

## Studying young adults' motivations behind Instagram posting habits

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**Abstract.** The current research explores the motivity behind young adults' Instagram posts about the factors - documentation, promotion, creativity, validation, and escape to understand if the results signal towards a rise in creativity, narcissism, or attention-seeking, determine the intent of creative expression of users' Instagram posts, and to study the positive aspect in Instagram usage. The Study employs the qualitative method of in-depth interviews for the collection of data. It applies the social interactionist and creative destruction theories to interpret the results to understand the mindsets of the respondents concerning their usage of Instagram. Findings suggest a positive attitude in creative usage of the platform. However, it was seen that the sample did not quite indicate attention-seeking behavior and narcissism. This Study is important in the space of new media and its usage because a large amount of research has been done to understand the negative impacts of social media. However, there hasn't been much exploration when it comes to the positive aspects of it. Hence, it leaves a lot of scope for more extensive research with larger sample sizes to establish a near concrete conclusion.

**Keywords:** Instagram usage motivations, positive aspects of social media, creativity, social media, attention-seeking, Study.

### INTRODUCTION

In the past decade or so, teenagers and young adults have done with Instagram what cavemen did with the wheel and fire; found numerous ways to use it, sometimes creatively and sometimes the way it was meant to be. And as they learned tricks to make the most of the platform, almost all managed to come up with a minimum of one reason to post and curate their profiles and walls. Even though Facebook has retained its popularity to some extent, it isn't stopping young adults from abandoning the platform for Instagram and Snapchat (Duncan, 2016); (Lang, 2015); (Matthews 2014) as cited in Alhabash& Ma, (2017) [1].

Interestingly and evidently, people these days no longer turn to social media simply to connect or look at what goes around in the world or in the lives of the people they know. This was essentially what Facebook marketed itself on in its initial years - connecting with people [2]. However, the warp-speed at which technology is evolving has left that function far behind and replaced it with tools like FaceTime, Skype, WhatsApp Video calls preferred much more by people for connecting or reconnecting. It won't be wrong to say that the speed with which Facebook replaced Orkut and informal email communication is nearly the same speed at which the video calling tools have left Facebook behind when connecting with people [3]. The intentions to use social media platforms have become far more self-centric today, and people now put a lot of thought into how they want to come across on social media, what is it that their walls will reflect, whether or not the things they post are in sync with their beliefs and personalities [4]. Most people want their Instagram walls to be a window into their attributes and also as creative self-reflection.

According to a 2015 Internet Trends report as cited in Huang & Fang (2018), "59 percent of the adults are very reliant on social media and over half of them access social media sites at least once every hour [5]." The report further states that "They go online constantly not only because their friends are using these social media sites but because they are also attracted to the design of these social media platforms."

However, one also needs to consider that the need to fit and seek validation from external sources has risen significantly [6]. The 'me v/s them' narrative has strengthened wherein there exists a constant need to compare and strive to be better than others [7]. However, this comparison and drive isn't always for the best reasons and has contributed to the growing feeling of narcissism [8]. This study aims to find out what factors drive young adults to personalize and curate their Instagram walls and whether it signals an increase in creativity, narcissism, or attention-seeking [9].

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Lev Vygotsky gave the Social Interactionist Theory (1978), which stressed how social interaction aids cognition. Vygotsky strongly believed that community plays a strong and central role in the process of meaning-making [10]. About mass communication, the media takes the form of the knowledgeable adult, and the masses take the form of the

developing child that seeks to understand the world and make meaning through interactions with the media. In the present study's perspective, the Instagram user is the developing child and their community of followers the knowledgeable adults [11]. It is through interactions with them that the users make sense of their social identities and position. The likes a photo generates, the comments one gets are all part of the interactions. And if this is the case, is it possible that these interactions are increasingly leading to a rise in narcissism or attention-seeking to get validation and be reassured of one's social identity [12].

