

**Adolescent Self Esteem and Instagram: An Examination of Posting  
Behaviors**

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## ABSTRACT

*Social media is a way that people can communicate and share parts of their lives through the internet (“Social Media”, n.d.). Being that the media tends to have an influence on the general public, it has an influence on adolescents as well. Sometimes, this influence can be quite negative (Sanders, 2015). Because of this, exploring their connection would be insightful. This study explores how a specific social media site (Instagram) may affect adolescent girls and their self-esteem. The researchers issued a self-esteem questionnaire to a group of girls on their self-esteem and compared it to their Instagram profiles. In this study, the researchers found that the participant with average self-esteem posted the most provocative photos on Instagram, while the participants with high self-esteem along with borderline-low self-esteem posted more goofy and filtered photos.*

## INTRODUCTION

While technology is still relatively new, it continues to evolve to this day. Social media is one of the more popular aspects of technology and is defined as “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.” (“Social Media”, n.d.). Social media can be also referred to as social networking sites and was first introduced when an “open diary” was founded. The open diary consisted of people coming together to write an online diary as a community (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). After the open diary, the popular idea of weblogs- also known as blogs- came into play (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With people becoming more apt to choose their smartphone or tablet over their desktop computer,

social media sites have adapted to this change by creating applications specific for the mobile device. The applications make it possible for people to connect through specific social media sites through their smartphone and/or tablet device.

The purpose of this paper is to relate social media to the idea of self-image of adolescents. With the media's definition of what makes someone attractive, adolescents tend to struggle with their self-image. Being that one of the main purposes of social media is to connect with one another, teens tend to use it as a way to recreate themselves (Simmons, 2014).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There have been many studies performed by researchers about the negative effects of specific social media platforms. A study by Clarke (2014) has found that adolescents will go to extreme lengths to gain more followers and likes on social media. They are going as far as to posting very provocative, nearly naked content onto their social media profiles just to gain more attention (Clarke, 2014). One of the biggest problems social media promotes is low self-image. According to a study done on social media's impact on South African Girls, young girls using a photo sharing social media site posted pictures wearing provocative clothing and posing provocatively (Botha, 2014). The concept of "sexy self-representation" was discussed and was defined as a way women are sharing images in which they see themselves or others see them as sexy (Botha, 2014). This is similar to the idea of a selfie. A selfie is a picture one takes of him or herself when he or she feels attractive and may post the selfie on social media (Walker, 2013). According to Botha, many women who have internet access willingly take part in the idea of sexy self-representation (Botha, 2014).

There are also numerous studies about how girls and boys used social media differently. Gender tends to determine how an individual represents themselves on social media (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). Boys will allow more public access to their social media, whereas girls tend to prefer more privacy. Both genders tend to be untruthful. Girls represent themselves to what they think boys will like and encourage interaction. Both genders choose profile pictures that, “reflect sexualized media portrayal.” (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015, page 5). Race and gender are factors that can influence how individuals act differently whether interaction is face to face or online (Kapidzic and Herring, 2014). Girls pose in more sexually available ways than boys do and on top of that, white youths are more revealing than black youth overall (Kapidzic and Herring, 2014). It is also suggested that gender and racial identities are created through social media and images (Kapidzic & Herring, 2014). There is a substantial difference between the way young girls and boys view themselves and others and this is portrayed through social media.

It is more expected that young females will post more provocative content to social media as a way to attract more attention. It is more obvious when females are trying to be provocative as opposed to young men because they have different ways of sexualizing themselves. Young women are more likely to post sexual images of themselves than young men are, although the trend is growing for young men to post more sexual pictures. For instance, young men are beginning to post more pictures of themselves shirtless (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). One study by Kapidzic and Herring found that “girls show themselves at a closer distance, more seductively posed, and more

revealingly dressed – in short, as more sexually available – than boys” (Kapidzic & Herring, 2014).

