Empirical Article

Understanding Motives, Usage Patterns and Effects of Instagram Use in Youths: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
This article provides an in-depth analysis of the motives and patterns of Instagram use among a sample of Belgian and Peruvian youths. 19 participants aged 18–28 underwent in-depth interviews to assess what Instagram means to them, why and how they use it, and what consequences of their use they perceive. The most recurrent motivations for using Instagram were self-expression, curiosity, documenting, entertainment, and connection. Five distinctive usage patterns were identified: urge and craving, passive use, anxious posting, social approval, and social comparison. The perceived consequences include an increased connection to others, the rise of "*Instagram-worthy*" content pursuit, issues with time management, a compulsive urge to enter, and constant comparison. Since Instagram relies mainly on visuals, poses questions about authenticity, identity, and self-presentation, and elicits strong emotional reactions from its users, it fosters social comparison, which may be harmful to youth's views on themselves, their self-esteem, and their self-worth.

Introduction

The Internet has revolutionized societies worldwide and has become ubiquitous and an essential part of daily life for most people (Talis, 2022). With the development of smartphones, digital media, and social media, the use of the Internet has multiplied, but so has its potential misuse. Over the last decades, research on Internet addiction and problematic Internet use has grown exponentially (Korte, 2020; Musetti et al., 2016; Talis, 2022; Schimmenti et al., 2021) and has produced a growing body of findings regarding the contributing factors, mechanisms, and consequences of Internet addiction and problematic Internet use, despite the wide variability in research methodology and the fact that the conceptualization of these terms remains debated (Aboujaoude, 2010; Billieux et al., 2015; Fineberg et al., 2018; Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2017; Talis, 2022).

Problematic Internet use (PIU) is the preferred term to describe a maladaptive pattern of internet use frequently reported among adolescents and young adults (Fineberg et al., 2018; Schimmenti et al., 2021). PIU comprises difficulties in controlling the behavior involved (e.g., gaming, gambling, buying, etc.) and leads to negative daily life consequences (D'Hondt et al., 2015; Fineberg et al., 2018; Spada, 2014). A specific form of PIU is *problematic social network use*, defined as a maladaptive pattern of seeking and using one or several social networks (SN), thus disrupting normal functioning (He et al., 2017). For instance, the urge to use SN daily can be stronger than the need for sleep and rest, leading users to withdraw from their real surrounding environment (Guedes et al., 2016; Pendergrass & Payne, 2018). Intensive SN use has also been associated with increased alcohol consumption, depressive symptoms, loneliness, suicidal ideation, body image disturbances, diminished self-esteem, and decreased academic performance (Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Bue, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020; Van Den Eijnden, 2018).

Users typically tend to engage in two or more SN in tandem to fulfill their emotional, social, and informational desires (Brandtzæg, 2012; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). However, as each SN displays unique features (e.g., text-based like Twitter vs. image-based, like Instagram) and serves specific purposes, using one does not imply using others in the same way (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Longobardi et al., 2020). Also, the

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intermediate processes that link the use of different SN to psychological well-being can differ (Baker & Algorta, 2016; Faelens et al., 2021; Hwang & Cho, 2018). Thus, findings resulting from the study of one SN may not be generalizable to others (Wong et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to investigate SN use separately and specifically.

One of the SN that has recently attracted the attention of clinicians and researchers is Instagram. Instagram is a photo-sharing application and social network platform that relies uniquely on visuals and image-based content. It is the fourth most often-used social network after Facebook, Youtube, and Whatsapp (Statista, 2021b) and is especially popular among young people: 63% of its users are between 18 and 34 years of age (Statista, 2021a). Its attractiveness lies in the possibility of using numerous built-in photo filters that help create visual effects to enhance pictures and videos' appearance with low effort. Additionally, it was the first platform that launched *stories*, giving users a reason to engage in story sharing and viewing daily and creating a sense of urgency that motivates users to stay there longer and return to the app more quickly (Moore & Craciun, 2021). As of 2019, 500 million Instagram users engage with *stories* every day (Statista, 2019).

Research into problematic Instagram use is relatively recent (Kirkabarun & Griffiths, 2018) and focuses mainly on the mental health consequences of using the platform. This research has suggested that Instagram use may have the worst impact on mental health of all SN, linking it to social comparison, loneliness, low self-esteem, negative mood, depression, distress, anxiety, and poor well-being (Faelens et al., 2021; Frison & Eggermont, 2017; Hill Holiday, 2018; Kirkabarun et al., 2018; Khodarahimi & Fathi, 2017; Marino et al., 2018; Matthes et al., 2020; Ponnusamy et al., 2020; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018; Vahedi & Zannella, 2019; Yang, 2016; Yurdagül et al., 2019).

What Makes Instagram so Engaging and so Pervasive at the Same Time?

Since Instagram uses images in a picture or video format as the primary means of communication, the life of an image on Instagram extends beyond its creation and is capitalized on its reception, attention, consumption, and appreciation (Ross, 2019). To see an image, it needs to appear in a user's feed, which is personalized, determined by a complex algorithm, and evolves over time based on the use of the platform (Mosseri, 2021). Images, therefore, need to be *valuable,* and one way to become valuable is in the form of *likes*. Likes on Instagram represent a way to obtain rewards and recognition and serve as indicators of status and popularity. As the number of likes is interpreted as received support, users tend to check often how many likes a post has received (Blease, 2015; Martinez & Garcia, 2019; Zell & Moeller, 2018) and are drawn to seek more and more *visibility* through comments, shares, and reposts. Thus, finding the ultimate balance

between selecting a good image, editing it, captioning it, and uploading it at a perfect time is essential to create a successful post (Ross, 2019).

Since being visible on Instagram requires the creation of images that generate engagement, users need to engage in *self-presentation* and *self-disclosure* to curate their online self and control how others perceive them. Previous research has shown that social network platforms are a playground for youths to explore their *identity* (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011; Turkle, 1995), which is the basis for building narratives about themselves through self-assessment and self-reflection (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). As such, youth can construct their online selves in different ways: they can create, edit, and re-edit who they are, decide to be completely different from who they are offline, or even create multiple selves (Attrill, 2015). Therefore, they can selectively decide the content they will share, so it describes them in the ways that represent their *ideal self-views* (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Vogel et al., 2014).

Recently, Davies (2020) pointed out that GenZs are showing an *online identity duality*: they portray one identity that is highly curated and reflects their uniqueness and individuality, and another that is an ongoing work in progress, which evolves as new information (new trends, new standards, etc.) is taken in. It is also highlighted that *influence metrics,* such as likes, views, or shares, force an evolution *from self-identity* to *brand identity*. Engaging in *self-branding* means developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital, which implies an effort to build a reputation and a desire to capitalize and get value from it (Davies, 2020; Whitmer, 2019, 2021). For that purpose, influence metrics are pivotal: the likes, comments, shares, and views are markers of popularity, sociability, likeability, approval, and acceptance (Kim & Lee, 2011; Vitak & Ellison, 2013; Vogel et al., 2014).

