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THE ATTITUDES, GRATIFICATION, PATTERNS AND PURPOSES OF USING INSTAGRAM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Toktam Namayandeh Joorabchi¹ and Reyhaneh Najjaran²

¹ Faculty of Education, The National University of Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia

² Faculty of social science, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran (FUM)

Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: 14 Dis 2024 Revised: 4 Feb 2025 Accepted: 29 July 2025 Published: 1 Sep 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Instagram Gratification Attitudes towards Instagram Students</p> <p></p>	<p>Instagram is a prominent social media platform among Generation Z in Iran, with users dedicating significant time daily to scrolling and accumulating numerous hours weekly. This study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the effects of gratification, attitudes, and purposes associated with Instagram use among Iranian students. We conducted in-depth interviews with 25 students from Ferdowsi University in Mashhad, Iran, who are active Instagram users. The objective was to explore how gratification, attitudes, and usage purposes influence students' engagement with Instagram. Findings indicate that students derive satisfaction from using Instagram, fulfilling various needs. Their attitudes towards Instagram usage are both positive and negative, reflecting diverse purposes. Students' interests vary widely, leading them to follow pages that align with their preferences. The study also discusses the broader implications of these findings.</p>

Corresponding Author:

* Toktam Namayandeh Joorabchi,
 Faculty of Education, The National University of Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia.
 Email: T.Namayande@gmail.com



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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become integral to daily life, serving as an online communication tool that has dramatically transformed various domains, including society, communication, marketing, and lifestyles (Kee, 2024). The advent of social media enables people to interact freely across any distance and at any time. Among young adults, Instagram has emerged as the most popular social network in recent years (Internet World Stats, 2021).

Yurdagül et al., (2021) assert that Instagram's unique nature among social networks stems from its focus on photo and video content. This distinction is further emphasized by the popularity of recent features, such as short videos temporarily posted as stories and reels (Ryan & Linehan, 2022). Recent studies by Lin (2022) and Roberts and David (2023) indicate that Instagram functions not solely as a tool for individual self-expression, but also as a mechanism through which individuals can explore their social spheres, actively pursuing material that resonates with their specific interests and ambitions. Instagram is particularly popular among Generation Z, who actively engage with content such as talent showcases and memes (Kee, 2024). Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, are considered 'digital natives,' having grown up in a digital communication environment. According to Brianna (2024), over 70% of Gen Z individuals use screens both before bed and upon waking. Approximately 63.9% of them use social media in the evenings before sleep, nearly twice the rate of Baby Boomers (Brianna, 2024). This makes them highly susceptible to social advertising online. Scholars note that Gen Z are prolific consumers of social media content and prefer to communicate through images rather than text, unlike previous generations (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). In 2023, Gen Z spent an average of seven hours and 41 minutes per week on Instagram (The Star, 2024).

According to World Bank figures from 2021, approximately 79 percent of Iran's population uses the Internet (World Bank Group, 2024). In Iran, the most popular platform among the broader population is Instagram, with 56% of users, followed by Telegram (39.3%) and WhatsApp (33.3%) (Iran International, 2024).

According to IDEA (2023), over 70% of people consistently use social networks. Zelkaa's statistics reveal that the average Iranian Instagram user follows over 275 public pages and has liked more than 7,000 posts in the past year. Iranian Instagram users have grown steadily from 28.5 million in 2019-2020 to 41 million in 2022. There are over 6.3 million public pages on Persian Instagram, with 440 million posts receiving 291 billion likes. The most popular categories are fashion and lifestyle, followed by individuals and news, beauty and skincare, technology and gadgets, and sports and fitness. Kong (2024) found that 44% of students favor beauty, fashion, and skincare content, while 41% prefer lifestyle and personal development. Fitness content is favored by 12% of students, and nutrition and diet content is the least popular, with only 3% indicating it as their preferred content.

The aim of this study is to explore the factors influencing Instagram usage among students. The main research question concerns the factors contributing to Instagram usage, which can be subdivided into four specific inquiries: 1) what are the attitudes of students towards using Instagram? 2) What gratifications do students derive from using Instagram? 3) What patterns and

purposes characterize Instagram usage among students? 4) Which pages do students typically follow on Instagram?