As mentioned previously, teens’ self-image can be easily shaped by outside sources such as the media and their peers. Social media can also play a part in what teens think of themselves overall. There are numerous social media sites and applications that allow teens to promote themselves through photos and videos. A few of these sites are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest. Most teens have a more positive interaction online and have a better sense of social inclusion by engaging with others through social media (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy, & English, 2014). Teens feel the need to belong, and interacting on social media platforms in a positive manner can meet those needs. Teens also use social media as a way to create new relationships and stronger bonds between existing ones (Miller, 2009).

### **Social Media and Self-Image**

Self-image is the idea or concept one has of oneself. In other words, it is an individual’s self-impression, which can have either a positive or negative on one’s confidence (“Positive Self Image and Self Esteem”, n.d.). Self-esteem is defined as confidence level one has of oneself (“Positive Self Image and Self Esteem”, n.d.). Although the two terms slightly differ, they generally relate to the same concept. Because of this, the terms self-image and self-esteem are used interchangeably for this study.

There have been various studies that demonstrate the correlation between self-esteem and the use of social media. Psychologists have stated that posting pictures of oneself online is a trait of low self-esteem (Gulf News Readers, 2015). The self-esteem of some depends on the recognition and appraisal that is gained from pictures posted to

social media sites. Although posting pictures of oneself online can lead to low self-esteem, some may argue that the idea of selfies and that nature can make one feel good about oneself. This is due to the control that is had over the content posted through social media (Gulf News Readers, 2015).

Social media has had a huge impact on young people's self image. "Teenagers' main criterion for choosing profile photographs is a belief that they look good in them... both genders perceive that girls place more emphasis than boys on selecting pictures in which they are attractive" (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015, p. 5). Teens purposely post stereotypical pictures of what young people view as sexy and strong (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). Herring and Kapidzic (2015) suggest that this trend of posting more sexualized photos is inherent instead of conscience because of the involvement of media in the lives of youth.

Adolescents take and post dozens of selfies a day and are posting them to social media with the expectation of receiving positive feedback from their peers (Gulf News Readers, 2015). This can cause teens to be more self-centered and lead to narcissistic behaviors. Young people can feel like they have control because of the selfies. They can alter them with filters and effects, which leads to, "more selfies equals more control," (Gulf News Readers, 2015). With the relationship between self-esteem and the amount of selfies posted to Instagram seeming to have a strong correlation, it is possible that teens use their selfies to boost their popularity and thus, their self-esteem (Gulf News Readers, 2015). With this being said, one must wonder to what lengths are teens going to gain more popularity. Teens tend to post more provocative photos to encourage more

likes and comments (Clarke, 2014). The extreme lengths that teens are willing to go to for Instagram fame are done in efforts to promote and increase one's own self-esteem.

### **How Does Self-Esteem Affect What Adolescents Post to Instagram?**

Social media is a prominent part in most teenagers' lives, especially in the United States. With the rise in technology, the way young people interact with it and each other has changed drastically. A more recent way to communicate is through posting photos to social media. One platform that has risen in popularity in recent years is Instagram. The purpose of this site is to share pictures that the user takes to depict certain aspects of their life. People can choose to "follow" certain users to stay updated on the photos they post and give feedback if they wish.

It is important to find out how the use of this specific website can influence how young women specifically view themselves and how they wish others to view them. It is also important to be aware of how it can positively and negatively affect the lives of our nation's young people. Social media is becoming more and more common within younger generations. It is important to be aware of how it can negatively affect people.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION & HYPOTHESIS**

Social media is a prominent part in most teen's lives, especially in the United States. With the rise in technology, the way young people interact with it and each other has changed drastically. A more recent way to communicate is through posting photos to social media. One platform that has risen in popularity in recent years is Instagram. The purpose of this site is to share pictures that the user takes to depict certain aspects of their life. People can choose to "follow" certain users to stay updated on the photos they post and give feedback if they wish.

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RQ: How does self-esteem affect what adolescent girls post to Instagram?