Besides being a tool for exploring their identity and engaging in self-presentation and self-branding, Instagram can also become a source of constant *social comparison*, especially since it encourages a specific aesthetic to generate valuable and engaging content. Evidence suggests that many people believe that others have happier and more successful lives than they do (Chou & Edge, 2012), so exposure to *stories* and pictures of others' "presumed perfect" lives on Instagram may enhance the impression that other peoples' lives are more exciting and satisfying (Faelens et al., 2021; Vogel et al., 2014), which is likely to have an adverse impact on well-being (Fealens et al., 2021). Thus, it seems that the use of Instagram is a double-edged sword, offering multiple possibilities for self-exploration, creativity, and connection, but also self-presentation, constant comparison, and pressure. However, despite the growing insight into these potential consequences of Instagram, a question that thus far has mainly remained unanswered is what makes youths so drawn to this platform and *why* they continue to engage with it despite its ill effects.

Approaches to the Research of Motives of Instagram Use

Most research concerning why users engage in social networks has drawn on the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) paradigm (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). This theory asserts that individuals actively select the media they engage with based on the types of gratifications they wish to obtain (Phua et al., 2017). Basic assumptions of the theory are that: (1) media use is goal-directed or motivated, (2) people use media to satisfy their needs and desires, (3) social and psychological factors mediate media use, and (4) media use and interpersonal communication are related (Katz et al., 1973; Kircaburun et al., 2018; Rubin, 1993).

The U&G paradigm is considered a *micro-level* media effects theory because it bases its observations and conclusions on individual media users instead of groups, institutions, systems, or societies at large (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Media use is a mediator between antecedents and consequences of media effects. Therefore, *the user* is the center point in the process, and by shaping their own selective media use, they partly shape their media effects. They also assert that dispositional, developmental, and social context factors influence selective media use (Valkenburg et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Dispositional factors include distal and stable factors such as temperament, personality, and gender, as well as more proximal and transient ones such as beliefs, motivations, and moods. Developmental factors are related to age and life experiences. Social context factors include micro, meso, and macro-level influences that encourage or discourage media use. Therefore, media effects are contingent on individual differences resulting from complex cognitive, affective, motivational, developmental, and social processes (Flayelle et al., 2019).

Recently, U&G has been applied to study goal-directed media consumption behavior in computer-mediated communication (Phua et al., 2017). Since SN are considered important tools for satisfying needs and fulfilling gratifications, it makes sense to apply the U&G approach to identify the types of gratifications sought and obtained. According to the literature, the most critical needs that are satisfied by SN are self-expression, developing and maintaining relationships, information exchange, recreation, following fashion, and affection expression (Kircaburun et al., 2018; Orchad et al., 2014; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Xu et al., 2012). Additionally, specific motivations for Instagram use include entertainment, convenience, appeal, self-expression, interpersonal social interaction, surveillance, documentation/archive, coolness, creativity, escapism, and peeking (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Huang & Su, 2018; Hwang & Cho, 2018; Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). However, a weakness of these studies is that they typically measure gratifications by employing questionnaires that borrow items from research on traditional media (e.g., TV, computers, mobile phones, and the Internet), which are not specific to SN or Instagram.

Previous research on the nature of problematic use of Internet and SN has called for specific research to understand the underlying processes, mechanisms of use, and specific effects (Billieux et al., 2015; Fineberg et al., 2018; Flayelle et al., 2019; Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2017). While Instagram continues to evolve, research exploring in depth *why* users engage with it is scarce. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated the specific motives, patterns of use, and consequences of using Instagram from a qualitative stance. Using qualitative methods can help identify motives and gratifications specific to Instagram, understand them profoundly and connect them to the usage patterns and consequences of use. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore what Instagram means for young people, what motivates them to engage in its use, how they use it, and the perceived consequences of use from a qualitative perspective.

Methods

This study is based on the naturalistic paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and uses a qualitative approach and the *constructivist grounded theory* method (Charmaz, 2014) to address the research objectives. From our point of view, current research on Instagram motives and usage patterns has not yet been able to shed light on how and why users engage with the platform and could benefit from an in-depth analysis of the meanings and interpretations that youths ascribe to their own Instagram use and themselves as users. Our assumptions are the following: (1) Instagram users select the platform actively because it can meet some of their *needs* and provide *gratifications*; (2) Instagram exerts a powerful influence on its users that produces an engagement that can have potentially adverse consequences; (3) image has a central role in generating sought gratifications and frustrations in Instagram users. In order to understand why and how youths use Instagram, detailed data from a small sample of cases was taken, which enabled analyzing multiple aspects of the topic and its interrelated elements (Camic et al., 2003). Interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample until theoretical saturation of the data was reached, which means that no significant new insights from the data could add meaning to the emergent categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Participants

Purposeful sampling allows identifying and selecting information-rich cases who are experienced and knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano, 2011; Patton, 2002), adding to the transferability of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). For this study, a *typical case* (Patton, 2002) would be a participant aged above 18, who owns a smartphone, has an Instagram profile, and is

actively posting or watching content. The final sample comprised 19 participants from Belgium ($n = 9$) and Perú ($n = 10$). It was assumed that including participants from countries with very different political, social, and economic backgrounds would enrich the study by portraying differences and commonalities. These countries were chosen for convenience, as the leading researcher is Peruvian but is conducting studies in Belgium and thus could easily access both samples.

Eleven participants were men, and eight were women. Their mean age was 23.16 years (SD=2.50). Twelve of them were students, and the rest were young professionals. For 10 participants, Instagram was the social network they used the most. Seven of the rest indicated that it was their second most used account. The mean time of Instagram use per day was 103 min (SD=77), and the participants had used Instagram for a mean of 5.5 years (min=3 years; max=8 years). 10 participants had their profiles in a private mode, while the other nine had a public profile, meaning that anyone could see their content. Eight participants reported having a second Instagram profile. The number of followers varied considerably, with numbers between 119–143,000, meaning there was an *influencer* in the sample. The mean number of publications made was 74. More information on the sample can be found in Table 1.

Materials and Procedure

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Université catholique de Louvain, and the data collection phase was about to start when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This situation provided an opportunity to include questions regarding using social networks during the pandemic. The results related to these questions have been published elsewhere (Romero et al., submitted).

In order to recruit participants for the study, an advertisement was posted on social networks (Facebook and Instagram), stating the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Before coordinating interviews with potential participants, volunteers received a short questionnaire on their use of social networks and Instagram and an informed consent form describing the purpose of the study and guaranteeing the participants' confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity. Both had to be returned to the researchers before scheduling the interview. Any questions regarding the study were addressed prior to the start of the interview, and oral and written consent was sought to record the interview.

The interview started by returning to the answers to some of the questionnaire questions to understand them in depth. The rest of the interview would follow, and the probe continued until the interviewer felt enough information had been

Table 1. Participants' demographics and Instagram use information.

