

# FROM PASSIVE SCROLLING TO MENTAL DISTRESS: HOW INSTAGRAM FUELS DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY IN ADOLESCENTS

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**Abstract:** The prevalence of Instagram use among adolescents has been accompanied by increased rates of depression and anxiety among this age group. Known for its algorithm-based news feed, quantitative measures of social validation, and a design aimed at encouraging passive scrolling, the app may capitalize on the developmental susceptibilities of this period. Passive scrolling was found to be a consistent predictor, acting mainly through three pathways: sleep disruption, body image dissatisfaction resulting from exposure to idealized images, and low self-respect due to unfavourable social comparison. Girls and younger adolescents were especially vulnerable, and their susceptibility was moderated by neuroticism, anxious attachment, and fear of missing out. Internal studies conducted by Meta revealed that the current safeguarding measures of the app fall short. In conclusion, it can be argued that Instagram is a valid environmental factor influencing the psychological well-being of adolescents. Clinicians should assess the scrolling behaviour of young clients, whereas policymakers need to address the issue of transparency and restrict engagement-increasing design elements for minors.

**Index Terms** - Instagram; adolescent mental health; passive scrolling; social comparison.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The growing popularity of social media platforms over the last twenty years has brought about a dramatic shift in the social sphere of youth life. Of the many social media platforms available today, Instagram has become one of the most widespread and visually driven digital spaces where young individuals dedicate considerable amounts of time each day. Focused on visual content, algorithms-based newsfeeds, and performance indicators such as likes and followers, Instagram constitutes a distinctive immersive space with potentially serious implications for adolescent development. With the increasing prevalence of depression and anxiety among young adults correlated with the rapid growth of social media use, experts in the field have been raising concerns regarding the influence that social media platforms, such as Instagram, can have on mental well-being (Keles et al. 79; Twenge and Campbell 311).

Adolescence is a particularly sensitive stage of development when the body and mind of a young individual become highly reactive to social stimulation, identity becomes increasingly important, and peer influences are at their strongest. Thus, adolescents remain exceptionally vulnerable to psychological risks associated with the social media environment (Tong 213; Cunningham et al. 123). As an application with a strong focus on curated algorithms, social comparison, and constant social feedback, Instagram may be taking advantage of these vulnerabilities in development in ways not captured by general measures of screen time. Indeed, passive scrolling is increasingly being considered a particularly problematic form of using Instagram, one that increases perceptions of inadequacy, envy, and social isolation (Thorisdottir et al. 535; Marengo et al. 106993).

There are several theories explaining how Instagram may be contributing to depression and anxiety. The theory of social comparison posits that people tend to judge themselves against other people. Since Instagram is a platform filled with highly curated and optimized content, there is hardly any escape from upward comparisons (Fardouly and Vartanian 82). When adolescents constantly judge themselves against idealized representations of their peers and influencers on social media, distorted perceptions of self-image, body image, and self-worth may follow. Multiple studies have shown that this phenomenon occurs significantly more on visual platforms like Instagram than on social media based on textual communication (Marengo et al. 106993; Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84).

Other than social comparisons, the fear of missing out (FOMO) also serves as a mechanism for Instagram to cause psychological problems among its users. Instagram's real-time story and events feature allows adolescents to observe social activities that exclude them, leading to increased stress and isolation (Blackwell et al. 69; Shannon et al.). To exacerbate these negative emotions, the reward-based system of notifications and interactions embedded in Instagram's application is likely to induce a pattern of excessive and maladaptive Instagram use, where adolescents become unable to stop using Instagram even when they experience negative psychological consequences (Sepas et al. 641; Aggarwal).

Epidemiological research on the relationship between social media usage and mental health disorders among adolescents has gained significant traction over the past few years. For instance, a systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Sepas et al. (641) uncovered a significant connection between problematic Instagram use and psychological distress, while Keles et al. (79) discovered robust connections between social media usage and depression, anxiety, and psychological distress among adolescents. Similarly, Azem et al. and Hilty et al. documented strong connections between social media use and depression among adolescents, especially regarding Instagram use.

