

Instagram: ‘Like’ it or Not 🙋

Investigating the Interactions & Emotions Associated with Instagram

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Abstract: It has been said that we are in an era of constant social media usage from young adults; where people can make a living off of being an “Instagram Influencer,” or “Instagram Model,” and where “likes” seem to be a form of online currency. An investigation was conducted in order to explore how University of Washington females interacted with Instagram, identifying some of the “unwritten rules” of this platform. Additionally, the research explored the emotional connection and response one may have in association with Instagram. Our findings show that participants had stronger reactions to perceived negative attributes, such as not receiving many ‘likes’ on a post.

Introduction

Today’s world holds a plethora of unique characteristics that are unlike any past generation. It is commonplace to walk about and see backs hunched, necks arched, and eyes down trot to the glow of a small screen in one’s hands, often with their thumb mindlessly scrolling. Even life outside of social media often consists of what’s generated within our screens; take for example, viral challenges, referencing memes, writing in emojis, speaking in hashtags, and ultimately choosing to post one’s own life back into the online world. Looking at Instagram specifically, it has transformed from a simple photo-sharing app to a place where countless individuals make a living off of being an ‘Instagram Influencer’ or ‘Instagram Model’. It’s an app that appears to have highly nuanced “hidden rules” and forms of “etiquette”, where accruing ‘likes’ seems to hold a great deal of weight. With that being said, society is also in the midst of navigating its greatest push for mental health awareness, which appears contradictory to this generation’s online behaviors and Instagram usage.

Our research explores how University of Washington undergraduate female-identifying students currently interact with Instagram and the emotional feelings or responses they have associated with the app. This study is of particular importance, as Instagram is currently

undergoing the testing of removing its ‘like count’ feature from photos, perhaps in the pursuit of advocating for stronger mental health and emotional stability of their users. A series of four semi-structured interviews were conducted, with an additional look into the interviewee’s Instagram profile for their number of followers and following. We found that users were hyper-aware of the ways the content they created would reflect on them, and considered the ways in which viewers would react to it before posting. However, when asked to discuss their behaviors and interactions with the app, their responses revealed feelings of embarrassment and dissatisfaction with oneself. While our study is not the only research conducted on this topic, we hope to ignite conversation within our community about how UW women use Instagram and their associated emotions with the app, which may eventually expand into a greater discussion for a larger population.

Literature Review

As Instagram grows at a rapid pace and becomes a household name, so does the scientific communities’ interest in understanding how the application, and similar ones, make an impact in our everyday lives (Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015). Our team was particularly interested in understanding behaviors related to Instagram from women-identifying users specifically. Research findings showed a correlation between a low sense of peer-belonging and users of Instagram who participated in behaviors like buying followers, modifying their appearance in photos or engaging in strategies such as “like-for-like” (liking someone’s photo in the hopes that they will reciprocate) (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis & Giulietta, 2017). The study’s findings prompted our interest in “Instagram Etiquette,” as we hoped to further explore Instagram behaviors and like-seeking tactics within women.

The second theme our team was interested in exploring was how receiving ‘likes’ impacted a woman’s mental well-being. Researchers found that the number of ‘likes’ a participant received did not affect body dissatisfaction, but had a significant effect on facial dissatisfaction (Tiggemann,

Hayden, Brown & Veldhuis, 2018). Our team expanded on this notion by investigating not only how ‘like count’, but also overall Instagram usage and time spent on the app impacted one’s emotions.

Previous studies have also shown that Instagram increases competition between female college students based on perceived attractiveness due to appearance (Arpan, Clayton, Hendrickse & Ridgway, 2017). This indicated to us that usage of the app has an impact on self-perception, and motivated us to examine this behavior’s relationship to the number of likes a female student receives. However, we recognized that there were other factors that also affected an individual’s interactions with the app. In addition to self-perception, there was also a component of the desired future perception to consider, which has been shown to impact what types of content an individual interacts with (Grieve & Lowe-Calverley, 2018). This means that a user believes that their interactions with others’ posts will reflect how they are viewed, and therefore engage in interactions which they believe will present a favorable image of them. This complicated feedback loop was something we tried to stay conscious of in the design of our study, and refrained from asking questions that included both self-perception and behavior at once. By separating these factors, we hoped to be able to gain a better understanding of the relationships between them.

Research determined Instagram to be different from other social-networking sites, such as Facebook, because Instagram is focused on self-presentation with non-reciprocal relationships (Jackson & Luchner, 2018). This means that the nature and design of the application could contribute to why like-seeking strategies are popular and contribute to users interacting with strangers, unlike on Facebook. With this understanding, we aimed to include questions which allowed us to compare how participants engaged with people they know versus those they do not on Instagram.

