

Different social media platforms, especially Instagram, have negative effects on its users. For my research, I specifically focused on the decline of mental health in relation to social media use. Symptoms of depression, lowered self-esteem, and negative self-perception and body image are all consequences of people's experiences on various social media platforms. Something I've noticed about posts on my timeline are how posed some of the pictures and captions are. I may have noticed this because of the frequency that I am on Instagram, but this app, in my opinion, is everyone's outlet for creating a profile that portrays an ideal version of themselves.

Oftentimes, the pictures people post, in order to get the most likes, are edited and transformed to make themselves look better, depicting a higher standard or unrealistic version of the reality they live in. Constantly viewing images that display amazing, yet falsified, versions of the truth affect viewers mentally because they think that they should look the same as the people in the pictures, or they should be leading the lives that are showcased by the images people post on their social media profile.

I am sometimes guilty of this too, but I feel that people overuse Instagram to make themselves look good. For example, girls on my timeline will post very revealing photos of themselves, but editing them a lot, or posing in a way to make them look more appealing in order to get attention in terms of how many comments and likes that post receives. The idea of "the economy of likes" is an idea discussed in Tedx Talk by Bailey Parnell which considers how people post content on Instagram or other social media platforms just to receive positive feedback from their followers in the form of likes and comments. People I know spend hours editing pictures, crafting a perfect caption, and timing when the majority of their followers would be using social media to maximize the post's views in hopes to receive the most likes and comments. These same people have even deleted a post or image if that post did not receive the amount of likes for which they had hoped, which is usually determined within the first couple minutes to an hour of the post being shared. This is not healthy for people to be putting so much time and energy into online content because the feedback they receive might not what they expect, which makes the issue worse. Instagram users consider their value based on the number of likes, as well as the number of comments and followers. So much depends on the followers' reactions to a post, rather than the person who posted feeling good about his or her picture; people who post

content online interpret their inherent value through the amount of likes they receive, needing a greater amount of likes to feel reassurance from their followers. However, this is largely where it affects people mentally and psychologically because they expect more positive feedback, or compare their feedback with the feedback of other users' posts and get upset when their content falls short.

The content social media users see also plays a large role in how they feel about themselves because the social media platforms serve as a medium of comparison between the user and the people they follow. When other people of the same social realm are portraying images of their lives on their profiles that are more impressive than the life of the viewers, they may ask themselves: Why am I not able to live a life like that? Why do they have more followers than I do? Why do their posts receive more likes than mine? Why don't I look as pretty, or as fit, as they do? This constant comparison online is mentally draining for social media users, yet these platforms that make people feel bad about themselves are addictive. As of 2017, social media users spent about 135 minutes per day on average surfing social media platforms, which has steadily increased each year since these websites were developed ([statista.com](https://www.statista.com)). Users of social media invest so much time into updating their newsfeeds because they want to be in the loop about the people they follow to avoid feeling left out, but they also compare their lives with the updates they see. It is a reverse psychology dynamic of wanting to know what people are up to yet not wanting those posts to make the viewer feel bad about himself or herself. The only time there is a benefit from using Instagram and other social media platforms is the dopamine rush that is felt from receiving positive feedback on a post, but only if that post receives at least the minimum of the expected amount of likes. The likes and comments make the people who posted on Instagram or other forms of social media feel accepted by their followers, contributing to their self-value and self-perception.

It is crazy to be so concerned about the way people are perceived by other individuals, but I think that if I personally did not have any social media, I would not think about this as much. However, I would also probably feel alienated from my friends who are constantly talking about content they see posted on Instagram. Because of this, Instagram tends to make me feel annoyed, aside from some inspiring posts from my friends. I notice that the way people are posting is "fake" and not accurate to how they really are, meaning they could have edited a photo so much that it

makes them look skinnier or tanner, for example, than they really do. I also get annoyed with the way I notice these things yet still try to conform to this unspoken standard of the “goals” of Instagram. The contradiction of not wanting to look fake yet still wanting my profile to look like the best version of myself frustrates me because I want to have the assurance of feeling that people think highly of me without having that be determined by the amount of likes on a post or by how many followers I have.

