

Psychological Effects of Instagram Social Media Application on Educated Youth

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This research study aims to explore and investigate the psychological effects of the Instagram social media application on the educated youth of Hazara University. Instagram is one of the most powerful and popular social media platforms among young people across the globe. Youth use this application to share and upload content, follow others, and like photos and videos.

Methodology: The study applies the Uses and Gratification Theory, which is highly relevant to the nature of this research. The population of the study consisted of students of Hazara University, and the sample included male and female students from various disciplines. Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire, allowing respondents to select responses based on their personal experiences. The sample size was 200 students. The collected data were quantitatively analysed using SPSS Statistical Software.

Findings: The findings reveal that the majority of the youth at Hazara University frequently use Instagram for uploading photos and videos, often utilizing different filters. The analysis also shows that Instagram usage has several psychological effects on users, including mood swings, difficulty in decision-making, poor sleep quality, and other mental health-related issues. The study further found that prolonged use of Instagram negatively impacts the self-esteem of many students at Hazara University.

Conclusion: It is concluded that Instagram has become a highly popular and frequently used social media application among the educated youth of Hazara University. The platform offers multiple features that enable students to share visual content, interact with peers, and maintain social connections beyond geographical boundaries. These features contribute to its widespread adoption and regular use among university students.

Keywords: Social Media, Instagram, Devices, Mental Health, Psychological Effects.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present study aims to explore and examine the psychological effects of the social media application Instagram on the educated youth of Hazara University. Among the numerous social media platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most widely used applications, enabling users to share photographs, videos, and text-based content enhanced with various filters and visual effects. Existing literature highlights the influence of Instagram's features and functionalities on its users. One study emphasizes that the platform primarily offers young users opportunities to share professional, personal, and lifestyle experiences with friends, family members, and peer groups (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Safdar and Eman, 2025; Safdar et al., 2024). Instagram provides features such as hashtags, geotagging, and filters, which facilitate creative expression and global connectivity due to its user-friendly interface. Consequently, young people utilize Instagram for social interaction, community building, and communication through direct messaging, sharing visual content, and engaging with posts via likes and comments (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Although Instagram is designed to be user-friendly, research indicates that it produces both positive and negative psychological effects. Key areas influenced by Instagram use include access to educational content, self-esteem, sleep quality, and social relationships (Fardouly et al., 2015). Several studies suggest that excessive use of Instagram can lead to increased stress levels and disrupted sleep patterns, particularly when usage occurs during late-night hours (LeBourgeois et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2023; Safdar and Eman, 2024). In contemporary society, Instagram has become an integral component of smartphone usage, especially among young people. Its diverse features enable users to connect globally, thereby increasing its popularity among educated youth.

However, the widespread adoption and global reach of Instagram have raised concerns regarding the psychological well-being of young users, particularly in relation to emotional health and social functioning. Research indicates that excessive Instagram use may contribute to difficulties in decision-making, poor sleep quality, mood disturbances, and reduced self-esteem (Keles et al., 2020). Exposure to idealized and curated content often promotes social comparison, which can negatively affect self-worth and emotional stability (Huang, 2017). Additionally, the addictive nature of the platform and continuous notifications may disrupt users' sleep patterns and concentration, further intensifying mental health challenges (Scott et al., 2019). Previous studies also suggest that comparing oneself to the carefully curated images of others can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and inadequacy regarding one's own life and appearance (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Shabir et al., 2014; Shabir et al., 2104a).

Overall, Instagram exerts both positive and negative influences on its users, largely depending on the type of content consumed and individual usage patterns. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that the overall impact of Instagram use on young people tends to be predominantly negative (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Prolonged engagement with Instagram has been associated with feelings of sadness and lowered mood, as young users frequently engage in upward social comparison (Fardouly et al., 2015). Furthermore, frequent Instagram use has been found to impair concentration and reduce young people's ability to make effective decisions and solve problems (Lepp et al., 2014). Additional research has also demonstrated that excessive use of Instagram can significantly compromise sleep quality among young users (Shalini & Tiwari, 2020).