H: Adolescent girls with low self-esteem will post more provocative content on Instagram.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For this study, four girls between the ages of 16 and 18 were given a self-esteem assessment questionnaire. Parental permission was obtained and each participant completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). When the sample had been selected, the content on the Instagram page of each participant was analyzed and compared to their score on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Separate coding sheets were created by each researcher to help analyze the data. The individual coding sheets consisted of different categories that described the content on each Instagram page. Once the separate coding sheets were created, intercoder reliability was determined making one final coding sheet. The final coding sheet consisted of nine different categories, which were set by strict guidelines to describe the participants' Instagram content. There is a biography, or bio, section available for each profile where a user can enter any information desired. The bio section of each Instagram account was also looked at to add to the data. The bio sections helped to analyze how self-esteem impacts the type of Instagram posts that are made.



The hypothesis of this study was that adolescent girls with low self-esteem will post more provocative content onto their Instagram page. This was tested by analyzing the content on each participant's Instagram page and compared it to the answers given on the self-esteem assessment. Field notes were taken during the evaluation of the Instagram posts. They consisted of the time posted, type of post (photo or video), filter/edits made to post, and participant identification code.

## **RESULTS**

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) was used to determine the self-esteem scores of the participants. The researchers added on two questions at the end of the self-esteem questionnaire to determine age of the participants and race. The two questions the researchers added to the survey had no effect in the outcome of the scores. The researchers scored the results of each participant and determined that two of the participants scored at the lower end of the scale, which qualifies for a borderline-low self-esteem score. One out of the other two participants scored at the higher end of the scale, qualifying for high self-esteem while the other scored in the middle qualifying for average self-esteem.

The next process was to create a coding sheet the researchers would use to evaluate each photo for each person. Both researchers completed the coding separately and then compared results together. While determining intercoder reliability, there was not a significant agreement between both researchers, so it was decided to re-code the data together while redefining specific categories. The researchers scored the results of each participant and determined that two of the participants scored at the lower end of the

scale, which qualifies for a borderline-low self-esteem score. The determined coding sheet can be found in appendix A.

Person 1 had a score of 30 on the Rosenberg Self Assessment Scale (1965), which was labeled as high self-esteem. Person 2 had a score of 20 and was labeled as having average self-esteem. Person 3 scored a 15 on the which was labeled as borderline low self-esteem. Person 4 was also labeled borderline low and she scored 16. From now on, HSE will represent high self-esteem, ASE will represent average self-esteem and BLSE will represent borderline low self-esteem. Person one had the most photos on her account out of all of the participants. A majority of her photos were coded as goofy or playful and had a majority of group photos. Person 2 had the next highest amount of total photos. She had a large amount of selfies posted as well as many provocative photos. Person 3 did not have a high total amount of photos compared to the first two participants. She had several serious photos posted as well as several provocative photos. Lastly, person 4 had the least amount of photos out of the four participants. She had a majority of goofy/playful photos and only one provocative photo.

Based on the content posted to the participants' Instagram accounts and the coding sheet, the results proved to be quite interesting. It was decided between the researchers that for a photo to be provocative, the individual must have a significant amount of skin showing, the focus of the photo to be cleavage or other private parts of the body, or for the facial expression to be sexual. The goofy/playful category was defined as laughing or any goofy or playful facial expression as well as poses. The serious category was defined by the facial expression as well as whether the picture was posed or not. If the individual was not smiling, or made any kind of blank or straight expression, it was

considered serious. The initial hypothesis for this study was that adolescent girls with low self-esteem would post more provocative photos. To elaborate more on this, person 4 (BLSE) had one provocative photo on their Instagram. In contrast, Person 2 (ASE) had the most provocative photos on her Instagram, yet had an average self-esteem score. Person 1 scored in the high self-esteem category on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem survey and also had the most photos posted to her Instagram. Out of the photos she posted, a majority of them were group photos as well as photos that fit into the goofy/playful category. The researchers found that person 2, who had average self-esteem, posted the most provocative photos out of the rest of the participants. Person 2 had a total of 26 photos, so 44% of her photos were labeled as provocative. Person 3 (BLSE) had 12 photos, so 33% which were labeled as provocative. It was originally hypothesized that participant 3 and 4 would have the most provocative photos. Participant 4, who had borderline low self-esteem, had only one provocative photo, which does not support the original hypothesis.