Method Description

Procedure Description

The interview protocol we created was made with the intention of performing a semi-structured interview. We provided enough questions to generate a *roughly* 30-minute interview with our participants. Our protocol was divided into three sections, the first being exploratory, and the latter focusing on the themes of “Instagram Etiquette” and “Instagram and User Emotions”. Interviews can be prone to participant bias and discomfort due to the potentially probing questions. We chose to combat this by conducting our interviews in the familiar atmosphere of the interviewee’s home, ensuring the questions in our protocol and general nature were colloquial, while reminding our interviewees that there’s no right or wrong answer. We chose questions for our first theme of “Instagram Etiquette,” that targeted what characteristics made for a good post and how our interviewees interacted with others’ posts. Example questions for this theme include: “What do you think a good Instagram caption consists of?”, “Do you believe there is an ideal time to post?”, and “What types of content or users do you tend to comment on?”. For our second theme of “Instagram and User Emotions,” we chose questions related to the motivations of how one interacts with Instagram and how their interactions on the app, or the app itself, made them feel. Questions we felt best represented this theme include: “What motivates you to open Instagram?”, “How does spending the amount of time you do on Instagram make you feel?”, and “How do you feel about Instagram removing the ‘like count’ feature from posts?” (Appendix A).

Pilot Testing

We interviewed four pilot participants for this study, ensuring that each participant was within our target group: female-identifying undergraduate students at the University of Washington, who were active on Instagram (Table 1).

Table 1: Description of Pilot Participants

Participant	Gender	UW Class Standing	UW Associations	Recruitment	Profile Details
A	Female	Senior	Foster School of Business Greek System	Friend of Interviewer	Followers: 2,392 Following: 1,244
B	Female	Senior	Industrial Engineering Greek System	Friend of Interviewer	Followers: 1,104 Following: 970
C	Female	Senior	Human Centered Design and Engineering Society of Women Engineers	Friend of Interviewer	Followers: 817 Following: 602
D	Female	Senior	Foster School of Business Economics	Friend of Interviewer	Followers: 363 Following: 364

Each participant was interviewed in their own home, discussing questions from our protocol, for roughly 30 minutes. With permission from the participant, the interviews were recorded for note-taking and coding purposes and then promptly deleted after transcription, allowing the participants to remain anonymous.

Results

After conducting the interviews, we gained valuable insight on our procedure and questions within our protocol. Our interviewees responded well to the familiar environment where the interview was conducted and the minimum effort that was required of them to complete the questioning. We discovered that the presence of a recording device had the tendency to make our participants hesitant, and that extra measures needed to be taken to really make our interviewing conduct colloquial and conversational. Our participants were surprised that they were able to spend approximately 30 minutes talking about Instagram, originally thinking they would not have much to say about the topic; this is what we believe to be the effects of well-structured questions that allowed for elaboration. Participants also appreciated that there was a chance for them to provide final comments, where many took this opportunity to reflect on their Instagram usage and how they might work to change their behaviors moving forward. A couple of questions were confusing for our participants, mostly from ambiguity of terminology or wording issues, which we were able

to conclude by the interviewees puzzled expression or request for clarification. Additionally, some questions were repetitive or perhaps unrelated to our topic, leading us to later make revisions.

Through our interviews, we were able to identify a few emerging themes surrounding our research topic, which can be found in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2: Emerging Themes

Theme 1: Humor is of great importance	Theme 2: Use app due to boredom & procrastination	Theme 3: Unhappy with the amount of time spent	Theme 4: Comments are more meaningful, but fewer 'likes' are more upsetting	Theme 5: Posts must be aesthetically pleasing
<i>"I think about my caption for two days because I want it to be funny, and that takes a while to think about." P3</i>	<i>"I know I should spend less time on [the app], especially when I have studying to do. It's a huge source of procrastination." P1</i>	<i>"I will mindlessly scroll and realize it is way past when I planned to sleep." P4</i>	<i>"I like reading through comments from friends, but don't mind if I don't get a lot. For some reason, I'm more annoyed when I see my post doesn't get as many likes." P2</i>	<i>"I like my profile to look cohesive, and have the same color theme. I think it looks nice." P1</i>

