

The Effects of Instagram Engagement (Likes, Comments, and Shares) on Self-Esteem and Validation

M.A.English (Assist. Lecturer)Adawiya Jabbar Kadhim

adawiya-jabbar@basrahoe.iq

Directorate of Education, Basra Governorate

ABSTRACT

The current study relied on a mixed approach, using a questionnaire and interviews. Validity and reliability were verified. The data was analyzed quantitatively for the first tool and qualitatively for the second tool, sequentially. The study revealed the paradox of “instant gratification”, which is the result of immediate reactions (liking, commenting, and sharing), which also works to enhance self-esteem in the short term, but promotes dependency in the long term. The study also showed that the criteria used by participants (Personal Verification Thresholds) directly affect the emotional responses of participants as a result of reactions to Instagram engagement. The current study also introduces the "Temporal Discrepancy Effect," and the important role of timing in interaction on social media, and that feedback has a more sustainable and deeper impact on self-esteem, and that there is a permanent and ongoing effect of (liking, commenting, and sharing) on the personal development of the individual, especially self-esteem. The study recommends the need to conduct more in-depth future research on mental digital health and the need to spread a culture of healthy use of social media.

Keywords: Instagram, social media, self-esteem, likes, comments, share

م.م. عدوية جبار كاظم
مديرية تربية محافظة البصرة

المخلص

اعتمدت الدراسة الحالية على نهج مختلط، باستخدام استبيان ومقابلات. تم التحقق من الصدق والثبات. تم تحليل البيانات كميًا للأداة الأولى وكيفيًا للأداة الثانية بشكل تسلسلي. كشفت الدراسة عن مفارقة "الإشباع الفوري"، والتي تنتج عن التفاعلات الفورية (الإعجاب، التعليق، والمشاركة)، والتي تعمل أيضًا على تعزيز تقدير الذات على المدى القصير، لكنها تعزز الاعتماد على المدى الطويل. أظهرت الدراسة أيضًا أن المعايير المستخدمة من قبل المشاركين (عتبات التحقق الشخصية) تؤثر بشكل مباشر على الاستجابات العاطفية للمشاركين نتيجة للتفاعلات على إنستغرام. كما قدمت الدراسة الحالية "تأثير التباين الزمني"، والدور الهام للتوقيت في التفاعل على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، وأن ردود الفعل لها تأثير أكثر استدامة وأعمق على تقدير الذات، وأن هناك تأثير دائم ومستمر لـ (الإعجاب، التعليق، والمشاركة) على التطور الشخصي للفرد، خاصة تقدير الذات. توصي الدراسة بضرورة إجراء المزيد من الأبحاث المستقبلية المتعمقة حول الصحة الرقمية النفسية وضرورة نشر ثقافة الاستخدام الصحي لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إنستغرام، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، تقدير الذات، الإعجابات، التعليقات، المشاركة

1. Introduction

The Instagram platform, which is known as the Insta platform for short, is a social networking service affiliated with the American company Meta. It was created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010, where its spread was rapid to the point that it became one of the largest social media platforms widespread and used effectively throughout the world. Studies have shown that one of the most prominent reasons for the success of this platform is that it allows the user to express himself distinctively by sharing the moments that the user chooses from his personal life, such as videos or photos, with a large number of audiences. As of 2023 and according to Statista (2023) Instagram boasts over 1.3 billion monthly active users. Social media engagement is a core part of the Instagram user experience and includes likes, comments, and shares. These metrics play an essential role in determining the reach and popularity of content. Likes reflect immediate

feedback and social approval, while comments provide an opportunity for direct interaction and dialogue. On the other hand, posts help spread the content to a wider audience beyond your immediate circle of followers (De Veirman, et.al., 2017).

Many studies, such as Vogel et.al., 2014 and Burrow & Rainone, 2017, reveal that the impact of participation standards extends beyond being a matter of the number of viewers and the digital realm, as it extends to the psychological aspect in a clear and certain way. For example, negative comments negatively affect the psychology of participation, and vice versa for positive comments. Positive comments resonate positively with the subscriber because they give him a sense of acceptance and self-esteem.

The current study aims to delve deeper into the depths of this platform and discover more secrets of how it affects the user's health, especially self-esteem. Fifty male and female university students from Basra Governorate participated in this study. In order to understand the psychological effects and to provide more transparent and clear views, the study aims to reveal whether liking, commenting, and sharing affect the self-esteem of university students. By analyzing these interactions and dynamics (likes, comments, and shares), the study seeks to understand the psychological impacts and provide an understanding of how users interact with the platform in a way that supports their mental health and mental well-being.