GRATIFICATION AND PURPOSE OF USING INSTAGRAM

Alhabash and Ma (2017) compared Uses and Gratifications (U&G) across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. They noted that daily time spent on Instagram and Snapchat exceeded that on Twitter. Entertainment and convenience were the primary motives across these platforms, with entertainment strongly predicting usage intensity.

Ko and Yu (2019) found that motives such as entertainment, passing time, bridging social capital, and information value predict users' intentions to continue using Instagram "Stories" function. Users reported that elements like inspiration, staying up-to-date, communication, maintaining contact, and a sense of belonging contribute to their extensive use of Instagram. Additionally, Instagram allows two types of user engagement: active use, involving posting and interacting through comments and likes (Verduyn et al., 2017), and passive use, which refers to scrolling and consuming content without interaction.

Al-Kandari et al. (2016) reported that Instagram offers categories of needs and motives that closely resemble those found in other social media platforms, including self-expression, social interaction, entertainment, and opinion exchange. Moreover, it addresses the desire for engaging in photography experimentation, a feature that is not adequately provided by many existing social media platforms. The strongest indicators for individuals utilizing Instagram for self-disclosure across various dimensions, such as honesty, quantity, positive sentiment, and profundity, were the needs for self-expression and social interaction.

Ong (2024) discovered that socially rewarding self-promotion, trendiness, and escapism positively correlate with satisfaction in using Instagram Reels. The feature allows users to express creativity and innovation through short videos, encouraging experimentation with different sounds and images, fostering fresh ideas. This novelty enhances the social media experience and consumption, particularly for young people seeking fun and an escape from daily life. Instagram Reels provide quick bursts of entertainment through humorous, relatable, or inspirational content, making them a prime platform for advertisers to integrate brand messaging seamlessly into popular entertainment formats.

Ong (2024) categorizes social media platforms into six classifications: online forums, media sharing, social networking, social bookmarking, and social news. These platforms serve diverse customer preferences and purposes, ranging from enthusiast-driven to professional-focused. They connect people globally who share similar beliefs or interests, enabling interactions such as politicians engaging with voters, entertainers with fans, and charitable organizations with donors. During emergencies, governments often use social media to disseminate crucial information. Ong also found that satisfaction with using Instagram Reels is highest when associated with escapism, followed by trendiness, socially rewarding self-promotion, and surveillance. These factors positively correlate with user satisfaction in utilizing Instagram Reels.

Meng and Leung (2021) found that users of vertical video-sharing platforms are motivated by both unique factors like novelty and trendiness, as well as traditional motives such as entertainment and

escape. This supports the validity of Uses and Gratifications theory. Menon (2022a) discovered that all life values and motives for using Instagram Reels are positively correlated, except for escapism, which negatively correlates with life satisfaction. This indicates that some users turn to Instagram Reels to escape real-life dissatisfaction.

Menon (2022b) found that age is positively associated with two Instagram story update motives: social sharing, indicating Stories serve as a means for interpersonal communication where individuals express emotions to their social circle, and socially rewarding self-promotion, suggesting users post to gain likes and comments as rewards. Women tend more towards trendy fashion gratifications and socially rewarding self-promotion in their Instagram story updates compared to men. This aligns with Sheldon and Bryant (2016) earlier research, which highlighted self-promotion as a primary source of satisfaction derived from Instagram.

Sheldon and Bryant (2016) observed that college students often like their friends' Instagram photos to boost their popularity. They also noted a positive connection between narcissism and self-promotion on the platform, emphasizing the importance of social interaction in social media behavior.

ATTITUDES AND PATTERNS OF USING INSTAGRAM

Gaber et al., (2019) found that consumers' perceptions of being informative, entertainment, credibility, and lack of irritation in Instagram advertisements strongly influence their attitudes. They also confirmed that positive attitudes towards Instagram advertisements positively affect attitudes towards the advertised brands.