Santos et al. showed that higher hours per day of screen time and particularly social media screen time were positively correlated with progressively worsening mental health conditions. Quinlan et al. (578) added to this that individuals with the highest social

media engagement scores had a relatively higher prevalence of depression and anxiety problems. Tiwari and Singh noted that such adverse health outcomes did not affect all users equally, especially those that had preexisting vulnerabilities like poor self-worth or mental health issues.

The physiological mechanisms behind the phenomenon also need to be addressed. Sleep architecture disturbance, resulting from Instagram use during night-time and exposure to blue light emitted from mobile screens, serves as an important mediating mechanism. Vannucci et al. (189) found that sleep disturbance played a significant role in mediating the relationship between social media use and depression among adolescents. This observation is consistent with existing literature showing that sleep loss during this developmental period exacerbates negative emotions and cognitive evaluations (Coyne et al.). Sexual differences in Instagram users' vulnerability to developing adverse psychological conditions form another layer of the problem under discussion. Specifically, teenage girls have been found to be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of Instagram due to higher rates of body image issues, appearance comparisons, and cyberbullying incidents (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Cunningham et al. 123). The visually focused nature of the platform combined with its tendency to focus on appearance can become toxic for young women who must simultaneously struggle with their puberty and personal development (Fardouly and Vartanian 82; Twenge and Campbell 311).

Although extensive research has accumulated around the problem in question, a number of lacunae and methodological weaknesses remain in the existing academic corpus. The prevalence of cross-sectional research designs within the field prevents causality determination. Different measures of both social media usage and adverse mental conditions prevent systematic aggregation of findings in this area (Quinlan et al. 578; Shannon et al.). In addition, the difference between active and passive Instagram usage has failed to receive necessary attention despite its psychological significance (Thorisdottir et al. 535; Aggarwal).

The current narrative review attempts to critically synthesize the available literature on the link between Instagram usage and depression and anxiety among adolescents. Through the exploration of the psychological processes, personal risk factors, and situational variables associated with this link, this review intends to contribute to the comprehension of how the unique features of Instagram use such as passive browsing, social comparison, fear of missing out, and content curation are transformed into psychological damage (Hilty et al.; Tong 213).

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The psychological implications of Instagram use by adolescents must be explored with reference to existing theoretical paradigms. The most fundamental framework within this context is that of social comparison theory developed by Festinger. Human beings have an innate need to assess their worth relative to other people (117). While in pre-digital social settings, this would be bound by geographical limitations, Instagram removes all barriers, bombarding adolescents with limitless content from peers and influencers (Fardouly and Vartanian 82; Marengo et al. 106993). The resulting social comparison scenario is predicted to create perpetual upward social comparisons, a phenomenon strongly linked to lower self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and susceptibility to depression (Valkenburg et al. 58; Sepas et al. 641).

Another complementary theory for exploring the psychological implications of Instagram is that of social learning theory formulated by Bandura. Adolescents are likely to construct their self-concepts based on the models presented to them through social media observation and imitation. As a social modelling platform, Instagram allows adolescents to consistently observe self-presentation styles and desirable lifestyles portrayed by influencers, celebrities, and their peers (Tong 213; Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84). Constant exposure to ideal models could lead to unrealistic standards that result in incessant psychological problems. According to Valkenburg et al. (58), self-esteem is an important moderator in this phenomenon. Besides, the Uses and Gratifications theory postulates that teens use Instagram in order to satisfy their psychological needs depending on how well or not these needs have been fulfilled or frustrated (Cunningham et al. 123; Hilty et al.).

### *Instagram-Specific Features and Their Psychological Implications*

Instagram cannot be properly analyzed in terms of its psychological effects on adolescents without looking at particular features of the platform. The inherently visual nature of the platform makes appearance, lifestyle, and attractiveness subject to continuous public scrutiny (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84). Appearance-focused comparisons that occur in this context have been proven to contribute to body dissatisfaction and objectification among young people (Marengo et al. 106993; Fardouly and Vartanian 82). The spread of digital manipulation tools, filters, and idealized lifestyles serves to systematically distort the comparison environment in favor of unrealistic expectations, and adolescent users remain particularly susceptible due to their underdeveloped critical media skills (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Tiwari and Singh).