1.1. Thesis Statement

Social media platforms have accompanied us wherever we go, and we have gradually become immersed in an endless digital ecosystem. These means have become a wide arena through which the subscriber can communicate with individuals who share many ideas with the user to enhance the expression of identity and belonging, and all of this significantly reshapes the scene of personal interaction and self-

perception. The rise of social media platforms has dramatically reshaped the landscape of personal interaction and self-perception. Among these platforms, Instagram stands out for its emphasis on visual content and user engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. Instagram is characterized by engagement metrics through its focus on the subscriber's visual content. These standards can affect how the image through which the user sees himself is formed. The widespread use of this platform, especially among young people, has created many fears, doubts, and questions about its impact on the mental health of this important segment of society. Although many studies have discussed the impact of social media on mental health, there is a limited and insufficient understanding of how the measures of this famous platform affect mental health, especially among university students, specifically the fourth stage, as a student about to graduate and they are on the cusp of leaving university life behind and embarking on the professional career. From this idea, this study was launched to fill the gap and be a study that will contribute to a deeper understanding of this issue.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does the number of likes, comments, and shares on Instagram posts affect the self-esteem of university students?
2. What is the relationship between Instagram engagement and the need for external validation among university students?

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the impact of Instagram engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) on the self-esteem of students in the College of Arts at the University of Basra.
2. To analyze the relationship between the level of Instagram engagement and the need for external validation among these students.

1.4. Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Higher levels of Instagram engagement are associated with higher self-esteem among university students.
2. **H2:** Students with higher Instagram engagement will show a greater need for external validation compared to those with lower engagement levels.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition of Basic Terminologies

2.1.1 Instagram Engagement: refers to the assorted ways and the multiple interactions users have with content on the platform. The fundamental components of engagement are “likes, comments, and shares”. Every element uniquely influences the perception and value of content within the Instagram ecosystem and consequently, these elements individually contribute to how content is perceived and valued by the customers(Cotter, 2019).

2.1.2 Likes: In Instagram, a “like” is the simplest form of engagement and action users can perform to show appreciation or endorsement of a post, represented by a heart icon that one can click to show appreciation for a post. liking a post indicates that you found the content enjoyable or worthwhile. This metric is often seen as a measure of popularity and approval, providing instant feedback to the content creator (Kurtz, 2015).

2.1.3 Shares: is the process of posting or reposting content to one’s account, thereby increasing engagement by widening its audience and amplifying its reach, allowing followers to see and comment on it. Such a process is critical for spreading content beyond the original audience, often leading to increased visibility and engagement from a broader user base and it is a fundamental activity that drives the flow of information and interaction across digital networks. (De Veirman, et.al., 2017).

2.1.4 Comments: “Comments” is another form of engagement that fosters direct interaction and dialogue, enabling users to express

opinions, provide additional information, or ask questions, and allowing users to provide more detailed responses to posts. Comments appear under the post and can include text, emojis, and tags of other users, thus, they can generate a feeling of community, belonging, and connection among users (Hu, et.al., 2014). These engagement metrics go beyond being passive; they are actively utilized by Instagram's algorithms to determine the visibility and reach of content (Cotter, 2019).

2.2 Importance of Engagement

Understanding the impact of social media interactions is crucial in today's digital age. Engagement metrics are extremely important and have considerable significance for both everyday users (regular users and influencers on Instagram (Burrow & Rainone, 2017)). For regular users, engagement acts as a form of social validation because receiving likes, comments, and shares can enhance self-esteem and provide a sense of belonging and acceptance within the online community. Conversely, low engagement can lead to feelings of isolation or inadequacy (Vogel, Rose, et.al., 2014).

On the other hand, for influencers and content creators, engagement is crucial for building and maintaining their audience. As stated by Mediakix (2019), high levels of engagement indicate a strong connection with followers, which can attract brand partnerships and sponsorship opportunities. Brands often look at engagement metrics to assess the effectiveness of influencers in reaching and engaging their target audience. Consequently, influencers put significant effort into creating content that resonates with their followers and encourages interaction. Instagram engagement metrics are integral to the user experience on the platform. They influence how content is perceived, valued, and disseminated, affecting both the psychological well-being of users and the professional success of influencers. Understanding these

dynamics is essential for navigating the digital landscape of social media (Cotter, 2019).

2.3 The Psychological Basis of Self-Esteem and Validation

The term self-esteem has been addressed by many people interested in psychology. It has been defined as the respect, appreciation, value, and competence that a person feels toward himself. That is, what a person believes about himself, his conviction, and positive thinking about himself. Self-esteem is an element rooted in educational psychology and is an essential element in mental health and well-being because it reflects a person's level of satisfaction with himself and, consequently, with others and overall life satisfaction (Neff, 2011).

One key measure of self-esteem is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), developed by sociologist Morris Rosenberg in 1965. The RSES is a widely used self-report instrument that assesses global self-esteem through ten statements related to overall feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement, providing a quantitative measure of their self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965).