1.1 Significance of the Study

Instagram is one of the most widely used social media applications among youth for sharing images, videos, engaging in live chat, and accessing a range of interactive features that support not only learning but also social interaction, civic engagement, and cultural exchange. Research indicates that while Instagram offers opportunities for communication and social connection, its use is also associated with various psychological challenges among young users (Zeib & Shahzad, 2023; Shehzad et al., 2025). Several studies conducted in developed countries and major urban centers in Pakistan have documented how Instagram use can be related to negative mental health outcomes such as increased anxiety, stress,

and lowered self-esteem, largely due to social comparison and excessive engagement with visual content (Husnain et al., 2025; Chhachhar et al., 2025). However, to date, no empirical research has specifically investigated these issues among students at Hazara University. This gap in the literature underscores the significance of the current study, which aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Instagram use affects the psychological well-being of educated youth at Hazara University. Findings from this research are expected to provide valuable insights for researchers, academicians, and journalists seeking to understand the complex psychological impact of Instagram on youth in this context.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The popularity of Instagram among students has increased substantially in recent years, with a large proportion of youth using this application more frequently than other social media platforms. Prolonged and excessive use of Instagram has been associated with a range of effects, among which mental health concerns have emerged as a major issue for investigators, researchers, and academicians. Growing evidence suggests that excessive engagement with Instagram may influence students' psychological well-being in various ways. Accordingly, the present research study aims to investigate and explore the excessive use of Instagram and its psychological effects on students. Therefore, the problem statement of the present study is articulated as: "Psychological Effects of Instagram Social Media Application on Educated Youth: A Study of Hazara University."

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

- H¹** It is more likely students of Hazara University frequently use Instagram social media application
- H²** It is more likely frequent use of Instagram social media application can affect the mood of students of Hazara University
- H³** It is more likely frequent use of use of Instagram create difficulty in decision making
- H⁴** It is more likely frequent use of Instagram social media application can cause self esteem on students of Hazara University
- H⁵** It is more likely frequent use of Instagram can affect mental health of the students of Hazara University

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of the literature constitutes a critical component of empirical research, as it enables researchers to examine existing scholarly work, identify research gaps, and situate the present study within the broader academic discourse. Through an examination of relevant books, journal articles, and empirical studies, the literature review provides a conceptual and theoretical foundation for understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

Existing research indicates that social media applications, including Instagram, play a significant role in the academic and social lives of educated youth. These platforms facilitate participation in academic discussions, collaborative project management, information sharing, and engagement with diverse online communities, thereby offering various educational and social benefits (Tess, 2013). However, alongside these advantages, extensive and unregulated use of social media has been linked to adverse psychological outcomes among young users.

Several empirical studies have demonstrated a strong association between excessive social media use and mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and heightened social comparison. Keles et al. (2020), in their systematic review, concluded that prolonged engagement with social networking sites is significantly associated with increased psychological distress among adolescents and young adults. Similarly, Valkenburg et al. (2017) found that frequent exposure to idealized online portrayals contributes to negative self-evaluations and diminished self-esteem, particularly among youth.

Research further suggests that students across different age groups use Instagram for both self-development and recreational purposes. While mindful and goal-oriented use may yield positive outcomes, exposure to unrealistic, curated, and digitally modified content can exacerbate stress and negatively affect psychological well-being (Chae, 2018). Without appropriate self-regulation, excessive Instagram use has been linked to impaired decision-making abilities, reduced task management skills, and decreased attentional control. Over time, this pattern may condition individuals to prioritize short-term gratification over long-term academic and personal goals, thereby reducing engagement in cognitively demanding activities such as studying or problem-solving.

Instagram's popularity is largely attributed to its visually oriented design and interactive features. Studies have shown that photo- and video-based content generates significantly higher user engagement compared to text-based material (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Features such as filters, editing tools, likes, comments, and sharing options foster creative expression and real-time interaction, contributing to a sense of belonging and social connectedness. Consequently, Instagram has become a powerful platform not only for individual users but also for businesses, marketers, advocacy groups, and social movements (Duggan, 2015).

Moreover, Instagram enables youth to connect with celebrities, influencers, and public figures, whose content often shapes opinions, attitudes, and lifestyle choices. Marwick (2015) argues that such interactions cultivate a perceived sense of intimacy between followers and celebrities, which can intensify emotional attachment and influence self-perception. Hashtags further facilitate civic engagement and collective action by allowing users to participate in discussions related to social justice, inequality, and political awareness, thereby strengthening youths' sense of social responsibility and community involvement (Teruelle, 2011).