Importantly, the adverse effects of Instagram usage that stem from its inherent nature have not remained purely hypothetical. Research performed by Meta itself and leaked to the public through investigative journalism shows that Instagram worsens the body image of a significant number of teenage girls as early as 2019, with the platform's researchers attributing the effect to social comparisons (Wells et al.). However, this information was kept secret from lawmakers, scholars, and the public for many years, amounting to a major negligence on the part of the institution towards young users. A recent report by Béjar et al., in an independent audit, analyzed 47 safety tools designed for Meta's teen users and discovered that only around one in five worked effectively. The other major issue with Instagram is its quantitative measures of social feedback such as counters, follower counts, and comments.

Instagram's social feedback mechanisms such as counters, followers, and the visibility of the comments can be viewed as adding another layer to social evaluation, which can be very stressful for young people. As noted earlier, the concept of social acceptance and peer approval can have significant psychological value among developing young people. In this case, social acceptance measures on Instagram can be viewed as proxies for self-worth (Sepas et al. 641; Shannon et al.). Along with that, Instagram's algorithm is geared to showing posts that get the highest engagement.

### *Passive Scrolling Versus Active Engagement*

The passive approach, which involves browsing feeds, watching Stories, and consuming content without engaging with others, has been found to be linked to higher rates of poor psychological health than the active form of using social media that involves posting, commenting, and sending direct messages (Thorisdottir et al. 535). According to Thorisdottir et al., passive engagement

with social media has been found to be positively correlated with depression and anxiety in Icelandic teens, while the active form showed weaker correlations. The different outcomes of the two forms of engagement have been attributed to the inability to reciprocate the social connection needed to provide a buffer against the negative comparison (Aggarwal; Keles et al. 79).

Passive scrolling is similarly strongly correlated with addictive behaviors on Instagram as well. Its infinite scroll format, personalized algorithms, and reinforcement schedules are all elements that contribute to the development of habits and make them very hard to control (Sepas et al. 641; Shannon et al.). Shannon et al.'s study found a significant relationship between problematic social media use and increased levels of depression, anxiety, and poor psychological well-being among teens and young adults. Blackwell et al.'s study (69) found that the fear of missing out was one of the major psychological factors contributing to compulsion to use Instagram, resulting in higher anxiety and lower life satisfaction for frequent users.

### ***Instagram Use and Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents***

The empirical literature documenting associations between Instagram use and adolescent depression and anxiety has grown substantially over the past decade. A landmark systematic review by Keles et al. (79) identified consistent positive associations between social media use and depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents, with frequency of use and emotional investment in social feedback emerging as key risk factors. Sepas et al. (641) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis specifically focused on Instagram, finding a significant and meaningful association between problematic Instagram use and psychological distress across multiple countries and demographic groups. Azem et al. and Hilty et al. similarly reported robust evidence linking social media engagement to depressive symptomatology in adolescent populations.

Longitudinal evidence has been particularly important in establishing temporal precedence. Coyne et al. conducted an eight-year longitudinal study and found that time spent on social media was associated with subsequent mental health difficulties, adding important causal weight to what had previously been a predominantly cross-sectional evidence base. Twenge and Campbell (311) corroborated these findings at a population level, drawing on three large datasets to demonstrate that media use was reliably linked to lower psychological well-being. It was also verified by Quinlan et al. (578) that adolescent individuals with high social media involvement displayed higher incidences of depression and anxiety, with female adolescents as well as psychologically vulnerable ones displaying significant results.

### ***Mediating and Moderating Mechanisms***

Some of the mediators by which Instagram use is known to influence mental health issues among teenagers include several pathways. One of the mediators by which Instagram use influences psychological health is sleep disturbance. For instance, according to Vannucci et al. (189), sleep disturbance is a mediator for the correlation between social media use and depression among adolescents, with Instagram being used extensively at night and exposure to blue light impacting their sleep quality. Considering that sleep acts as a foundation for regulating emotions and stress responses during teenage years, it is possible that chronobiological disruption serves as a mediator through which Instagram increases vulnerability to internalizing disorders (Coyne et al.; Keles et al. 79).

