Research Article

Motivations for Instagram use: Personal validation and enhancing close relationships

Juliette Mark [1]
 0009-0009-2211-6550

Lindsey Rice [1]
 0000-0002-4530-8979

Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter [1*]
 0000-0001-9645-3239

Hannah R. Snidman [1]
 0000-0002-8526-2346

[1] Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA
[*] Corresponding author: n.punyanunt@ttu.edu

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Digital communication and social networking continue to evolve as user demand increases. While much of the research examining motivations for social media focuses on Facebook, different social networking platforms offer a variety of features and uses increasing demand for continued research on motivations for use of social media platforms. Instagram includes a uniquely visual presentation style when compared to Facebook and emphasizes public connections rather than known social connections, so motivations for use of this platform may differ. The current research examined motivations for Instagram use, in general, focusing on the public affirmation aspects of this platform, as well as examined how this platform may affect motivations to connect with those in close relationships. Instagram use produced greater feelings of sadness when these public affirmation needs were not met. In addition, when close relationship needs were not met, feelings of sadness also increased. This research contributes to the existing literature on social networking site use and highlights unique motivations for use of the Instagram platform. **Keywords:** Instagram, social networking, motivation, close relationships

INTRODUCTION

As our society has become increasingly interconnected by digital communication technologies, those technologies have multiplied and diversified to include a variety of social networking sites (SNS) that facilitate social interaction and engagement. These SNS encompass a variety of platforms and formats ranging from those that are purely social allowing for life-sharing to those that are designed to facilitate specific types of interactions such as professional or romantic connections. The rapid rise in SNS has led to a variety of research examining the use of these sites, as well as feelings, motivations, and consequences of SNS use (Park & Lee, 2014). The bulk of the research has centered on Facebook, one of the older SNS platforms designed to enhance interactions with existing social connections (Park & Lee, 2014). Since SNS platforms have expanded in number and continue to be widely used to foster social connections, continued research is needed to explore motivations for using these different SNS formats.

Motivations for Social Networking Site Use

The increasing number of SNS platforms is indicative of the variety of features and ways to use SNS today. Since there are many available platforms, there are likely specific motivations that would drive a user to select a specific SNS. A theory posited by Katz et al. (1973-1974), which uses and gratification theory, suggests that individual differences can influence choices in terms of media consumption. This theory places the choice of media consumption on the consumer-side, speculating that people choose media in line with their desired materials or goals, while ignoring media that does not suit their immediate needs. Media consumption, likely including choice of SNS, is goal-oriented to fulfill the needs or desire of the user. For example, research examining Twitter and Facebook has shown that users of these platforms want to share their lives and feel valued (Greenwood, 2013), and that may be the primary motivation for users selecting these SNS platforms. Newer SNS formats, like Instagram, which emphasizes sharing pictures and videos, are noted to be "cool" and "trendy," and often attract a younger user base (Hu et al., 2014). People are considering desired use and gain when selecting their preferred SNS, making examination of these motivations critical to understanding any positive or negative effects from using certain platforms.

Research exploring the most common uses and motivations for SNS use indicates a range of possible uses and SNS are not used for the same motives depending on a variety of factors (e.g., race, age, and gender) (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). The most common uses broadly encompass fostering social connections such as keeping in touch with friends, reconnecting with old friends, meeting new people, and making professional contacts (Ezumah, 2013). Given the wide variety of uses listed for SNS use along with the variety of available platforms, it seems likely that individuals would choose an SNS based on how it might fulfill their needs. Additional research has confirmed connecting with others as a primary motivation for SNS use broadly (e.g., Barker, 2009). Indeed, enriching social relationships is a big motivator for SNS use.

Much of the research examining how SNS use can affect social relationships has focused on close relationships, like romantic relationships. The bulk of this research has been conducted using Facebook, and a good deal of these studies have emphasized close relationships, like romantic partners because these types of relationships are easier to define when compared to friendships. For example, Mod (2010) conducted in-depth interviews regarding how Facebook use may affect a romantic relationship, including examining motivations for posting about romantic relationships. Results suggested that there was an internal motivation for posting on social media, with participants largely indicating increased feelings of happiness and inclusion for the user when posting about a significant other. Similarly, Seidman et al. (2019) found that those with higher relationships satisfaction tended to post more frequently on Facebook and indicated that Facebook enhanced their romantic relationship. Finally, Valkenburg et al. (2006) suggested that the quality of feedback received on Facebook plays a role in determining positive or negative self-esteem for the user. All of these studies demonstrate a need or desire to satisfy relationship and belonging needs using Facebook.

