Instagram's Impact on Self-Esteem of Local High Schoolers

Carolyn Pyun[1], Jennifer Cotton[2]

[1]Saratoga High School, [2]Headwaters Science Institute

ABSTRACT

Social media's effects on connecting people worldwide and its exponential growth in usage sparked studies on its effect on the mental state of users. In the local community of Saratoga, Instagram particularly seemed to have the ability to negatively affect the self-esteem of teenage users from comparison and overly fixation on follower counts. However, a result from a local survey targeted toward the local high schoolers disputes most of the aspects proposed. There was a contrast in expectations on every self-esteem or insecurity-related question, suggesting that the correlation between Instagram usage and self-esteem is weak on a local scale. The results also concluded that people did generally have a superficial view of Instagram. Contrasting with expectations, follower count was not a focus to be labeled "overly fixated." Still, the results did support that such features did not necessarily correlate with a higher self-esteem level. A look into local high schoolers' feedback on their experiences with Instagram ultimately revealed layers of complexity on the effects of social media on society.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media both in use and popularity now plays a critical role in modern society and how people connect, especially how it affects teens whose social behavior is continuing to develop through adolescence (1). The fairly new technology of social media, which refers to the web and mobile platforms allowing individuals to connect with others with a network via sharing, co-creating, or exchanging forms of digital content, has also led to studies on its impact on mental well-being and mental health issues (2). Some outcomes of studies suggest users of social media are tied to negative mental health outcomes like suicidality, loneliness, and decreased empathy (3). Others suggest no evidence for harm (3). Particularly Instagram, an online photo and video sharing social platform launched in October 2010, has risen in popularity (4). Since its launch, it has amassed more than 150 million active users, an average of 55 million pictures uploaded by users each day, and more than 16 billion pictures shared so far (5). However, little research has been focused on this giant's impact, and it has not received as much attention as other social platforms like Twitter, for instance (4). There are also close to no regulations, rules, or guidelines that came with the boom in social media, and there are still studies to create the most optimal management system (6). According to research on U.S. Instagram users by age group as of March 2022, users between 25 and 34 years old account for the largest percentage of 30.5 percent of U.S. Instagram users, and 13 and 17 years old account for 5.9 percent of U.S. Instagram users (7). Through observations of fellow students and myself, I wanted to explore whether there is a correlation between social media and self-esteem. I have personally experienced a negative outlook on myself and my productivity when I spend time on Instagram in particular. When I actively try to limit my time or reduce my time on Instagram, I have experienced a better view of myself and have heard similar experiences from other people I know. Although social media is a new technology able to create vast connections, I hypothesize that using Instagram, in general, affects self-esteem negatively because people, especially teens, compare themselves with what others post, which often does not reflect reality. In addition, the popular focus on follower count is unhealthy because the number of followers does not necessarily correspond to higher self-esteem or self-confidence. The conclusions from the research conducted contradicted many of the aspects of this hypothesis, further emphasizing the complexity of the effect of social media on society.

METHODS

The online survey was created with Google Forms and consisted of questions for Instagram users about their opinions and experiences using the platform.

The first question confirmed whether the respondent has Instagram. The second question was a chart asking to mark the listed social media platforms they have and if they use them actively. The third question asked to check or add what activities improve the well-being of the respondent. If a respondent answered that they had Instagram, they were directed to the next section.

The next section was filled out by Instagram users marked in the first question. The questions involved a variety of questions constructed as Likert scales to multiple choice questions. They asked about their time on Instagram, their experiences on Instagram, their opinions on Instagram, and other questions to screen the respondent's self-esteem.

The survey was distributed to a local high school by posting the link on a weekly newsletter sent out via Gmail to all parents and students in the high school. The form was open for around two weeks to gather responses. Responses gathered from the form were linked to a Google spreadsheet for data management and google form charts were used to analyze the results.

RESULTS

From personal experience and observations amongst fellow peers, Instagram particularly seemed to have a negative impact on self-esteem and confidence. This mini-experiment prompted me to question whether there was a correlation between Instagram use and self-esteem. I created an anonymous survey that would gather data regarding opinions on Instagram and the self-esteem of respondents to investigate this question. Once the survey was distributed to the local high school, I analyzed the responses to determine if there was a connection between Instagram and self-esteem.