Discussion

Our original interview protocol did not include an introduction that explained the purpose of our study, thus we added a brief statement which shared our research question, thanked the participants for their time, and explained their rights and protections as a participant (Appendix B). This section was added to our interview protocol in an effort to make future interviewees comfortable and aware of our research purpose, in order to show our appreciation and respect for participants, and to ensure we are conducting an ethical study in which our participants are aware of their rights. We removed the question, "Do you own a smartphone?" and several subsequent ones, as this was already a requirement of our study. We also made the decision to remove questions we deemed to be irrelevant as they pertained to phone usage years ago (Appendix A). The initial introduction for "Theme 1: Instagram Etiquette," was long and formal in wording. We felt the explanation did not meet our goal of being colloquial and fostering comfortable conversation, thus decided to cut down the text and reworded the introduction to be more informal

(Appendix A & B). Additionally, instances of asking how our participants “interact” with something were cut, and instead we explicitly stated examples of interactions to make the questions clearer. For example, instead of asking, “How do you interact with your feed?”, we asked, “Do you ‘like’ or comment on posts in your feed?” (Appendix A & B).

Due to the current event of Instagram testing the removal of ‘like counts’ in an effort to push for greater mental health awareness, we were drawn to research the interactions and emotional associations female-identifying undergraduate students have with Instagram. In order to gain more insight on this topic, we chose to pursue the methodology of a semi-structured interview, creating a protocol with questions oriented around two major themes. We conducted these interviews as pilots, with four interviewees we knew met our criteria. Our preliminary research is of significance as it generated several emerging themes that we feel could be expanded on or more aggressively targeted during future research studies using a larger, more randomized selection of participants.

Limitations and Ethical Concerns

Credibility of our interviews was not a primary concern, as we simply asked about the participant’s personal experiences. However, we were conscious of the potential issues that could arise from participant bias, where an interviewee may be inclined to provide inaccurate information to protect their image. To combat this, we were hyper-aware of interviewee comfortability and reviewed all questions in advance to eliminate discomfort and leading questions. The transferability of the feedback we received from our interviewees is likely low and unrepresentative of the greater UW female-identifying undergraduate population. This is because we conducted interviews with a small sample of participants, and our interviewees were conducted with participants we already knew, thus creating the issue of convenience sampling. This as a limitation within our current study, but can be changed for future research if this study were to be

conducted again. Because the dependability of the study depends primarily on the context within which the research occurs, we attempted to ensure that our interviews were conducted in a similar manner and atmosphere (interviewee homes) for each interviewee. In order to mitigate issues with confirmation, we analyzed our findings from the interviews individually first, then reconvened as a group to share our findings. This allowed us to see differences across participants, notice details we might have otherwise missed, and identify areas that needed further discussion.

Our primary concerns pertaining to ethical dilemmas in this study focused around the issues of participant discomfort, emotional risk, and privacy. While the topic of Instagram behavior may not seem particularly sensitive, it is unusual for a user to be asked to provide an in-depth analysis of their day-to-day usage of the app. For this reason, and the fact that society tends to place a negative connotation around over usage, particularly with young women, we were vigilant of the manner in which we conducted our study, and the wellbeing of those who partook in it. To combat any emotional risk, we chose to sacrifice the randomness of our pool of participants and conduct interviews with participants we already had a rapport with, creating more ease for the participant and a notion of safety throughout our study. Additionally, the location and atmosphere of our interviews was important, as this too impacts how comfortable a participant is. To combat discomfort, we chose to conduct our interviews in the homes of our participants, and ensured our interviews were semi-structured as opposed to a rigorous structure, allowing for a more colloquial environment. Additionally, we combatted privacy concerns by informing our participants they would remain anonymous and that we would only go forward with our study after receiving explicit consent for interviewing, recording for note-taking purposes, and scraping Instagram profile data (number of followers and following).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol (Original)

Exploratory

For this portion of the survey we are going to ask questions to better understand your daily life. At any time throughout the survey, feel free to elaborate on your answer, ask clarifying questions or bring up any topics related to our questions that you would like to discuss.

- How old are you?
- What do you study at the University of Washington?
- What is your current living situation (at home, dorms, sorority/fraternity, apartments off-campus)?
 - Who do you live with? How did you meet them?
- Where did you grow up?
- Do you own a smartphone?
 - What kind of phone do you have?
 - If yes, how long have you had a smartphone?
 - Did your parents ever monitor your phone usage?
 - How much time do you think you spend on your phone each day?
- Which social media applications do you use?
 - What is your favorite social media application? Why?
 - Do you use Instagram?
 - When did you download Instagram?
- Do you use social media applications on a regular basis (4x-7x a week)?
 - If yes, what are three of your most used social media applications?
 - Approximately how long have you had these accounts?

- Do you typically have private or public social media accounts?
 - If mixed, ask which applications they have private/public account for
- Do you know what a “unfollow tracker” is?
 - If no, explain (An application used to track who unfollows you, mostly used on Instagram and Twitter)
 - If yes, ask if they use it
- Do you typically follow people you know or strangers?
 - If participant follows strangers, what makes you follow a stranger?