This was such an interesting topic for me to conduct research on because it is a very prevalent issue that I see within my own life and within the lives of close friends of mine. Personally, I find myself comparing the way I look with the way the people I follow on Instagram look. It can upset me because I feel that I should be altering my eating habits or exercise routines in order to look more similar to the people I see on my Instagram feed. I have considered getting eyelash extensions, which are a big cost, in order to look better, especially when I am in photographs. I probably never would have had these thoughts if I were not exposed to the content on Instagram, which is probably edited anyway. I have also followed exercise and fitness profiles closely, changing the way I work out so that I could possibly see the results pictured on those accounts. Instagram has become a huge medium for posting weight and body transformations as well as exercise habits. Some people use Instagram to motivate their followers, while others use it as a way to show off and get positive attention from others. I find it hard for myself to avoid Instagram, although when I log on, I often see images of people showing off their bodies on fitness or fashion accounts or showing off vacations, parties or clothes and so it can make me have negative self-perception when what I have or what I look like does not mirror the people I follow. Many of my friends have done “cleanses” of social media which is when they decide to delete some or all social media platforms as a way to rebalance their mental state. This is a very healthy idea, but it is upsetting that they even need to do this. I feel that Instagram will continue to be a platform of social media where people post very edited images and content that affects the mental state of the people that view it based on the way it is designed.

Some future uses that I hope to happen on Instagram would be to steer it away from being a platform that emphasizes the way things are edited and how many likes the content receives. Many people notice the mental decline that Instagram causes and have started movements such as adding the hashtag #MakeInstagramCasualAgain. Although many

people use this in a joking manner, it is an accurate representation of how people have noticed the way it negatively affects self-perception and body image. If people continue to promote positive movements through hashtags and post more realistic content that does not represent an idealized version of a person's life, the mental health of Instagram users would likely improve. Instead of posting images where people show off their bodies, the trips they take, or their fitness in unrealistic or falsified ways through editing technology, people should instead be posting more wholesome content that can be an inspiration or a positive boost of energy. People could use more positivity in their lives, and since Instagram is so widely used, it would benefit all of its users to have a pick-me-up on this social media platform.

The algorithm that Instagram uses to produce an individualized news feed for every user is based on how often the users logs on, how often they like their followers' posts and their overall engagement on the site. The content people see is calculated in terms of the likelihood that the user will like that content. So unfortunately, if someone is not necessarily likely to like something you post, it may appear after scrolling very far down on their news feed, or potentially not at all. This definitely plays a role in the self-value people place on themselves attributed to the number of likes or comments they receive on a post. I think it would be beneficial to the users of Instagram and their mental health if the person behind the algorithm creation reverts it back to its original way of showing posts that are most recent. This would be an easier way for people to avoid missing a post because the algorithm had made it invisible for them. Also, people may feel less targeted that their posts become invisible to their followers simply because they do not log on as often as other users, or because their followers may not be as inclined to like their post.

Another way to limit the negative mentality that Instagram generates is having more censoring on its content. Although there are settings that allow users to filter out words in the comments or captions of posts they find inappropriate or hurtful, these settings are not as accessible as they could be. Instagram could maximize the benefits of this setting if it were more readily available to its users. This would not solve all of the negative self-perception issues that Instagram users feel from viewing this site's content; however, it is a step in the right direction for bettering the mental health of the people who are members of this online community.

Altogether, Instagram has a lot of criticisms that need to be addressed to better the mental health of its users. The users' self-perceptions will continue to worsen as more people create accounts and post edited photos and idealized images of themselves in order to depict a version of themselves that they want people to see, rather than show genuine content. There are ways to improve the mental health of Instagram users including: positive movements such as #MakeInstagramCasualAgain; altered algorithms to improve visibility of content; censoring settings; and social media cleanses. These strategies can hopefully improve the commonly suffered consequences of logging on to Instagram and other social media platforms, without having to eliminate them from our lives since they are a useful and accessible way of staying connected with others online.