The form gathered 15 responses from students who use Instagram. Of the Instagram users, 93.3% (14 people) responded that they went on Instagram daily while 6.7% (1 person) went on weekly. More than half of the users spend more than 30 minutes at a time when they go on. 40% of respondents identified posting monthly, 40% identified posting weekly, and 20% responded they did not post.

In a Likert scale question of "What is your experience when you go on Instagram?" 100% of the respondents answered in the "neutral-positive" range. Of those, the majority (80%) answered with a positive experience (Fig. 1).

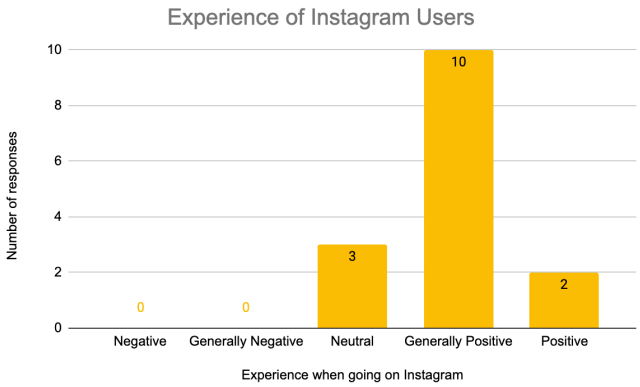

Figure 1: Likert Scale Response for experience when going on Instagram. Pretty positive experience when going on Instagram. 100% of respondents answered neutral-positive scale with 80% answering a generally positive (includes "generally positive" and "positive") experience.

In a Likert scale question of "Instagram makes me feel insecure about myself" 93% of the respondents answered in the "never-sometimes" range. 1 person (7%) responded "always". Nobody chose "mostly" (Fig. 2).

In a Likert scale question of "I compare myself to others on Instagram" there were at least 2 responses per each choice in the scale. 40% responded in the "strongly disagree-disagree" range and 46.7% responded "strongly agree-agree" range (Fig. 3).

In a multiple choice question of "Have you felt jealous or envious of what people post on Instagram?" 20% responded in the "often-always" range and 40% responded in the "rarely-never" range leaving the rest 40% responding "sometimes" (Fig. 4).

In a Likert scale question of ranking "Who I am on

Instagram accurately depicts me in real life" and "The way others present themselves on Instagram accurately depicts them in real life"; 40% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" how they present themselves on Instagram accurately depicts themselves on Instagram, 20% responded "neutral/unsure," 33.3% "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed"; 13.3% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that others present their real-life selves accurately on Instagram, 26.7% responded "neutral/unsure," and 60% "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" (Fig. 5).

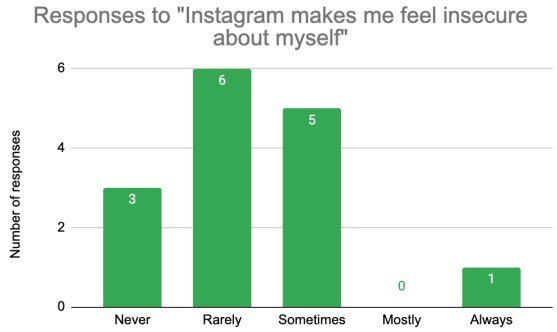

Figure 2: Likert Scale Response for Instagram and insecurity. 93% of respondents answered never-sometimes range, indicating Instagram does not usually make them insecure about themselves. One person responded always.

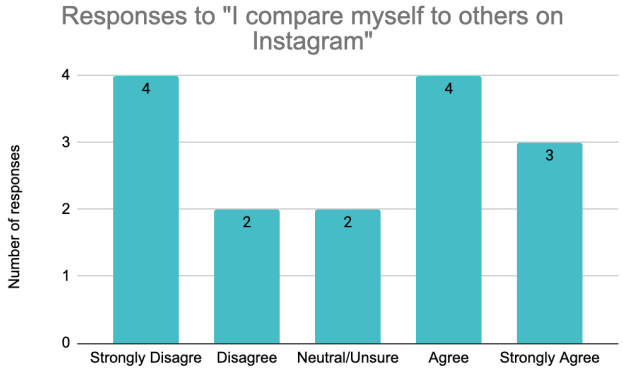

Figure 3: Likert Scale Response for comparison on Instagram. Responses were pretty spread apart with at least 2 responses per each scale. 40% respond strongly disagree-disagree range. 46.7% respond strongly agree-agree range.