Another critical theory related to self-esteem is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to Maslow, self-esteem needs to encompass feelings of accomplishment and recognition, both from oneself and others. When these needs are fulfilled, individuals feel confident and valued, which is essential for reaching self-actualization. Maslow (1943) proposed that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy, with self-esteem situated in the fourth level, just above love and belonging, and below self-actualization.

In the same vein, Validation refers to the recognition and acceptance of a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as understandable and legitimate and it might be affected by both external sources, such as

family, friends, and society, and internal sources, such as self-acceptance and self-compassion. It is a fundamental aspect of interpersonal relationships and psychological health, as it helps individuals feel seen, heard, and valued. There are two types of validation external validation and internal Validation. External validation involves yearning for recognition, approval, and affirmation from family and peers and it is regarded as a basic human necessity, especially in social contexts where individuals strive to fit in and be accepted. Whereas external validation can increase self-esteem and provide temporary feelings of worth, an over-reliance on it can lead to dependency and vulnerability to external opinions. Regarding the Instagram realm, positive reinforcement from receiving likes and comments can enhance self-esteem, but a lack of such feedback can lead to feelings of inadequacy (Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

On the other hand, internal validation is accepting and acknowledging one's own experiences, emotions, and worth without needing external approval, thus, it is derived from within oneself. Internal validation fosters resilience and a stable sense of self-worth, as it is less susceptible to the fluctuating opinions of others. Some practices are often used to cultivate internal validation such as mindfulness and self-compassion. For maintaining healthy self-esteem, balancing external and internal validation is crucial. Although external validation can support internal validation, individuals need to develop their own internal validation. Those who achieve this are better prepared to withstand external criticism and retain a consistent sense of self-worth(Neff, 2011).

2.4 Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory, proposed by Leon Festinger in 1954, suggests that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others. This theory posits that

people have an inherent drive to evaluate themselves, often by comparing themselves to others around them. The roots of the Social Comparison Theory can be traced back to the pioneering work of Leon Festinger. In the 1950s Festinger proposed the theory based on the fundamental idea that individuals possess an innate inclination to evaluate themselves through comparisons with others. He posited that these comparisons serve two primary functions: self-evaluation and self-improvement (Burrow & Rainone, 2017).

The mechanisms of social comparison involve some thematic aspects. The first is upward social comparison which involves assessing oneself in comparison to those perceived as superior in a particular attribute skill or achievement. In the form of comparison often serves as a source of motivation and Inspiration. When we compare ourselves to individuals we perceive as more accomplished and it can ignite a desire for self-improvement. The second aspect is the downward social comparison which entails comparing oneself to individuals who are perceived as less accomplished or fortunate this form of comparison can enhance one's self-esteem as it provides a sense of security and contentment with one's current status(Festinger, 1954). The third is the lateral social comparison which involves comparing oneself to individuals with similar attributes, skills, or opinions. This form of comparison can serve as a source of validation and affirmation, reassuring individuals that they are on par with their peers. In a professional setting, an employee may find reassurance in comparing their level of skill and competence to colleagues in similar roles. This lateral comparison can provide a sense of belonging and competence(Mumford, 1983).

Social Comparison Theory plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's self-esteem and self-worth. Continuous exposure to upward comparisons can lead to feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem. Conversely, downward comparisons can boost one's self-esteem

creating a sense of satisfaction and self-worth. Social comparison is a potent motivator when individuals compare themselves to those who excel in a particular area. It can ignite their motivation and ambition. They are inspired to set higher goals and work diligently to achieve them (Buunk, Gibbons, 2007).

The concept of social comparison can significantly influence both competition and collaboration in various settings. Social comparison theory has a substantial impact on consumer behavior people often purchase products and services to meet perceived societal standards and to construct a positive image in the eyes of others marketers leverage this aspect of social comparison to promote their products and shape consumer decisions regarding luxury fashion brands frequently use upward social comparison by associating their products with celebrities (Buunk and Schaufeli, 2018).

On Instagram, social comparison is particularly prevalent due to the platform's visual nature and public engagement metrics. Users often compare the number of likes, comments, and followers they have with those of their peers. This constant exposure to curated and often idealized representations of others' lives can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, as users may perceive themselves as less successful or less attractive (Buunk, et.al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014).