Another mediator by which Instagram use can affect teenagers' mental health includes body image dissatisfaction. For example, Fardouly and Vartanian (82) found that appearance-based comparison was a mediator for the correlation between social media use and body image among teenagers. In addition, Marengo et al. (106993) extended similar findings to highly visual social media websites such as Instagram. The abundance of digital image manipulation on Instagram fosters a uniquely skewed comparison landscape (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Tong 213).

Individual variables play a substantial role in moderating the impact of such phenomena. According to Valkenburg et al., self-esteem served as a robust moderator whereby individuals with lower pre-existing self-esteem were more prone to experiencing adverse impacts resulting from social comparisons (58). Blackwell et al. noted that neuroticism, anxious attachment, and FOMO acted as further moderators at the individual level (69). Primack et al.'s study revealed that frequent social media users experienced greater social isolation, implying that the superficial social interactions enabled by Instagram might not fulfill the basic requirement of belongingness (Shannon et al.; Cunningham et al. 123).

### ***Gender Differences and Developmental Considerations***

Gender can be considered another consistent moderator of Instagram and mental well-being associations in teenagers. In various researches, adolescent girls have been found to be more vulnerable to Instagram-induced psychological damage compared to their male peers due to the increased significance of physical comparison in girls' lives and importance of relational membership to the female adolescent identity (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Twenge and Campbell 311). According to Keles et al. (79) and Cunningham et al. (123), female teenagers were more prone to depression and anxiety associated with social media usage, with the issues of body image and victimization through cyberbullying playing significant roles.

Another potential moderating factor appears to be developmental timing. Adolescents in the early age range (approximately from 10 to 14 years old) appear to be especially vulnerable at this point in time because of the combination of physiological transformations, growing need to be part of the peer group, and lack of fully developed executive functions typical of early adolescents (Tong 213; Hilty et al.). The ability to critically evaluate social media content and to reframe socially negative comparisons has not developed enough yet among early adolescents.

### ***Research Gap***

Even with the presence of an extensive body of evidence, however, there still remain a number of crucial gaps in the literature that need addressing. From a methodological standpoint, the prevalent use of cross-sectional research designs in this area of study limits one's ability to establish causal relationships in the interaction between Instagram use and adolescent psychological health (Quinlan et al. 578; Shannon et al.). While the potential existence of reverse causality, namely the hypothesis that adolescents experiencing depressive or anxious conditions will exhibit higher levels of excessive social media activity, has yet to be investigated in much of the current literature (Keles et al. 79; Coyne et al.). The problem of measurement heterogeneity, in turn, is further complicated by the broad spectrum of methods used by researchers when measuring social media use in their respective studies

(Hilty et al.; Azem et al.). The difference between active and passive social media use, even though its relevance has been proven previously, is yet to be considered (Thorisdottir et al. 535; Aggarwal).

### III. METHODOLOGY

Narrative review is employed as the research method in the current study, which aims at consolidating empirical and theoretical findings on Instagram use and its association with depression and anxiety in adolescents.

A broad literature search was undertaken in five prominent databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Moreover, grey literature resources, such as reports from different institutions and investigative material, were searched for policy-related data not available in peer-reviewed scientific papers. The scope of the search has been limited to those sources that were published in the English language.

The keywords used for searching the above-mentioned databases include: Instagram, social media, adolescents, teenagers, youth, depression, anxiety, psychological distress, mental well-being, passive scrolling, social comparison, body image, problematic social media use, screen time, and internalising symptoms. Hand-searching of references from the retrieved papers was also undertaken.

#### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria: (a) the study examined social media use with a particular focus on Instagram in relation to depression, anxiety, or psychological distress; (b) the study examined Instagram or social media use in relation to depression, anxiety, or psychological distress in adolescent populations aged 10–19 years; (c) the study employed a peer-reviewed empirical design, including cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, systematic review, scoping review, or meta-analytic approaches; and (d) the study was published between 2015 and 2025, with the exception of foundational theoretical works cited for conceptual grounding (Festinger; Bandura).

Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on adult populations without adolescent-specific data, examined social media platforms other than Instagram without platform-disaggregated findings, reported outcomes unrelated to mental health, or were published in languages other than English. Conference abstracts, editorials, and opinion pieces without empirical data were similarly excluded, with the exception of institutional reports and investigative documentation cited as grey literature evidence.

