

**Impacts of Instagram Usage on Life Satisfaction and Social Capital of New
Yorkers**

Emma Jacobson

Department of Communications, Pace University

December 19, 2023

Introduction

Instagram is becoming more integrated into our lives with every passing day. We use it to connect with our friends, shop, find things to do, network, build a circle we are proud of, and an aesthetic that represents who we are. But where do we learn how to do all this? Since when did aesthetic personal curation become a requirement of social relevance? Everyone in New York seems to have an account on Instagram. What purpose does Instagram serve in the lives of New York millennials and gen-z? Instagram really is what you make of it. It is an effective tool to improve the quality of life for its users by helping them maximize their social capital and satisfy their curiosity, however, it also holds the potential for addiction, comparison to others, and decrease of mental wellbeing.

Uses and gratifications of using media, as explored in the Audiences for Daytime Radio Serials study by Paul E. Lazarsfeld, asserts that during the 1920s, radio had quickly become a home medium. Not much was known how or why viewers chose the content they consumed from the massive wave of media messages. This study explored whether listeners passively experienced the radio, accepting whatever they stumbled upon, or if they purposely sought out certain radio types and programs. Radio was new and everyone was using it, but the significance of radio in the lives of listeners had yet to be researched prior to the Daytime Radio Serials study.

Instagram is somewhat of a modern day equivalent to radio. Instagram has become a daily ritual in many of our lives, especially New Yorkers. A new society is unfolding in which social media mass communications are playing an increasingly important part. Instagram is a relatively recent but extremely widespread development in the way people communicate. It is particularly emphasized in NYC.

People tend to give out their Instagrams now before their numbers when they meet a new person. The rise of Instagram has been so quick that peoples' particular reasons and benefits for using it have not been fully determined. Little is known about how the social emphasis on Instagram is affecting the general public of NYC.

The research question which this study aims to answer is: *Is Instagram improving the quality of New Yorkers' lives?* Topics of exploration will include feeling obligated to use Instagram in order to stay "relevant" socially, actual levels of enjoyment obtained through Instagram usage, accuracy of representation on Instagram, Instagram as a tool to build social capital, and impacts of usage on mental health. In addition to gathering data on the previously stated ideas, this study will investigate the rise of Instagram as a tool for New York nightlife events to find their audience.

The idea behind having a "secret address" selectively given out to attendees at their request via the Instagram direct messaging feature is to "create a safe space" and allow hosts to vet attendees. This is to prevent dangerous and disruptive individuals from entering the event. This method of invitations raises questions of what exact criteria is being used to dictate who is given the address, as well as if this tactic of using Instagram as a channel to select attendees for a party effectively cements these events as "safe spaces". The "safe space" nightlife concept ties back into the study of uses and gratifications gained from Instagram usage. Do Instagram accounts accurately depict the people who run them? Does not participating in Instagram shut an individual out of the future of New York nightlife? Is Instagram as a tool for cultivating a safe community effective or performative?

Literature Review

Media changes in society tend to happen suddenly, and Instagram is no exception. The rise of radio was so rapid that at the end of the 1930s, the implications of such widespread popular culture and news had not been determined (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995, p.93). Instagram's sudden rise can partly be attributed to its addictive nature. Some photos attract many likes, while others fall short. Users chase the next big hit of likes by posting one photo after another, and return to the site regularly to support their friends (Alter, 2017, p. 9).

Instagram is currently a very popular social networking site among teenagers. The main reason is that visuals are generally preferred to text. People want nice pictures to illustrate their stories. Instagram is an effective platform for visual storytelling and plays a significant role in the lives of millennials and gen-z, as it offers a beautiful, visual world. (Muhammad, 2018). People increasingly embrace social networking sites as tools for both communication and information, which help them fulfill their informational, emotional, and social desire (Phua, 2016). Over the last decade, the popularity of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have increased rapidly, becoming a daily routine for many people. (Reimann et al. 2021).