Pseudo	Country	Age	Sex	Occupation	Favorite SN1	Favorite SN2	Time Spent on Insta per day in mins	Years Using Insta	Type of Account	Number of Followers	Number of People They Follow	Number of Publications
Nala	Peru	18	F	Student	**Instagram**	Youtube	73	5	Private	669	373	88
Sandy	Peru	23	F	Intern	Whatsapp	**Instagram**	180	8	Private	266	178	47
Mary	Peru	24	F	Student/ Psychologist	Whatsapp	Twitter	20	7	Public	608	586	26
Vera	Peru	24	F	Student	Whatsapp	**Instagram**	60	7	Public	143,000	46	103
Diane	Peru	27	F	Bussiness manager	**Instagram**	Facebook	180	3	Private	411	2190	107
Sergei	Peru	19	M	Student	**Instagram**	Whatsapp	240	5	Public	2812	715	27
Gabo	Peru	20	M	Student	Whatsapp	**Instagram**	74	5	Private	293	270	14
Manu	Peru	23	M	Technician	Facebook	**Instagram**	60	—	Public	265	444	56
Ali	Peru	25	M	Student	**Instagram**	Youtube	93	6	Public	666	550	243
Juan	Peru	28	M	Student/ Assistant	**Instagram**	Whatsapp	90	3	Public	265	595	7
Lotte	Belgium	21	F	Student	**Instagram**	Messenger	120	6	Private	542	488	101
Eli	Belgium	22	F	Student	**Instagram**	Facebook	90	4	Private	289	462	31
Loise	Belgium	23	F	Student	**Instagram**	Snapchat	300	6	Public	261	357	238
Tami	Belgium	23	F	Student	Messenger	**Instagram**	120	8	Private	254	255	70
Rina	Belgium	24	F	Student	**Instagram**	Youtube	133	5	Public	1052	652	89
Jane	Belgium	26	F	Student	Facebook	**Instagram**	73	6	Private	119	286	48
Tim	Belgium	23	M	Student	Youtube	**Instagram**	90	7	Private	782	784	29
Andre	Belgium	23	M	Worker	Youtube	9gag	40	—	Private	—	—	—
Francis	Belgium	24	M	Worker	**Instagram**	Youtube	25	4	Public	156	332	13

gathered. The interview format was semi-structured with some basic questions regarding Instagram motives, usage patterns, consequences, and additional questions that could be asked if needed. Some example questions are: "*What comes to your mind when you think about Instagram?*", "*When do you use Instagram?*", "*What do you use Instagram for and why?*", "*Do you usually comment on posts or react to the stories of the accounts you follow? Why? Why not?*", "*What changes (positive or negative) have occurred in your life since you use Instagram?*".

The interviews were held between July and August 2020. Two native-speaking researchers conducted the interviews in the participant's native language (French or Spanish). Both researchers were appropriately trained to conduct interviews and supervised by the leading researcher. Due to the restrictions imposed for the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were held online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams and lasted 60–75 min. It is important to notice that at the time of the interviews, both countries were at different stages in addressing the pandemic, with Belgium coming out of the first wave and gradually lifting the lockdown measures while Peru was going through a critical period of the pandemic and remained in lockdown.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo 20. Data analysis involved rooting categories in the evidence obtained from the data (*grounding categories*) without trying to validate previous theories concerning the subject. It also implied exploring the connections between categories through *sensitive constant comparison:* looking for commonalities and differences between incidents, identifying subcategories, and integrating them into a larger structure to produce major categories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). The interviews were first coded by two researchers (SR and WVB), and thematic analysis was conducted inductively and iteratively. Starting with an *open coding* process to retrieve initial approximate and provisional categories, and after several meetings were held between the researchers, *focused coding* was performed to allow more condensed codes to emerge. Finally, *axial coding* allowed to build a texture of relationships around the category axis, making the links between categories visible (Charmaz, 2014).

To decide on the number of interviews to be held, the principle of saturation was used, with the aim to reach sufficient *conceptual depth*. The latter involves ensuring a sufficient depth of understanding in data collection and analysis that allows theorization based on the findings. Initial coding of the first interviews, which followed shortly after the interviews, allowed to assess whether rich and thick data had been acquired. Further interviewing and coding were then performed, and once it was confirmed that theoretical saturation had been reached for most major themes, interviewing was stopped, and the rest of the interviews collected up to that point were analyzed. Where possible, and only when the

participants granted access to the researchers, some of the public Instagram profiles were reviewed (posts, stories, comments) for triangulation purposes, whereby the user profile information was contrasted with their recollections of their use of the platform.

Lastly, it is essential to mention that in naturalistic inquiry, the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings emerging from the data can be assessed by several criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Peer debriefing meetings were held among researchers to provide *credibility* to the findings, and data were triangulated with the Instagram profiles that researchers could access with the participants' permission. Concerning *transferability,* purposive sampling and the *thick description* provided in this report will allow the transferring of the results to future studies. Frequent meetings and discussions among the researchers coding the interviews allowed the proper unfolding of emergent categorizations, thus providing some form of *dependability.* Finally, reflexivity and memo keeping ensured some neutrality, which corresponds to the *confirmability* criterion.

Results

An overview of the different themes, sub-themes, and categories that emerged from the interviews is given in Table 2.

Meanings Assigned to Instagram

The most common Instagram-related association expressed by the participants is that it is a *showcase*. They portray Instagram as a place where people can put themselves in the limelight and receive attention by showing their passions, interests, individuality, and uniqueness. Also, by carefully crafting the content they post, they feel they can influence the perception and impressions of what others will think and say about them. The degree of crafting and the intention to manage the impressions of others vary but are equally shared by men and women and are more often shown by those who have a public profile and seek to become influencers. There is some acknowledgment that they control the *persona* they want others to see, thus choosing what they want to share and what they want to conceal from the world.

A second meaning is that of *immediacy and urgency.* Participants concede that Instagram is, in a way, ingrained in their behavior and their routines. They feel the urge to share *live* how they feel, what they are doing, where they are, and with who they are. The more exciting, intriguing, different, and unique they perceive an event or experience to be, the more they need to share it immediately, and their phone is always ready to capture it. Participants also expressed that although the content they share has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., pictures of activities at home instead of travel or party pictures), they continue to share or check what others are up to. However, others refrain from publishing something because, in their view, it would not be interesting or engaging enough.

Table 2. Main themes, categories, and their description.

