

Using Instagram risks young adult users to develop depression

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### Abstract

This paper discusses social networking sites (SNSs), which are used by around 40% of the world's population daily to create an online world where users can use to present themselves, interact and stay connect with friends or strangers (Brown, 2018). In 2010, a social application named "Instagram" was developed and become the most popular image-based application. By that, many researches relate to social media and mental health issues have looked at the connection between them. In this paper, it will particularly investigate the connection between Instagram and depression. This paper will examine on common motives of using Instagram by young adults such as coolness and surveillance/knowledge about others and factors such as time spending on Instagram, percent of strangers followed, and social comparison which could be a risk to have depressive symptoms and could affect young adult users.

*Keywords:* Depression, Instagram, Mental Health, Social Media

Social networking sites (SNSs) give a public/private online space for individuals to present themselves and have remarkably changed the way we communicate, express our identity, do business, and live. Some of the most well-known and popular include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These SNS and associated applications are providing a channel for users to stay connected with their friends, communities, and the world (Donnelly, 2017). In these applications, users can share their ideas, personal information, photos and other kinds of media to their friends or even strangers. These abilities encourage users to express things that represent their identity. However, one of the SNS's essential characteristics is social interaction from both content creator and viewer sides. These mentioned features create an online social world that is fundamentally different than its offline counterpart. To be successful in online social media applications means that the user has a lot of interaction from other users. The way to count those interactions is by looking at the number of their followers, numbers of likes and comment on their posts. It inspires users to present the most positive aspect of their lives in order to gain virtual attentions such as likes, or comments not only from their friends, but strangers around the world (Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015). Most young adult users strive to be recognized in social media which is one of the negative impacts of using social media. This paper will focus on one of the most famous SNS among young adult, aged between 18-29-year-old called Instagram. It will examine on a statement that the usage of Instagram could affect young adult users to develop depressive symptoms.

### **Instagram and young adults**

#### **Instagram**

Instagram is an online photo-sharing application which has 800 Million users from around the world (Wade, 2018). It is one of the most popular SNS applications among young

adults. Instagram allows users to post pictures and short videos to their profiles. Text-only contents cannot be created on Instagram unlike other social media such as Facebook or Twitter (Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015). Users can write a caption or use hashtags to describe the photos. To look at the notable social interaction features, Instagram users can like, comment on posts, send direct messages to other users and they are able to tag other users in their pictures as well. Instagram users can choose to make their profile as a public or private profile but it is common for people to set their profile as public. The primary reasons of using a public profile are that it enables other users to be able to view, follow the profile, give likes and comments on public posts. Another reason is the public profile can be searchable via names or hashtags on its posts (Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015). By that, using hashtags can promote your pictures as well as your profile to be followed by other users who could be random strangers and gain popularity.

### **Motives of Using Instagram**

Almost 60% of Instagram users are young adults, aged between 18 and 29-year-old (Wade, 2018). Sheldon & Bryant (2016), analysed Instagram users' behaviors and studied the motives of using Instagram. The results show there are 4 major purposes of using Instagram which are surveillance/knowledge about others, documentation, coolness, and creativity. Moreover, they also found that users tend to put less significant on connecting or interacting with other people, but they focus more on personal identity and self-promotion. Two motives which are important to this paper are coolness and surveillance/knowledge about others.

People normally join activities because of popularity with their friends (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). In the case of Instagram, it has features which society considers they are cool such as applying filters for your photos, tagging, following trendy hashtags, convenient ways to

explore other users' photos, and opportunities to follow celebrities' life. Further than the features, Instagram offers a channel for ordinary people to gain popularity and self-promotion. Most of Instagram users' goal is to gain a significant number of "likes" on their posts. For instance, Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis & Giuliatti (2017) have examined the frequency of doing like-seeking behaviors by almost 500 participants and the result presents that about 90% of participants have at least one like-seeking behavior. The most common behaviors are uploading and taking a picture, using a hashtag and a filter while using software or application to modify one's physical appearance, and purchasing followers and likes are the least common behaviours (Dumas et al., 2017). They concern about the "likes" because "likes" are used to justify their popularity, also the number of followers is used to judge one's popularity (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Greenwood (2013) said that it is human nature to have the need to feel seen, valued, and recognized by other people. Therefore, the "likes", "comments", and the number of followers have acted as a kind of social support from others. These can directly affect one's self-esteem and self-worth. For example, participants in a study describe that they feel like winning, happy and flattered when they receive attentions such as likes or comments, on the other hand, it can lower self-confidence and self-esteem when they do not get many attentions (Chua & Chang, 2016).