### IV. RESULTS/FINDINGS

#### *Prevalence and Patterns of Instagram Use Among Adolescents*

The reviewed literature consistently documents high rates of Instagram use among adolescents globally, with the platform ranking among the most frequently used social media applications in this age group. According to Balamurugan and Vijayarani, most teenagers from 13 to 17 years old use Instagram every day with their average time usage per day exceeding two hours. Tiwari and Singh observed that teenagers not only extensively use this application but become its early users since they start using it even prior to attaining the minimum required age of 13 years old. Moreover, the character of their use of the app is mostly passive.

Institutional evidence supports these results. Research papers within institutions released by investigative journalism show that a notable number of teenage users reported spending longer hours on Instagram than their original plans, as the algorithm of the social media site was seen to be one of the main factors contributing to this problem (Wells et al.). In a separate analysis conducted by Béjar et al., it was found that even with the creation of Teen Accounts in 2024, the basic engagement framework of Instagram did not change, thereby encouraging passive usage among teenagers.

#### *Association Between Instagram Use and Depressive Symptoms*

From literature review, a reliable association was found between Instagram use and depressive symptoms among adolescents. In a meta-analysis, Sepas et al. (641) found a statistically significant association between problematic Instagram use and psychological distress, effect sizes being small to moderate in value. Keles et al. (79) also observed consistent associations among different studies regarding the presence of depression due to increased use of social media and that the intensity of use along with emotional involvement were contributing factors to the risk amplification.

The dose-response relationship associated with Instagram use and depression was verified by Santos et al., who proved the increasing trend in depressive symptoms associated with the increase in the use of social media screen-time per day. The generational rise in depressive symptoms and suicide-related outcomes among U.S. adolescents were found to be linked with the growing prevalence of Instagram among adolescents since 2010 (Twenge et al., "Declines"). Coyne et al. supported the dose-response theory of Instagram use with their longitudinal study.

#### *Association Between Instagram Use and Anxiety*

The available literature equally suggests an existing strong relationship between the use of Instagram and anxiety symptoms among adolescents. Hilty et al. have indicated that anxiety has been a consistent mental health problem, with social evaluative anxiety being a critical issue for individuals who use Instagram. Shannon et al. have also noted that the use of social media can lead to anxiety, and in their study on problematic social media use, they concluded that Instagram was one of the platforms that posed a high risk of anxiety problems. Blackwell et al. have found that FOMO is one of the predictors for both heavy Instagram use and anxiety.

#### *The Role of Passive Scrolling in Psychological Harm*

Empirical evidence supporting this notion was offered by Thorisdottir et al. (535), who found that passive social media consumption showed a much stronger link with the manifestation of anxious and depressed mood symptoms than the active kind did. The same findings were repeatedly confirmed in the review conducted by Aggarwal and Quinlan et al. (578), showing that the absence of response to social stimuli, the mere process of silent consumption, without any subsequent social contact, is the most psychologically harmful form of interacting with Instagram. Social comparison theory explains why this is the case – passive

consumption provides users with maximum exposure to upward comparison stimuli while depriving them of any opportunity to counterbalance them through social support (Festinger 117; Valkenburg et al. 58).

### ***Mediating Factors: Sleep, Body Image, and Self-Esteem***

A number of intermediary pathways by which Instagram usage impacts negatively on depression and anxiety levels amongst teenagers have been identified in this literature review. Sleep disturbance stood out as one of the most commonly observed intermediaries. According to Vannucci et al. (189), poor sleep is a significant intermediary between social media usage and depressive symptoms since late-night usage, cognitions triggered by notifications and blue light all work towards preventing the onset of sleep and causing poor sleep quality. The second intermediary identified is body dissatisfaction, especially among adolescent girls. Fardouly and Vartanian (82) established that social comparison regarding one's appearance was a significant intermediary factor influencing the negative impact of social media use on body satisfaction, a finding that was reinforced by Marengo et al. (106993) for visually oriented social media applications. Self-esteem operated as both an intermediary and a moderator factor in the reviewed literature.