Themes	Categories	Description where necessary
Meanings assigned to Instagram	A showcase	
	Immediacy and urgency	
	Superficiality	
	Search for perfection	
	Realness versus fakeness	
	Pursuit for likes	
	Fear of being judged	
	Implicit rules	
	Algorithm	
	Addictive nature	
	Source of inspiration	
Motives of use of Instagram	Self-expression	Includes sharing original or other's content that participants find meaningful, expresses who they are, and has to do with essential aspects of their lives, interests, or work. If it is visually beautiful or interesting, it is even better.
	Curiosity	It includes every reference to scrolling through or peeking at other people's (famous or not) stories or posts out of curiosity regarding what they are up to. This could lead to both positive and negative comparisons.
	Documenting	It includes uploading posts or stories to document and store important moments, events, or experiences in their lives that they can come back to afterward to remember them.
	Entertainment	Includes all the references to using Instagram for its variety of content, use for entertainment, fun, and passing the time.
	Connection	Includes any references to using Instagram to keep in touch with friends, family, and acquaintances, generate conversation, meet and reach more people, catch up and make plans with them.
	Following trends	Includes references that being on Instagram is imperative because otherwise, they will miss out since everybody is there and people their age use it.
	Coping with emotions	Includes references to using Instagram as a coping mechanism for uncomfortable emotions or situations (e.g., boredom), to vent, reassure yourself, escape reality for a while, and procrastinate some responsibilities.
	Need to be seen	Includes references to using Instagram to be seen, get attention, and feel validated.
	Information	It includes using Instagram to be up to date with events happening globally, news, learning, getting product recommendations, pursuing new interests, and discovering new stuff.
	Professional use	Includes references of using Instagram to have a platform to promote themselves, their work, their art, for entrepreneurship, to become an influencer etc.
	Impact others	Includes references regarding the possible effect that the content they post might have on others, for example: Informing others, doing activism, making people laugh, generating interest in them, inspiring them.
Usage patterns	Urge and craving	It refers to an urge or reflex to enter the platform. This happens typically daily, many times a day, and is accompanied by difficulty controlling the time on the platform.
	Passive use	Refers to moderate use, in which the user engages in scrolling and watching stories and videos, but they are unlikely to comment or react to other people's content.
	Anxious posting	It refers to a pattern where the person actively uses the platform, consuming and posting content but feeling anxious, vulnerable, exposed, and afraid of being judged.
	Social approval	It refers to a pattern of usage where the user takes time to craft posts and stories using filters, editing, adding embellishments, etc. in order to get more likes and reactions from their followers. The emphasis is on the aesthetic side of the posts.
	Comparison pattern	Usage pattern in which, after consuming or posting content, the participant engages in upward or downward comparison, triggering feelings of relief or envy, depending on the result of the comparison.
Emotions and feelings	Positive	Includes: Happiness, gratification, curiosity, satisfaction, pride, uplift, comfort, excitement, interest, pleasure, recognition, relief, feeling flattered, security, calmness, admiration and empathy.

Themes	Categories	Description where necessary
	Negative	Includes: Stress, anger, discomfort, envy, frustration, sadness, boredom, indifference, shame, anxiety, feeling judged, guilt, insecurity, tension, worry, ambivalence, embarrassment, fear, vulnerability, pressure, disappointment, *flème*, exposure and burden.
Change and consequences	Increased connection to others	
	Instagram-worthy content	
	Time management	
	Compulsive urge to enter the app	
	Constant comparison	

Superficiality was also widely mentioned, especially since the platform relies on images and videos to convey messages. Participants are aware that the content found on Instagram does not always reflect the full picture but reflects the "positive" or "perfect" side of things. This may seem superficial and frivolous to some, but it is seen as inevitable.

> It's just that Instagram is sometimes this kind of frivolous place (…). I mean you post your best picture, your best face and so, on that note, sometimes it gets a bit… like… really superficial, and you think "why are we even worrying about these things?"
>
> - Ali[1], M, 25, Perú

Along with this superficiality is a constant *search for perfection*. Participants recognize Instagram as a social network with a high aesthetic side. Using beauty criteria and personal standards, they select which photos or videos can be posted and how much they will need to edit and filter them to be "*Instagram-worthy*," which means: consistent, captivating, and engaging. The captions accompanying the photos must also be well crafted, meaningful, aspirational, and perfectly written.

> What motivates me to publish is when I find a photo that is aesthetically beautiful, and I say to myself, "ah, I find it beautiful, so I want to share it". And precisely, what prevents me from publishing is sometimes I say to myself, "oh, that's a nice picture, but I don't find it like, wow" and I don't see the point of publishing it, so I might as well keep it for myself.
>
> - Tami, F, 23, Belgium

> You take a picture of your food, and you put music or a sticker in the background that has to do with that food, and it looks super good, or you edit the story, put effects, color, stripes to make it more striking.
>
> - Sergei, M, 19, Perú

The distinction between "*real*" and "*fake*" on Instagram is blurred. To some extent, participants give themselves permission to be selective with what they share and to curate their posts or stories to a certain degree, but there is much criticism for others' (especially influencers') lack of authenticity, fakeness, lying to followers by "over-staging" content, or using other's content as their own.

> Also fakeness because there is this wave of all the influencers "here eating my bowl," right? And it's actually a picture taken from Pinterest! So I think it's very related to when you want to give a positive image. Not necessarily me, because I post anything, right? As I usually complained about my thesis, I'd go "here, I am suffering with my thesis". That is something real. But not everyone uploads real things, so when I think about Instagram, I think about this fakeness.
>
> - Mary, F, 24, Perú

Both Belgian and Peruvian participants acknowledge the pursuit of *likes*. They explain that the effort put into crafting beautiful posts and stories serves to receive reactions from others. Those with a large following seek to get more engagement and likes. Some participants revealed that the number of likes, comments, and reactions and checking who saw their stories is important to them. They act as reinforcers and provide validation and reassurance. There is also the expectation that specific people "like" the content, such as close friends or family.

> Well to be honest, it's a little bit the quest for likes, unfortunately. So you say, "God I hope I'll have more likes, or at least not fewer likes than last time". So, I can't explain why because I'm not at all hoping to be interesting in people's eyes. But yes, when I post, it's true that I tell myself that I hope I'll have some likes. Because I tell myself that "if you don't have any likes, it's a bit of a shame", it means that you're not… It's a super weird feeling because at the

same time I'm not at all like that in everyday life, and I don't want to make myself interesting, but it's true that on Instagram, when you post a nice picture, and you like the picture you posted… well, you want people to like your picture.

- Eli, F, 22, Belgium

On the other hand, participants also expressed that Instagram increases their *fear of being judged*. They acknowledge that, like other social networks, posting content opens the possibility of being judged and criticized, and they are particularly sensitive to it. The opinion of others is important, both for men and women in both countries. The fear of being judged may influence the content that is posted (more curated and *likable*), as well as the fear of making spelling mistakes in the posts' descriptions and the care not to post something that might appear too different from who they usually are.

There's always a little stress because I'm not a big fan of spelling, I get stressed and I say to myself, "if I've made a mistake or something in my photo description, everyone will be able to see it". So I usually keep my descriptions pretty short too. (…) Also, I'm rather discreet when posting, but there's always a little stress and I ask myself if I will accept entirely what others will think.

- Jane, F, 26, Belgium

Participants also acknowledged the *implicit rules* or "codes of conduct" they follow. An example of such a rule is the *reciprocity* for likes on posts or reactions to stories: if someone likes your content, you must like the other back, and if someone reacts to your story, you must acknowledge that person with a heart. Another example is to *follow back* someone who follows you. Many participants mentioned that they are following people for the simple reason that the others followed them first. For some, it is an act of courtesy; for others, this is related to social norms that are difficult to break.

Everybody follows each other in the student housing, so it's a bit weird not to follow them back, and I think that's really why we were following each other. This is ridiculous because we don't appreciate each other, which was quite open. You see, we knew that we didn't appreciate each other. But well, since everyone followed each other and there was a bit of a sheep-like effect, we followed each other, and that was it. Really to stick to the standards, in fact.

- Tami, F, 23, Belgium

The likes and comments also play a role in the Instagram *algorithm*. Participants know that the content they receive on their news feed and the available stories (including ads) is not the same for everyone. They know it is specifically targeted to them based on their interests and the people and profiles they primarily engage with.