The theory of Creative Destruction, given by Joseph Schumpeter in 1942, was originally drawn from the concepts of economist Karl Marx and states that continuous product and process innovation replaces older mechanisms. While Schumpeter and Marx gave the concept in the context of economics and capitalism, it has since then been used in the context of various other disciplines [13]. The application of the theory to mass communication and media studies is apt in the current scenario. As newer media came into existence, the older or traditional media became obsolete. If not replaced, their popularity has been taken over by the new media. In the context of this study, this holds for the various media platforms, social media in particular. Applying it to Instagram in the present context, the evolution of the application has rendered other social media platforms less used [14]. This liberty of use of this social media platform causes the users to do the crux of this Study. Moreover, it will also be useful in understanding the creativity levels in the respondents [15]. It can be used to understand if the older forms of creative expression are being taken over by this platform that seems to be on its way to trump the social media package.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Li & Xie (2020) examine the 'influence of image content on social media engagement by using data sets of social media posts about major airlines and sports utility vehicles' on Twitter and Instagram. Drawing from the literature, they proposed three effects of image content: mere presence effect (immediately viewable pictures), image characteristics effect (effects of images on media user engagement based on four characteristics - colorfulness, presence of human face and emotional state, image source and image quality, image - text fit effect (research has shown that irrelevant pictures in print ads pose difficulties for the reader to comprehend the main message. The authors aimed to find if this holds for social media as well). The results indicated a strong positive 'mere presence effect of image content on user engagement' in both product categories on Twitter. The study also found that high-quality and professionally shot pictures lead to higher engagement on Twitter and Instagram and for both product categories.

"Social network users shared an average of 3.2 billion digital images each day in 2015 on Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp combined," according to Meeker (2016), as cited in Li & Xie (2020). This also implies that photo-sharing applications such as Instagram are being used creatively for promotion and marketing. Further to that, Meeker states –

Instagram and Pinterest, two image-centric social media apps, have quickly risen to become the second-and fourth-largest social network in the United States by user penetration (eMarketer 2018). The old idiom 'A picture is worth a thousand words has become the new maxim among social media marketers.

Deriving from the uses and gratifications theory, Sheldon & Newman (2019), through their paper, addressed the correlation between the tendency to repeatedly seek reassurance from others about love and worth and interpersonal rejection related to Instagram usage in minors. To explain gratifications for Instagram use, they based the Study on five variables identified in previously done the research - social interaction, documenting, diversion, self-promotion, and creativity. The Study determined if excessive reassurance-seeking and interpersonal rejections are positive predictors of using Instagram to satisfy various needs. It was found that excessive reassurance-seeking in teens resulted in increased usage of Instagram for self-promotion and creative gratifications.

Huang & Fang (2018) conducted a study with university students in Taiwan to understand if university majors and genders affected the motives for the use of Instagram and topics of interest among them. The study was divided into five factors - social interaction, documentation, diversion, self-promotion, and creativity. The findings indicated that the motives for Instagram usage were mostly to look at posts, particularly involving social interaction and diversion motives. When the participants were divided by their majors, it was found that the design majors displayed strong creative motives and seeking creative inspiration from Instagram. In contrast, the engineering majors displayed strong social interaction motives. When divided by gender, it was found that female students used Instagram to escape awkward situations and male students used it to show off.

The Study by Barry et al. (2017) extended another research that studied the association between posting self-photographs (selfies) and self-perception, particularly narcissism. Selfies were coded according to their frequency and themes such as physical appearance, event/activity/location, affiliation with others, college, other/undifferentiated relative to the participants' posts that did not include their image. The focus of this study was on narcissism. Still, it also extended its scope to include self-esteem, concerns about physical appearance, and fear of missing out (FOMO) as potential factors.

The results indicated a fair and logical connection between displaying one's activities or accomplishments and the aspect of narcissism focused on displays of superiority. They also indicated an inclination towards promoting one's activities without possibly facing criticism for posts overtly focusing on one's appearance.

Alhabash & Ma (2017) aimed to study the differences between Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram concerning the intensity of use, time spent daily, and use motivation under the application of the uses and gratifications theory. Results showed that the maximum time was spent daily on Instagram, followed by Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter. The highest use was equal between Instagram and Snapchat, followed by Facebook and then Twitter.

Sheldon & Bryant (2016), in their paper published in *Computers in Human Behavior* (p. 58, pp. 89–97), state that Instagram users emphasize more on personal identity and self-promotion in addition to other motives than focusing on connecting with other people. This study also found that the motivations to use Instagram were self-expression and self-documentation, such as convenience, media appeal, passing time, social interaction, and information sharing.