Kong (2024) discovered that students exhibit a 46% negative attitude when they lose followers on Instagram. Andreassen (2015), as cited in Köse and Doğan (2019), noted that social media users with negative self-perception tend to gauge their success based on likes and followers, relying more on external validation. This perception stems from the belief that attractive or popular individuals garner more followers on social media. Moreover, Kong (2024) found that students harbor negative attitudes towards curated Instagram photography, associating it with potential issues such as eroded self-esteem, self-doubt, eating disorders, depression, and other hidden challenges that can significantly impact individuals' lives (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023).

Damaryanan and Subekti (2024) observed that the participants exhibited favorable attitudes towards utilizing Instagram as a tool for practicing spoken English. However, despite acknowledging Instagram efficacy for language practice, their motivation to engage with it for educational purposes was somewhat subdued. Moreover, the participants' positive perceptions regarding Instagram utility for enhancing English pronunciation align with similar conclusions drawn from prior research conducted both in Indonesia and internationally (Erarslan, 2019; Issa & Shyamala, 2021).

Morais et al., (2024) found that Instagram is a favored social network among students, where they spend a significant amount of daily time primarily to connect with friends and family and discover new content. Participants indicated that they do not use social media for acceptance, validation, or integration purposes, but rather to reinforce existing knowledge and feelings through feedback on

shared content. The study highlighted engagement habits that occupy nearly one-fourth of users' daily waking hours, sometimes with minimal positive impact on other activities.

Hackstedt (2024) studied the relationship between Instagram usage intensity and university students' sense of purpose in life. The study found no significant relationship between Instagram usage intensity and sense of purpose in life. However, both active and passive usage slightly moderated this relationship positively.

USES AND GRATIFICATION THEORY

Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) formulated a framework in 1973 encompassing five social and psychological needs that are fulfilled through media consumption. These needs encompass cognitive needs, which pertain to the acquisition of knowledge and information, or the enhancement of comprehension; affective needs, which denote a yearning for emotional or creative experiences; integrative needs, which involve the necessity for bolstering credibility, status, or confidence, incorporating both affective and cognitive components. Social integrative needs revolve around the imperative of fortifying connections with significant others, while tension-release needs entail the desire to disengage from the self in order to relax and escape.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory examines how Generation Z utilizes Instagram, focusing on their primary activities such as liking posts, sharing stories, and sending direct messages, which are driven by entertainment. These insights offer valuable guidance for developing effective digital strategies to establish sustainable relationships with Generation Z (Kee, 2024). Ko and Kuo (2009) illustrate that young individuals achieve a sense of social integration through active story posting on social media platforms.

Kusuma and Yuniardi (2020) found that entertaining content on Instagram generates pleasure and satisfaction among users, highlighting the role of reward sensitivity as outlined in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Smith (2021) noted that Instagram users carefully curate their public image to reflect their ideal self, leveraging the platform's visual nature for self-expression through photos and videos. Instagram immersive features like stories and reels provide users with an escape from daily life, as discussed by Kocak et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2020). Boursier & Manna (2018) and Diefenbach and Anders (2022) highlighted how Instagram interactive tools facilitate social connections by enabling instant feedback and engagement, fostering a sense of community among users.

Sheldon and Bryant (2016) identified motivations driving Instagram engagement, including monitoring others' activities, sharing personal moments, showcasing creativity, and seeking popularity. These motivations influence various user behaviors on the platform, from active content creation to passive consumption, supported by Instagram's platform features.

METHODOLOGY

The current study employed thematic analysis (TA), as described by Braun et al. (2016), a widely adopted qualitative method. Thematic analysis goes beyond mere word counting by identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas, known as themes, within the data. Codes are developed to represent these themes and are applied to the raw data for later analysis and

interpretation. Reliability in thematic analysis is particularly crucial due to the interpretative nature involved in defining and applying codes to textual data, especially when multiple analysts are involved. Strategies for monitoring and enhancing intercoder agreement are essential to maintain rigor and reliability throughout the analytical process.

Despite challenges related to reliability, thematic analysis remains valuable for capturing the nuanced meanings within textual datasets and is extensively used in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2012).