I'm not an Instagram engineer, but there's a default algorithm that means that if there's content shown to me, and I like it, they will know it. Well, they'll send me back another one that could potentially interest me too, and they're very good at it because it's well-targeted, and so I'm going to stay even more on their platform. That is surely their goal because since it is free [Instagram], they have to make money with ads, and the longer I stay, the more ads I get.

- Francis, M, 24, Belgium

Participants also described the *addictive nature* of Instagram. They know they will have difficulty stopping once they access Instagram because new, engaging, inspirational, funny, entertaining, and easy-to-digest content will continue to show up. As stories are only available for 24 hours, there is pressure to post something and consume the content posted by friends, influencers, and favorite stars. If one does not connect to Instagram daily, one might miss out on something important.

It's true that Instagram, if I don't go one day, the next day I say to myself, "Damn, I missed the stories of the people I follow and adore." And that's something that stirs me up because after they will tell me "oh, but I already told you about it" (…), and yes, so I am moderately addicted to it, to not say not at all. There is a bit of, maybe a bit of denial, of social desirability because I like this social network a lot. And it is entirely stupid, but I really like this network. There are lots of pictures, there are so many diverse people, you see a lot of stuff from all over the world without having to be considered a friend or publish your private life. We can display whatever we want, while knowing the limits.

- Loise, F, 23, Belgium

The last meaning assigned to Instagram is that it is a *source of inspiration*, particularly for *lifestyle* issues such as sports and fitness, cooking recipes, fashion, or decoration. The consumed content allows access to new, innovative, or trendy ideas in different areas of life, and it becomes a goal to live and look like Instagram personalities and influencers.

Lifestyle why? Because that's really what I consume, isn't it? It's a lifestyle. I mean, if you see, for example, the beauty influencers, which is like the fastest example, what they sell you *is a lifestyle*[2]. Now, I can follow them, but I also follow many professionals from different fields, like, for example, designers, entrepreneurs, chefs (…) Because as these people are dedicated to sharing their work and what they do, in some way, what they share with you *is their lifestyle*[3]. In other words, what they think, what they do, how they do it in their day-to-day life. In a way, that creates an idea about them, who they are, and what is good about their lifestyle, you can adapt it to yours, right? Eh… and let's say the content that I see can be added to my life is of those people I follow.

- Diane, F, 27, Perú

Motives of Use of Instagram

Based on the answers to the interview questions on the different motives for using Instagram, the most frequently mentioned motive was *self-expression*, that is, sharing what is meaningful. Users view Instagram as a means of self-expression, where a picture, usually accompanied by a caption or a text that describes the moment in esthetic, artistic, or poetic terms, captures a special moment that they wish could last forever. Some participants need to share a beautiful picture or a special moment (e.g., a trip, a new restaurant, something they discovered, etc.). On the other hand, they may also have second thoughts and think that the content will not be attractive or interesting enough for others or that the caption will sound cliché. Users want to be unique, original, different, and stand out.

> You upload something to your stories because you like it, and you want to upload it, and that's it. Nobody will say anything. If people like it, they will react. But when you post something, you intend to show it publicly, it is something that you want to upload, a picture or a video that you really like, and you want others to see it.
>
> - Sergei, M, 19, Peru

> As I was saying, I share moments in general where I'm feeling good, when I'm happy and I am living a nice moment and then, voilà, I want to share it. I want to show that I am content, that I am happy with good people. I live a cool moment and voilà!
>
> - Jane, F, 26, Belgium

Another often-mentioned motive is *curiosity*. Most participants mentioned a not-so-healthy curiosity to check what friends, acquaintances, and influencers post or upload to their stories to keep track of what other people are doing and compare to others. Some participants reported feeling better and relieved when they noticed that their friends were posting content inside their homes and doing fewer activities outside due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some also reported that checking other people's content helped them fight boredom.

> The goal here…is the curiosity to see what happens with other people. And in that sense, I sometimes find it a little unhealthy to tell yourself "Oh, I'm happy to go on Instagram to see what X is doing, what Y is doing", and I find it unhealthy because I think it is a little intrusive.
>
> - Eli, F, 22, Belgium

A third recurring motive is *documenting*. Posting stories and posts is a way of documenting one's experiences and creating long-lasting memories that are easy to access and share. Since the posts remain stored in the app, it liberates space on their smartphone, and they are already curated since what is uploaded is what one wants to show or remember. In addition, pictures will not be unintentionally erased or lost when posted. Although stories are only viewable by others for 24 hours, Instagram has a "stories archive" that users can access.

> They must be photos that I like. And I keep them as a memory. Because if the photo is lost, I'm never going to get it again. So, I would like the memory to remain there in the photo, right? In other words, it will not be erased in this application, and my photo will not be lost. So, it is basically that. It stays as a memory.
>
> - Sandy, F, 23, Perú

Another motive is *entertainment*. Participants describe that when they have some time between tasks, they scroll on Instagram to see the content of their interest, such as their favorite artist or influencer, sports, books, food, exercise routines, beauty, fashion, or activism. There is always something on Instagram to watch and consume, and using the content is a fun way to pass the time.

Participants also brought up *connection* as a motive. Instagram helps to reach out to others. For some, it is a means to start a conversation: If a person reacts to a story or comments on a post, it opens the door for a conversation that can provide connection, whether or not it is meaningful. For others, it allows maintaining social connections that otherwise would not be possible (for example, school friends and acquaintances). Some found reassurance that friends and acquaintances were doing well during the pandemic when they saw what they posted or uploaded on their stories. Others could reach out and meet people they would not have met otherwise. For instance, for men, it opened a path for meeting girls.

> I usually upload a story to receive specific comments. Hmm, and get reactions… sometimes from a specific person or not. I think the reason I use Instagram is to talk to other people. People who usually I didn't speak to, it was like "hi, how are you? How is it going?" Things like that, right? People not so close to me. I mean, like… more to generate conversations and things like that, with unusual people (…) It does help me contact my friends, right? Know what they are doing, know if they are okay, right? That, more than anything.
>
> - Gabo, M, 20, Perú

Another reason for Instagram use is *following trends*. Having an Instagram account and entering the platform is imperative not to miss out on the latest trends and information and to belong since *everyone* is using it.

> Instagram is the new Facebook. That is, it is a new application that almost all people, if not all, are using. Even my mother has

Instagram, my uncles have Instagram, so (laughs) it's a good thing that it has become very popular.

- Ali, M, 25, Perú

Half of the participants mentioned that *coping with emotions* was a motive for Instagram use. They acknowledged that using Instagram distracts from uncomfortable emotions such as boredom, sadness, and rage. Some mentioned that they used Instagram to escape reality, as a reassuring mechanism, procrastinate tedious tasks, or vent their emotions.

(…) simply because I'm bored, and I want to check my Instagram, so sometimes you can have fun with the stories that people upload huh… they upload a story with their grandmother, laughing or telling a joke, then you have fun if you have had a bad day, if you wake up a little sad, a little bored, because of this pandemic then you go to Instagram and see a dance video and say "wow, how cool" and it can make your day, right?