Despite these opportunities, a growing body of research highlights Instagram's contribution to mental health challenges, particularly among adolescents and university students. Excessive use has been consistently associated with feelings of inadequacy, upward social comparison, and emotional distress, which may lead to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Valkenburg et al., 2017). Nevertheless, some studies suggest that Instagram can also function as a supportive space where users share personal struggles, promote body positivity, and encourage self-care practices. Such content may foster social support, reduce feelings of isolation, and encourage open dialogue about mental health issues when consumed mindfully (Fardouly et al., 2015).

In summary, the existing literature reveals that Instagram exerts both positive and negative psychological effects on youth, depending largely on usage patterns, content exposure, and individual self-regulation. While the platform offers educational, social, and emotional benefits, excessive and uncritical use poses significant risks to students' mental health. This body of literature underscores the need for context-specific research, particularly in underexplored academic settings such as Hazara University.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which provides a valuable framework for understanding why individuals actively select specific media platforms to satisfy their personal needs and motivations. The theory posits that media users are not passive recipients of content; rather, they are goal-oriented individuals who consciously choose media based on the gratifications they seek, such as information, social interaction, entertainment, or self-expression (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Within the context of social media, this theory explains how young people strategically use platforms like Instagram to fulfill various psychological and social needs.

For instance, educated youth may use Instagram to maintain social connections with family and friends, consume entertainment content such as music and videos, explore lifestyle trends, acquire informal knowledge, or share personal experiences and memories as a form of self-expression. These diverse usage patterns reflect users' active engagement with the platform to meet their informational, emotional, and

social gratification needs. Therefore, the Uses and Gratifications Theory is highly relevant to the present research, as it helps explain the motivations underlying Instagram use among youth and provides a theoretical lens through which its psychological effects can be examined.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology refers to the systematic design adopted by the researcher to examine the phenomenon under investigation. In the present study, a survey research method was employed to collect data from the relevant population, as it is considered appropriate for examining attitudes, behaviors, and psychological effects among a large group of respondents. The population of the study comprised students of Hazara University, Mansehra. From this population, a sample was drawn consisting of both male and female students enrolled at the university. A systematic random sampling technique was used to ensure fair representation and reduce sampling bias. The total sample size for the study was (n=200) students, including 100 male and 100 female participants, selected to enhance the generalizability of the findings across genders. Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire containing close-ended questions, allowing for consistency and ease of analysis. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate accurate and reliable statistical results.

4. RESULTS

The present research study is based on survey technique to collect the data from the respondents of Hazara University to get their opinion about the using of Instagram Social media Applications and its psychological effects. The data was collected according to objectives of the study.

Table 1: *Demographics of the respondents*

Statement	Category	Frequency	%age
Gender	Male	100	50%
	Female	100	50%
Age	18-20	56	28%
	21-22	70	35%
	23-24	40	20%
	More than 24	34	17%
	1st	26	13%
Semester	2nd	32	16%
	3rd	22	11%
	4th	40	20%
	5th	52	26%
	6th	15	7.5%
	7th	10	5%
	8th	3	1.5%
Discipline	Arts and Humanities	87	43.5%
	Social Science	76	38%
	Science	37	18.5%

N=200

Table one shows the demographics of the respondents. It includes gender, age, semester in which they are study and discipline. Table one indicates both the genders have equal percentile i.e. 100%. As for as age of the respondents is concerned data tabulation reveals that overall, 35% respondents have the age between 21 to 22 followed by 28% respondents have the age between 18 to 20 while 20% respondents have the age between 23 to 24 and 17% respondents have the age more than 24.

As for as the semesters in which the students are studies is concern, the table one indicates that overall 26% respondents are studying in the 5th semester followed by 20% are studying in 4th semester, 16% in

2nd semester, 13% in 1st semester, 11% 3rd semester, 7.5% 6th semester, 5% 7th semester and only 1.5% respondents are studying in 8th semester.

The faculties of the respondents is concerning the table one indicates that overall 43.5% respondents studying in Arts and humanities discipline followed by 38% in social sciences and 18.5% in science discipline.