Participants

The study included 25 participants from Ferdowsi University, encompassing both undergraduate and post-graduate students aged between 21 to 29 years. All participants were active Instagram users, with usage durations ranging from 3 weeks to 12 years. Daily usage varied from 30 minutes to 5 hours, while weekly usage ranged from 1 hour to 35 hours. The participants' follower counts ranged from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 2000 followers. Regarding the number of accounts they followed, participants followed between 15 and 1000 accounts.

Table 1: Demographic information per participant

Participant Pseudonyms	Age	Years of using Instagram	Hours of using Instagram per day	Hours of using Instagram per week	Number of Follower	Number of Following
Sahar	22	6 years	30 min	6 hours	70	50
Sara	22	3 weeks	3 hours	24 hours	100	120
Yasamin	21	9 years	Not daily	1 hour	493	338
Mina	22	2 years	4 hours	24 hours	680	450
Fatemeh	23	9 years	3 hours	21 hours	public page= 85 private page= 76	public page= 1200 private page=993
Samaneh	22	6 years	3 hours	15 hours	130	500
Shahab	29	12 years	3:30 hours	21 hours	1805	1713
Amir	21	12 years	2 hours	15 hours	190	1000
Shima	23	4 years	2 hours	20 hours	2200	600
Reza	23	7 years	30 min	4 hours	250	222
Nilofar	23	5 years	30 min	5 hours	1140	400
Maryam	22	3 years	5 hours	35 hours	50	300
Elahe	23	10 years	1:30 hour	8 hours	20	15
Negar	21	6 years	2 hours	14 hours	90	100
Mitra	22	5 years	1:30 hour	12 hours	136	190
Naser	21	3 years	3 hours	21 hours	300	350
Homa	22	4 years	5 hours	28 hours	730	400
Kimiya	23	7 years	4 hours	20 hours	51	230
Neda	21	2 years	2 hours	12 hours	72	100
Atefeh	23	7 years	4 hours	15 hours	255	410

Parvaneh	22	4 years	5 hours	14 hours	417	491
Mahoor	22	4 years	1 hour	8 hours	160	170
Saeedeh	22	8 years	1:30 hour	15 hours	230	310
Atiyeh	22	7 years	5 hours	16 hours	200	409
Ali	22	7 years	5 hours	25 hours	300	230

Procedure

This study utilized a qualitative research design involving face-to-face interviews with students enrolled at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad, Iran. Participants were selected based on their use of Instagram, representing various faculties and academic levels (post-graduate and undergraduate). Appointments were arranged with these students to conduct interviews, each lasting between 60 to 120 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a mobile phone, and participants' voices were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, interviews conducted in Persian were translated into English for analysis and reporting purposes.

Measurement

The interviews were conducted in a semi-open, informant-centered manner, resembling a strategic and personal-experience-focused conversation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). Transcripts were interpreted through a thorough and iterative reading process. Categories emerged from data segments, continuously referring to relevant literature until no new categories arose. Each complete text was divided into content-specific excerpts, and their essence was condensed through semantic and contextual analysis. Coherence was consistently evaluated at each stage through semantic analysis, ensuring alignment with the original excerpts' essence.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. Each transcript was thematically analyzed, utilizing Braun and Clarke's six step framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cooper et al., 2012). Codes and themes were identified inductively from the dataset. Transcripts were re-read thrice to attain data familiarization (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cooper et al., 2012). A rapid analysis of themes then ensued to achieve full immersion within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Taylor et al., 2018). With the aid of MAXQUDA, codes were organized into categories and initial themes were developed. No further codes, categories or themes arose from the final three transcripts, confirming that data saturation had been achieved (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). To address the trustworthiness of this research, analytic triangulation was completed (Steinke, 2005). Two researchers independently analyzed each transcript and met to discuss, and further refine the identified themes. Furthermore, each participant was emailed a copy of the themes generated from their transcript, allowing for member validation to occur (Birt et al., 2016).

