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INSTAGRAM VS REALITY: INFLUENCE OF INSTAGRAM ON DEPRESSION AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS - A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Introduction and purpose: The vast majority of the global population has access to the internet and consequently to social networking services (SNSs). These are online social media platforms that facilitate interaction between users and enable the sharing of information. One of the most popular SNSs is Instagram. However, the utilisation of this application does exert an influence on the mental health of users, yielding both favourable and unfavourable outcomes. This study aims to review the literature on the correlation between Instagram use and depression among the largest group of users – adolescents and young adults.

Stage of knowledge: Instagram is a free application for sharing photos and videos which has rapidly become an integral part of life for many people around the world. Due to the visual nature of its content, this social networking platform possesses characteristics that differentiate it from other such services, making it worthwhile to investigate the effects of this medium on mental health. Given its popularity, particularly among young users, studying the correlation between Instagram and a range of psychological well-being variables can provide valuable insights into its impact on the mental health of adolescents and young adults, such as depression.

Materials and methods: A comprehensive literature review was conducted utilising the Google Scholar and PubMed databases, employing the following keywords: Instagram, Social Networking Services, Depression, Mental Health, Adolescents, Young Adults.

Results: Unlimited access to social networking services has an impact on the mental health of users. Specifically Instagram use can lead to unfavorable results on mental well-being, such as depression. The group most vulnerable to these negative consequences is also the largest group of users – adolescents and young adults.

Conclusions: Further research on the influence of Instagram on depression among adolescents and young adults is essential to gain a more profound understanding of their mental health and to identify effective methods of preventing the adverse outcomes associated with social media use, such as depression. Furthermore, the potential of Instagram as a medium for promoting mental health should be given due consideration.

KEYWORDS

Instagram, Social Networking Services, Depression, Mental Health, Adolescents, Young Adults

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Introduction.

Research indicates that, on average, 46, 000 posts are uploaded to the Instagram platform every sixty seconds [1]. Instagram has been identified as the third most widely used social media platform among adolescents aged 13 to 17 years, after YouTube and TikTok [2]. This group, along with young adults, constitutes the majority of Instagram's user base [3].

Adolescence is characterised as a developmental and unstable phase, during which rapid physical and mental changes leave adolescents susceptible to the influence of social media [4] and vulnerable to psychological disorders [5] including depression. Due to its heterogeneous nature depression requires the implementation of preventive strategies and early interventions, as well as appropriate treatment eventually [6]. It has been confirmed that a variety of social media use patterns (i.e. high/focused on Instagram or Snapchat/low use pattern) appear to differentially predict psychosocial adjustment during early adolescence. The most concerning pattern is that of high social media use, which has been found to be particularly problematic in terms of its ability to predict higher depressive symptoms [7]. Depression or its symptoms can even occur in childhood, with prevalence increasing dramatically during adolescence [8]. In recent years the incidence of depression among adolescents and young adults has increased [9].

Instagram allows users to share edited or unedited photos and videos, which can be accompanied by a textual caption and hashtags. Other users can interact with this content by liking, sharing, commenting on it or

by starting conversations via Instagram Direct Messages. Furthermore, the platform offers a selection of functionalities that enable users to create Instastories, Reels and live broadcasts. The distinguishing characteristic of Instagram is its emphasis on visual content. So far, research on the social media effects on mental health have been mainly focused on the use of social networking services (SNSs) in general. For instance Cunningham et al. confirmed that depression symptoms were associated with the multi-dimensional nature of SNS use including time spent using these sites, intensity of use and problematic use [10]. However, there is a need for further research on the relationship between specifically Instagram use and mental health because of its differences comparing to other social media platforms [11]. The objective of this study is to undertake a comprehensive literature review of Instagram utilisation and its impact on the incidence of depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults.

Materials and methods.

A comprehensive review of literature available in the Google Scholar and PubMed databases was undertaken. The following keywords were used: Instagram, social networking services, depression, mental health, teenagers, young adults.

Results.

Studies are not compliant on the impact of Instagram on mental health. Researches have demonstrated a divergence in the impact of Instagram on depression, ranging from a strong effect to an absence of influence. This variance was frequently mediated by diverse factors.

Some empirical studies have indicated a negative correlation between Instagram use and subjective well-being over time [12]. The extant literature also indicates that social networking services non-users exhibited significantly lower levels of depression than Instagram and other social media application users [13]. This finding is consistent with the results of the study, which investigated the impact of Instagram abstinence on subjective well-being among young men and women. A comparative study was conducted on a group of 40 participants who suspended their Instagram usage for a duration of one week, and a control group comprising an equivalent number of individuals who continued to utilise the application as usual. The findings revealed that women who had abstained from Instagram exhibited significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect in comparison to those who maintained their regular Instagram use. Interestingly, the investigation did not identify any substantial outcomes associated with Instagram abstinence in terms of enhancing well-being in the male demographic [14].

