorded session were transcribed, followed by reading and re-reading of data to get accustomed to the information collected. The responses obtained from the participants were then transcribed and translated to English using language experts. Open coding procedure was followed to find codes followed by sub themes and then major themes. It was followed by initial coding of data were a total of 185 codes were generated and which were clubbed into 25 subthemes and 3 major themes.

Results

Descriptive analysis was conducted on the scores obtained from the Instagram Addiction Scale. The scores ranged from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 72, with a mean score of 37.45.(SD=14.244). Male and female participants were found to obtain a mean score of 39.77 and 36.78 respectively. Based on the categorization provided by Kircaburun and Griffiths (2008), 60.4% of the youth were found to fall in the non-addicted category, 26% were classified as moderately addicted, and 13.6% as severely addicted. It is to be noted that, none of the participants scored within the severely addicted range.

From among the students identified as moderately addicted, 15 students were identified using purposive sampling method for further in-depth interview. 60% of participants were females. Variables were used in place of participant names to ensure confidentiality. Data analysis yielded three major themes, each comprising multiple subthemes, that reflect participants' motivations for using Instagram, as well as its perceived impact on their behaviour and well-being. The themes that emerged from analysis were the following: Reasons behind initiation, Reasons of usage and Impact on behaviour and wellbeing. To aid readability, each theme and associated subtheme is presented in order of prevalence amongst the dataset. Table 1 depicts each theme with their associated subthemes.

Table 1. Major themes and Subthemes identified from qualitative data analysis

Sl. No.	Major themes	Subthemes
1	Reasons for Initiation	Peer influence, curiosity, self-interest, need for communication, social pressure, social influence, conformity
2	Motivations for Continued Use	Pop culture, escapism, entertainment, killing time, socializing, exploring feeds/reels, relationship building, mood enhancement
3	Impact on Behaviour and Well-being	Addiction, interference with daily routines, identity shaping, social comparison, reduced real-life interaction, poor time management, sleep disturbances, procrastination, ambiguous effects, achievement motivation

Reasons behind initiation

Participants described various factors that contributed to their initial engagement with Instagram. A prominent reason was peer influence, as many users were introduced to the platform by friends. Curiosity and self-interest were also common motivators.

Peer influence- A vast majority of students responded peer influence as a primary reason for starting to use Instagram underscores its role in social belonging and connectivity. *For instance, Participant X stated:*

"I installed it because every other friend was using it and most of them in the class had it." According to Y: "Everyone was having an account during that time so I also started one."

Curiosity

Many users start their Instagram journey driven by an interest to see firsthand how it works, what content is available, and how people interact on it.

X: "I was curious about starting an account and wanted a better understanding about pop culture."

Social influence

A few students responded that social influence was one of the reasons for their initiation of Instagram usage. It varies from family, classmates or even other people they know.

X: *"I installed Instagram because my brother and even all my friends had it so I also started it."*

Y: *"I started using Instagram because most of my class and people I know had an account so I started it."*

Self interest

One participant reported that he/she started using Instagram out of self-interest

and willingness. Their interest was out of a better understanding about the platform and how it worked.

X: *"I started an account out of peer influence as well as self-interest."*

Communication

A few reported that they started using Instagram in order to connect and communicate with people both known and unknown as most of them were using the app.

X: *"Most of my friends were communication with each other using Instagram, so I also started one in order to facilitate communication."*

Social pressure

Few of the participants reported social pressure as one of the reasons behind starting Instagram revolves around the various external and internal factors that compel individuals to create an account on the platform.

M: *"When I came to college everyone was having an account, so I also started one."*

Conformity

Some participants reported that, they started using Instagram to conform with others. They started an account without even knowing what the app really is.

X: *"I started using Instagram simply because everyone else uses it thus so I am."*

Y: *"it was trending at that time so I wanted to give a try."*

Reasons for usage

This exploration not only highlights individual differences but also sheds light on common themes that resonate across diverse user experiences. Eight sub themes under the theme include Pop culture, Escapism, Entertainment, Killing time, Socialisation,

Explore feeds and reels, Relationship building, Personal communication and Mood booster.

Pop culture

Pop culture as a motive for using Instagram highlights the platform's role in keeping users connected with the latest trends and happenings in entertainment, fashion, and celebrity life.

S: "I mainly use it as a source of entertainment when I'm free. I usually watch celebrity profiles and reels on the app."

T: "I like to explore feeds and reels as well as stalking my favourite celebrities account."

Entertainment

Majority of the participants responded entertainment as a motive for using Instagram. Users log in to watch funny videos, scroll through inspiring images, and interact with engaging stories.

X: "I mainly use it as a source of entertainment when I'm free. I usually watch celebrity profiles and reels on the app."

Escapism

The theme of escapism as a motive for using Instagram reflects how the platform serves as a refuge for users looking to take a break from the stresses or monotony of daily life.

X: "I mainly use Instagram to watch reels, chat and especially for news. Sometimes I use it to avoid conversations at home."