Along with photos and videos, each participant had written their own personal bio to add to their Instagram. The Instagram bios can either be short or lengthy and many times add to the overall atmosphere of an individual's Instagram page as well as give more insight into that individual's personality. Person 1 (HSE), who had the most photos out of the four participants, also had the most information in her bio. Her bio consisted of several emoji's, which are small images such as smiley faces or other characters. There was also some personal information in her bio along with a bible verse and other religious references. Person 2 (ASE) had other social media identification in her bio, as well as emoji's. Person 3 (BLSE) just had one emoji. Lastly, person 4 (BLSE) only had

religious references in her bio. There is also the option to have a profile picture on Instagram. All four participants had profile pictures for their pages. The researchers decided to subject the profile pictures to the same coding sheet used in analysis for the Instagram photos posted. Person 1 (HSE) had a serious profile picture, person 2 (ASE) had a goofy one, person 3 (BLSE) had a provocative picture and person 4 (BLSE) had a goofy picture. The researchers also looked at the number of group versus selfie photos. Person 1 (HSE) had the most photos overall as well as the most group photos. She also had a total of 22 selfies (including both taken by user and by someone else). Person 2 (ASE) had a total of 17 selfies, but only had 4 group photos. Similar to Person 1, both Person 3 (BLSE) and Person 4 (BLSE) had more group photos than selfies. Person 3 had 8 group photos and 4 selfies, while Person 4 had 7 group photos and only 3 selfies. Person 1 (HSE) used filters on 37 photos and added effects to 27. Person 2 (ASE) added filters to 13 photos and added effects to 14 photos. Person 3 (BLSE) added filters to 7 photos and added an effect to one. Lastly, person 4 (BLSE) used filters on 6 photos and added an effect to one photo.

### **ANALYSIS**

The original hypothesis of this study was that the girls with the lowest self esteem would post the most provocative photos. Person 4 was one of the girls with the lowest self esteem. However, she had only posted one provocative photo which is the equivalent 9% of her total photos. Although Person 4 did not have the outcome hypothesized, Person 3, who was also in the borderline-low range, did have the second highest rate of provocative photos. This is along the lines of what was expected. Person 2 (ASE) created an unexpected outcome; she had the highest percent of provocative photos at 44%. One

difference between person 3 and person 4 that the researchers noticed was the religious affiliation person 4 seemed to have. As noted above, the researchers assume this because of the biblical scripture verses in the bio of person 4. This could be one possibility as to why person 4 had the least provocative photos out of everyone in the test group. Her spiritual faith could be a core foundation to her personality and is one influence as to how she portrays herself to others. However, her lower self-esteem would be the ultimate motivation for either posting or not posting provocative photos.

Aside from the different categories of photos posted to each participant's Instagram, there were other aspects of the participants' Instagram content that was analyzed to come to a solid conclusion. The researchers analyzed the number of group photos versus the number of selfies as well as photos that had a filter and/or effect as a way to relate the information back to the initial hypothesis. As mentioned in the results section, Person 1 (HSE), 3 (BLSE), and 4 (BLSE) all had more group photos than they did selfies, while Person 2 (ASE) had more selfies than group photos. The fact that Person 1 (HSE) had more group photos may relate to her high self-esteem in the sense that she may not feel like she has anything to prove, while Person 2 (ASE) may be trying to get more attention for herself with the number of selfies on her Instagram. She may also be using these selfies as a way to boost her self-esteem more towards the higher range. Because Person 3 (BLSE) and 4 (BLSE) had more group photos than they did selfies may imply that they are not comfortable putting themselves out there alone, which also relates to their borderline-low self-esteem.