Another study aimed to examine the extent to which adults engage in different behaviors on Instagram to gain attention and validation from others via 'likes' (Dumas et al., 2017). It tried to understand individual differences in the frequency of like-seeking behavior and motivations for Instagram usage. Two factors - normative or deceptive, separated Like-seeking behavior. It was concluded that deceptive like-seeking was predicted by a weaker sense of peer belonging, contrary to normative like-seeking, which was understood to be because of a stronger sense of it. A strong sense of narcissism was seen in both factors.

This paper further iterates what most other studies have found that "as opposed to other SNS sites, Instagram use is focused more on self-presentation and promotion rather than building and maintaining relationships." Adding to it, the paper states that almost 25 percent of the photos (selfies/self-portraits) on Instagram focus primarily on self-presentation. Further, (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) identified that "in addition to using Instagram to monitor other individuals (friends and otherwise)," its use by university students was more for self-presentation. Interestingly, the paper also found that this drive of use of Instagram was also for "promotion motives, including documenting their lives to others, expressing and showcasing their creativity, and increasing their popularity among peers." The findings of this study were consistent with most other studies that concluded that Instagram for the young is a space for self-promotion, attention, and seeking validation. Research has also revealed that the pursuit of attention and self-validation via Instagram likes may be positive in certain cases. The paper also studied the motives for Instagram usage and its relationship to contextual age and narcissism. This is the foremost study examining various motives for Instagram usage and has been cited and used as a base for several other studies.

This study concluded that the main reasons for Instagram usage are surveillance, documentation, coolness, and creativity. It stated, "Instagram primarily focuses on images or pictures whereas Twitter is a more text-based forum." In addition, it found that to document moments of their lives, people are more likely to post a picture on Instagram and not compose a tweet about such events (Highfield, 2015) as cited in (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Instagram also allows users to include a caption with the picture. In this way, the platform acts as a virtual photo album for many people. This was followed by coolness due to the features of various filters, trending hashtags, and the ability to explore posts and follow popular celebrities. The least influential motive was creativity, with the factor being more associated with the use of Pinterest. This study particularly emerged as a motive because the platform allows users to display their creative talents by applying filters and making their posts "artsy." Instagram, a visually based social networking site, also contributed to the emergence of creativity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research aimed to study underlying motivations of young adults' Instagram posts to understand creativity, narcissism, and attention-seeking behaviors and/or attributes.

**Rationale:** To look at the motivity behind young adults' Instagram posts concerning the factors - documentation, promotion, creativity, validation, and escape.

### **Sub Objectives:**

1. To see whether the results signal a rise in creativity, narcissism, or attention-seeking.
2. To determine the intent of creative expression of users' Instagram posts.
3. To study the positive aspect of Instagram usage.

The non-probability sampling procedure and purposive sampling method were apt since pre-deciding the criteria to select the sample were essential to the research question. The sample was gathered through the exponential non-discriminative snowballing technique. The age group 18-26 years was chosen as the respondent age group for the Study, based on a review of literature, where it was found that social media usage in general and Instagram usage in

particular within this age group is maximum and is driven by various factors, such as for purposes of use, aspirations, using the medium for personal gains, among others.

The Study takes into account psychological factors and motivating variables. To collect qualitative data for the Study, a non-probability sampling procedure and purposive sampling technique were used, with in-depth interviews as the data collection tool. The method best suitable for the Study was in-depth interviews because the results of the Study depended on people sharing their personal experiences, perspectives, and histories, for instance, the real intentions for posting on Instagram, and everybody may not be comfortable speaking about things that would signal towards their need for validation in a focused group discussion. More so, this technique assisted in asking personalized questions which produced more authentic answers for the Study. Also, it reduced the risk of influencing other people's opinions which may have led to a discrepancy in a subject's answer.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF ENGAGEMENT**

A section of the interview schedule analyzed the quality and quantity of the respondents' engagement with Instagram as a platform, also to view and understand it from the point of view of the variable of creativity. The respondents were questioned on areas like hours spent daily on the platform, frequency of posting a picture to their wall, and rating the application's purposes. It was found that, on average, most people spend around two hours on Instagram daily. A majority of the respondents said that their usage has particularly gone up owing to the pandemic and lockdown, which essentially means that people turned to the platform more in their free time for various reasons, be it for simple browsing or creating content.