- Sergei, M, 19, Perú

Some interviewees also mentioned the *need to be seen*, *information*, *professional use*, and *impact others* as motives for using the platform. The description of these categories can be found in Table 2.

Patterns of use

Although participants can use Instagram differently depending on their motives, emotional state, available time, or the need to share something, some distinctive patterns of use were noticed. A *pattern of use* is, thus, a repeated or regular way to engage with the platform and what users do with it. The first pattern reported is an *urge and craving* to use Instagram, which is related to the addictive potential of the platform. Participants typically refer to an "urge" to go on Instagram, described as reflexive or performed automatically, such as clicking on the app to scroll mindlessly or check stories. This occurs daily or sometimes many times per day, in between activities, while doing other things that do not require much attention, or when one gets bored. Checking one's Instagram feed can thus be the first thing done after waking up and the last thing before going to sleep. It is often accompanied by difficulty controlling the time spent on the platform, as shown by staying more than one intended, procrastinating, and not fulfilling responsibilities. Participants who reported this behavior felt burdened but unable to stop it, as it takes much effort to control or regulate the time spent. They also mentioned losing track of time and wishing they would use Instagram less to enjoy other activities and focus on other tasks.

It's more in the sense that it's addictive, once you start, you want to stay because you think, "ok this is the last publication I'm checking…oh, but the one just below, it looks good, it looks

interesting", and so that's how it is. You scroll, and then you look up, and your 10 minutes turned into 30 minutes. And so, it's in that sense that I try to regulate as much as possible because otherwise (…) I could stay there the whole day without any problem.

- Eli, F, 22, Belgium

An opposite pattern, *passive use* of the platform, was also found. Participants who show this pattern do not have the urge to access their account compulsively but access it to check other people's content or to be entertained by watching stories, videos, and scrolling. On the other hand, they do not post or upload stories or share content themselves and are unlikely to comment or react to other people's content. Occasionally, they like a post, so it appears more frequently on their feed, thus using the algorithm instrumentally.

(…) Given the number of years I am on Insta and my publications, I think I have commented something on Instagram maybe once or twice. Yeah, you can say I am a passive consumer (…) I don't give many likes to people's content either, I don't know what it is (…) since I choose the content I want to see, only if I am very interested in something, I will give it a like yeah. (…) Step one is watching; step two is liking, but then posting, commenting, or responding to a story, that's a bigger step.

- Francis, M, 24, Belgium

The third pattern of use emerging from the data is *anxious posting*. Participants who show this pattern use the platform actively and besides consuming content, they interact by posting, sharing content, and uploading stories, but at the same time, they feel anxious about what others' reactions might be. Some are afraid of being judged, others feel vulnerable and exposed, and some are afraid that people will not like their content, which may refrain them from posting. Some participants said they would only post if they had something *interesting* to say, implying that other people's opinions about them are important.

I go: "Oh my God, will people like this post?" It's my personal Instagram so, I'm scared in a way, so I'd rather not know, I turn off the notifications, then some hours later or the day after I go back and say: "oh, there are this many likes", and I am less anxious. I've sometimes found myself counting in my head, "there are two likes, three likes, four likes".

- Ali, M, 25, Peru

I try to tell myself, "it's more for you than for other people," but having a like is always nice. I'm not going to tell myself: "Oh my God, there are only three likes on my photo, what a shame" I'd rather think, "here there are three people who like my content" (…) Now that I think about it, I don't know how I would react to a negative comment, I am quite sensitive at this level, this is also why I don't often post much, because I don't want to receive any, even in real life outside of social networks. I don't know how I'd

react. Either I would go over and over it in my head, or I would feel touched in a way.

- Jane, F, 26, Belgium

Another use pattern frequently found among both men and women in both countries is *social approval*. It relates to the *pursuit of likes* and covers behaviors such as crafting beautiful posts and stories, embellishing them, and editing them to get likes and reactions from others. Users who show this pattern feel happy, belonging, connected, and accepted when they receive positive reactions and interact with their followers. However, when social feedback is not received, they feel disappointed.

When I upload stories, I don't just upload them and share them, and that's it. I put some time into it, so it looks harmonic because it is a part of myself that I will share. So, I try to make it look not too cold, or else people won't want to see it or read it. So, I use gifs or filters that help an idea pop up or showcase more of what you are sharing, for example.

- Diane, F, 27, Peru

The last pattern found among the participants in the study is *comparison*, whereby watching other peoples' content makes one feel better or worse. Users who show this pattern realize that comparing themselves to others can be a disservice but cannot help doing so. There is some awareness that others' content can be fake or staged, yet there is a desire to develop a particular *lifestyle*, which may vary depending on whom is being followed, like a celebrity, an influencer, or a peer. Sometimes users feel envious or inadequate about themselves and have mixed feelings about their platform use.

(…) Comparing oneself is human. So, if, for example, I come across Kylie's profile, not even Kylie Jenner, because I do not necessarily compare myself to Kylie Jenner, but if I come across the profile, for example, of a friend here, uh, it is true. I follow many Youtubers on Instagram, and I see a lot of traveling, and sometimes I indeed think to myself, "oh well, how come I don't travel so much?". I have a bit of the same thing sometimes with friends who publish many trips, like, a lot of trips, and I'm like "ah well, how come I don't do so many trips?". It doesn't necessarily last, but it's true that right now, I'm telling myself: "uh it's a shame I can't do them".

- Tami, female, 23, Belgium

Feelings and Emotions Associated with Instagram Use

Instagram use triggers a vast array of emotions and feelings. Although both positive and negative emotions were reported (see Table 2 for an overview), it was surprising to hear the participants talk about how exposed, vulnerable, or ashamed they felt when posting content on the platform. This was especially true for participants with a public profile and those who try to become influencers or promote their brand and work.

Perceived Consequences of Use

According to the study participants, the most often mentioned consequence of using Instagram was an *increased connection to others*. Instagram users consider the possibility of staying in touch with friends as a positive outcome. Although Instagram is not often used to message - other apps are preferred for that purpose – it allows to stay connected with friends through posted content. Shared content can also reach more people, especially when profiles are public.

A second positive effect of Instagram use is the possibility of *meeting new people* who are alike or appealing and whom one would not meet otherwise.

I think I have opened up a little more to others. I met people who shared the same passion as me. And I know that they are people who, uh, won't take me for a crazy person as soon as I talk about a book[4]. Because I know that when I talk about a book, I know that I can be very excited by the book or even by a bookstore or whatever, and there are often people who don't understand why I'm so excited. So, it's people who understand how I feel and all that stuff. I've found a group where I belong to, and it's nice even if it's on social networks.

- Rina, F, 24, Belgium

This verbatim reveals the feeling of belongingness as a driver for using the platform. Most participants in our study had specific interests (art, books, music, dance and performance, sports, decorating, fashion, lifestyle, etc.), and Instagram allowed them to communicate those interests to others through posts and stories or by interacting with other people's content, thus opening the possibility to connect, feel accepted, and belong.