Along with the number of selfies versus group photos that the participants had on their Instagram profile, there were also a number of photos each participant had that

feature some kind of filter or effect. What the researchers constituted as a filter and as an effect on a photo differ slightly. The researchers counted a filter as anything that may have changed the natural lighting of the photo, while an effect consisted of any border or frame around the photo as well as any animation or emoji on the photo. Person 1 (HSE) had both the most filters and effects on her photos out of all the participants. This may be because she had the most photos overall, but in some aspects it goes against what the researchers have previously suggested about Person 1. For example, the researchers predicted that because of Person 1's high self-esteem she would not feel the need to prove or alter anything through her Instagram profile, but the number of filters and effects used suggest something different. The researchers felt that the use of an effect and/or filter hints at the desire to appeal to the participant's Instagram followers and perhaps gain more attention. With that being said, it was difficult to correlate Person 1's high self-esteem with the number of photos that contained a filter and/or effect. A majority of Person 2's (ASE) photos fit into the filter and effect category. This relates to the previous suggestions that have been made about Person 2 and her possible self-centered personality and desire to attract more attention. Person 3 and 4, both with borderline-low self-esteem, had most of their photos in the filter and effect categories. Each participant had a filter on more than half of their total photos, and had only one with an effect. Even though Person 3 and 4 had the least amount of photos out of all participants, the fact that they had more than half of their photos filtered points to their low self-esteem. This is because they are enhancing their photos to fit what they think their followers would like.

Although the pictures and videos posted to each participant's account were one of the main focuses for this study, the individual bios were also used in the data analysis. Being that Participant 1 (HSE) had the most information in her bio, it may speak to a more open personality. Her bio along with her high self-esteem score may be related because high self-esteem suggests that she is not afraid to put herself out there. Person 2's (ASE) bio only contained information related to her other social media pages. The fact that she has the most provocative photos and is the only one who listed her contact information for other social media pages may speak to a more self-centered personality. Person 2 was also the only participant who had a public Instagram page, which means anyone and everyone can view whatever she posts on her page whether they follow her account or not. Person 3 (BLSE) had only had one emoji in her bio. Her bio and the fact that she did not have much content to analyze may lead to the assumption of a more closed-off and shy personality. Her borderline-low self-esteem score can add to this as well because lower self-esteem scores suggest the feeling of low self worth, which may be why she does share as much of her life through Instagram as some of the other participants do. Lastly, Person 4's (BLSE) bio was solely a verse from the Bible. In addition to her bio, the fact that Person 4 had the least amount of photos on her Instagram may imply a more conservative personality.

### **Communication Privacy Management Theory**

The Communication Privacy Management Theory describes the process of disclosing information including how and when people decide to share certain information (Petronio, 2008). People may avoid disclosing certain information because of fear of rejection or creating a negative impression (Kennedy, Martin, Thompson, Himes,

Clingerman, 2012). Also, people may only disclose certain information if he or she feels that it could create a positive impression.

Relating communication privacy management to the study could help explain why some of the subjects have more provocative photos than the others. Certain participants may feel uncomfortable sharing types of photos that other subjects are comfortable disclosing. Also, three out of the four participants had a private Instagram account meaning a request to follow them had to be received and approved in order to view their content. Person 2 (ASE) was the only participant to make her account open to the public as well as the one with the most provocative photos. This alludes to aspect of the theory that says people may disclose certain information to create a positive impression (Kennedy, Martin, Thompson, Himes, Clingerman, 2012). It appears that Person 2 (ASE) feels more comfortable disclosing personal information compared to the other participants because of her privacy settings. She had the option of making her account private, but chose against that. By allowing her account to be public, everyone has access and can look at her information. By disclosing her information to more people, she has more opportunity for positive feedback. Furthermore, each participant's bio relates to the kind of information they want to share with others. For example, Person 1 (HSE) had the most information in their bio, which may portray an inviting personality. In contrast, Person 3 (BLSE) had only one emoji in their bio, which may have seemed trivial to someone who may not know her very well or even at all. Because of the lack of information given in her bio and her Instagram account being private, it is possible that Person 3 did not disclose certain information out of fear of rejection or creating a negative impression.