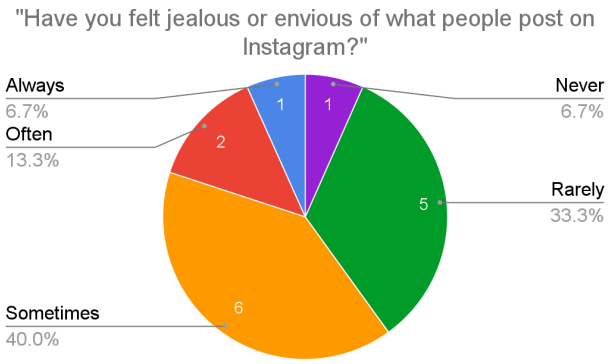

Figure 4: Response to jealous/envious of other people's posts on Instagram. 20% respond often-always range. 40% respond rarely-never range.

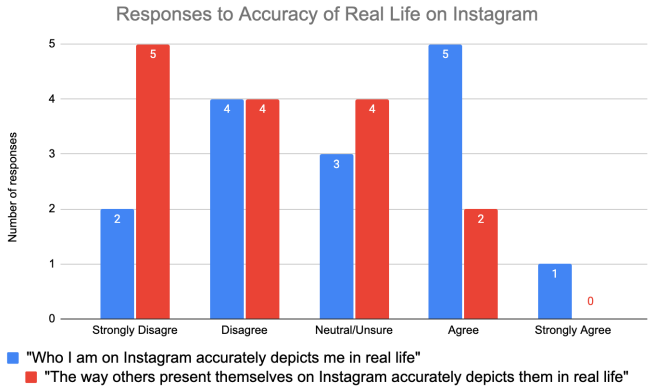

Figure 5: Likert Scale Response for accuracy of real life on Instagram. 40% strongly agree or agree how they present themselves on Instagram accurately depicts themselves on Instagram. 33.3% strongly disagree-disagree that they present themselves accurately on Instagram. 60% strongly disagree or disagree that how others present themselves accurately depicts them.

In a question asking to rank like, followers, comments, views, and close friend features in order of importance, two (13.3%) ranked followers first as most important, and six (40%) ranked followers second as most important making the average ranking of "follower" second place to comments ranked first with six (40%) ranking it number one.

In a Likert scale question of "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I wish I could have more

confidence," the responses are shown divided by follower count; five of the respondents had 100-300 followers, three had 301-700 followers, and six had 701-900+ followers. All respondents with a 701-900+ follower count responded "strongly disagree-neutral" to "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "strongly agree-agree" to "I wish I could have more confidence" (Fig. 6, Fig. 7).

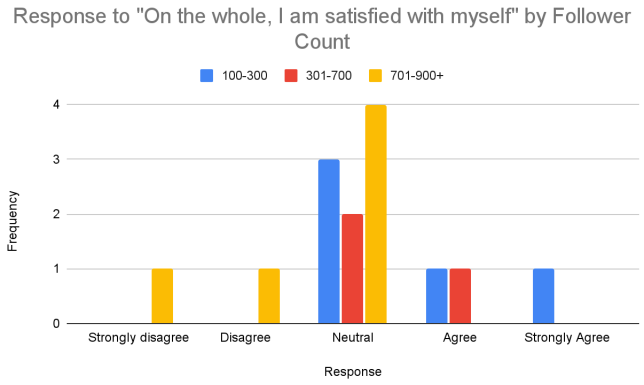

Figure 6. Self Satisfaction by Follower Count. Fourteen out of the 15 Instagram users provided a follower count. Responses with 701-900+ suggest lower satisfaction. Five had 100-300 followers, three had 301-700 followers, and six had 701-900+ followers.