Y: "I use the app sometimes to distract myself from my problems and also to kill my boredom. Reels and stories appeal to me the most."

Killing time

Some of the participants reported "Killing time" as a motive for using Instagram. It reflects its role as a go-to platform for users looking to fill spare moments.

Q: "I use Instagram in order to kill time and to view reels and to see the post ,stories of others."

R: "I mostly use Instagram in order to kill time or when I feel bored. I like watching Instagram reels the most."

Socialization

Socialization as a motive for using Instagram highlights how the platform serves as a digital space for connecting with others. Users engage with friends, meet new people, and join communities that share similar interests.

X: "Instagram has enabled me to make new friendships and connections as well sustain older ones."

Explore feeds and reels

The theme of exploring feeds and reels as a motive for using Instagram showcases user's interest in discovering new content. This activity involves scrolling through endless streams of photos, videos, and stories to find engaging and inspiring material.

A: "I like the content related to comedy and love. Usually spend time watching reels."

B: "For me, I mainly use insta to scroll through reels, watch stories and posts of others and sometimes to stalk people. Mostly I like entertainment reels."

Relationship building

Instagram usage and relationship building revolves around the platform's role as a facilitator of connections, communication,

and community building. For some of the participants, it was the reason for usage.

X: "I have made many new friends through Instagram who share similar passion, ideas and interests like me. Also it has enabled me to maintain my old and present friendships."

Mood booster

Some of the participant's motive for Instagram usage is mood booster . it underscores the platform's ability to positively impact users' emotional well-being and uplift their spirits.

C: *"Sometimes I use Instagram to avoid negative moods also certain contents make me inspirational and motivational and elicit a positive mood in me."*

D: *"As Instagram algorithm works, I get my mood related contents on my feed and i think, it motivates me more to use Instagram in certain situations."*

Impact on human behaviour and wellbeing

The theme of Instagram usage and its impact on behaviour and wellbeing encapsulates the intricate relationship between social media engagement and individual psychosocial dynamics. The subthemes identified are addiction, interference with daily activities, identity shaping social comparison, limited real life interactions, time management issues, disturbed sleep and productivity, procrastination, ambiguous effects and achievement motivation.

Addiction

Instagram, with its highly visual and interactive nature, has the potential to trigger addictive tendencies in users.

A participant X responded as follows:

"I feel like getting addicted to Instagram, mostly its reels because it very difficult for

me to not use it. It has also interfered with my studies by not doing assignments on time and loading up my work."

Interference with daily activities

Usage of Instagram and its interference with daily life activities underscores the pervasive impact of social media on individuals' routines and responsibilities.

Participant X responded as follows:

"Even when there is no notification or messages the first thing I use after getting up in the morning is Instagram. Even when I know it is negative. If I start using it, it is very difficult to stop it. And very hard not to use Instagram. It affects my schedule of the day and I also forget about the things which I'm ought to do."

Identity shaping

A participant X responded as follows:

"Yes, to some extent, I have felt that Instagram have some significant role in shaping my identity. I get an outlook about the things happening around me and thus influencing my perceptions."

Social comparison

Users frequently engage in an ongoing process of measuring their lives, accomplishments, and looks against those displayed by others on the platform. 6 participants out of 15 reported as they do compare. A participant O responded as follows:

"When I see my Instagram followers travel somewhere or perform something, I use to compare myself."

Limited real life interactions

A participant C responded as:

"I think it's easy to build strong connections through Instagram rather than being face to face. I can easily share things and its more comfortable."

Another response of participant D:

“Instagram mostly interfered with my studies and interactions. At home, by spending more time on Instagram in my room alone had limited my interaction with family members.”

Time management issues

Some of the participants have showed that they struggle with time management due to excessive use of Instagram. Participant K said:

“Instagram has become a part of my life. I often feel guilty and angry for wasting my productive time on Instagram.”

Disturbed sleep and productivity

One participant X reported as:

“Instagram has affected my sleeping pattern as well as appetite and has also took a toll on my overall well-being.”

Procrastination

A participant X responded as:

“I think I procrastinate more with Instagram. Clothing, food, several ads and paid promotions from favourite Instagram influencers have a lot to do with it.”

Ambiguous effects

The effects of Instagram usage can be ambiguous, influencing individuals both positively and negatively. A response is:

“I think Instagram have both positive and negative effects on my life, however I don't regret installing it.”

Achievement motivation

One participant U said:

“Instagram exerted effects such as, when I see reels about someone achieved a goal or chose something which might be better than my decision, I get inspired.” Another participant V said: *“Instagram reduced my*

motivation and aspiration in order to achieve my goals.”

Together, these themes highlight the complex and multifaceted role of Instagram in participants' lives, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of their implications in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

The study revealed that the participants had a clear answer regarding their usage of Instagram and its effect on their well-being. 185 codes were generated during the analysis which were clubbed into 25 sub themes and 3 major themes. The summary of these themes and sub themes is mentioned below.