Many participants mentioned that the content they post became more "*Instagramable.*" This means, for example, that a drink with friends becomes an opportunity to make a picture and post it on Instagram, which is something they were not thinking of before. It also refers to the meticulousness with which photos are taken, the number of pictures taken before one can choose *the suitable on*e, or the way one dresses for the photos or stages the photoshoot. Some participants think this is fun and consider it part of their lifestyle, but others find it exhausting, meaningless, and contributing to the aura of fakeness and superficiality surrounding the platform. Yet, some see a positive consequence in the fact that their style has improved.

I feel that Instagram has been more helpful to me in, like, (…) taking care of how I dress and how I look. I feel it's an extremely superficial social network (…) but I feel like it's helped me try to look my best, so to speak, or look good for other people.

- Gabo, M, 20, Perú

In terms of negative consequences of Instagram use, the most often mentioned is the impact on *time management*, more specifically time loss and procrastination. The ubiquitous, readily available, and easy to consume content of Instagram reportedly fosters distraction and the loss of the notion of time.

> I'm getting in there all the time, so if I'm feeling a little addicted, then I don't like getting in there all the time to distract myself. I'd like to do something else instead of being on Instagram.
>
> - Nala, F, 18, Perú

Another negative consequence is the *compulsive urge* to access the platform, which manifests itself through (a) an inability to focus on tasks because of the urge to constantly open notifications or check for new content on the app; or (b) interrupting actions in the present to record a story or take an Instagram-worthy picture.

> I know that when I get bored, I actually go back there. Or even when I'm in front of the TV, I go back there very easily. I can't focus on my show, but it depends on the show. But I know that when I'm in front of the TV with my parents in the evening, um, I quickly go back to my phone and spend more time on Instagram whatsoever.
>
> - Rina, F, 24, Belgium

Constant comparison also emerged as a potential consequence, both in a positive and negative sense. On the positive side, there is the reassurance of focusing on one's interests when shared by others, creating a sense of belonging and acceptance. On the negative side, participants also see the detrimental effects of unfavorable comparison, especially when they consider their lives less exciting or perfect than those portrayed by other users. Both male and female users reported a loss of self-esteem when comparing their physical appearance or fitness status to others.

> Among the negative, I think that when you post and follow people who post similar content, you can actually compare yourself a lot. So, it affects me because I feel that comparing to others is harmful.
>
> - Vera, F, 24, Perú

Discussion and Conclusion

Whereas the popularity, rapid evolution, and potentially harmful consequences of Instagram make the use of the platform a relevant topic for research, few studies have thus far focused on Instagram users' experiences to obtain an in-depth understanding of their motives and usage patterns. This study aimed to address this issue through a qualitative approach.

Drawing on the Uses and Gratifications framework, we assumed that Instagram users would engage with the platform to pursue psychological and social needs and gratifications (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). Our findings confirm that users are very aware of the gratifications and frustrations they can obtain from Instagram use. Moreover, as expert users, they know *how* to make the most out of the platform. However, some non-conscious involvement seems to be reflected in the verbatims portraying mindlessly scrolling and the urge to enter the platform. As such, it seems like there are two different types of engagement: a purposeful one which U&G can explain, and a non-conscious/automatic one which is out of the users' control and can be explained by the way the platform has been designed to produce engagement (e.g., infinite feeds, rewards through likes, intermittent variable rewards, among others. For a review see Harris, 2016).

Regarding the *motives* to use Instagram, social interaction has been regarded in the literature as the most powerful reason for using SN (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009), suggesting that Instagram users primarily use the platform to maintain relationships (Hwang & Cho, 2018; Lee et al., 2015). However, in our study, self-expression was the primary motivation to use Instagram, while *connection* emerged only as the fifth most important motive, after *curiosity, documenting* and *entertainment*. This is an interesting finding as it highlights that individual motives come before social needs. It confirms previous findings that SN offer endless opportunities for *self-presentation* and that Instagram users obtain gratifications from them (Abbott et al., 2013; Kim & Lee, 2011). By using Instagram, they can expand their identity and show their continuous real-time evolution, their own perceived unique creative skills and talents, and who they are as individuals, in other words, their uniqueness (Davies, 2020). Overall, the motives found are similar to those reported in the literature (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Huang & Su, 2018; Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), yet they emerged with different degrees of importance and have been structured and defined in more detail in this study. For example, *curiosity* and *information* are two separate motives, and a unique motive for *professional use,* including self-promotion, entrepreneurship, and becoming influencers, was found.

Regarding the *patterns of Instagram use*, our study results suggest that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, i.e., the same person can exhibit more than one pattern depending on his or her motives, the gratifications sought, and other individual and social factors. Interestingly, the first pattern to emerge was the *urge and craving* one, which shares similarities to what has been described in the literature on behavioral addictions, IA, PIU, and problematic use of social media: an urge and a reflex to enter the platform many times a day, accompanied with difficulty controlling the time spent on the platform (D'Hondt et al., 2015; Fineberg et al., 2018; Schimmenti et al., 2021; Spada, 2014). This is worrying as it appears to be widely present and seems to be the norm rather than the exception. Another pattern that had not emerged in previous literature as a pattern but rather as distinctive of specific individuals is *passive use*, in which the user engages

in scrolling and watching other people's content but refrains from posting and interacting (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022). We believe this pattern can be shown by every Instagram user and is likely to be activated depending on the emotional state, the level of consciousness of the behavior, and the gratification sought. Finally, three distinctive new patterns were found: *anxious posting, social approval, and comparison*. These three patterns highlight the actions executed on Instagram (creating a post, editing, consuming content) and their immediate consequences, such as feelings of vulnerability, fear of being judged, waiting for likes and reactions, and engaging in comparison. It is important to continue investigating these distinctive patterns and their relationships to well-being outcomes.

The *consequences* of Instagram use found in this study partially confirm those that have already been reported previously, such as time management issues, urge, and constant comparison (Foroughi et al., 2021; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018; Van Den Eijnden et al., 2018). A unique finding is that users portray seeking material to post on Instagram as a consequence, and they have incorporated specific words in their language for content that is worth showing on Instagram (i.e., "*Instagram-worthy*" or "*Instagramable*"), while this was something that they were not engaging with before starting to use it. It seems that they are looking for more opportunities to engage in self-presentation through "*Instagramable*" content, reinforcing the idea that *self-branding* is highly important to them (Davies, 2020). Another consequence of Instagram use emerging from our study is the degree of *social comparison* that is experienced. The content to which participants are exposed serves as feedback on who they are and are expected to be. As the literature shows, there are two types of social comparison: upward, which occurs when comparing oneself to superior others who have positive characteristics; and downward, which occurs when comparing oneself with inferior others who have negative characteristics (Vogel et al., 2014; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989). Although the youths who participated in our study compare themselves in both directions, the result is usually negative with upward comparison. When comparing themselves to others, they feel inadequate, not good enough, or hopeless because their lives will not be as perfect as those portrayed on Instagram, which confirms previous findings that people consider that others have happier and more successful lives than themselves (Chou & Edge, 2012). It will be imperative to continue understanding *comparison* both as a usage pattern and as a consequence and continue looking for avenues to break the comparison cycle on SN, which has proven detrimental to well-being (Faelens et al., 2021).