3. Methodology of the Study

3.1 Research Design

The current study employs a mixed-methods approach by integrating both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview) to investigate the effects of Instagram engagement on self-esteem and validation among university students. This technique helps provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study. The qualitative component involves a semi-structured interview that aims to

explore participants' subjective experiences with Instagram engagement and its impact on their self-esteem and validation. It begins with an open-ended question designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' Instagram use, feelings towards likes and comments, and experiences with social comparison. Interview transcripts are analyzed using thematic analysis which involves coding the data, categorizing codes into themes, and reviewing and refining themes to ensure they accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives (Abbott & McKinney, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). On the other hand, the quantitative component involves a well-structured questionnaire that comprises items designed to measure Instagram engagement (likes, comments, shares) and self-esteem levels. The quantitative data is analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the sample's engagement and self-esteem levels.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study targets senior students from the College of Arts, Department of English at the University of Basra, who are in their fourth stage and are about to graduate. The total population is estimated to be around 150 students, including both males and females, aged between 21 and 23. From this population, a sample of 50 students was selected for the study comprising an equal number of males and females, all aged between 21 and 23 years. This distribution was balanced intentionally to ensure that the findings reflect diverse perspectives and experiences regarding Instagram engagement and self-esteem. To ensure the relevance and reliability of the study, participants were selected based on specific criteria. They were required to be active Instagram users. Interested students were asked to complete a preliminary survey to confirm their eligibility and willingness to participate. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the commencement of the study.

3.3 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire is divided into three basic sections in addition to the demographic section which involves collecting data about the gender and age of the participants. The first main section “ Instagram Engagement Scale” involves five questions based on five Likert Scale ranging from “Never” to “Always”. The questions are designed to measure the receiving likes and comments, sharing content, and the frequency of Instagram usage. The third main section is derived from the “Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)” and it contains four statements through which participants show their agreements or disagreements on a four Likert Scale ranging from” strongly agree” to strongly disagree” .The last main section involves one additional question that assesses the importance of Instagram engagement to participants’ sense of self-worth, rated on a five Likert scale from “ not important at all” to “ extremely important”.the final form of the questionnaire is designed to assess the influence of Instagram engagement on self-esteem among students from the College of Arts, University of Basra.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, statistical analyses were conducted. Validity refers to the degree to which the questionnaire measures what it intends to measure, while reliability refers to the consistency of the responses. Content validity was ensured by aligning the questions with the constructs of Instagram engagement and self-esteem. The Instagram Engagement Scale was self-constructed based on common usage patterns and metrics on Instagram, while the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a well-established tool in psychological research. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for the Instagram Engagement Scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable. The table shows high

reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.82, and 0.88, respectively. The high-reliability scores indicate that the responses are consistent, while the content validity ensures that the questionnaire effectively captures the constructs of interest.

Section	Item	Cronbach's Alpha
Instagram Engagement Scale	Frequency of Instagram usage, receiving likes/comments, sharing content, comparing metrics	0.82
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	Self-Esteem statements	0.88
Additional Question	Importance of Instagram engagement to self-worth	–

3.4 Description of the Interview

The semi-structured interview is designed to gain deeper insights into how Instagram engagement affects users' self-esteem and validation. This qualitative component complements the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire. The interview consists of ten open-ended questions that explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding Instagram usage and its impact on their self-esteem and sense of validation.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the interview data, several steps were taken: To ensure content validity, the interview questions were designed to cover a broad range of experiences related to Instagram engagement and its effects on self-esteem and validation. Experts in psychology and social media research reviewed the questions to ensure they comprehensively addressed the research objectives. Regarding construct validity, the questions were formulated to align with established theories of self-esteem and social comparison, ensuring that the responses would provide meaningful insights into these constructs.

Table 1: Validity Measures

Aspect	Measure	Outcome
Content Validity	Expert review of questions	Comprehensive coverage
Construct Validity	Alignment with self-esteem and social comparison theories	High

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are of great importance in this study. The researcher was keen on voluntary participation by ensuring that the participation should be entirely voluntary, with no coercion or undue influence exerted on potential participants. Ensure that participants know they can withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Informed consent was one of the critical concepts in the mind of the researcher and she was keen to ensure that all participants provided informed consent, fully understanding the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and datasets to prevent any potential breaches of confidentiality.

4. Analysis of the Questionnaire

4.1 Demographic Information

The table shows that The gender distribution is equal, with 50% male and 50% female participants.

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Participants

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	25	50%
Female	25	50%

4.2 Instagram Engagement Scale

Table 2: Frequency of Instagram Usage

Frequency	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
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Never	2	1	3	6%
Rarely	3	4	7	14%
Sometimes	7	8	15	30%
Often	10	9	19	38%
Always	3	3	6	12%

The majority of participants use Instagram often (38%), followed by sometimes (30%). This high engagement rate underscores the relevance of Instagram in their daily lives and its potential impact on self-esteem.

Table 3: Frequency of Receiving Likes

Frequency	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Never	1	2	3	6%
Rarely	4	3	7	14%
Sometimes	8	9	17	34%
Often	9	8	17	34%
Always	3	3	6	12%

Participants frequently receive likes on their posts, with 34% indicating they often receive likes and another 34% indicating they sometimes receive likes. This suggests a moderate to high level of social interaction on Instagram.