Table 2: Positive Youth Development (PYD) Themes Generated from Exploring Participant's Responses

Themes	Subordinate themes	Description	Number of Participants	Exemplary Quotes
Gratification of Using Instagram	Cognitive	Sports, Nutrition (diet) General information Language, Style and fashion News, Books and movies Financial matters Immigration matters	24	We gather information from Instagram in various fields such as sports, nutrition, general information, language, style, news, financial and immigration matters, about books and movies
	Escape		22	Instagram posts help me escape from my daily routine, mental engagement, and distress
	Personal Integration	Motivational and psychological content Role modeling (influencer and blogger)	19	Motivational pages, influencers, and bloggers have helped me to have a better connection with myself and achieve personal growth
	Social Integration	Hashtagging Interaction with friends and acquaintances Participation in campaigns (environmental, social) Cultural issues (changing mindsets, closer relationships among people) Common traits of an individual with others	16	I feel closer to people through various methods such as using hashtags, participating in campaigns, or interacting with friends and acquaintances and people with whom I share common characteristics
	Affective	Social, cultural, sports and Personal issues	25	Clips related to social and cultural issues in Iran are usually upsetting and seeing them bothers me When someone disrespects my interests or I see a negative clip about them, I get very upset. On the contrary, presenting positive aspects makes me happy
Pages Followed		Friends, Relatives Bloggers, Comedy pages Style pages, News pages Sports pages, Nutrition pages, Cafes in Mashhad Language learning pages, Nature pages, Online shops Personal growth and body peace, cooking pages Singers and actors Movie and series	25	My Instagram explores only News and sports gossip, from bodybuilding to various sports; it's all about either bodybuilding or football I mostly follow cooking and baking pages, comedy and feminist pages I mostly follow people I know or very famous bloggers

		Introduction pages		I follow comedians, and singers. I also follow cooking and baking a lot because I'm interested in it
Purposes of using Instagram		Establishing communication with friends, Entertainment Achieving income, Easy shopping (less time-consuming, possibility to compare prices and goods) Following the News	25	I use Instagram for entertainment, more communication with my friends, shopping, following news, and earning income
Attitudes towards Instagram		Positive Finding restaurants and cafes easier Establishing a link with the community Progress in life and human thinking Negative FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) false information, comparing oneself with others Wasting time Trying to keep up with the Joneses Inane clips	Positive 18 Negative 7	Positive Instagram has led to the progress of individuals' lives and establishing connections with society. It also makes it easy to find various recreational places through it. As entertainment, it is also a good platform Negative Instagram is a place where people show off, and there is a lot of false information and inane clips in it. People compare themselves to the others and receive negative impacts or envy them. It's also very time-consuming

RESULTS

Gratification of Using Instagram

Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973) identified and categorized five dimensions of media use needs. These dimensions encompass **cognitive needs**, which involve acquiring information and understanding about our surroundings; **affective needs**, related to enhancing emotional and aesthetic experiences; **personal integrative needs**, which contribute to strengthening personal credibility, confidence, stability, and status; **social integrative needs**, involving enhancing connections with family, friends, and society at large; and **escapist needs**, which fulfill the desire for diversion and tension release.

In relation to the affective dimension, Instagram profoundly influences our emotions. For instance, Samaneh recounted how various clips related to the Ukrainian plane crash deeply moved her, recalling one instance where she was moved to tears. Niloufar shared that news headlines on Instagram often provoke strong emotional responses, even when the news itself may not be particularly contentious. Neda expressed her joy at seeing videos of Iran's victories in the Asian Cup, highlighting how such content can elicit intense positive emotions. Overall, respondents consistently indicated that affective news and events on Instagram have a significant impact on their emotions.

In the escape dimension, many students expressed a desire to break away from daily routines and societal stressors through Instagram. Shahab noted that late at night, when feeling impatient, Instagram serves as a way to pass time effectively. Similarly, Niloufar mentioned using Instagram to alleviate boredom by following the latest music trends.

Cognitive gratification represents another dimension of using Instagram which focuses on obtaining information and knowledge. Samaneh highlighted using Instagram to stay updated with news, relying on credible pages for information. Parvaneh noted learning about current feminist issues and gaining knowledge from Instagram. Overall, all students used Instagram as a means to gather information and stay informed about various topics.

Social integration through Instagram is highlighted by Maryam's experience who shared how interacting with content related to animals and pet owners made her feel a sense of closeness and taught her how to interact with animals. Similarly, Ali mentioned that "posting on Instagram and receiving comments or tags from others creates a sense of connection and encouragement, fostering closeness with those who engage with their posts". These interactions illustrate how Instagram can facilitate social integration by connecting individuals with shared interests and encouraging mutual interaction and support.