These findings emphasize a need for self-expression and for knowing how one is perceived by others, while highlighting the importance that is placed on others' opinions. This leads to creating and sharing curated, engaging content that reflects one's identity and uniqueness. These aspects are intrinsically related to pressure and questions about the *self,* *identity, authenticity, self-presentation, self-disclosure,* and *self-consciousness.* The interviews revealed tensions among users between who they are online and offline, who they are and who they want to be, what they should or should not portray about themselves, how they should and should not behave on Instagram, what is or is not expected of them, and how they incorporate what they see on Instagram in their own lives. Previous literature on the subject points toward a feedback model where people's reactions (influence metrics) to the presented self will influence future-self-presentation (Fullwood, 2019) and will have an impact on offline behavior (Brown, 2014; Chester & Bretherton, 2007). The youths in our sample seem to be mimicking some of the influencers' behaviors by emphasizing the need for individuality, uniqueness, aesthetics, charisma, sharing what they think can be of value, and showcasing themselves. Moreover, given their connectedness as digital natives, they are very sensitive to their peers. As such, their self-identity, and in turn, their self-branding, are constructed through what they share, what their friends share, and how other people respond to it (Boyd, 2014; Davies, 2020). Accordingly, they may be tempted to construct a false self-presentation to gain the approval of their peers and reject aspects of their true self that do not meet the demands of their audience (Davies, 2020). As Attrill-Smith (2019) points out, the self is malleable and adaptable, and over time the core self will change; thus, whichever *self* these youths present online could have positive and negative consequences offline.

Another interesting finding is the dual nature of the beliefs regarding Instagram, the motives, the usage patterns, the emotions they report experiencing, and the perceived consequences. They portray both positive and negative experiences with the platform. While a post might reflect creativity and self-expression, there is also the fear of being judged and the feeling of being vulnerable and exposed after posting. While curating a story and filtering it can make a participant doubt their authenticity and question if they are being too fake and what others would think of them, at the same time, the likes, comments, and positive feedback make them feel special. This poses several implications for future research on these topics: (1) motivations and sought gratifications are complex, vary within the same person, and can change constantly; (2) the overall experience in a SN such as Instagram is varied, comprehensive, and not purely positive or negative; (3) there is unresolved dissonance in the beliefs and criticism they hold towards Instagram and their engagement with the platform. A recent study found that *affect experiences* with SN could be organized across four functional dimensions: *relational interactions, self-expression, exploration,* and *browsing*. All of them had their positive and negative aspects. For example, relational interactions contributed to closeness and disconnection, self-expression facilitated affirmation and concern about judgment, exploration could lead to inspiration and distress, and browsing could lead to entertainment/admiration, boredom, and envy. These findings indicate that social media is not either positive or negative for

specific individuals, but rather *positive and negative affect are distinct dimensions*, called *the see-saw* of social media (Weinstein, 2018). Our findings, although gathered from a sample of emerging adults, share similarities. However, we find dual expressions not only in terms of affect but also across beliefs, motivations, usage, and consequences. Finally, regarding dissonance, one possible explanation is that youths prefer to stay on the platform and keep using it out of *fear of missing out* (Beyens et al., 2016; Weinstein, 2018) and because the needs for acceptance and belongingness (sought gratifications) are higher/more important than the potential costs to their mental health resulting from using the platform.

Despite the heterogeneous group of participants in this study in terms of cultural background, gender, and age (some are considered Millennials, and some are GenZs), there were many similarities in the motivations, usage patterns, feelings, and perceived consequences of use. The only palpable differences relate to the content created, posted, and consumed, reflecting each participant's interests and individualities. The sample for this study was composed of students and young workers who are also dancers, artists, entrepreneurs, and aspiring influencers (in fashion, sports, and book analysis). This was a recurring question in our analysis: why are there so many similarities if the literature points toward assessing and understanding cultural differences? There are two possible explanations for this. One is that regardless of the content seen or generated, which is very personalized and specific to each user, the core motivations and gratifications are the same for everyone, and Instagram is appealing to everyone in the same way because it targets fundamental human needs such as the need for attention, recognition, the need to be seen, the need to belong, etc. (Yau & Reich, 2018). The other is that social media has removed geographical and cultural barriers, and ideas, practices, and entertainment are globally accessible, become viral and increase the pace and intensity of communication and feedback (Davies, 2020), which may mean that youths are experiencing Instagram fundamentally in the same way.

Taken together, these results highlight that while other platforms, such as Facebook, are optimized for social connection, Instagram is optimized for self-presentation (Kim & Kim, 2019), building social capital, and storytelling, which are aspects of the self rather than of relationships with others. It would be interesting to explore how the content produced affects the self and others when producing it. This phenomenon is called the *expression effect*, and occurs when a sender internalizes the behaviors or beliefs they show or disclose, so their self-concept or behavior changes (Valkenburg & Taylor, 2017). Also, further investigation is required on how this curated representation of the self and the use of Instagram translates into real life (Davies, 2020). Previous research suggests that users' online experiences can mirror their offline strengths and struggles (George & Odgers, 2015). Are these youths taking their *real selves* to the online world, are their *online selves* on Instagram shaping the way they are and

behave in real life, or both? The distance between them needs to be further researched through the concept of *authenticity*: what could be a healthy use of the platform where youths share what they feel comfortable sharing authentically?

Interview studies are important because they give Instagram users a voice and focus on their experiences, but they also have limitations. One interview might not have been enough to reveal the full range of experiences that participants have with the platform. Additionally, interviews count on the participants' ability to recall and report their experiences which might not be available or be concealed due to social desirability; thus, other underlying or unconscious motives are left out. Future studies could consider ethnographic designs or further triangulation, including full access to the interviewees' Instagram profiles to reveal other motives. Another limitation was that due to the pandemic and the voluntary nature of the participation, it was not possible to contact the participants for a follow-up interview which would have helped increase the credibility of our findings. Finally, the last limitation concerns the sampling strategy. Although the cases interviewed consisted of typical Instagram users, paying attention to other influences that shape the motivations, sought gratifications, and usage patterns is essential. The sample was composed of educated youths, so it would be necessary to include diverse individuals who could be experiencing Instagram differently. Social factors (exclusion, violence, being part of minorities), developmental factors (contextual age), individual factors (individuals with specific personality characteristics), and context-related factors can also affect how youths select and use media according to U&G and thus, should be investigated further.

To conclude, a unique finding of our study is that beliefs about Instagram, motivations to use it, and usage patterns are complex and unique to each individual and can produce positive and negative emotional experiences and consequences. Although motivations found are similar to those from other studies, five unique usage patterns emerged that should be further investigated. Instagram will continue to evolve and develop exciting and engaging features targeting youth, and they will continue to use it for self-presentation and building social capital. However, more attention should be paid to the potential harm to the self and identity derived from usage patterns that produce more frustrations and negative emotional experiences than gratifications. Research that considers the multiple changes that the individual experiences with Instagram over time and how emotional experiences and motivations shape the use of the platform should be encouraged. Although individuals engage with multiple platforms simultaneously, understanding their unique contributions to the well-being of youth remains essential.

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Open Practices

The raw data, the interview questions, and the coding manuals used in this manuscript are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

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Notes

1. All of the participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
2. This was emphasized vocally by the participant.
3. Idem.
4. She shares mainly book reviews through her Instagram account.

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