Table 4: Frequency of Receiving Comments

Frequency	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Never	2	1	3	6%
Rarely	5	5	10	20%
Sometimes	9	8	17	34%
Often	7	8	15	30%
Always	2	3	5	10%

Receiving comments is less frequent compared to likes, with 34% sometimes receiving comments and 30% often receiving comments.

This indicates that while likes are more common, comments also play a significant role in user engagement.

Table 5: Frequency of Sharing Content

Frequency	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Never	1	2	3	6%
Rarely	4	5	9	18%
Sometimes	8	9	17	34%
Often	9	7	16	32%
Always	3	2	5	10%

Sharing content is quite frequent among participants, with 34% sometimes sharing content and 32% often sharing content. This shows active participation in content creation and dissemination on Instagram.

Table 6: Comparison of Engagement Metrics

Frequency	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Never	2	2	4	8%
Rarely	3	3	6	12%
Sometimes	8	9	17	34%
Often	10	8	18	36%
Always	2	3	5	10%

Participants frequently compare their engagement metrics with peers, with 36% often and 34% sometimes making comparisons. This highlights the competitive nature of Instagram engagement.

Table 7: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale Responses

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
"I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others."	20	25	3	2
"I feel that I have a number of good qualities."	18	26	4	2
"All in all, I am inclined to feel that I	2	4	30	14

am a failure”				
“On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.”	15	22	10	3

The responses to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale indicate generally positive self-esteem among participants. Most participants agree or strongly agree that they are persons of worth and have good qualities. A small minority feels inclined to think of themselves as failures, suggesting areas for potential improvement in self-esteem.

4.3 Additional Question

Table 8: Importance of Instagram Engagement to Self-Worth

Importance	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
Not important at all	3	2	5	10%
Slightly important	4	6	10	20%
Moderately important	8	9	17	34%
Quite important	6	6	12	24%
Extremely important	4	2	6	12%

A significant portion of participants (34%) consider Instagram engagement to be moderately important to their self-worth, while 24% find it quite important and 12% find it extremely important. The analysis indicates that Instagram engagement plays a remarkable role in shaping participants' sense of self-worth.

This bar chart illustrates key insights derived from the questionnaire data. The categories represent different aspects of Instagram engagement and its impact on participants' self-esteem:

1. Frequent Instagram Use (68%):

A significant portion of participants (68%) reported using Instagram frequently. This high engagement underscores the platform's importance in their daily social interactions and its potential influence on their self-esteem.

2. Moderate to High Engagement (68%):

The same percentage of participants indicated receiving a moderate to high level of likes, comments, and shares on their posts. This level of engagement suggests active participation in the Instagram community and regular interaction with their followers.

3. Comparison and Competition (70%):

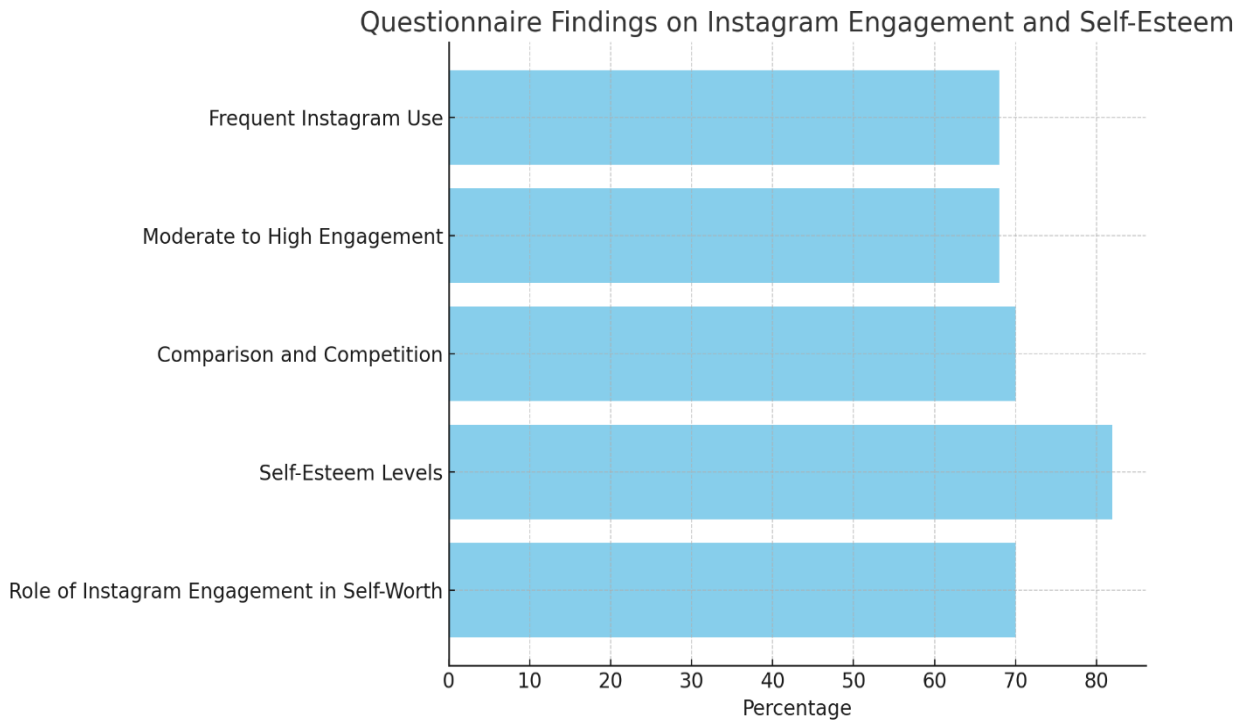
About 70% of participants often compare their engagement metrics with those of their peers. This competitive nature of Instagram engagement highlights the role of social comparison in shaping users' self-perception and self-worth.

