

The Psychological Impact of Instagram update-Removal of “Likes” Count

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Abstract

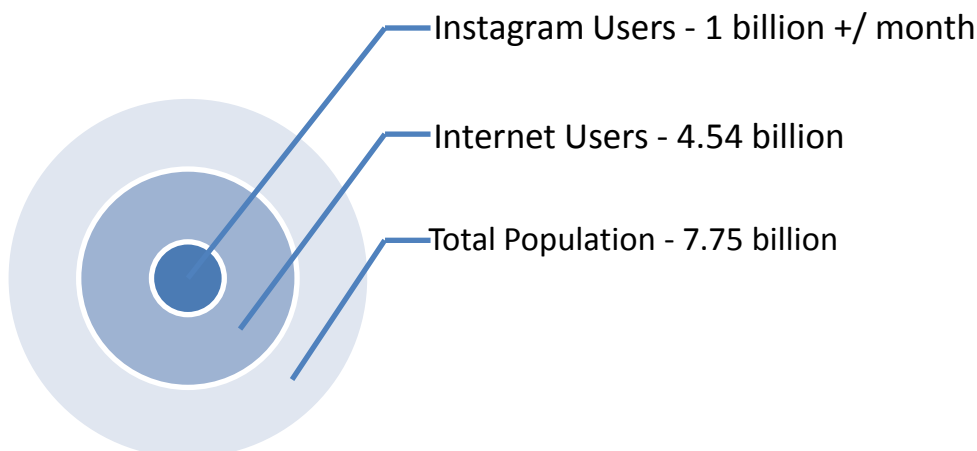
With the advancement of technology over the ages, the ease of access to the internet has improved significantly. The world has moved from the traditional means of sharing information and communication to using social media applications like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, etc. One such application is Instagram that has attracted a lot of attention and internet traffic in recent years. Instagram is a social media platform primarily used to share photos and short video clips. Technology has made life and connectivity a lot easier, but it has also brought upon with it some observable negative influences on the psychological well-being of its users predominantly affecting young minds. The utility of social media has altered from sharing content and enhancing connectivity to seeking mass validation. The "likes" count on the posts uploaded by the users has become a quantitative measure of approval and acceptance promulgating negative psychological and physiological impact. Given this, Instagram has taken an initiative towards moderating the negative impact of the social media platform on mental health. The new Instagram update, that is in the testing phase in 8 countries, will remove the visibility of "likes" count from the posts uploaded. This paper reviews some of the critical negative effects Instagram poses and suggests the possible positive impact of the new update on the mental health of its users.

Keywords: Instagram, Social Comparison, Social Conformity, Body Image, Social Media, Likes Count, Psychological Well-Being.

Introduction

According to a statistical report, the total population of the world as of January 2020, is 7.75 billion out of which, 4.54 billion people around the world are using the internet. Almost half of the total population (3.80 billion) are active social media users with a 9 percent year-on-year growth. Within the last decade, the use of the internet has increased tremendously. This has led to the development of several Social Media Apps thus significantly increasing the number of Social Media Users. Social Media is any digital platform that can be used to create and share information in real-time. The world's most used social platforms are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, WeChat, Twitter, and Instagram. Social media is primarily dominated by the Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996). Around 90.40 percent of the millennials are social media users. This number is followed by 77.50 percent of the Generation X population (born between 1965 and 1980). Whereas only 48.20 percent of the Baby Boomers (born between 1944 and 1964) use any form of social media. Instagram is the sixth most popular social networking site and more than 1 billion people use Instagram every month. Of the total number of users, almost 65 percent of them are below the age of 35.

Fig. 1 Graphical representation of INSTAGRAM users in 2020



On the one hand, social media has virtually tied the whole world together, revolutionizing the process of communication and information sharing, while on the other, researches show that social media apps have been accentuating mental health problems, especially in teenagers and young adults. Social media is turning out to be more addictive than alcohol and cigarette. The negative impact of social media usage has been primarily observed in the younger generation as compared to older generations. As per the 2017 statistics, social media addiction was observed highest in young adults. About 29 percent of the people in the age group of 18-24 years and 17 percent in the age group 25-34 years were addicted to social media. This number was significantly lower (less than 10 percent) in other age groups.