Table 2: Habits of Using Instagram

Statement	Category	Frequency	%age
Do you Use Instagram?	Yes	200	100%
	No	Nil	0%
How frequently do you use Instagram?	To Some Extent	52	26%
	Frequently	79	40%
	Very Frequently	69	35%
Which device do you use for Instagram?	Mobile	132	66%
	Laptop	28	14%
	Tablet	40	20%
	All of them	Nil	0%
How much time do you spend on Instagram?	0-1 hours	43	21.5%
	1-2 hours	89	44.5%
	2-3 hours	45	22.5%
	More than 3 hours	23	11.5%

N=200

Table two shows habits of the respondents using Instagram social media application. The table two indicates that overall, 100% respondents use social media application. As for as frequency of using Instagram social media application table two indicates that overall, 40% respondents use Instagram social media application frequently followed by 35% very frequently and 26% to some extent use Instagram social media application.

The respondents of the Hazara University use different devices for the purpose of the using Instagram social media application, table two indicates that overall, 66% respondents use mobile phone for Instagram followed by 20% use Tablet and 14% respondents use Laptop for Instagram usage.

As for as time spending on using Instagram social media application is concern, table two reveals that overall 44.5% respondents use Instagram for 1 to 2 hours a day followed by 22.5% 2 to 3 hours a day, while 21.5% respondent use this application for 0 to 1 hour a day and 11.5% spend more than 3 hours a day on using Instagram social media application.

Table 3: Psychological Effects of Instagram Social Media Application on Youth

Statement	Category	Frequency	%age
Instagram has an impact on students' mood	Strongly Disagree	32	16.5%
	Disagree	21	11%
	Neutral	11	5.5%
	Agree	84	42%
	Strongly Agree	52	26%
Instagram makes it harder to make clear decision	Strongly Disagree	42	21%
	Disagree	12	6%
	Neutral	35	18%
	Agree	80	40%
Using Instagram for long	Strongly Agree	31	16%
	Strongly Disagree	25	12.5%

period makes the students more distracted	Disagree	6	3%
	Neutral	42	21%
	Agree	92	46%
	Strongly Agree	35	17.5%
	Strongly Disagree	87	43.5%
Instagram influences the students' self-esteem	Disagree	65	32.5%
	Neutral	23	11.5%
	Agree	20	10%
	Strongly Agree	5	2.5%
	Strongly Disagree	23	11.5%
Instagram usage affects the sleep quality of student	Disagree	36	18%
	Neutral	32	16%
	Agree	84	42%
	Strongly Agree	25	12.5%
	Strongly Disagree	39	19.5%
Instagram has a strong effect on students' mental health	Disagree	32	16%
	Neutral	22	11%
	Agree	70	35%
	Strongly Agree	37	18.5%

N=200

Table three shows the different psychological or mental effects of using Instagram social media application on youth. Table three indicates that overall, 42% respondents agree that Instagram social media application effect the mood of the users followed by 26% strongly agree, 16.5% strongly disagree, 11% disagree and 5.5% respondents remained neutral on the question that the using of Instagram social media application effects the mood of the consumers.

The extensive use of Instagram may affect the student's decision making. The table three indicates that overall, 40% respondents agree that Instagram social media application make harder in decision making followed by 21% strongly disagree, 18% respondents remained neutral, 16% respondents strongly agree, and 6% respondents disagree with the statement that use of Instagram social media application make harder in decision making process.

Using Instagram social media application for longer period make the respondents distracted. Table three indicates that overall, 46% respondents agree that extensive use of Instagram make them distracted followed by 21% respondents remained neutral, 17.5% strongly agree, 12.5% strongly disagree and 3% respondents disagree with the statement.

As for as using Instagram influence on self esteem of the respondents is concern, table three indicates that overall, 43.5% respondents strongly disagree followed by 32.5% respondents disagree, 11.5% respondents remained neutral, 10% respondents agree with the statement and only 2.5% respondents strongly agree that use of Instagram social media application influence on the self esteem of the consumers.

Sleep quality effects on youth who are using the Instagram social media application is revealed in table three and table three shows that overall, 42% respondents agree that using Instagram social media application effect on their sleep equality followed by 18% disagree, 1% respondents remained neutral, 12.5% respondents strongly agree while 11.5% respondents strongly disagree.

As for as overall mental health is concern, table three indicates that overall, 35% respondents agree that extensive use of Instagram social media application can affect their mental health followed by 19.5% respondents strongly disagree, 18.5% strongly agree, 16% disagree and 11% respondents remained neutral.