Instagram has been so successful due to its addictive nature and the many gratifications that can be obtained by its usage, most notably self expression, social interaction, and escapism. As a result of Herta Herzog's Audiences for Daytime Serials Study, it was determined that women in the 1940s obtained the following uses and gratifications from daytime serials: emotional release, wishful thinking, and valuable advice. As a result, the serials were openly embraced and enjoyed by American women across the country (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995, p.107). Teenagers

have embraced Instagram to gratify themselves through self-expression, surveillance of others, and entertainment. By posting their activities, writing captions, and commenting on others photos, self expression is achieved.

Instagram also allows us to see what others are doing. Humans are innately curious creatures; Instagram helps users satisfy their sense of curiosity. Instagram serves as an escape from stressful days, provides relaxation, and alleviates boredom. However, using social media is undeniably a two-edged sword (Muhammad, 2018). People are addicted to Likes. We experience withdrawals. Likes have unassumingly emerged as the first digital drug to dominate our culture (Alter, 2017, p. 128). Audiences are goal-directed in their media selection, actively interpreting media messages to achieve optimal levels of gratification, including knowledge seeking, social interaction, diversion, escapism, and civic participation. Motivations for SNS use included information exchange, conformity, freedom of expression, social maintenance, and recreation, with the strongest influence being making new connections (Phua, 2016). Instagram had the highest influence on its users compared to other SNSs (Reimann, Ozimek, Rohmann, Bierhoff, 2021).

Social capital, or the resources people receive from the relationships they have, plays a significant role in people's choice to use Instagram. People are endlessly driven to compare themselves to others. We take photos to capture memories that we'll revisit privately, but primarily to share those memories with others. In the 1980s that meant inviting friends over to watch slides of your recent vacation, but today that means uploading photos of your vacation in real time (Alter, 2017, p. 217).

Combining photo sharing, video, and social networking in one app enhances creativeness and allows people to connect and reach others conveniently.

Instagram helps users to communicate further and deeper for business purposes, informative purposes, entertainment, and relaxation (Muhammad, 2018). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define social capital as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”. Activated by human relationships, social capital acts as productive activity when people use the relationships as resources to achieve their goals. In the age of online communication, where people can easily use their mobile devices to access their online social connections at any time, SNSs are increasingly becoming important platforms for creation and maintenance of social capital (Phua, 2016).

Bridging social capital applies to distant relationships and loose connections to other people; it may offer possibilities such as getting a work placement or participating in cooperative endeavors. Bonding social capital refers to close relationships, offering emotional support, such as family and close friends. Currently it is a widespread habit to interact with a lot of people on SNSs and to maintain both distant and close friendships that mobilize both types of social capital. (Reimann et al. 2021).

Instagram is associated with improvements in social capital, which is linked to a higher sense of satisfaction with life. However, Instagram provides inconsistent feedback, which, when left unchecked, could contribute to poor mental health. Inconsistent feedback drives us nuts. Instagram is a font of inconsistent feedback. One of your photos might attract 100 likes and 20 positive comments, while another posted 10 minutes later attracts thirty likes and no comments at all (Alter, 2017, p. 218).

Instagram, followed by snapchat, ranked the worst SNS for people’s mental

health. Instagram drives people to compare themselves with other users. Social media admittedly has an addictive nature. People gratify themselves through the “likes” they receive. It connects people and brings them closer than before, but unmanaged usage could lead to detrimental effects such as anxiety and depression (Muhammad, 2018). Active SNS use is conscious generation of content, such as creating a story or commenting on others’ contributions. Passive SNS use is consuming social content.

Studies showed passive SNS use is negatively associated with well-being. The decrease of well-being after passive SNS use was mediated by the feeling of having wasted time. Active use was positively associated with well-being. The increase of wellbeing after active use was mediated by the development of social capital. Previous research indicated that the accumulation of social capital via social relationships constitutes the most important factor of overall satisfaction with life. Both active and passive Instagram use are positively correlated with bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital has the strongest associations with SNSs use, but bonding social capital has the strongest association with satisfaction with life. (Reimann et al. 2021).

Past research provides considerable insight on the benefits and potential drawbacks of using Instagram, as well as why it is popular. Questions of whether people actually enjoy using Instagram, or whether they feel they “have to” use it because of its widespread relevance and popularity, provide a substantial ground for additional analysis.