Another motive that may cause depressive symptom is surveillance/knowledge about others. One of the main reasons for using Instagram is "surveillance/knowledge about others" (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Users that have this motive want to use Instagram to interact with friends, to see visual posts of others, to follow friends and inspirational accounts, to "like" followers' photos. To look at the term "knowledge about others", it means that users like to gather other users' information ranging from socio-economic status, relationship status, number

of friends and more which can be found on the Instagram profiles. These actions and behaviors of browsing other users' photos on Instagram may trigger the presumption that these photos are demonstrative of how those users actually live. As the research from Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015) asserts that the act of conclusive other people life by judging from shown photos on Instagram's profile makes people more vulnerable because they compare themselves with assumed lives of others. This can lower their self-esteem and trigger the occurrence of depressive symptoms.

### **Discussion**

Depression is a sensitive issue to inspect and it could be different for each individual. However, researches by Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015), Hernandez & Smouse (2017), Donnelly (2017), and Uhler (2016) which all study the connection of social media application usage and depression. By these researches, there are three major factors that can lead users to have depressive signs. The first is the amount of Instagram using time, next is the percent of strangers followed, and lastly social comparison. Those 3 variables are all connected together to make a development of depression of Instagram users.

The study from Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015) has focused on the link between frequency of using Instagram and depressive symptoms. He found that other variables such as social comparison and the percent of strangers followed are unavoidable to look at the same time. He purposes the links between those 3 factors with the depressive symptom (See Appendix A). The method that he used to collect data is doing a survey of young adult participants whose age is in the range of 18 to 29 years old. He collected information about the amount of time they use the Instagram daily, a total number of strangers who follow them and strangers that they followed, measured feeling scale 1 out of 10 of 4 items from the Social Comparison Rating Scale. Those 4

items are confident, attractive, desirable and inferior in comparison to other users on Instagram. And last needed info on depressive symptoms which measured by using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D). The results from Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015) study indicated that a significant moderator is strangers followed which associate between Instagram use and social comparison, but it has a slight effect on the association between Instagram use and depressive symptoms. Further, the research reveals that the more Instagram use is related to have a greater risk of depression only for users that have high levels of strangers followed. Still, there is a trend which shows that Instagram use and depressive symptoms can be indirectly associated when social comparison was positive at the highest levels of strangers followed. He interprets the results that more frequency of using Instagram had a slightly significant direct association with greater depressive symptoms. Also, more frequent Instagram use was not associated with social comparison, and more positive social comparison was associated with fewer depressive symptoms. About the number of strangers followed, it significantly controls the correlation of Instagram use with social comparison and it indirectly associated between Instagram use and depressive symptoms. His findings highlight the importance of how many strangers follows are, he said that it can lead to have a negative social comparison because users more likely to judge toward those they do not know and places improper attentions on their characteristics to explain behavior. However, seeing friends' photos or posts might generate positive feelings because the users know how their friends actually live. Therefore, the conclusion from Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015) is using Instagram has negative effects with well-being for those who follow a lot of strangers, but for those who follow fewer strangers on Instagram, it reflects positive associations with well-being.