Theme 1: Instagram “Etiquette”:

For this portion of the survey we are going to ask questions related to social media “etiquette”; in other words, we are going to explore whether or not you perceive there to exist unspoken rules surrounding social media usage, specifically Instagram, and whether or not you abide by them. We will also explore your social media usage behaviors, such as how frequently you use the application, how you use the application, and what features you use the most.

- What is the purpose of using Instagram for you?
- What types of content do you think are best suited to Instagram?
- What do you think are attributes of a good Instagram post?
- What do you think a good Instagram caption consists of?
- Do you think there is an ideal time to post on Instagram?
- When do you normally post on Instagram?
- How do you determine what to post?
 - What types of content do you post?
 - How often do you post?
 - What influences your decision to post?
 - Do you use hashtags in your posts?
 - How do you decide a caption?
 - Do you tag people/locations in your posts?
- How do people interact with your posts?
- Do you archive posts?
 - What influences your decision to archive posts?
- How do you interact with your feed?
 - How often do you check your feed?
 - How much time do you spend scrolling through your feed on average?
- What types of content do you interact with?
- What types of content do you comment on?
 - What motivates you to comment on someone’s post?
- What types of posts do you “like”?
- What characteristics draw you to a particular post?

Theme 2: Instagram and User Emotions

“For this portion of the survey we are going to ask questions related to how using social media may or may not influence one’s emotions, and therefore behavior.”

- What motivates you to open your Instagram app?

- On an average use, how will you interact with the Instagram app?
 - What part of the app do you spend the most time on?
 - Feed of who you're following?
 - The explore page?
 - Stories?
 - How does spending the amount of time you do on Instagram make you feel?
 - What types of accounts do you follow outside of your friends?
 - How does seeing that type of content make you feel?
 - (Examples: Enjoyable, overwhelming at times, etc)
- Are there certain types of posts you have a more positive/negative reaction to?
- How do you feel about Instagram removing the “like count” from posts?
- How does getting a lot/a few likes on a post make you feel?
- Are there certain types of photos you know won't get as many likes as normal for you?
 - If so, why is that?
 - Do you consider this before posting? (or... Do you refrain from posting these types of photos?)
- Do you think your Instagram profile is an accurate representation of you?
 - Why or why not?
 - Are there particular things from your life you try to portray?
- Do you participate in certain activities or take photos, with the intention of posting Instagram?
 - If so, how do you feel about that?
- What types of content, photos, or people do you tend to comment on?
 - Why do you choose to comment?
 - How do you feel about commenting on someone's post?
 - How do you feel about receiving comments on one of your posts?
 - How does the number of comments (a lot vs. a few) you receive on a post make you feel?
- How do you prepare to post on Instagram? Is there a process you go through from taking (a photo) to actually hitting “post” on Instagram? Describe that for us
 - (Perhaps:
 - Selecting the right photo
 - Consulting with friends
 - Ensuring it fits in with the rest of their profile
 - Editing the photo
 - Coming up with a good caption
 - Etc.)
 - How do you feel about this process?
- How often do you check back to Instagram to monitor your post after posting it?
- Have you ever removed or considered removing photos from your profile after posting?
 - Why is that?
- Is it important for you that you have a cohesive Instagram profile?
 - If yes: Can you elaborate on why and the steps you take to do so?
 - If not: Do you take any steps at all to review what your profile looks like as a whole?
- Have you ever been upset after using Instagram, or after seeing a particular post?

- (Perhaps upset about spending too much time on there, getting jealous of someone's post/apparent lifestyle?)
- Have you ever been particularly happy after using Instagram, or after seeing a particular post?
- Do you have any final comments on how you use Instagram or the emotional connections/responses you have with the app?

Conclusion and Debrief

- Summarize what participant said
- Check to see if interpretation is correct
- Ask if they have any questions

Appendix B: Interview Protocol (Revised)

Thanks for letting us sit down and talk with you today. We will be discussing Instagram usage and associated emotions with the app. We want to preface this interview with the understanding that there's no right or wrong answer we're looking for, we just want to gain a better understanding of your personal experience. We will keep your name anonymous for the purpose of our research and if you're uncomfortable answering any question we can move past it or take a break.

Exploratory

For this portion of the interview we are going to ask questions to better understand your daily life. At any time throughout the interview, feel free to elaborate on your answer, ask clarifying questions, or bring up any topics related to our questions that you would like to discuss.