Methodology and Discussion

RQ: Is Instagram improving the quality of New Yorkers’ lives?

I used mixed method surveying, specifically nine Yes/No Polls and one open ended question box, to further research the relationship between Instagram usage, New Yorkers, social capital, and nightlife accessibility (see Appendix A). I posted these polls and open-ended question box publicly on my personal Instagram account (@maidenmercyy) using the Instagram Stories feature. They were available for 24 hours. Data was gathered on 70 Instagram users, 38 of whom are current New York residents. The aim of this research is to further understand the impact Instagram has on daily life. The results were as follows:

1. *Do you live in NYC?*

General Results:

Yes: 54%

No: 46%

2. *Do you use Instagram to help you keep in touch with a broad circle of acquaintances?*

General Population:

Yes: 94%

No: 6%

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 95%

No: 5%

3. *Do you use Instagram to keep in touch with your closest friends?*

General Population:

Yes: 81%

No: 19%

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 76%

No: 24%

4. *Do you feel your Instagram account is an accurate portrayal of who you are?*

General Population:

Yes: 58%

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 58%

No: 42%

No: 42%

5. *Have you ever “dmed for an address” to a nightlife event on Instagram?*

General Population:

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 63%

Yes: 68%

No: 37%

No: 32%

6. *Have you received every address you requested?*

General Population:

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 48%

Yes: 61%

No: 52%

No: 39%

7. *Do you generally feel safe at NYC nightlife events?*

General Population:

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 61%

Yes: 71%

No: 39%

No: 29%

8. *Do you enjoy using Instagram?*

General Population:

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 77%

Yes: 68%

No: 23%

No: 32%

9. *Are you 21 or older?*

General Population:

New Yorkers only:

Yes: 67%

Yes: 63%

No: 33%

No: 37%

There is much to be inferred from this data. First, it can be concluded that the vast majority of Instagram users (94% of the general population surveyed) utilize the platform to connect with a wide range of people, which would be considered bridging

social capital. There is not much difference (1%) in the statistics for New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers regarding this gratification. It can be said that Instagram undoubtedly benefits users by allowing them to accumulate bridging social capital, which improves their lives.

Less people use Instagram to build close and intimate relationships, which would correlate with bonding social capital. However, bonding social capital is still a widespread gratification for users (81% of the general population surveyed). Bonding social capital was 5% less popular for New Yorkers (76%) than the general public. It can be said that Instagram allows for the accumulation of bonding social capital, but it can also be used exclusively for bridging social capital, as in networking. 19% of the general population and 24% of New Yorkers use Instagram exclusively to network, not to maintain close relationships. That is almost one quarter of the New York population.

Slightly more than half of the general population (58%) believe that their account on Instagram is an accurate portrayal of themselves. These statistics are exactly the same for the general population and for New Yorkers. It can be said that for some people, their Instagram accurately reflects who they are, but not for all. Further research could be conducted on contributing factors to this discrepancy between who we are and who we portray ourselves to be. This data calls into question the idea of using Instagram to create safe nightlife spaces. How can you tell if a person is “safe” when all you have is an often misleading profile?

Slightly more than half the general population (63%) have used Instagram to request addresses of nightlife events to attend. This percentage is 5% higher for New Yorkers (68%). This data suggests that the practice of using Instagram to find an audience for your event is happening outside of NYC; it is emerging as a

mainstream practice.

Slightly less than half of the general population (48%) have received every address they have requested on Instagram. This percentage is 13% higher for New Yorkers (61%). It can be said that Instagram undoubtedly is used to hand select attendees for nightlife events, and not everyone makes the cut. One of the criteria to receive a nightlife address in New York may be to live in the city, as a higher proportion of New Yorkers are receiving addresses than people who live elsewhere.

Slightly more than half of the general population (61%) feel safe at New York nightlife events. It is worth noting that many of the respondents of this survey are residents of New Jersey, so they are experiencing New York nightlife as a commuter rather than a local. This percentage is 10% higher for New York locals (71%). However, that still leaves more than a quarter of both populations reporting feeling unsafe at nightlife events. Nothing is perfect, but the data suggests Instagram may not be the most effective vetting method for nightlife events.