Impression management is how people try to control the way others see them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). There are two different components for this, the first being the motivation for the impression and the second being how the impression is constructed (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). When posting to Instagram, impression management is key. There is a lot of thought put in about which photo is chosen to make the post. By posting a provocative photo, the user is aiming for a sexual impression. They are motivated to be seen sexually and they construct that message by using a photo that is provocative.

One of the things the researchers found interesting was that one of the girls, Person 2 (ASE), had a completely open account. This meant that anyone could send a friend request to Person 2 and immediately have access to everything she had on her profile. The other three participants had closed accounts, meaning that the user had to accept the friend request before the sender had access to the information. This relates to how, “People generally are careful to whom they tell, how they make decisions concerning when, how, and the extent to which they tell others about themselves,” (Petronio, 2002, page 1). Person 1 (HSE), Person 3(BLSE), and Person 4 (BLSE) are portraying this aspect because they are being careful about who sees their information and are able to restrict people from seeing it that they don’t want to. Person 2 (AVE) is allowing anybody to see her information and has no way to keep it private unless she was to change her account settings.

According to Susan Waters and James Ackerman (2011), “Facebook users strategize how to regulate permeability, for example, by avoiding or choosing certain topics to disclose,” (Waters & James, 2011, p. 104). Similar to Instagram, Facebook users can adjust the privacy settings depending on how open or closed they want their

information to be. The way Instagram users regulate permeability is by setting their account to either private or public. They can then disclose things about themselves depending on the types of pictures they post.

By analyzing the participants' Instagram posts and comparing them to their scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) the researchers were able to conclude whether or not the initial hypothesis was proven to be true or not in this study. As it was previously stated, the hypothesis for this study was that adolescent girls with low self-esteem would post more provocative photos. From the results and analysis, the researchers found that for this specific study, the participant with average self-esteem was the one with the most provocative photos, while those with the lowest self-esteem had the least amount of provocative photos and the participant with high self-esteem also had the least amount of provocative photos. The results did not completely match the original hypothesis. Some reasons for this can be found in the next section.

### **LIMITATIONS**

This study was limited in some ways. One limitation was the way young people self identify with gender. Adolescence is a confusing time for almost everyone and gender identity issues can make it even more confusing. This limited the study because the research did not include how the participants identified themselves sexually. There could be a difference in the way heterosexual girls portray themselves compared to homosexual girls or bisexual girls that was not analyzed in this study. Another limitation was sample size; only a small number of students were given the self-esteem questionnaire. Also, this research only focused on one type of social class. Positioning on a social class scale could influence the self-esteem of teenage girls and how they would

want to portray themselves. For instance, a girl from a lower-class family might feel insecure around other girls her age who come from families from an upperclass. She may want to portray herself in a way that would make people from upper-classes notice and accept her. Another limitation was that only young people from the Midwest were sampled. If possible, multiple countries should be represented. Or, if concentrating on one country like this project did, participants should represent multiple regions of the country. Self-esteem and use of social media (Instagram) may be different depending on what region of the world you come from. Another limitation of this study was that the content posted to the participants' Instagram accounts were taken at face value. There was no follow up with participants to get their input on what they posted to their Instagram account as well why. Another limitation was that the researchers and participants knew each other personally, so it is possible that the participants tried to portray themselves in a way they believe that the researcher wanted to see.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As mentioned in the limitations section, there were several setbacks that added to an overall difficulty of this study. If the same research question were to be used for a future study, one suggestion would be to survey participants from a wider range of ethnicities. Another suggestion would be to interview the participants and get their input as to why they post certain things to their Instagram. Moreover, another suggestion would be to use a large sample size and study all types of social classes in order to form more complete research.

Social media plays a significant role in the lives of adolescents. with this being said, there are a number of studies that can be conducted in the future that relate to

adolescents and their use of social media. One suggestion for future research would be how Instagram comments affect what adolescents post to their accounts. Another idea for future research would be the differences in the use of Instagram for adolescent girls versus adolescent boys.

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