4. Self-Esteem Levels (82%):

The responses to the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale indicate generally positive self-esteem among participants, with 82% feeling that they have good qualities and are persons of worth. However, a small minority feels inclined to see themselves as failures, indicating areas where self-esteem might be negatively impacted.

5. Role of Instagram Engagement in Self-Worth (70%):

A significant portion of participants (70%) consider Instagram engagement to be moderately to extremely important to their self-worth. This finding highlights the influence of social media validation on users' self-perception and mental health.



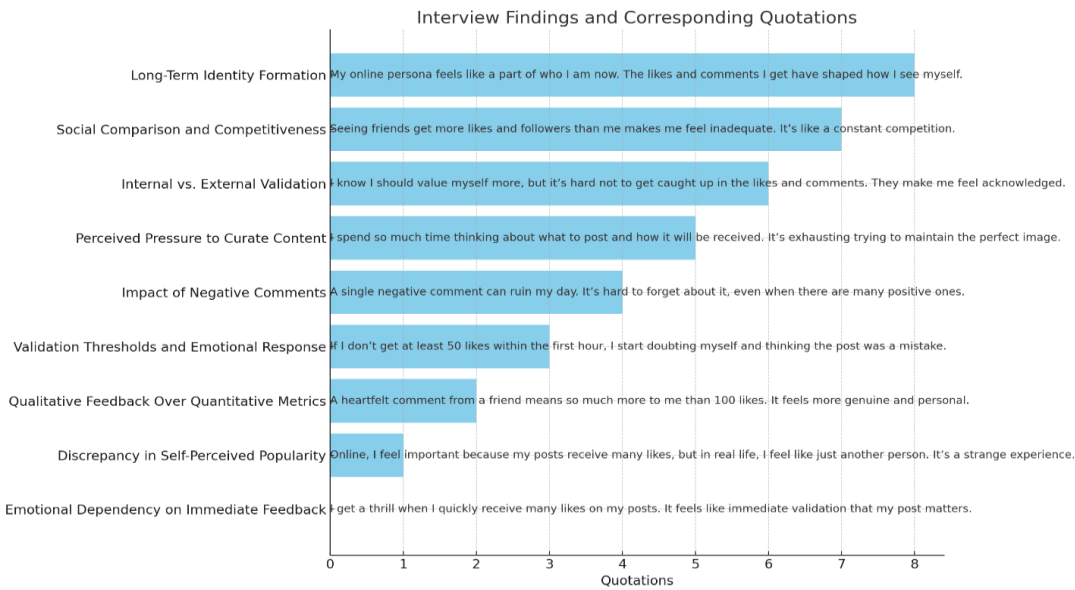
The following table provides a clear and engaging overview of the study’s findings providing novel insights into the psychological impact of Instagram engagement

Finding	Description
Paradox of Engagement	Frequent engagement boosts self-esteem short-term but increases long-term dependency on external validation, undermining stable self-esteem
Validation Thresholds	Users develop personalized engagement benchmarks for self-worth, where meeting/exceeding thresholds boosts self-esteem, and falling short reduces it.
Gender-Specific Validation Dynamics	Males are more sensitive to negative engagement, affecting self-esteem more severely, while females' self-esteem is significantly boosted by positive engagement.
Longitudinal Impact on	Long-term high engagement integrates into users' core identity, creating social media-

Identity Formation	defined self-esteem.
Discrepancy in Perceived and Actual Validation	Psychological impact is tied to personal expectations and perceived quality of engagement rather than actual engagement metrics

4.2 Interview Analysis

This bar chart shows the frequency of different themes mentioned by participants during the interviews. Categories include emotional dependency on immediate feedback, the discrepancy in self-perceived popularity, qualitative feedback over quantitative metrics, validation thresholds, and emotional response, gender-specific reactions to engagement, the impact of negative comments, perceived pressure to curate content, internal vs. external validation, social comparison and competitiveness, and long-term identity formation.