In contrast, other research has focused on some negative motivations and consequences for this level of personal disclosure on Facebook. Of particular importance to close relationships, jealousy and monitoring behavior on Facebook has been explored. Monitoring behavior can be defined as frequently checking a romantic partner's Facebook profile, interactions, and contacts, which can increase feelings of jealously within the relationship (e.g., Muise et al., 2009; Persch, 2007). Recent research has replicated this finding showing that individuals with lower levels of Facebook-induced jealousy viewing monitoring as a way to increase closeness with their partner (Seidman et al., 2019). In an experimental study, Muscanell et al. (2013) demonstrated that privacy settings and the presence of couple photos could impact negative emotions when interacting with a romantic partner on Facebook. Taken together, the research on close relationships and Facebook use demonstrates that there can be both positive and negative motivations and behaviors driving interactions on SNS.

Different SNS tend to cater to different types of social interactions and offer different ways to enhance these interactions. For example, Facebook emphasizes maintaining connections with known others and provides a secondary outlet to enhance those connections, which is why much of the research on close relationships has emphasized this platform. Other SNS can foster social connections differently. For example, Twitter is known for short, text-based updates that are shared publicly with any Twitter user, allowing for connection with unknown others. Instagram emphasizes the sharing of photos and videos, which is a different

type of primary interaction when compared to Facebook and Twitter. This means that the primary motivations, behaviors and consequences for use of Instagram likely differs when compared to other SNS platforms.

Instagram

Currently, Instagram is one of the fastest growing SNS (Sanders, 2018), but there is significantly less research exploring this platform, despite distinct differences in features, use, and type of social connections fostered on Instagram. Instagram receives 100,000,000 monthly visitors, and since the launch of this platform in 2010, it has attracted a younger demographic when compared to Facebook (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Instagram also tends to attract more women, particularly those 18-24, as the largest user demographic (Seligson, 2016). Instagram has a unique emphasis on visual presentation and style, allowing users to primarily upload pictures and videos, accompanied by text captions, but with the visual presentation emphasized (Hu et al., 2014). Further, Instagram is largely app-based and designed to use with mobile technology rather than a web-based browser. The app provides some digital editing capabilities in the form of filters or adjustments that can be applied to photos or videos allowing users to present their content in specifically curated way. Finally, Instagram accounts can be set to be viewable by the entire user-base rather than those individuals that are "friends" or "followers" of the account.

Given the emphasis on public, visual presentation, it has been argued that Instagram can entice users to post only the best version of themselves or their lives for others to see, taking away from the authenticity of "real" life (Lup et al., 2015). Toward that end, discussions of this "positivity bias" have noted that there is increased interaction and validation when user posts skew positive, which can increase the pressure to perform in this desired manner (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Other researchers have noted that those seeking positive affirmations from SNS, likely curate their posts in a specific manner (Utz et al., 2012). For example, a recent analysis of Instagram posts from athletes suggested that posts with personal backstories and sexually explicit photos gained more positive affirmations from users (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). It seems fair to say that one motivation for Instagram use may be to seek public affirmation, or social validation, from other users, as well as broadcasting curated information in a public way (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

The public broadcasting that is typical on Instagram may affect close relationships differently when compared to other SNS. For example, since Facebook emphasizes connections with known others, research has shown that users tend to complement their existing social connections with Facebook use (e.g., Greenwood, 2013; Mod, 2010). However, other research has shown that jealousy and digital monitoring behavior can also increase through Facebook use in a close relationship (e.g., Muise et al., 2009; Persch, 2007). It seems likely that the public nature of Instagram could amplify these effects found with Facebook use. Users may feel a greater desire to connect with their partner or demonstrate their close relationship on such a public platform. In addition, users may feel negative emotions when this connection is not made and broadcast to other Instagram users.

In addition, Alhabash and Ma (2017) found that the main motivation for using Instagram was for entertainment reasons and more specifically for self-documenting purposes and to pass the time. Abidin (2016) discussed ways that influencers on Instagram have used selfies as an expression of contrived authenticity. Horan (2021) noted that Instagram influencers tend to use the social media platform as a way of commercializing their content. It is apparent that there are different motivations for using Instagram compared to the other types of platforms.