- How old are you?
- What do you study at the University of Washington?
- What is your current living situation (at home, dorms, sorority/fraternity, apartments off-campus)?
 - Who do you live with? How did you meet them?
- Where did you grow up?
- What kind of phone do you have?
 - How much time do you think you spend on your phone each day?
- Which social media applications do you use?
 - What is your favorite social media application? Why?
 - Do you use Instagram?
 - When did you download Instagram?
- Do you use social media applications on a regular basis (4x-7x a week)?
 - If yes, what are three of your most used social media applications?
 - Approximately how long have you had these accounts?
- Do you typically have private or public social media accounts?
 - If mixed, ask which applications they have private/public account for
- Do you know what a "unfollow tracker" is?
 - If no, explain (An application used to track who unfollows you, mostly used on Instagram and Twitter)
 - If yes, ask if they use it
- Do you typically follow people you know or strangers?

- What type of people or accounts do you follow outside of your friends?
 - Influencers, celebrities, news, food, animals, memes, etc.

Theme 1: Instagram “Etiquette”

For this portion of the interview we are going to ask questions related to social media “etiquette”; whether or not you perceive there to exist unspoken rules surrounding Instagram, and your interactions with the app

- What is the purpose of using Instagram for you?
- What types of content do you like to see on Instagram?
 - What do you think are attributes of a good Instagram post?
- What do you think a good Instagram caption consists of?
- Do you think there is an ideal time to post on Instagram?
 - Why is that?
 - When do you normally post on Instagram?
- How do you determine what to post?
 - What types of content do you post?
 - How often do you post?
 - What influences your decision to post?
 - Do you use hashtags in your posts?
 - How do you decide a caption?
 - Do you tag people/locations in your posts?
- Do you save posts from others?
 - What influences your decision to save posts?
- How often do you check your feed?
 - How much time do you spend scrolling through your feed on average?
- What types of content do you comment on?
 - What motivates you to comment on someone’s post?
- What types of posts do you “like”?
- What characteristics draw you to a particular post?

Theme 2: Instagram and User Emotions

For the final portion of the survey we are going to ask questions related to emotional behavior and responses of using Instagram.

- What motivates you to open your Instagram app?
- What part of the app do you spend the most time on?
 - Feed of who you’re following? Explore page? Stories?
 - How does spending the amount of time you do on Instagram make you feel?
- How does seeing posts from accounts you follow outside of your friends make you feel?
 - (Examples: Enjoyable, overwhelming at times, jealous, etc)
- Are there certain types of posts you have a more positive/negative reaction to?
 - Have you heard of the term, “hate-like”?
 - (Being jealous or not actually *liking* the person or content, yet still double tapping it)
 - What are your thoughts on this?

- How do you feel about Instagram removing the “like count” from posts?
- How does getting a lot/a few likes on a post make you feel?
- Are there certain types of photos you know won’t get as many likes as normal for you?
 - If so, why is that?
 - Do you consider this before posting? (or... Do you refrain from posting these types of photos?)
- Do you think your Instagram profile is an accurate representation of you?
 - Why or why not?
 - Are there particular things from your life you try to portray?
- Do you participate in certain activities or take photos, with the intention of posting Instagram?
 - If so, how do you feel about that?
- What types of content, photos, or people do you tend to comment on?
 - Why do you choose to comment?
 - How does the number of comments (a lot vs. a few) you receive on a post make you feel?
- How do you prepare to post on Instagram? Is there a process you go through from taking (a photo) to actually hitting “post” on Instagram? Describe that for us
 - (Perhaps:
 - Selecting the right photo
 - Consulting with friends
 - Ensuring it fits in with the rest of their profile
 - Editing the photo
 - Do you edit photos in a different app?
 - Do you pay for filters?
 - Coming up with a good caption
 - Etc.)
 - How do you feel about this process?
- How often do you check back to Instagram to monitor your post after posting it?
 - Do you have the notification pop-ups?
- Have you ever removed or considered removing photos from your profile after posting?
 - Why is that?
- Is it important for you that you have a cohesive Instagram profile?
 - If yes: Can you elaborate on why and the steps you take to do so?
 - If not: Do you take any steps at all to review what your profile looks like as a whole?
- Have you ever been upset after using Instagram, or after seeing a particular post?
 - (Perhaps upset about spending too much time on there, getting jealous of someone’s post/apparent lifestyle?)
- Have you ever been particularly happy after using Instagram, or after seeing a particular post?
- Do you have any final comments on how you use Instagram or the emotional connections/responses you have with the app?

Conclusion and Debrief

- Summarize what participant said and check to see if interpretation is correct
- Ask if they have any questions