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The influence of culture and self-esteem on social media use

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationships between culture, self-esteem, and Instagram use. The first hypothesis was that there would be a positive relationship between individualism, Instagram use, and public self-consciousness. The second hypothesis was that there would be a positive relationship between self-esteem and Instagram use. The results did not support the hypotheses. Suggestions and practical applications are provided.

Introduction

Social media is a prevalent part of modern life, however, there is limited research on the effects of culture and self-esteem on social media use. We investigated the impacts of these on Instagram use among college students, using both Instagram posting frequency and the public self-consciousness scale as measures. We hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between individualistic culture and higher posting frequency, as well as higher public self-consciousness. We also hypothesized that participants who rated their self-esteem higher would post more frequently.

Method

Participants

Through convenience sampling, 82 participants completed a Qualtrics survey sent by email. There were 43 participants from the class of 2023, 33 participants from the class of 2024, and 6 participants from the class of 2025. The gender distribution was 65 females, 11 males, and 6 other.

Materials

The survey included the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) and questions from the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975) that pertained to the public self. We also asked questions related to Instagram usage patterns. Basic demographic questions were also included.

Procedure

Participants received an informed consent email consisting of the survey and basic background information about the research. After consenting, participants answered questions about their demographic background and their usage of Instagram along with the personality survey questions. After completing all questions, participants were debriefed about the purpose of the study and thanked for their participation.

Results

A chi-square test for independence was computed to determine whether post frequency order on Instagram (never, less than once a month, once a month, once a week, once a day) was related to cultural background (individualistic, collectivistic, both/neither). The results were not significant $X^2(8, N = 82) = 10.94, p = .25$, with similar posting frequencies across all cultural backgrounds.

A Pearson r coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between time spent on Instagram and self-esteem and public self-consciousness. There was no correlation between self-esteem and time spent on Instagram, $r(78) = .02, p = .87$. There was no correlation between public self-consciousness and time spent on Instagram, $r(79) = .10, p = .37$. A final correlation was conducted to assess the linear relationship between self-esteem and public self-consciousness. There was a positive linear correlation between the two variables; the higher the self-esteem scale results, the higher the public self-consciousness scale results, $r(79) = .65, p < .001$ (see Table 1 for correlation matrix).

Table 1
Correlation Matrix

Variables	Self-esteem	Public Self-consciousness	Time spent on Instagram
Self-esteem	--	.65*	.02
Public self-consciousness		--	.10
Time spent on Instagram			--

Note. Correlation coefficient with * is significant at the $p < .001$ level.

When comparing their time spent on Instagram, there was no significant difference between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures, $t(57) = -0.98, p = 0.33$. There was also no significant difference when comparing the public self-consciousness scores of individualistic and collectivistic cultures, $t(58) = -0.52, p = 0.61$ (see Table 2 for means).

There was no significant difference in self-esteem based on post frequency order, $F(4, 76) = 0.21, p = 0.94$. There was also no significant difference found for public self-consciousness by post frequency, $F(4, 77) = 1.08, p = 0.37$.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations for time spent on Instagram and public self-consciousness by cultural background

Culture	Time spent on Instagram (daily average in minutes)	Public self-consciousness score
Individualistic	31.40 (27.39)	25.57 (4.68)
Collectivistic	41.46 (51.19)	26.20 (4.64)

Note. Public self-consciousness scores range from 7-35, higher scores indicate higher public self-consciousness.

Discussion

The only significant result found was a positive correlation between self-esteem and public self-consciousness among Instagram users from Boston University. This result aligns with our first hypothesis which stated that social media users that report higher self-esteem would be more likely to have a higher degree of the public self.

Our second hypothesis was that social media users who come from individualistic backgrounds would have a higher degree of a public self. The results did not support this, as cultural differences did not affect individuals' time spent on Instagram or post frequency order, nor did they impact the degree of public self-consciousness or self-esteem. These outcomes could potentially be because every user has a different reason for using Instagram. Some people use Instagram to post pictures, while others enjoy interacting with friends and family through private messages. Depending on the reason for using Instagram, someone could spend minutes on the platform while others spend hours; this is not always dependent on one's self-esteem or self-consciousness. Future research could ask participants to explain their motivations for using Instagram to clarify this finding.

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to conduct a study which includes individuals from older generations, as they might have different purposes for using Instagram such as sharing photographs exclusively with family members. We could also expand to studying social media platforms such as BeReal or TikTok since each includes diverse features. These newer platforms are also increasing in popularity and might reveal more about how social media use changes over time, and if differences in usage are influenced by age or other factors.