A detailed comprehension of the interview responses revealed that 18 people out of 23 admitted posting a picture on their wall at least once a month or more. This highlights that most people engage with their walls quite often and prefer to keep some activity going on. Around 65 percent of the people said that their feeds are personalized and, to a certain extent, a reflection of, if not their total personality, at least a version of it. So, it can be said that most of the time, people added a personal touch and expressed some part of their lives in the form of a post on their feeds. When treating Instagram as a digital journal, 10 out of 23 respondents agreed with it, adding that they used the platform as a personal journal or photo album for memories. One respondent mentioned that she used her wall for creating content and expressing herself as a dancer. Still, the intention behind it was to simply share her art and not actively promote it from a business angle.

Furthermore, 21 out of 23 interviewees rated their purpose of using Instagram to pass the time when bored and taking a break from their schedules. This observation reiterates the role of Instagram as part of the social media package that people use for browsing and escaping from their everyday schedules instead of treating it exclusively and especially as a platform for expression of creativity.

### **NARCISSISM AND ATTENTION-SEEKING**

The interview schedule also aimed at testing the respondents for variables of narcissism and attention-seeking. It was found that 47 percent of the respondents were not bothered with the likes received on their photos, while 53 percent said they were somewhat bothered about getting likes lesser than their expectations. They also said that more likes and comments on their pictures made them happy and satisfied. Forty-eight percent said that a higher number of likes and comments instilled a sense of confidence while lesser likes or comments left them feeling disappointed concerning the picture in particular. However, the 47 percent of people who said that they are not bothered by likes also said that if they received higher likes, it would make them feel good, showing a contrasting trend. 13 out of 23 respondents said their feeds constituted more selfies and self-portraits as opposed to other kinds of posts. It was also seen that these same 13 respondents agreed to click selfies or self-portraits more often than other things or objects or people. It was also observed that 15 out of 23 respondents rated checking on a recently posted photo as four or five on a scale of 1-5. While six respondents rated the behavior as three, two rated it as a two on the 1-5 scale. This highlights a need for constantly checking for likes and comments or analyzing the photo for its worthiness on the platform.

When the respondents were questioned if they posted about the milestones in their lives on their feed, 11 out of 23 said that they didn't think Instagram was the platform to share their highlights. While seven said they posted life highlights because they wanted to share important moments with their followers, four thought it would depend on what kind of highlight it is. One of the respondents maintained that while they did not post highlights, they would want to do it in the future. Interestingly, all 23 respondents denied clicking pictures solely to post them on Instagram.

From the findings for the traits of narcissism and attention-seeking, it can be concluded that the respondents displayed the attention-seeking trait slightly more given that their happiness and sense of confidence seemed to be directly proportional with the number of likes and comments received on pictures posted on the app on their profiles. The Study concludes it as 'slightly' because a lot of respondents also maintained that they do not prefer to share everything on their feeds, hence clarifying that it does not quite indicate attention-seeking behavior. The sample did not display strong narcissistic traits, given that not a lot of them preferred to click or post a higher number of selfies or self-portraits.

However, these findings align with the social interactionist theory. What is also interesting to note is that the majority of the respondents have a private profile on Instagram and hence a carefully curated community of followers. This indicates that the users seek to make sense of their social identities and positions from the lens of their followers.

### **CREATIVITY**

The interview schedule also tested the respondents' display of creativity through their feeds. It is interesting to note that the idea of aesthetics ranged from a simple feeling of calmness to as specific as framing and positioning of elements for the respondents. 14 out of 23 respondents said that they followed no particular theme or pattern while posting on their feed. While two said that they intended to make their feeds cohesive and thematic, seven of them asserted that they followed a pattern for posting on their feeds. These patterns were - vintage, monochromatic, white frames, series of three pictures, using a common filter.