It is also worth referring to a study conducted among 491 high school students from Turkey. The findings indicated that problematic Instagram use (PIU) among male and female adolescents aged 14 to 19 was associated with depression. Body image dissatisfaction partially mediated these associations. The negative effects of Instagram use were found to be more pronounced among female users than among male users [15]. In general, a higher level of engagement with Instagram is exhibited by female users in comparison to male users [16]. Their primary concerns are appearance on social media [17] and the reception of favourable peer feedback on their online content [18], what makes them more prone to negative consequences associated with utilization of social media [19]. These results are further validated by the findings of another study conducted exclusively among women aged 18 to 35, which demonstrated that excessive Instagram usage may lead to adverse psychological outcomes, including depressive symptoms and a negative self-perception with regard to appearance [20]. It is also noteworthy that problematic social media use (PMSU), characterised by an inability to regulate social media usage [21] and the utilisation of social media as a means of escaping reality [22], is more severe among Instagram users (problematic Instagram use - PIU) compared to Facebook users [23].

It has been demonstrated that specific problematic behaviours exhibited on social media platforms are associated with the onset of major depressive disorder, thereby increasing the probability of its manifestation [24]. Online survey-based research from 2019 on 504 millennials showed that individuals who were more likely to compare themselves to others, those who have the tendency to be upset by being tagged in unflattering images, those who are reluctant to share images of oneself with others and those who showed predisposition towards social media addiction were more likely to meet the criteria for major depressive disorder. The study also demonstrated that individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder exhibited a comparable level of engagement on Instagram as those who were not diagnosed with the condition. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that individuals with major depressive disorder had a smaller number of followers and followed a smaller number of other accounts. However, a contrary observation was reported in another study, which noted a small positive correlation between self-reported depressive symptoms and the number of followers and followees [20].

Similar conclusions regarding the use of Instagram and social media addiction as predictors of depression were obtained in a study conducted among 103 young adults [25]. The present study demonstrated that Instagram usage and SNS addiction exhibited a correlation. No such relationship existed between Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat and SNS addiction or depression, which makes Instagram a specific social networking site and highlights the necessity to consider the impact of Instagram on mental health as a distinct phenomenon from other social media platforms.

The relationship between social media use and depression is a complex one, with the nature of this relationship being dependent upon the user's individual characteristics and the specific characteristics of the platform. Instagram Investment, defined as emotional involvement in Instagram utilisation, is a construct that explains how individuals are impacted by their use of Instagram and significantly predicts depression and stress [26]. Aside from the time spent engaged with the application, even merely browsing Instagram, without undertaking any posting or interacting with other content, has been shown to predict an increase in depressive symptoms over time [27]. This phenomenon is also evident in the number of selfies taken prior to posting on Instagram and the practice of photo manipulation. These practices can create a sense of deception online, as evidenced by studies [28]. In contrast, authentic self-presentation has been linked to less negative outcomes [29].

Lup et al. conducted a study that examined the relationship between Instagram usage and depressive symptoms through the mechanism of negative social comparison with the intensity of this comparison being moderated by the number of strangers one follows on the platform. A total of 117 young adults, ranging in age from 18 to 29 years old, completed online questionnaires. The findings of the present study generally suggest that more frequent use of Instagram has negative associations with social comparison and depressive symptoms for individuals who follow a greater number of strangers [30].

Contrastingly, there are studies that demonstrate a favourable impact on Instagram users' mental well-being. Mackson et al. demonstrated that Instagram users may report lower levels of depressive symptoms than non-users [16]. Moreover, in another study conducted among 633 first-year students from Germany using a questionnaire sent by email, the following results were obtained: Instagram use correlated positively with positive mental health variables including extraversion, life satisfaction, and social support [31]. This phenomenon can partially be explained by the observation that social media platforms that prioritise visual content, such as Instagram, have been found to be positively associated with positive mental health outcomes. This finding aligns with the outcomes of a cross-sectional eye-tracking study conducted with participants aged 18–31, which demonstrated a preference for online pages comprising a primary large image and minimal text [32]. Other study investigated the relationships between the various types of social media platforms and psychological functioning in a diverse sample of emerging adults from the United States (aged 18–22 years). The findings indicated that individuals who utilised a greater number of diverse social media platforms exhibited a higher prevalence of anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, alcohol consumption and drug use. However, using Instagram itself was not associated with these measures of psychological functioning [33]. In addition, Fardouly et al. also found no significant association between depression and Instagram membership or intensity of use [34].

Despite the fact that Instagram possesses particular characteristics that may render users susceptible to negative consequences, it can also be considered as a feasible and acceptable platform for the dissemination of evidence-based mental health interventions designed to reduce depression stigma among young people [35]. Social media platforms offer a promising means to reach large, diverse youth populations, providing an opportunity to deliver interventions where young people are highly active.

Conclusions.

As demonstrated in this review of relevant literature, Instagram has been found to exert an influence on depression among adolescents and young adults. Nevertheless, a definitive characterisation as either positive or negative is not straightforward. Given the popularity of Instagram, especially among young users, and the platform's variety of features, there is a need for further examination of its influence on mental health. It is crucial for identifying effective methods of preventing adverse outcomes arising from social media use, such as depression. Research on the use of social media as a medium for the education of young people in relation to mental health is also worthy of note.

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Critical review of the article – Oliwia Gugąła, Aleksandra Gęsińska, Aleksandra Magdalena Furczyńska, Filip Bracichowicz, Wiktoria Socha.

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