More than three quarters of the general population (77%) enjoy using Instagram. This statistic is 9% lower for New Yorkers (68%). It can be said that the majority of Instagram find pleasure in using the app. Earlier, it was determined that slightly less than one quarter of the population used Instagram exclusively for distant connections, or networking. It is also about one quarter of both populations who do not enjoy using Instagram. It can be said that although most Instagram users tend to experience pleasure in using the app, some users do not enjoy it. It can be hypothesized that those users who do not enjoy it are either using Instagram solely to build professional and distant connections, or feel obligated to be on the app despite not wanting to in order to stay in the know socially.

Slightly more than half of the general population (67%) questioned in this data

were older than 21. This statistic is 5% lower for New Yorkers (65%). It can be said that this data is made up primarily of Gen Z and Millennial respondents.

The primary reasons for using Instagram that emerged from the open ended question were keeping up with friends, networking, meeting new people, creative inspiration, memes, to book or play shows, to find shows and nightlife events to attend, to promote personal work, to stay relevant, and self expression.

One response confirmed the perspective that began this paper: You have to have an Instagram now, whether you want to or not. In the words of this survey respondent, “at this point, it’s weird not to [have an Instagram account].”

In conclusion, Instagram really is improving the lives of New Yorkers. New Yorkers generally like using Instagram, and they find it beneficial in the building of both bridging and bonding social capital. Instagram offers the potential to express yourself and shape how you are perceived. It also comes with additional benefits if you use it well, such as a place to find events to attend in your city, a source of inspiration and entertainment, and a way to promote your creative work. There is a growing pressure to get online and be a part of the Instagram community. With unchecked usage, Instagram has the potential to result in comparison to others and potentially addiction. However, Instagram’s effect on the lives of New Yorkers and the rest of the population is overwhelmingly positive.

References

- Alter, A. (2017). *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. Penguin.
- Lowery, S. A., & DeFleur, M. L. (1995). *Milestones in mass communication research: Media effects*. Longman.
- Muhammad, F. M. (2018). Instagram Effects as Social Media toward Adolescence and Young Adult Users: Uses and Gratification Approach. *Proceedings of the International Conference of Communication Science Research (ICCSR 2018)*.
<https://doi.org/10.2991/iccsr-18.2018.44>
- Phua, J., Jin, S. A., & Kim, J. (2017). Uses and gratifications of social networking sites for bridging and bonding social capital: A comparison of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 72, 115–122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.041>
- Reimann et al. (2021). Post more! The mediating role of social capital between Instagram use and satisfaction with life. *Current Psychology*, 42(14), 12175–12189. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02579-6>

Appendix A

Open Ended Question Box: "Why are you on Instagram?"

General Population:

"Social life and also networking is a big part of my future career."

"Inspire, fuel my interests (music, art, sociology, etc)."

"Follow friends and meet new people."

"At this point because it's weird not to."

"Keep in touch with friends, see artists' events, and creative inspiration as well as memes."

"Business promotion is easiest here, also I like endless scrolling, I had no friends so I downloaded it to try and meet people and it worked."

"Post my art, find shows to go to."

"Promote my music."

"I crave attention."

"ADHD doom scrolling, friends."

"Because people give you time to understand you even when they don't irl [in real life]."

"Memes."

"Show my art, book shows, acquire a girlfriend/lover."

"Share some parts of my life with the world."

"Stay in touch with friends and family, stay current on general news."

New Yorkers only:

"Show cool pictures I take and my artistic perspective."

"Publicize my art, archive my outfits, stay connected."

“Stay connected with people, show my taste in art through photos.”

“Keep up with trends and friends.”

“Started out as a way to express myself and become more comfortable in my identity.”

“Keep in touch and up to date with people and help promote my work.”

“Stalking my enemies, as a creative medium to express myself and see what everyone else is up to.”

“To stay in contact with my friends across the US and Canada.”

“Promote my events, socialize with friends, network, keep an eye on sh*t for sale, follow artists I like.”

“To stay in contact with my community.”

“Networking and to stay socially relevant.”

“The addiction of scrolling, keeping up with friends, trend forecasting for work.”