When the respondents were asked if they edited pictures before posting them online on the application, 16 of them agreed to it. A similar number of respondents also said that they did not use a separate application for editing and just did it with their phone tools. Seven of them said they posted photos in their natural form. However, those who agreed to edit pictures also maintained that it was mostly basic such as making changes in brightness, saturation, and proper framing by cropping. These numbers indicate that while most people preferred editing, they also believed in retaining the original appearance of the photos to a great extent. This finding seems to be in line with the increase in creativity, for it seems that people are now capable of finding patterns and aesthetically pleasing frames in their surroundings while clicking a picture as opposed to artificially editing photos to make them seem creative later.

While 10 of the respondents said that they considered themselves artists and either promoted or would promote their work on Instagram, four of them said that their art is a personal part of them which they wouldn't want to put out for everyone to see. Eight of them did not consider themselves to be artists but said that if hypothetically they were, they would definitely want to use Instagram to showcase their work. Interestingly, all 23 respondents said that they loved to see other people promoting their talents and followed a lot of creative feeds. They also believed that people were using Instagram increasingly as a creative outlet because of the kind of reach and community that the app provides. When questioned on whether they consciously curated their feeds, 69 percent of them said that they did not do so. However, 31 percent maintained that they put thought into the photos they were posting. Therefore, it can be concluded that people look at Instagram as a good platform for displaying their creativity. Even though the number of people consciously curating the feeds is less, the fact that they show a positive attitude towards the promotion of arts on the platform indicates a rise in the number of creative feeds some time in the future, if not now.

When the respondents were questioned on the characteristics of Instagram as a platform, the majority of them maintained that it was no longer exclusively used for its original function - that of communicating through pictures. They also agreed to use other evolved features more. One of the respondents said that they like the Instagram Tv (IGTV) feature the best, for it allows longer video uploads.

These findings align with the creative destruction theory since the majority of the respondents said that Instagram's popularity is credited to the community that has migrated from Facebook. Clearly, it is the case of Facebook's functions becoming obsolete and being replaced with Instagram. Moreover, Instagram, the original function of communication through pictures as unique selling property, risks losing exclusivity with the addition of multiple new features to the app.

### **CONCLUSION**

There are several relationships between the usage of Instagram and different aspects of creativity, narcissism, and attention-seeking that have come to light through this study. The sample did not show any narcissistic traits but exhibited a slightly higher inclination towards attention-seeking behavior. The sample displayed a high inclination towards creativity, and even though the numbers of respondents curating their feeds creatively were observed to be less, it was seen that people like to use the platform for their varied interests. Moreover, the use of the platform also varied with their needs - as a photo album and as a journal were the two main uses that came up often in the answers of the respondents. The theories of creative destruction and social interactionism were found to be of relevance to the findings, with the former sitting well with the variable of creativity and the latter with the attention-seeking attributes.

The absence of narcissistic traits is a positive sign that maybe social media might finally be getting to the stage where it has positive aspects to its usage and not just negative. People no longer seem to be obsessing over the number of likes and comments on a picture they post instead of focusing their energies on curating a wall that they might prefer going back to every once in a while. One respondent said that they noticed a trend with their pictures where if they aren't selfies or self-portraits, they tend to receive lesser likes, and this is exactly why they prefer to post selfies than other pictures. A similar trend was observed by yet another respondent who said that group photos evidently received lesser likes in comparison to self-portraits. Yet, this doesn't affect the posting habits of this respondent.

The reviewed literature connects well with the research question, with each paper contributing to the existing knowledge of the various factors that were chosen to study. Studies opposing the topic of this research were referred to for the formation of stronger questions and clarity. However, this research hopes to start a conversation about the positive aspects of the usage of social media.

### **LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE**

The limitations of this Study primarily lie with the size of the sample. Larger sample size would generate more accurate results. Also, more variables can be taken into account for a better understanding of narcissism, attention-seeking, and creativity.

A quantitative approach can be taken with the use of personality scales in order to assess associations between personality traits and Instagram usage behavior. In the context of the uses and gratifications theory, the research can be further taken ahead to assess how the theory can be revived in this day and age to explain how adolescents and those reaching young adulthood will use media to their gain. It can also be used to understand its negative effects to find a balance in the influence of social media over the younger generations.

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