### ***Moderating Factors: Gender, Age, and Personality***

The examined literature showed some individual characteristics and demographic variables moderating the link between Instagram and mental well-being. Of all variables, gender was shown to be the most significant one, as adolescent girls experienced more pronounced correlations between Instagram utilization and depression and anxiety than boys did (Keles et al. 79; Cunningham et al. 123). Such a finding is linked to the increased importance of appearance-related social comparison among girls and excessive consumption of content depicting idealized images on Instagram (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Fardouly and Vartanian 82). Age also played a moderating role, making younger adolescents more susceptible to negative psychological consequences from Instagram utilization because of underdeveloped executive function (Tong 213; Santos et al.). At the same time, Blackwell et al. (69) found such personality traits as neuroticism, anxious attachment, and FOMO to mediate the relationship at question, whereas Primack et al. confirmed an increase in the psychological risks from Instagram utilization for socially isolated individuals.

## **V.. DISCUSSION**

The results summarized in the current narrative review point to a very specific and worrisome result: Instagram usage is correlated with depression and anxiety in adolescents through multiple biological and psychological processes. This consistent pattern of results, which includes systematic reviews, meta-analyses, longitudinal research, scoping reviews, and official reports from multiple countries, provides strong support for the result that Instagram is an important environmental risk factor for adolescent mental health (Sepas et al. 641; Keles et al. 79).

### ***Interpreting the Findings***

Based on the findings discussed above, one can conclude that what actually leads to psychological harm in adolescents is not their use of social media in general, but the particular structure and behavior that define Instagram activities. It appears that passive browsing is one of the most potent predictors of such negative consequences, in accordance with theoretical expectations concerning the fact that social comparison cues without social rewards lead to more serious psychological consequences (Festinger 117; Thorisdottir et al. 535). These findings are crucial for interpretation since they imply that just reducing the overall amount of screen time is not going to be enough and that special attention should be paid to the nature of the user's activities.

The involvement of sleep disturbance, body image dissatisfaction, and decreased self-esteem in the Instagram-mental health connection brings much-needed clarity to the relationship (Vannucci et al. 189; Fardouly and Vartanian 82; Valkenburg et al. 58). However, these mechanisms do not occur independently of one another but most probably occur together and complement each other, where sleep disturbances exacerbate emotional regulation issues, leading to increased awareness of appearance-related social comparisons that lead to low self-esteem in an endless loop of psychological disintegration.

### ***Contradictions and Inconsistencies in the Literature***

Nonetheless, a few inconsistencies and tensions in methodology should be noted in connection with the examined literature. According to a number of longitudinal studies conducted by Coyne et al., among others, there is evidence for the existence of effects whose significance is relatively small in terms of size despite being statistically significant, which calls into question their significance as compared to other risk factors of depression and anxiety in adolescence (Quinlan et al. 578). Some scholars suggest that preexisting psychosocial vulnerabilities such as trait neuroticism, anxious attachment, and low self-esteem may predispose adolescents not only to increased exposure to Instagram but also to adverse consequences, making the observed relationship spurious (Blackwell et al. 69; Valkenburg et al. 58). Reverse causation has yet to be resolved satisfactorily in the existing research.

Finally, although the role of gender differences in vulnerability to Instagram risks has been demonstrated repeatedly, the underlying mechanism associated specifically with boys remains understudied relative to that linked primarily to looks (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Cunningham et al. 123).

### ***Clinical and Policy Implications***

The implications of the current review have significant clinical and public health implications. In clinical practice, psychologists who are dealing with teenagers suffering from depression and anxiety disorders must incorporate the assessment of the teenager's use of Instagram in their comprehensive psychosocial assessment. They should pay close attention to the frequency at which they scroll passively, how they react emotionally to social feedback, and whether the excessive use of the platform disrupts their sleep patterns during the night (Hilty et al.; Vannucci et al. 189).

Cognitive-behavioural interventions addressing maladaptive social comparison, body image issues, and compulsive Instagram usage induced by fear of missing out have shown promise and deserve further research (Aggarwal; Tong 213).