Table 4: Hypotheses results

Hypothesis	χ^2 Value	df	Result
H1	5.58	2	Accepted
H2	83.66	4	Accepted
H3	62.36	4	Accepted
H4	118.72	4	Rejected
H5	32.46	4	Accepted

The final hypotheses decision table summarizes the results of the Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests applied to each hypothesis. The findings indicate that H1, H2, H3, and H5 are accepted, showing significant effects of Instagram usage on frequency, mood, decision-making, and mental health. However, H4 is rejected, indicating no significant impact of Instagram usage on students' self-esteem.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study employed a survey research design to examine the psychological effects of Instagram use among students of Hazara University, Mansehra. Data were collected from 200 respondents through a structured close-ended questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. The findings indicate that Instagram is extensively used by students, with a substantial majority (75%) reporting frequent usage. This finding is consistent with earlier studies which highlight Instagram as one of the most popular social media platforms among youth due to its visual appeal, interactive features, and ease of use (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Duggan, 2015). The high frequency of usage supports the first hypothesis and aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that individuals actively choose media platforms that fulfill their social, entertainment, and informational needs (Katz et al., 1974).

The results further reveal that 68% of the respondents agreed that frequent Instagram use affects their mood. This finding supports the second hypothesis and corroborates prior research indicating that prolonged exposure to social media content, particularly idealized images and curated lifestyles, can influence emotional states and mood regulation among young users (Keles et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2017). Social comparison processes, often intensified on visually oriented platforms like Instagram, have been shown to contribute to mood disturbances and emotional vulnerability (Fardouly et al., 2015; Huang, 2017).

In addition, the study found that 66% of respondents acknowledged that excessive and prolonged use of Instagram negatively affects their decision-making ability, thereby supporting the third hypothesis. This finding is in line with previous studies suggesting that habitual social media use can impair cognitive control, reduce concentration, and make it difficult for users to engage in goal-oriented decision-making (Turel et al., 2014; Lepp et al., 2014). Frequent engagement with instant gratification features such as likes and notifications may condition users to prioritize short-term rewards over long-term academic and personal goals (Panek et al., 2013).

Contrary to expectations, the results indicate that 76% of respondents disagreed with the statement that frequent Instagram use influences their self-esteem. Consequently, the fourth hypothesis was not supported. This finding diverges from several international studies that have reported a negative association between Instagram use and self-esteem due to upward social comparison and exposure to idealized content (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). The discrepancy may be attributed to contextual or cultural factors, differing patterns of content consumption, or a growing awareness among students regarding the curated nature of online content.

Finally, the findings show that more than 53% of respondents agreed that frequent Instagram use has a significant impact on their overall mental health, thereby supporting the fifth hypothesis. This result aligns with a growing body of literature suggesting that excessive Instagram use is associated with increased levels of anxiety, stress, loneliness, and psychological distress among youth (Keles et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019). While Instagram also offers opportunities for social support and self-expression, its

excessive use appears to pose notable risks to students' mental well-being, particularly when mindful usage boundaries are not maintained (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Overall, the findings of this study largely support existing literature and emphasize the need for awareness regarding responsible and balanced Instagram use among university students. The results also contribute to the limited body of research focusing on the psychological effects of social media use within the context of Hazara University, offering valuable insights for researchers, educators, and mental health practitioners.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and empirical evidence generated from the study, it is concluded that Instagram has become a highly popular and frequently used social media application among the educated youth of Hazara University. The platform offers multiple features that enable students to share visual content, interact with peers, and maintain social connections beyond geographical boundaries. These features contribute to its widespread adoption and regular use among university students.

At the same time, the findings indicate that frequent and prolonged use of Instagram is associated with several psychological concerns. The study highlights that excessive engagement with the platform may influence users' moods, impair decision-making abilities, and contribute to broader mental health challenges. Although Instagram serves entertainment, communication, and self-expression purposes, unregulated use and constant exposure to curated content can foster unhealthy comparison and emotional strain among young users.

Overall, the study suggests the need for mindful and balanced use of Instagram among youth to minimize potential psychological risks. It also underscores the importance of awareness initiatives by educational institutions, policymakers, and social media companies to promote responsible usage and digital well-being. Encouraging students to utilize social media platforms for constructive learning, positive interaction, and personal development may help maximize benefits while reducing adverse psychological effects.

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