A recent study by the Royal Society for Public Health ranked Instagram as the worst social media app among all the others for young people's mental health. According to the research, Instagram has the most negative impact causing addiction, anxiety, cyberbullying, depression due to body image issues and the general pressure to conform to societal standards of beauty and popularity. Keeping in mind the increasing mental health crisis in its users, Instagram has decided to remove the "likes" count to help people's wellbeing and health and enable users to focus more on connecting with people. As of July 2019, 7 countries have been selected to test this new update - Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ireland, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand. In November 2019, the update was rolled out in the USA making it a total of 8 countries to have implemented the change.

Aim of The Study

This study aims to theoretically review and critically evaluate the impact of the social media application, Instagram, on the mental health of its users. The paper focusses on suggesting the possible positive effects of Instagram's recent update – to remove the visibility of "likes" count on the uploads, to other users – on mental health.

What Is Instagram?

Instagram is a Facebook-owned social media application that enables people all across the world to share photo and video content with its other users. Users can follow, like, comment and share the

photos/videos uploaded on Instagram with each other. Adapting the functionality of Snapchat, users can also upload stories that disappear from the feed after 24 hours. Instagram also lets its users manipulate the photo/video content by using 'filters' before uploading it on their feed. Launched in October 2010, the app now has 1 billion-plus active users per month with two-thirds of its users falling in the age group of 18-34 years. It is the sixth most popular social networking site and has more than 50 billion photo uploads so far. Around 63 percent of its users log in to the app once per day and spend 28 minutes on the app on an average. Over the recent few years, Instagram has found its application in the business world as well. More and more brands are now using Instagram to advertise their products. According to a report, Instagram generated 20 billion dollars in ad revenue in 2019.

Although, Instagram is helping make the world smaller, enabling people across the globe to share useful content and helping businesses attract more customers; it is also creating an opportunity to fall prey to the possible negative impacts of the app on its user's health. It is, therefore, necessary to evaluate any negative impact the app can have on the physiological and psychological well-being of a person.

Negative Effects of Instagram on Health

The quantitative feedback system (likes, comments, shares) in social media apps is a notable feature. It facilitates the reward system in the brain. Any medium of notification, like sound or pop up or lighting up of the screen, lets the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine – the feel-good chemical. It is the release of dopamine and thus the feeling of momentary elation that the brain gets addicted to. The constant need for euphoria leads to a persistent lingering, increased monitoring and increased usage of the social media apps.

Negative Social Comparison

The term Social Comparison was first coined by the Social Psychologist, Leon Festinger in 1954. He stated that humans tend to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by some means. However, in the absence of objective or non-social means, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison,

respectively with the opinions and abilities of others. He also stated that the comparison with others can lead to unpleasant consequences.

A study was done in 2015 on the association of Instagram use with depressive symptoms and social comparison as a mediator. Instagram has a functionality that enables its users to connect to any of its other users by "following" them on the app. It was observed that people who followed a greater number of strangers were more likely to exhibit depressive symptoms than people who followed less number of strangers. This observation is in coherence with another finding that suggests that Facebook users who are "Facebook Friends" with more number of strangers are likely to exhibit attribution error towards them. Coined by the Social Psychologist Lee David Ross, the term attribution error means the tendency of people to assign one's personality as the cause of their behavior and ignore the situational circumstances. As a result, when Instagram users view photo/video uploads of the strangers they follow that have high engagement in terms of "likes" count or comments etc., portraying a life that is better off than the viewer, an attribution error occurs. The viewer assumes that the viewee's whole life is exactly how it is depicted in the pictures and ignores the possibility that it all might just be circumstantial. This leads to negative social comparison and a possible increase in depression and anxiety. On the other hand, when people view the photo/video uploads of people they know personally and are aware of their current conditions, it makes the occurrence of negative social comparison and attribution error very less likely as the viewer already knows the reality of their lives and makes no assumptions. Thus less likely to exhibit depressive symptoms.

Another study has revealed the unpleasant effect of negative social comparison on the self-esteem and life satisfaction of its users. Reportedly, people suffered from a lowering of self-esteem when they were exposed to user accounts that have a higher number of "likes" count and comments or any kind of engagement on their content, irrespective of the matter of the content. There are two main types of social comparison - Upward comparison and Downward comparison. Upward comparison is when people compare their opinions and abilities with other people who are better than them in the respective parameters. Downward comparison is when people compare themselves with others who are worse off than them in the corresponding opinions and abilities. The research suggested that an upward comparison with people who are not from an immediate circle of friends or family can affect life satisfaction adversely.