In terms of personal integration, Atiye finds reassurance and motivation on Instagram, learning from posts that it's normal not to feel good sometimes and discovering ways to improve her well-being like exercise or reading. Saeideh shared how Instagram has been beneficial in calming her mind, citing an example of learning and sharing helpful tips like the "5 by 5 rules" which have positively impacted her life. These instances demonstrate how Instagram supports personal growth and mental well-being by providing valuable insights and strategies.

Attitudes Towards Instagram

Regarding attitudes towards Instagram, users express both positive and negative perspectives. Homa views Instagram positively, using it to research places and make informed decisions about purchases or outings. Shahab believes Instagram has advanced human life and enriched experiences, reflecting a generally positive sentiment shared by over half of the respondents.

Conversely, negative attitudes are also prevalent. Yasmin criticizes Instagram as a platform for seeking attention and showcasing a false reality. Saeideh acknowledges Instagram's allure but expresses concern over the time it consumes. Atefeh describes feeling envy and sadness when comparing her life to others' displayed luxuries on Instagram. These perspectives highlight the dual nature of Instagram impact on users' attitudes and emotions.

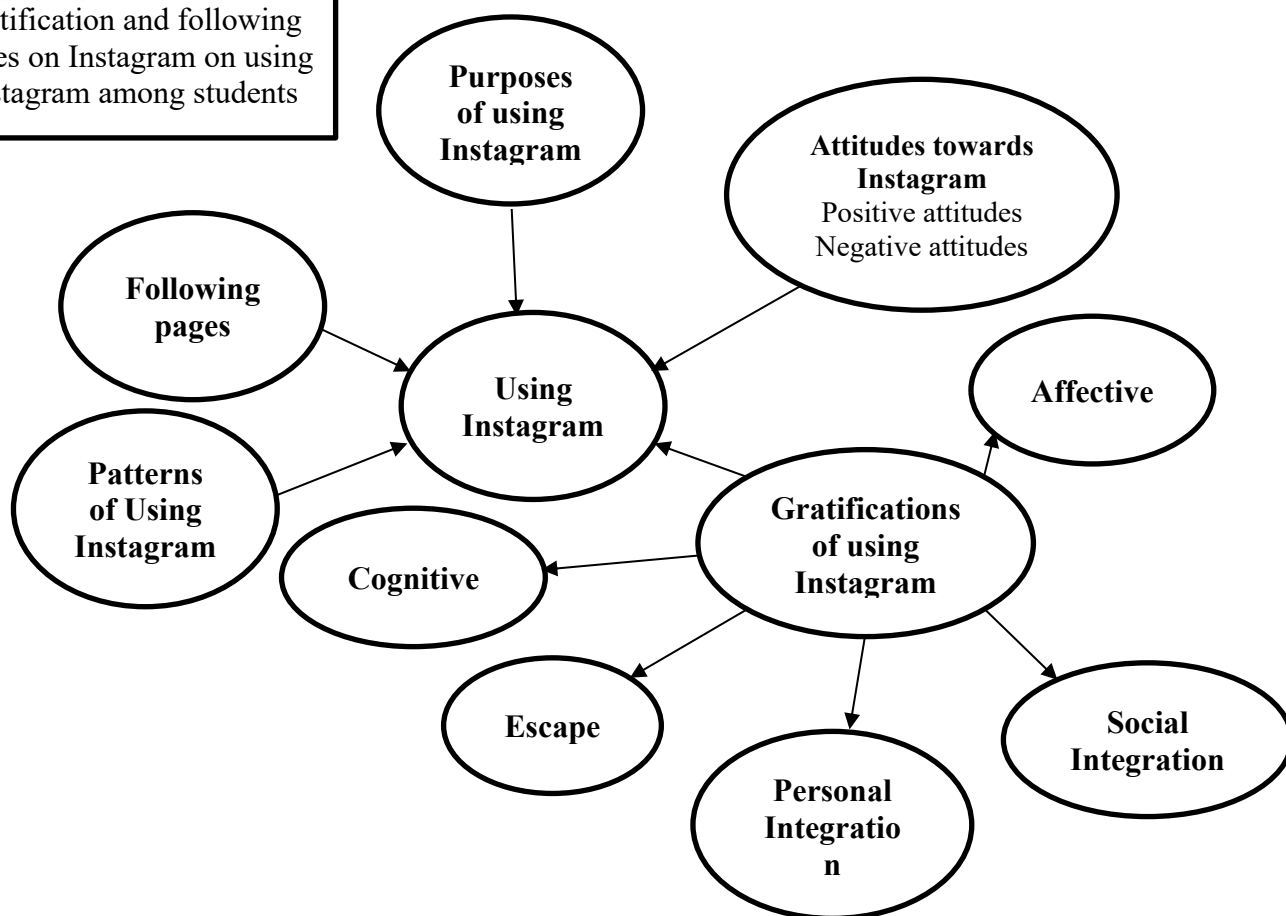
Purpose of Using Instagram

Users utilize Instagram for various purposes. Mahoor finds it convenient for shopping due to its efficiency and entertainment value, allowing her to compare items quickly and make hassle-free purchases. Sara uses Instagram primarily for communication, reconnecting with old friends from elementary and high school through the platform. Amir prefers Instagram for accessing news, appreciating its video format which saves time compared to reading text-based news. These diverse intentions demonstrate how Instagram serves different needs, from practicality and social connection to staying informed.

Following Pages

Students' use of Instagram is influenced by their attitudes, purposes, and gratifications. They mainly use it for communication with friends and family, and also follow interests like celebrities, online shopping, news, sports, cooking, nutrition, and personal growth activities such as learning new languages. This framework illustrates how attitudes and gratification shape specific uses and the benefits students derive from Instagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The effects of purpose, pattern, attitudes, gratification and following pages on using Instagram among students



DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to qualitatively explore the factors influencing Instagram usage among students, based on their personal experiences. The findings highlight students' attitudes, purposes, and usage patterns on Instagram, focusing on their interests in following pages that provide gratification and enjoyment. Specifically, students predominantly follow friends, relatives, celebrities, online shops, news, and sports and fitness pages. These results align with Kong's (2024) findings that students commonly follow pages related to beauty, fashion, skincare, lifestyle, personal development, fitness, workout, nutrition, and diet.

Instagram usage gratification is divided into five main categories. In terms of affective gratification, students express being emotionally impacted by news on Instagram, which can evoke feelings of sadness or happiness. The visual nature of Instagram, focusing on videos and images, intensifies these emotional responses as it provides vivid documentation. For example, students reported feeling deeply saddened, even crying, due to news like the Ukrainian airplane crash (PS752). Conversely, they also experienced joy from watching videos of soccer victories on Instagram. This finding is supported by Vermeer and van den Heijkant (2023) and Swart and

Broersma (2023), who similarly found that Instagram users are emotionally affected by news content.

In the cognitive dimension, students use Instagram to gather information, update their knowledge, and access news. This trend contrasts with older generations who typically rely on traditional media like TV and radio for information, as noted by Andersen et al., (2021).

Regarding social integration, students connect and communicate with others on Instagram, sharing knowledge and discussing various topics and events with friends and relatives. This finding aligns with Menon (2022b), who observed users using Instagram stories and reels to express emotions within their social circles. Additionally, Verduyn et al. (2017) highlighted how Instagram is used for posting content and engaging through comments and likes. Valkenburg et al. (2022) found that youth use Instagram for inspiration, staying current, communication, maintaining connections, and fostering a sense of belonging, contributing to its extensive use. Sheldon and Bryant (2016) also noted that social interaction and engagement are significant predictors of social media behavior.

In terms of personal integration, students express that Instagram helps them improve self-confidence and self-awareness by discovering their talents and strengths. This finding is supported by Menon (2022b), who noted that students use Instagram stories and reels for socially rewarding self-promotion, earning likes and comments as validation. Additionally, Sheldon and Bryant (2016) found that self-promotion is a key source of satisfaction on Instagram. Ong (2024) observed that liking friends' photos on Instagram contributes positively to popularity and self-promotion among peers. These insights underscore how Instagram serves as a platform for enhancing personal identity and confidence among students.