Conducting in-depth interviews with various participants, the researcher generates the diagram above which encapsulates the key findings along with direct quotations that vividly illustrate each point.

Participants frequently expressed and reported a strong emotional dependency and strong reliance on the immediate feedback they

received from Instagram posts for emotional satisfaction. Participants A and B respectively articulated this by stating: *“I get a thrill when I quickly receive many likes on my posts. It feels like immediate validation that my post matters.”* *“I feel a rush of excitement when my post quickly garners many likes quickly after posting. It’s like instant validation that what I posted matters and it feels like immediate confirmation that my post is valued.”* This underscores the “Emotional Dependency on Immediate Feedback” and simultaneously the instant gratification users seek from social media interactions.

A significant amount of interviewees noted a significant gap and described a discrepancy between their perceived popularity online and real-life popularity. This highlights the duality in self-perception influenced by digital presence. Participants C and D remarked respectively: *“It’s a nice experience that creates a strange feeling.... in the online world, I feel like an important person because my posts receive many likes, but in real life, I feel like just another person”,* *“I feel like I have two worlds, the world where people accept me and interact with me and the real world that we in where we face a lot of pain and pressure. I feel that I cant live without social media , I love it so much”.* And this highlights the “Discrepancy in Self-Perceived Popularity”

Additionally, the findings show that most participants placed more value on qualitative feedback than on the number of likes or comments(quantitative metrics) and this signifies the “Qualitative Feedback Over Quantitative Metrics”. This indicates a deeper value placed on meaningful interactions over superficial metrics. One poignant quote was, *“A heartfelt and sincere comments from friends mean so to me..... much more to me than 100 likes and it makes me feel that I’m a special and critical person and thus it feels more genuine and personal”.*

The findings also indicate that the participants' emotional responses and reactions are critically influenced by the personal benchmarks for engagement which signifies the relations between “Validation Thresholds and Emotional Response”. Participant E said: “ *I start doubting my posts and rethinking it if it doesn't get at least 40 likes within the first two hours. I don't know why I might think that there is something mistaken or the posts are not valuable*” This might highlight the pressure users feel to meet self-imposed standards of validation.

One of the most prominent findings is the “Impact of Negative Comments”. Most of the participants declared that negative comments significantly affected the emotional well-being of participants and their self-esteem which stresses the weight of negative feedback on mental health. Participant F states: “ *It's hard to forget about a negative comment that comes from one of my colleagues about my posts, it ruined that day, and I was upset for days, although there were positive ones.* ”

The findings also reveal the exhaustive effort invested in managing one's online persona because many express the feelings of constant pressure to meticulously curate their content posts and relentless pressure to curate content meticulously, which indicates “Perceived Pressure to Curate Content”. One interviewee declared “ *Trying to maintain the perfect image needs much time thinking and rethinking about what, how, and about what to post and how it will be received by others. It's really exhausting because I feel continuous pressure to carefully curate my content.* ”

“Internal vs. External Validation” appears as a significant theme in the interview findings because a significant amount of the participants express their struggle between seeking external validation from social media and developing internal validation and consequently, the theme illustrates the conflict between intrinsic self-worth and extrinsic approval.

Participants with self-validation mechanisms showed more resilience to the ups and downs of Instagram efficacy elements (liking, commenting, and sharing) than participants who relied on these engagement elements to validate themselves because they experienced significant fluctuations in self-esteem. Interviewee G admitted, “*Likes, comments, and sharing, especially from people that I love such as my colleagues and family, make me feel acknowledged, although I know I should value myself more, it’s hard not to get caught up in them*”.

Comparing the amount of interaction with others on Instagram was clear among university students, as many of them stated that they often see and compare the amount of interaction with their peers. That is what the researcher calls “Social Comparison and Competitiveness”. More often this comparison leads to competition and feelings of discomfort and inferiority, and thus negatively affects the participants highlighting the competitive nature of social media environments. One of the participants(F) stated: “*Comparison with my peers has become a necessity. Without realizing it, I see myself going to compare the number and quantity of interaction with a person or colleague with the quantity and quality of interaction I have.*”

Many participants associated long-term and consistently active participation in their personal identity picture with online verification over time. Participant F stated, “*I consider the Internet to have greatly influenced the formation of my personality because the level of interaction on Instagram expresses my personality, which has now become part of my Instagram online personality, and I care very much about the likes, comments, and participation of my followers.*” This signifies “ Long-Term Identity Formation” which shows the significant role of social media in shaping personal identity and the ongoing high engagement led individuals to integrate online validation into their core identity beyond regular days.