Eating Disorders

One of the most commonly used symbols on Instagram is the 'hashtag' (#) symbol. The hashtag symbol is used with a phrase that groups the content correspondingly. According to a recent report, the #food hashtag is in the top 25 most popular Instagram hashtags. Instagram has given public figures and "influencers" a platform where they can get in touch with its million users and utilize it to propagate messages worldwide. Celebrities therefore often

upload content of food and fitness regimes promoting a healthy diet, healthy living, and a particular body image. This attracts attention from the masses and increased activity (likes, comments, shares, etc.) However, the same has been linked with increasing signs of eating disorders like anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorders, etc. A study done in 2017, established a direct relationship between increasing Instagram use and increasing symptoms of Orthorexia Nervosa (ON). Of the total study sample, 49 percent of the population showed the prevalence of this eating disorder.

Nearly half of the people suffering from an eating disorder have comorbid mood or anxiety disorder. Thus, eating disorders do not just affect physical well-being but they also lead to psychological distress and even fatality in extreme cases. Of all the mental illnesses, eating disorders have the highest mortality rates.

Body Image:

Body Image is the perception, thoughts or attitudes of one's physical appearance. Numerous researches have been done to study the impact of social media use on body image satisfaction. The female gender has been particularly seen to be affected by the appearance comparison. Since the gender ratio on Instagram is almost the same (52% females and 48% males), the observable effect of the phenomenon is also quite high. Appearance comparison is a socio-cultural factor influencing body dissatisfaction among young women. There are several mediums for making the comparisons. E.g., in-person comparisons, print media comparisons or social media comparisons.

Social media has played a vital role in bridging the gap between common people and celebrities. Celebrities often post pictures of their daily lives and routines just like any of the commoners. This allows the common public to get a visual peek into their real lives along with their reel lives on the screens. It was observed in a study done on women, primarily in the age group of 18-30 years, that when women were exposed to thin and attractive Instagram images of celebrities and even unknown peers, appearance comparison took place which led to increased body and mood dissatisfaction. However, the degree of appearance comparison varied with the levels of celebrity worship (an obsession with the lives of celebrities). There was a direct relationship found between celebrity worship and appearance comparison and subsequently body and mood dissatisfaction.

Another study found that the "likes" count on Instagram images played a significant role in predicting body dissatisfaction. Depending on the type of image, women with thin-ideal figure (type 1) and women with average figure (type 2), the number of likes count determined the level of appearance comparison and thus body dissatisfaction. For type 1 images, higher likes count invoked higher comparison whereas, for type 2 images, lower likes counts invoked greater comparison.

However, the worst affected are adolescent girls. Adolescence is a very important stage for

psychosocial development. Being exposed to the right things for a well-developed personality is of utmost importance. Studies show that 9 in 10 teenage girls suffer from body dissatisfaction. The social comparison amongst adolescent girls is alarmingly high. According to Chua and Chang's study in 2016, adolescent girls find evaluating themselves by comparing with their peers based on "likes" counts. A study conducted on 144 teenage girls revealed that girls with a higher tendency for social comparison, when exposed to "filtered" images of their peers on Instagram, reported higher body image dissatisfaction.

The ill effect of body dissatisfaction is not just limited to a negative perception of one's body image. Researches have shown that body dissatisfaction is one of the leading causes of eating disorders. While eating disorders alone might not be as detrimental to the psychological well-being as they are to the physical health, the accompanying anxiety and mood disorders can take a huge toll on the mental health of the people suffering from eating disorders.

The Instagram Update

In the wake of the detrimental effects of social media on its users, and especially its effect on adolescents, Instagram has taken an initiative to remove the visibility of the number of "likes" count on the content uploaded. Instagram on its twitter handle tweeted in April 2019 that it wants its users' followers to focus more on the posts uploaded than the number of "likes" the posts get. In this new update, only the user itself will be able to see the total number of likes count on their uploads and not others. Instagram launched this new update as a test routine in Canada in May 2019. Followed by Ireland, Italy, Japan, Brazil, Australia, and New Zealand. It started testing the update in the US from November 2019. On multiple occasions before launching the update, Adam Mosseri, the CEO of Instagram made statements about how Instagram wants to create a less pressurized environment where people feel comfortable expressing themselves and how they want people to worry less about the "likes" count and spend more time connecting with people.