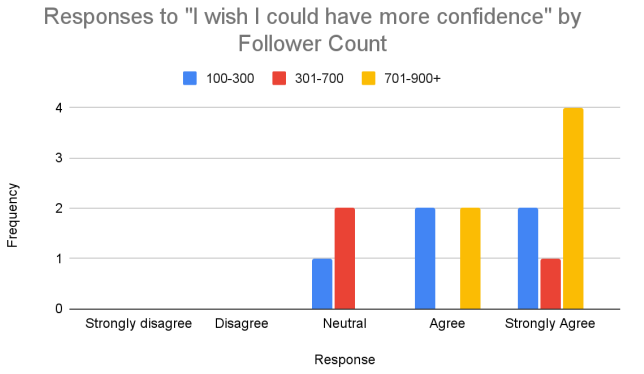

Figure 7. Self Confidence by Follower Count. Fourteen out of the 15 Instagram users provided a follower count. Five had 100-300 followers, three had 301-700 followers, and six had 701-900+ followers. Responses with 701-900+ suggest lower confidence.

DISCUSSION

I could conclude that the majority of respondents could be considered active on Instagram and thus reliable in their responses on their experience on the platform, from the survey of the amount of time spent and amount of times posting on Instagram.

The generally positive experience on Instagram as seen in figure 1 contradicted my hypothesis because it expected responses about a negative experience to some degree. However, there might have been a bias in how the respondents interpreted "going on Instagram" since the question did not exactly specify whether it was after or during a session.

The expectation of responses to the insecurity question in figure 2 was that the responses would be mostly in the "sometimes-always" range, but the results dispute the hypothesis with a majority responding the opposite "never-sometimes." The expectation of responses to the comparison question in figure 3 was also that a vast majority of the respondents would answer in the "agree-strongly agree" range. Although the majority did respond in the expected range, it does not support the hypothesis as much similar to the insecurity question because the responses were pretty spread out and not completely skewed. The expectation was also a greater percentage of jealousy in other posts to support the hypothesis, but the results showed that only 20% responded in that range in figure 4. These results together helped determine that the hypothesis was not as supported.

The varied spread-out answers for "Who I am on Instagram accurately depicts me in real life" compared to the majority (60%) answers of "disagree-strongly disagree" for "Who others are on Instagram accurately depicts them in real life" supports the idea put forth by the hypothesis that Instagram could be viewed as superficial (figure 5). The results in "Who I am on Instagram accurately depicts me in real life" contrasted expectations with a spread-out answer that was not skewed towards "disagree-strongly disagree."

"Follower" was expected to be ranked first, however it differed from expectations and was ranked overall second. The Instagram feature of comments also contrasted expectations by being ranked first by a majority. The results sorted by follower counts for the general current self-esteem screening questions

in figure 7 and figure 8 display a trend that a higher follower count does not necessarily correlate to greater self-esteem or confidence. Therefore, the statement that follower count has the most attention placed on it was disproven and the statement that more followers mean a "happier" life in terms of greater self-esteem was supported.

Overall, the results disputed some parts of the hypothesis while supporting others. Proposed ideas on self-esteem relating to Instagram usage generally were not supported. However, an analysis of displaying the data by followers showed support for the smaller aspects of social media not correlating with higher self-esteem levels.

The largest limitation and potential source of conclusion error was the quantity of data collected. The 15 students' responses may not be an accurate representation of the entire local student population (with hundreds of students). The questions of the survey were also very subjective and could be interpreted differently. Most were focused on quantitative data, so the details and nuances that could be gathered from qualitative data were not as present.

Further with the smaller aspects of social media correlating with self-esteem, it would be interesting to see if other factors like age or type of account (private or public) have a trend. More data, especially data on non-Instagram or nonsocial media using teens could be compared with the findings in this research. If a way to collect more data is available, expanding to other areas is also potential future research. There may be interesting regional differences in responses. The limitations of this research to only Instagram could also be further expanded by researching the effects of other social media platforms like Facebook, Tik Tok, Twitter, and Snapchat, to name a few. Perhaps the data collected from all social media platforms could be analyzed together to determine if there is a trend in the whole of social media with self-esteem.

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