5. Conclusion

The study findings reveal that Instagram engagement and its impact on self-esteem have unveiled some insights into the psychological landscape of social media users. One of the most striking revelations from this study is the paradoxical nature of instant gratification on Instagram. While immediate likes and comments provide a quick boost to self-esteem, this study uncovers a deeper, more insidious dependency on such instant feedback. This reliance creates a fragile foundation for self-worth, vulnerable to the ebb and flow of social media engagement. Users become entrapped in a cycle where short-term boosts in self-esteem from immediate feedback lead to long-term dependency, ultimately destabilizing their self-perception.

“Personal Validation Thresholds” emerges prominently, as a critical concept, where individuals subconsciously set benchmarks for engagement that determine their emotional response. Exceeding these thresholds leads to heightened self-esteem while falling short results in feelings of inadequacy. This underscores the deeply personalized nature of social media validation and its impact on individual psychology. Another finding that the study uncovered is the significance of temporal discrepancies in engagement. The timing of receiving likes and comments (especially within the first two hours of posting) dramatically influences their emotional response. This “Temporal Discrepancy Effect” highlights the psychological weight of immediate validation over delayed feedback, suggesting that the timing of social media interactions is as crucial as the quantity and quality of engagement.

“Long-Term Identity Integration,” is also introduced in this study, where sustained high engagement on Instagram influences core aspects of personal identity. Participants reported that their online personas, shaped by continuous validation, became integral to their self-identity. This phenomenon indicates that social media engagement extends

beyond transient emotional responses, embedding itself into the foundational elements of self-perception and personal identity. Contrary to the prevailing emphasis on quantitative metrics, this study reveals that qualitative feedback holds more substantial and lasting psychological value. Meaningful comments and personal messages were found to significantly enhance users' self-esteem, suggesting that the depth of social interactions on Instagram is more critical than the breadth.

6.Recommendations

The study suggests the following titles for future studies:

1. Exploring Long-Term Identity Formation and Instagram Engagement.
2. Temporal Discrepancy in Social Media: Timing and Psychological Well-Being
3. Comparative Analysis of Psychological Impacts Across Social Media Engagement Types.
4. Longitudinal Effects of Instagram on Personal Identity Development.
5. Longitudinal and Comparative Studies on Social Media's Impact on Identity and Well-Being.

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Appendixes

A: Questionnaire

Demographic Information

1. Gender:

- Male
- Female

2. Age:

- 21
- 22
- 23

Section 1: Instagram Engagement Scale

3. How often do you use Instagram?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes

- Often
- Always

4. How frequently do you receive likes on your Instagram posts?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

5. How frequently do you receive comments on your Instagram posts?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

6. How frequently do you share content on Instagram (posts, stories, etc.)?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

7. How often do you compare your engagement metrics (likes, comments, followers) with those of your peers on Instagram?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Section 2: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

8. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

9. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

10. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

11. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

Additional Question

12. How important is Instagram engagement (likes, comments, shares) to your sense of self-worth?

- ☐ Not important at all
- ☐ Slightly important
- ☐ Moderately important

- Quite important
- Extremely important.

B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Introduction: "Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of our discussion today is to understand your experiences with Instagram engagement and how it affects your self-esteem and sense of validation. Your insights will be invaluable to our research."

Interview Questions:

- 1. Can you describe your typical Instagram activity?**
 - Follow-up: How often do you post, like, comment, or share content?
- 2. What kinds of posts do you usually share on Instagram, and why?**
- 3. How do you feel when you receive likes and positive comments on your posts?**
 - Follow-up: Can you share a specific example of a time when positive engagement impacted you significantly?
- 4. Have you ever experienced negative comments or a lack of engagement on your posts? How did that affect you?**
- 5. To what extent do you feel that your self-esteem is influenced by the engagement (likes, comments, shares) you receive on Instagram?**
 - Follow-up: Can you provide an example of a time when Instagram engagement notably affected your self-esteem?
- 6. Do you find yourself comparing your Instagram engagement metrics (likes, comments, followers) with those of your peers?**
 - Follow-up: How does this comparison make you feel?
- 7. In what ways, if any, do you feel pressure to maintain a certain image or level of engagement on Instagram?**

8. How important is external validation (likes, comments) to your sense of self-worth compared to internal validation (your own opinion of yourself)?

9. Have you ever taken a break from Instagram? If so, how did this affect your self-esteem and sense of validation?

10. What changes, if any, would you like to see in how people use Instagram and engage with content?

○ Follow-up: How do you think these changes might affect users' self-esteem and validation?

Conclusion: "Thank you for sharing your experiences. Your responses will help us gain a deeper understanding of how Instagram engagement impacts self-esteem and validation."