Another research from Hernandez & Smouse (2017) also investigates the relationship of time spent on Instagram and depression symptoms. It explains that spending large amounts of time on Instagram and seeing other people have happier lives make them believe that life is not fair. The author said that the feeling is worsen when they follow strangers and Instagram has offered an opportunity for users to do it. Moreover, when users follow public figures who have privileged lives, it will lead them to make a correspondence bias, and unsettled negative comparison, finally they could develop low self-esteem issues, dissatisfaction, and depression. Next study from Donnelly (2017), it adds another explanation for Instagram use associates with depressive symptoms by using social rank theory. Users are competing against other users to reach online social media fame and a common goal. On Instagram which fame means having lots of followers and likes on photos. Social rank theory verifies that users will feel overcome or upset if they cannot succeed in reaching the goal. Sloman (2003) states that when people fail to compete others in social rank, it considers as a failure and it can cause mechanisms for suffering from defeat. In relation to Instagram users, they could feel vulnerable and depressed because they are not achieving the Instagram platform goal by not receiving considerably likes and other attentions as other users.

Lastly, one more interesting research which similar to the research by Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015). Uhler (2016) has studied the correlation between social media time and depressive symptoms. His mediation about relationships between variables are some different from Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015) by adding Positive self-presentation by others as a variable (See Appendix B). Although, he did not purposeful focus on Instagram the result of his research is interesting. He discusses that spending time on social media has linked to depression which mediated by social comparison. As well as, observing other users' self-enhancing posts

frequently on social media is often to have a social comparison-mediated and positive relationship to depression. Still, levels of favorable self-presentation of users are expected to be indirectly correlated with depression. He concluded that social media still can be good for users who have self-affirming purposes, but it will be unhealthy to use it for social comparison.

### **Conclusion**

Social network applications become a new medium for people in this digital age to communicate and stay connected with other people whether friends or strangers. Most of social applications have offer interactive features such as “like”, “comment” or “follow” which are drawing attention for most teens and young adults. Especially, Instagram which has millions of users around the world and is one of the most popular among other social media apps (Wade, 2018). Instagram is a photo-based app with unique features that provoke users to have some kind of behaviors which may lead to develop depressive symptoms. From many social media or Instagram related studies, it could interpret that there are 3 major factors which are Instagram using time, percent of strangers followed, and social comparison. Those factors are the effects from their motives of using Instagram which 2 directly impacted motives are surveillance/knowledge, and coolness. However, those 3 depression provoked factors are connected together to make users have depression and it might depend on how the users use the Instagram as well. Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015) concludes that the users who have a higher risk to develop depression are those who spend a lot of time on Instagram, they follow a lot of stranger accounts to compare themselves with strangers and have a negative feeling toward strangers’ posts. All in all, Instagram is only a tool for online users to be used for earning popularity and connecting with other users. The application itself does not lead users to have

depression but the way that the users use the application could contribute depressive symptoms. Still, more studies and research are needed to analyse the link between social media application and depression deeply because depression is a sensitive issue.

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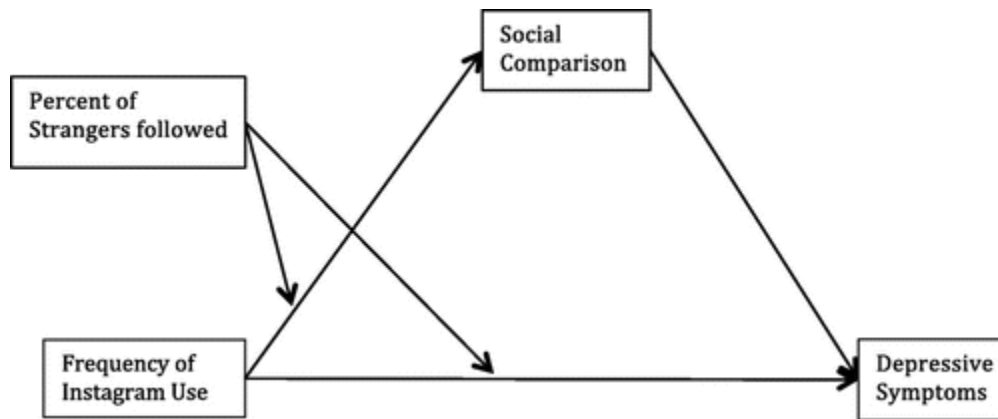
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## Appendix A

The diagram shows conditional associations between Instagram use and social comparison at different levels of strangers followed by Lup, Trub & Rosenthal (2015).



## Appendix B

The diagram shows associations and relationships between variables by Uhler (2016).