Possible Positive Effects of Removing "Likes" Count In The New Update

Social Conformity:

Fitting-in

Humans are social animals living in a society with certain societal norms. Any individual exhibiting deviating behavior is termed as an outlaw and rejected by the others. Teens and adolescents especially, have the tremendous pressure of "fitting-in". With social media giving a platform to share content and often "show-off" to the whole world, the pressure to "fit-in" has increased manifolds. Often people upload certain content only because others have received validation for similar content. The number of "likes" the photo/video gets is used as the measurement of validation. Replicating actions because it is socially acceptable to fulfill the desire to be liked or accepted falls under "social conformity". Removing the likes count will remove any scope of quantitative measurement of social validation. It will

enable people to upload the content that they want to rather than focusing on what others are doing and replicating the actions just to "fit-in", in the hopes of receiving the same kind of validation.

Compulsion

The most liked picture on Instagram is of a brown egg in a white background. It was uploaded by the Instagram handle "world_record_egg" (EGG GANG) on January 4, 2019. It has received up to 54.3 million likes as of March 2020. The like button on Instagram is used as the quickest and simplest way of expressing likeness or support towards the content uploaded by the users. Double tapping the picture or just clicking the like button sends the notification to the content uploader and the counter of the number of likes count visible below the picture increases by one. Often people view or like a post not because it is of their interest or relevant to them but because of the curiosity arising from the high number of "likes" count the picture has received and the compulsion to engage with the post because the rest of the world is. The new Instagram update will enable users to browse through the content that they find relevant and hit the like button on the content only because they truly like it or support the idea and not because they feel coerced to do it.

Social Comparison

Social media has become a platform to seek constant validation from the masses. Higher engagement with the post is considered as an indication of more popularity or a mass validation of the content. The social comparison theory postulates that humans seek for comparisons of their abilities and opinions with others. With likes count as a measure of the validation, it has become a common practice among people to compare their posts with others. This creates immense pressure among the users to upload content that will attract the maximum number of "likes" and may lead to anxiety if the number of likes is not up to the expectations. Adolescence being the crucial stage for psychosocial development, if not handled properly negative social comparisons can lead to long-term detrimental effects. This, in turn, can damage one's self-esteem or lead to depressive symptoms. With the removal of likes count, users will be able to upload any content without the added performance anxiety that comes with comparing posts with other users.

Body Image and Eating Disorder

The perception of an ideal physique is to be subjective. Although, for reasons unknown, the idea of a perfect body has been very objective and has been passed on for generations. Social media apps are observably widening the gap between the ideal and the real. People posting pictures of the "ideal" body image attract more "likes" and as a result more validation. Social media helps promote the objective idea of a "perfect" body image ensues inferiority complex amongst those who do not have the "acceptable" body image. This can propagate eating disorders that have comorbid anxiety and mood disorders and sometimes lead to fatality. Removing the likes count from such posts will help users, especially women to stop comparing themselves with

others and be comfortable in their skin. It can help change the objective perception of an ideal body image to a subjective idea. This, in turn, might be able to reduce the number of people suffering from eating disorders and the accompanying disorders, lessening the negative impact on the psychological well-being of social media users.

Conclusion

The use of the internet has increased exponentially in the last 25 years and with it has increased the usage of social media. Social media has made sharing of information and communication around the world much faster and easier. But with the increased use of social media comes the risk of hampering mental health. Instagram founded in 2010 has a user base of more than 1 billion per month in just a decade. Social media apps have been condemned for inflicting harm on the psychological well-being of its users. Instagram has particularly been responsible for negative social comparison inducing depressive symptoms, lowered self-esteem and lowered life satisfaction; eating disorders with comorbid mood and anxiety disorders; negative perception of one's body image inducing anxiety; amongst other problems like sleep deprivation, social media addiction, cyberbullying, etc. Although social media cannot be completely eradicated to check the negative impacts, Instagram has taken a step in the direction of mitigating these adverse effects by removing the visibility of the "likes" count number on the posts. This can predictably lead to a reduction in the intensity and frequency of negative social comparison, social conformity, eating disorders and negative body image perception. In all likelihood, it will enable Instagram users to upload content independently and without any external influences promoting better mental health.

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