At policy level, all the findings presented above, including the exposure of Meta's concealed internal research (Wells et al.) and an external audit that showed how ineffective the safety measures on the Instagram Teen Accounts were (Béjar et al.), show that self-regulation by platforms themselves is clearly not enough to safeguard teenage users. Policies demanding transparency from

algorithms, restricting the infinite scrolling and variable reinforcement of the platform for those below 18, and mandatory independent audits of the safety measures on the platform would provide an evidence-based policy solution. Public awareness campaigns advocating media literacy and critical consumption of media, especially Instagram, should form part of school curricula (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Tiwari and Singh).

## VI. LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations associated with this current review worth mentioning. Firstly, the interpretation of scientific literature within the context of this review cannot be considered systematic. This means that during the selection process of scientific articles some selection bias might have occurred in favor of the articles that confirm the main hypothesis of this review (Quinlan et al. 578).

The second limitation associated with this review is linked to a design of primary studies. Most of the articles used in the current review contain cross-sectional studies and use self-report measures for both Instagram usage and mental wellbeing outcomes. Self-reports of social media usage may introduce recall bias into results (Thorisdottir et al. 535; Shannon et al.).

The third limitation associated with this review refers to its geographic coverage. This current review primarily covers studies conducted in Western countries such as the United States, the UK, and Northern European countries. Such a focus restricts the generalizability of the results obtained to other geographic areas, where Instagram is actively used, such as Low-Income Countries (Azem et al., Tiwari and Singh).

Fourthly, the use of grey literature references in terms of the Wall Street Journal report and Fairplay's audit while contributing to the availability of key information not accessible by peer review processes also contributes to varying levels of methodological soundness among the sources reviewed (Wells et al.; Béjar et al.).

Lastly, due to the continually changing characteristics of Instagram's platform design, algorithms, and demography, the results of research completed before 2022 might not accurately represent the effects of platform changes made since then such as Reels, artificial intelligence-based content recommendations, and Teen Accounts (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Aggarwal).

## VII. CONCLUSION

This narrative review sought to evaluate the link between the usage of Instagram and the development of depression and anxiety among teenagers. Specifically, this paper aimed to explore the processes by which passive browsing and the specific characteristics of the Instagram platform lead to adverse psychological effects. As demonstrated by the literature reviewed herein encompassing theories, experimental research, systematic reviews, meta-analysis, and official policy reports that Instagram is an important, independent factor in contributing to mental health issues among teenagers, through established causal processes such as social comparison, body image dissatisfaction, sleep disturbances, fear of missing out, and addiction (Sepas et al. 641; Keles et al. 79; Vannucci et al. 189).

Notably, the findings of this review show that the psychological damage resulting from Instagram usage is not an all-encompassing experience but varies based on the nature of the interaction, the amount of time spent on the platform, and the user's personal psychological predispositions, such as gender, age group, self-esteem, and personality (Thorisdottir et al. 535; Valkenburg et al. 58; Blackwell et al. 69). Adolescent girls, younger adolescents, and individuals who suffer from preexisting mental conditions have been found to be more vulnerable than others based on the evidence presented in the scholarly literature. In addition, the information revealed about Meta's suppressed internal investigation and the ineffectiveness of the safety mechanisms for the Instagram Teen Account account for why voluntary actions taken by the company cannot be expected to suffice (Wells et al.; Béjar et al.).

From a theoretical perspective, this review adds to the body of knowledge by combining the principles of social comparison theory, social learning theory, and the uses and gratifications approach in a comprehensive explanation for the psychological damage experienced through Instagram interactions, focusing on passive scrolling as the primary behaviour responsible for the adverse outcomes (Festinger 117; Bandura; Cunningham et al. 123).

Future studies should emphasize the use of longitudinal and experimental designs for determining causal directions, standardized and platform-specific measurement tools, and under-researched risk pathways pertaining to young men and other cultures (Hilty et al.; Aggarwal).

To conclude, the development from scrolling passively to damaging psychologically does not have to occur, yet the circumstances that make it highly likely are firmly rooted in the workings of Instagram, which can only be effectively countered by an integrated approach combining clinical intervention, education, regulation, and platform engineering, in which the mental wellbeing of young people must take priority over their metrics and profit margins (Balamurugan and Vijayarani 84; Shannon et al.).

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