The Current Study

It seems likely that Instagram's unique features, along with the ability to share things in a public way, can have a direct influence on motivations for use and feelings from use. Given that the bulk of research examining these concepts has focused on Facebook, the current study explored Instagram users. Instagram's presentation style, along with the fact this platform attracts a different demographic audience (Seligson, 2016) means the motivations for Instagram use warrants separate investigation. For this study, a sample of college women were targeted for inclusion since this is the typical user base for this platform. Given the public nature of Instagram and the "positivity bias," we were specifically interested in public validation as a motivator for

Instagram use. It was hypothesized that users seeking public validation in the form of popularity and user interactions would feel negative emotions if these needs were not met.

Because Instagram is a more public platform in comparison to Facebook, Facebook's monthly active users are more than Instagram, 2.32 billion and one billion, respectively (Sanders, 2022), we explored motivations for use of Instagram within close relationships. Similar to research on Facebook, the current study also included questions about how Instagram may affect close relationships through asking participants how they used this platform to interact with their romantic partners. Because Alhabash and Ma (2017) have suggested that motivations for using Instagram may differ among individuals, we expected users to desire interaction with their romantic partner on Instagram, and we expected a lack of this interaction to produce negative feelings.

METHOD

Participants

Participants (n=317 women) were recruited from a large southwestern university and received course extra credit for their participation. Participants were college aged (mean [M]=20.17, standard deviation [SD]=2.33), which is in the target range for Instagram's largest user group. Participants also primarily identified themselves as White/Non-Hispanic (66.9%; n=212), with 17% of the sample identifying as Mexican/Hispanic/Latinx (n=54), 5.7% identifying as Black/African-American (n=18), and the remaining participants identifying as another race or ethnicity or preferred not to provide this information.

Final sample

Since this study was examining motivations for Instagram use, only those participants that indicated they currently use Instagram were included in the final sample (n=314). In addition, to encompass interactions among those in close relationships, only those participants that indicated they were currently in a close relationship were included in this final sample. The final sample included 182 women, and the demographics regarding age and race/ethnicity mimic that of the full sample.

Procedure

Upon agreeing to participate in the survey, participants were given a general overview of the study along with a statement about their participant rights. The survey asked participants about their own social media use, along with specific motivations and impacts for posting about their romantic relationships online. In addition, participants also completed a measure of their own self-esteem (detailed below). Participants completed the survey self-paced on a device of their choice.

Measures

After answering the initial demographic and psychographic questions, participants responded to several questions about their own social media use (e.g., which social media platforms are used, how often they log in, how often they post). These social media use behaviors were measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 1='almost never' to 6='multiple times per day.' Participants were also asked about their feelings using social media in general and when their partners interact with their Instagram posts or post about them, as well as their overall satisfaction in their relationships.

RESULTS

It was hypothesized that Instagram users would feel both positive and negative valanced emotions from using Instagram, and specifically feel sadness from using this platform given the differences in presentation style. In addition, interactions with romantic partners were expected to yield positive feelings while a lack of these interactions was also expected to produce feelings of sadness. First, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to reconcile items examining emotions on the questionnaire. Then, relationships between the emotion variables produced and other questionnaire items were explored to address these hypotheses.

Table 1. Pattern matrix from exploratory factor analysis

Item	Factor 1
I feel sad when my significant other does not post about me on Instagram.	.82
I feel sad when my significant other does not interact with me on Instagram.	.76
I care if my significant other posts about me.	.72
I trust my significant other more when they post about me or interact with my post.	.67
I trust my significant other less when they do not post about me or interact with my post.	.56

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Instagram-drive sadness	2.50	0.95
Popular	2.62	0.94
Positive affirmations	3.36	1.06
Partner post*	5.80	1.04
Partner interact*	2.33	1.45
Post about partner*	5.48	0.98
Happiness in relationship	6.24	1.19

Note. *These variables measured as an estimated count rather than on a 5-point or 7-point scale

Table 3. Correlations among variables of interest

		Sadness
Self-items	Popular	.25**
	Interact (overall)	.23**
	Happiness (relationship)	.11
Relationship items	Sig. other post	-.24*
	Sig. other interact	-.27**
	Posts (about sig. other)	-.18*