The reasons for starting to use Instagram are varied, with major themes such as peer influence, curiosity, self-interest, communication needs, social pressure, influence, and conformity. Nearly all male and female participants shared similar factors as motivating their initiation of Instagram use. These motivations stemmed from personal interests, experiences, and socio-cultural backgrounds, shedding light on why individuals choose to join Instagram. Among these themes, peer influence emerged as the predominant reason reported by the majority. Understanding these responses provides insight into the driving forces behind Instagram adoption. These findings are consistent with previous research on Instagram use, which also highlights similar patterns of behaviour, motivations for usage, and psychosocial impacts among users (Althobaiti, 2018; Lele, & Hadole, 2023; Saletti, Broucke, & Beggelaer, 2022).

The sub themes that emerged with respect to reasons for usage include pop culture, escapism, entertainment, killing time, socialising, exploring feeds and reels relationship, building and mood booster. Socializing emerged as a significant motive,

reflecting a desire for connection and interaction within the platform's community. Many users spend significant time watching reels and discovering trends. Relationship-building is also important, with users aiming to foster existing connections and form new ones. Moreover, Instagram serves as a mood booster, suggesting that users turn to the platform for upliftment and positivity. Studies done in recent past also offer similar conclusions (Bucyte, & Solveiga, 2023; Smoktunowicz, Bia³obrzeska & Jakubik, 2025). Each of these reasons carries its own weight and significance, reflecting the diverse needs and intentions of users engaging with the platform.

Instagram's influence on behaviour and well-being encompasses addiction, interference with daily activities, time management issues, identity shaping, social comparison, limited real-life interactions, disturbed sleep and productivity, procrastination, ambiguous effects, and achievement motivation. Instagram has positive effects, serving as a motivator for achievement and enhancing mood. However, users report that Instagram often interferes with daily activities, leading to low productivity in studies, and daily life. Procrastination and distraction are significant challenges. Despite the negative impacts, users continue to engage with the platform, highlighting the complexity of its effects, which can be both positive and negative. Instagram stands out as the most widely used platform among adolescents and young adults compared to other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. It's remarkable that nearly everyone in this demographic has an Instagram account.

The study tried to explore the motives for Instagram use. The study was found to provide some insights about the reasons and the impact of Instagram use among young adults. The qualitative research design helped to delve deep into the subjective

experiences of participants regarding the same. The interview schedule helped to get focus on a particular area. As the interviews were taken separately for every participant, it could yield unbiased opinions that are not dependent on the other participant's opinion. Some responses given by individuals were significantly different but some are very much similar. The subjective experience of the participant helped a lot to understand the reason behind the influencing factors. The findings of the study could be taken into consideration while charting plans especially for young adults to develop different preventing or controlling methods on Instagram usage as well as other social media platforms.

Qualitative research on the motives behind Instagram usage offers valuable insights into the subjective experiences and perspectives of users. However, like any research method, it has its limitations. One of the major limitations of this study is that it used only used one mode of data collection, that is interview method. Employment of one more method to obtain data would have yielded more reliable results. The data was collected from the participants using telephonic interviews. Hence, it was not possible to have a direct interaction with the participants or observe their non-verbal cues. Qualitative research typically involves small sample sizes, which may not represent the broader population of Instagram users. Therefore, findings from qualitative studies may not be generalizable to all users.

The subjective nature of qualitative research can make it challenging to replicate findings consistently. Different researchers may interpret data differently, leading to variations in results. Participants may provide responses that they believe are socially acceptable or desirable rather than reflecting their true motives behind Instagram usage. This can distort the findings and limit the accuracy of the results. The following

recommendations are made for future research. Investigating cultural differences in motives behind Instagram usage by conducting interviews with users from diverse cultural backgrounds can be carried out. Understanding how cultural norms and values influence motives can help tailor Instagram's features and content to different user groups. Age-specific studies can reveal generational differences in motives and shed light on the unique needs and preferences of different demographic segments. As Instagram continues to introduce new features and updates, researchers should explore how these changes impact users' motives and behaviours.

Adding focus group discussion along with interviews will yield more reliable results. In-depth interviews and FGD's could be conducted in the offline mode which might provide additional information. Future studies should prioritize ethical reflexivity and consider how researchers' own biases and positions of privilege may influence the research process and findings

Conclusion

The study was found to provide some insights about the reasons and the impact of Instagram use among young adults. The qualitative research design helped to delve deep into the subjective experiences of participants regarding the same. The interview schedule helped to get focus on a particular area. As the interviews were taken separately for every participant, it could yield unbiased opinions that are not dependent on the other participant's opinion. Some responses given by individuals were significantly different but some are very much similar. The subjective experience of the participant helped a lot to understand the reason behind the influencing factors. The findings of the study could be taken into consideration while charting plans especially for young adults to develop different

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Akhitha Shijo, Post Graduate Student, SDMIMD, Mysuru, Karnataka

Faiza Fazal E. A., Post Graduate Student, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Sandra Samuel, Post Graduate Student, K. E. College, Mannanam, Kerala

Malini R, Associate Professor of Psychology, Union Christian College, Kerala