In the escape dimension, the majority of students indicate seeking an escape from the monotony and stress of societal pressures by engaging with music and humorous videos on platforms like Instagram. The act of escapism is enabled by the deeply engaging narratives and short video clips, providing a brief relief from the demands of one's everyday existence (Kocak et al., 2020; Ong, 2024; Wang et al., 2020).

In terms of purposes, students use Instagram for shopping, communication, entertainment, and news, aligning with findings that highlight entertainment as a primary motive (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Research also shows that Instagram serves purposes such as building social connections, passing time, and self-expression (Al-Kandari et al., 2016; Ko & Yu, 2019).

Students hold both positive and negative attitudes towards Instagram, though the majority lean towards the positive. They appreciate its convenience for online shopping, discovering restaurants, and cafes. However, negative attitudes arise from concerns about people showing off, dishonesty, social comparison, and the platform's time-consuming nature. This aligns with existing research indicating positive attitudes towards Instagram (Damaryanan & Subekti, 2024; Erarslan, 2019; Issa & Shyamala, 2021). Conversely, negative sentiments emerge when students experience follower loss (Kong, 2024) or when Instagram use contributes to issues like self-esteem erosion, self-doubt, eating disorders, and depression (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023). Social comparison on Instagram is also noted as a significant negative aspect, consistent with studies by Gambelli (2024) and Byrne (2024) and Carr (2024).

In relation to the patterns of using Instagram, Generation Z exhibits a propensity for extensive engagement with the platform. The research findings indicate that the demographic of users comprises predominantly young individuals under the age of 30. These users typically engage with Instagram for a duration not exceeding 12 years, spending a maximum of 5 hours daily, and maintaining up to 2k followers and following 1k accounts. This observation is consistent with a report published in *The Star* in 2024, which highlights that Generation Z, in the year 2023, allocated an average of seven hours and 41 minutes per week to Instagram (*The Star*, 2024). Moreover, the study unveils Instagram popularity among the youth in Iran, aligning with Morais et al.'s assertion in 2024 that Instagram ranks as the preferred social media platform among the youth (Morais et al., 2024). The platform serves as a primary communication tool for staying connected with acquaintances and discovering fresh content. Additionally, Hackstedt's research in 2024 establishes a correlation between the intensity of Instagram usage and individuals' sense of purpose in life (Hackstedt, 2024).

Youth use Instagram to fulfill their needs, leading to enjoyment and increased usage, as per the uses and gratification theory. Generation Z engages in activities like liking, sharing stories, and sending direct messages, finding them entertaining and trend-worthy. Posting stories fosters social integration among young users (Ko & Kuo, 2009). Amusing content on Instagram provides pleasure and enjoyment, especially for users with high reward sensitivity (Kusuma & Yuniardi, 2020; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Moreover, Hossain (2019) highlights that users' habits mediate the relationship between the theory of Uses and Gratification and the purposes of using Instagram. Positive experiences on Instagram can cultivate habitual use and reinforce users' intentions to continue engaging with the platform. Meier et al. (2020) found that youth use Instagram to develop talents and achieve personal growth, demonstrating its role in goal attainment and user satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

This research paper examines the usage of Instagram among Iranian youth, particularly Generation Z, emphasizing the five dimensions of gratification: escape, affective, cognitive, social integration, and personal integration. The study reveals that young adults in Iran use Instagram extensively for various purposes, with both positive and negative attitudes towards the platform. They engage with Instagram for different durations over the years, following pages aligned with their interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Iranian youth's heavy use of Instagram presents an opportunity for the government to promote skill development and personal growth through this platform. Future studies should adopt a mixed-method approach, combining surveys with qualitative methods like focus groups, to gain deeper insights into youth behavior on Instagram.

Research could also expand to include diverse user groups such as online shops, housewives, working women, and school students, using mixed methods to provide a comprehensive understanding. Further exploration could focus on privacy concerns' impact on user interactions,

posting habits, and willingness to share information with advertisers, shedding light on user preferences and behaviors on Instagram.

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