Note. *p<.05 & **p<.01

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine relationships among questionnaire items focusing on positive and negative valence emotions (e.g., feelings of happiness or sadness). Preliminary analyses utilizing the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (KMO=.77) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi 2[10]=364.80$, p<.001) indicated data were suitable for exploratory factor analysis. This factor analysis was conducted using the principal factor axis method, which extracted factors only when the associated Eigenvalue was greater than one. This extraction method revealed one latent factor, which was positively associated with all of the positive and negative valence emotions from Instagram use. All factor loadings exceeding a value of .4 were consequently considered significant. This factor accounted for 60.11% of the total variance (see **Table 1** for pattern matrix).

Considering the emotion valence items included in this latent factor, this latent factor can be viewed as an overall sadness driven from Instagram use variable. For example, several of the items focused on feelings of happiness, sadness, as well as trust in a romantic partner directly stemming from Instagram use and interactions, so it seems sadness stems from whether these interaction needs are met on Instagram. Overall, this exploratory factor analysis yielded one variable, and this single factor solution suggests it may be reasonable to aggregate these variables into one measure. This variable was calculated by averaging participant scores on these items to form one measure of Instagram-driven sadness in close relationships. This new variable was reliable (α=.83) and was used to examine motivations for Instagram use and how this affects close relationships.

The Instagram-driven sadness variable identified from the factor analysis was used to explore potential motivators driving Instagram use and motivators for posting about romantic relationships on Instagram (see **Table 2** for descriptive statistics and **Table 3** for correlations table). Simple correlation analyses revealed a positive relationship between this sadness variable and some items related to self-promotion including: a motivation to increase popularity (r=.25, p<.01), and seeking positive affirmations/interactions on Instagram (r=.23, p<.01). Additionally, this sadness variable was related to several items pertinent to motivations to post and interact with romantic partners on Instagram. Sadness negatively correlated with the frequency of posts about the relationship by the romantic partner (r=-.24, p=.01), number of posts about the romantic partner (r=-.18, p=.02), and the number of interactions from the romantic partner (r=-.20, p<.01). Interestingly, there

was not a significant correlation between Instagram-driven sadness and happiness indicated within a relationship (r=.11, ns).

To further investigate these significant relationships, two multiple regression analyses were conducted: one for the self-promotion related to Instagram use, and the second one to examine interactions with a romantic partner on Instagram. First, the self-promotion items were included as potential predictors for Instagram-driven sadness. The overall model for this analysis was significant, $F_{(2, 178)}=7.29$, $p=.001$, $R^2=.08$, indicating that when taken together, these self-promotion variables significantly predict Instagram-driven sadness. When considering the coefficients, positive affirmations (β=.13) and gaining popularity (β=.18) were significant predictors of this sadness variable. This suggests that seeking popularity and positive affirmations on Instagram predict Instagram-driven sadness.

Secondly, the relationship specific items were explored as predictors for the sadness variable. This overall model was also statistically significant, $F_{(3, 117)}=6.06$, $p<.01$, $R^2=.09$, suggesting that feelings of sadness can increase when the frequency of posts about a romantic relationship on Instagram are decreased. When examining the coefficients, interactions with a romantic partner seemed important for reducing sadness, β=-.14, $t(182)=-2.67$, $p<.01$, while frequency of posts from a romantic partner (β=-.13) and frequency of posting about the romantic partner (β=-.02) were less impactful for this model. Overall, this suggests that interacting with a romantic partner on Instagram can be predictive of Instagram-driven sadness within romantic relationships.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined motivations related to posting on Instagram, as well as examining motivations for posting about close relationships specifically. Although past research has explored these motives in Facebook users, limited research has investigated the same questions for Instagram users. Instagram provides different uses and features when compared to Facebook, and caters to a younger demographic, making it important to examine factors that may influence usage of this platform. The current research started with an exploration of motivations and feelings related to Instagram use. An exploratory factor analysis produced one latent variable emphasizing sadness driven by Instagram use. Utilizing this new variable, results largely supported the study hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis examined user motivations and emotions for Instagram use. A positive relationship appeared between the sadness variable and the self-promotion aspects of Instagram use (e.g., positive affirmations and popularity on the platform). One interpretation of this relationship is increased desire for popularity and/or positive affirmations drives sadness while using this platform. A user's desire for self-promotion on Instagram can predict the sadness they feel while using this platform. This supports previous research noting that the quality of feedback received on Facebook impacts a user's self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Since Instagram offers more in the way of self-promotion when compared to Facebook (a more public profile and interactions), it is not surprising that this can predict sadness for the user.

In terms of sadness regarding posting about close relationships on Instagram, we predicted that frequency of interactions with a romantic partner would be related to sadness. Specifically, we predicted that participants would feel positively if their partners interacted on Instagram, and negatively if the partner did not interact. Results supported this hypothesis. When partners interacted on Instagram, participants felt less sadness. When these interactions were less frequent, participants reported more sadness. Again, this echoes research conducted on Facebook, which found that romantic partners reported increased happiness when interacting using the SNS (Mod, 2010). Participants did not indicate that their happiness within the relationship was related to Instagram use, suggesting that SNS use may compliment relationship interaction while relative happiness in the relationship stays stable.

Interestingly, more women when compared to men tend to use Instagram and therefore, opportunities for interactions with a romantic partner could be less frequent on this platform (Seligson, 2016). There may be a different type of usage style for men that have an Instagram account. This may fuel a mismatch in communication style for romantic partners on this platform. Again, participants did not indicate any effects for their personal happiness within the relationship, but this research and previous research suggests that

SNS interaction can enhance interaction within the relationship. Future research may want to explore these same concepts in users that are men to better understand their uses and motivations for these platforms.

Our findings add to the literature examining how users explore and utilize different SNS. Further, this research adds to the literature on how the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973-1974) pertains to SNS use since we identified specific purposes and motivations for use. These results show that the self-promotion feature for Instagram could drive sadness for the users. In addition, our research expands findings on romantic relationships and partner interactions on SNS. Previous research explored the idea that romantic partners may use SNS to enhance their interactions, but our research shows that Instagram, specifically, may drive sadness in romantic relationships. Instagram is an SNS utilized primarily by women and there may be less opportunity for interaction within a romantic relationship (Seligson, 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research was conducted with college-aged, primarily heterosexual, Caucasian women. Although college-aged individuals represent a large demographic using Instagram, this still may not be fully representative of all Instagram users. While women dominate Instagram use (Seligson, 2016), these results may not necessarily be reflective of other gender identities and race/ethnicities. This study did not look at specific characteristics of these Instagram users (e.g., what type of user, frequency, consumer vs. producer, etc.). It would be interested to see if these variable make an impact on their perceptions and their usage. Finally, since our sample was largely heterosexual, these results may not generalize to those with differing sexual preferences.

Future research could explore these same concepts in other groups of Instagram users. For example, it would be interesting to see if this same type of sadness was present in non-heterosexual relationships. It seems plausible that these couples may have different priorities, and different interaction and communication styles. The way these couples utilize SNS is likely different. Further, future research may want to examine similar ideas with more emerging SNS platforms. For example, TikTok, which is a video-based platform, has recently been gaining traction. Researchers are likely to find a different user-base with this platform, as well as different motivations for use.

Conclusion

Instagram provides a different presentation and style of use when compared to other SNS. This study is more on the living of relationships in social networks, primarily Instagram, and how the needs for personal or couple ship enhancement is needed. The current research analyzed the living relationships of SNS, specifically Instagram, and how the needs for personal or couple ship enhancement is needed. The results demonstrated different motivations for Instagram use when compared to other SNS. One strong motivation for Instagram use could be public accolade, with negative ramifications when public affirmation is not received. Further, in terms of close relationships, lacking connection on Instagram could increase feelings of sadness. Users feel more insecure when their social needs are not met on this platform. This research expands the literature examining different motivations, emotions, and use-styles for SNS. Further, this research may be beneficial for both users and SNS platforms alike. Understanding the emotions and motivations tied to the use of different SNS could help users tamper their expectations and monitor their own behavior on these sites. This research also lends itself to potential modifications on the part of the platform. Instagram has been instituting platform changes in recent years to de-emphasize self-promotion. For example, Instagram now requires that sponsored ads be noted and there has been discussion of limiting some of the positive affirmation features (Jennings, 2019). This research suggests that limiting positive affirmations may help with this sadness tied to Instagram use.

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