



A Study on the association between Instagram Addiction and Emotion Regulation among Gen Z and Millennials

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Abstract: The current study examined the connection between Instagram addiction and emotion regulation among Gen Z and Millennials. Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms and it plays a significant role in daily life, especially for younger users. Emotion regulation means managing and responding to emotional experiences effectively. Standardized scales were used to measure Instagram addiction and emotion regulation. The sample included 62 participants aged 18 to 44. The study investigated the link between Instagram addiction and emotion regulation and compared the levels of Instagram addiction between Gen Z and Millennials. The findings showed a significant negative correlation between cognitive reappraisal and Instagram addiction, disengagement, escapism, and excessive use. Gen Z individuals reported significantly higher levels of escapism and total Instagram addiction as compared to Millennials, suggesting greater engagement and emotional reliance on the platform. The results indicate that Gen Z individuals may depend more on Instagram for emotional regulation, particularly through escapism. Encouraging digital mindfulness and promoting healthier coping strategies could help Gen Z users manage their emotional experiences without excessive reliance on social media.

Keywords: *Instagram, Instagram Addiction, Emotion Regulation, Gen Z, Millennials*

1. Introduction

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom”

Viktor E. Frankl

Instagram is one of the most widely used social networking sites (SNS) with over 2 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2025). It is one of the most popular SNS among Gen Z and millennials alike, although usage patterns may differ. Instagram was launched in 2010 as a first-of-its-kind photo-sharing platform. It was later acquired by Facebook in 2012. Instagram has undergone numerous updates over the years, now utilising user input and preference algorithms to deliver content tailored to each user's unique interests, based on their interactions with similar content on the social media platform. The app also features direct messaging, allowing users to chat and share content seamlessly, making it one of the most widely used means of communication in today's digital era.

While Instagram keeps people connected, there are emerging studies that try to investigate the nature of this communication and overall interaction with the social media app, its pros, cons, advantages, disadvantages, etc. There are studies on social media in general that point out the duality of the nature of social media, i.e. both the good and bad parts. The good parts include connection and communication, while the bad parts include dependence, addiction, emotional regulation difficulties, etc. As of February 2025, India has 413.85 million users on Instagram, the highest number globally (Statista, 2025). Instagram Reels are the most popular format of content viewed by the Indian audience, with 92 per cent of users preferring this particular format over any other similar formats, according to the IPSOS study commissioned by Meta. The study, which surveyed more than 3,500 people across 33 centres in India, highlights Reels dominance in daily viewing habits (Desk, 2025).

Emotional regulation, in layman's terms, is the ability to regulate and manage our emotions healthily. According to the Process Model of Emotion Regulation, as developed by James Gross (1998, 2002), there are 5 emotion regulation strategies: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (Yarwood, n.d.-b).

A study by Kircaburun and Griffiths (2018) conducted on 752 university students revealed that agreeableness, conscientiousness, and self-liking were negatively associated with Instagram addiction, whereas daily internet use was positively associated with Instagram addiction.

Researchers analysed the negative outcomes of excessive Instagram dependency among young users and found that overuse was positively associated with stress, emotional exhaustion, and reduced mindfulness. The findings found that dependency on Instagram contributes to both personal and social problems, emphasising the emotional strain linked to excessive social media use (Báguena et al., 2025).

Instagram Addiction

“Instagram is a popular social network platform that brings benefits to many. However, for a small minority, problematic use may be an issue of concern (i.e., Instagram addiction). This addiction appears to originate from various contexts and can also have psychosocial consequences” (Fard et al., 2023).

Andreassen and Pallesen (2014) defined Social Networking Sites (SNS) addiction as “spending too much time on SNSs due to an uncontrollable urge, in which excessive use leads to negative consequences in real-life areas.”

“Social media addiction is a behavioural addiction that is characterised as being overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable urge to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas” (Hilliard, 2025).

ÖKSÜZ and MASATCIOĞLU (2025) conducted a study on 292 Gen Z individuals aged 18-24. The study used standardised scales: the Instagram Addiction Scale and the Adult Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale. The study found a significant relationship between Instagram addiction and various psychological factors.

A systematic review by Adeyanju et al. (2021) included 9 studies that examined young Instagram addicted individuals (age range 19-35) and found a strong relationship between Instagram addiction and mental health disorders such as depression or depressive behaviour; however, no direct causality was proven. In contrast a study conducted on 46 Gen Z participants analysed the types of content, including both positive and negative messages, that Gen Z perceived on Instagram, and found that overall, Instagram had a positive impact on emotional and mental well-being (Hayes, 2021).

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation refers to “the processes through which individuals try to influence which emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how these emotions are expressed” (Gross, 2008).

Emotion regulation is the set of automatic and controlled processes involved in the initiation, maintenance, and modification of the occurrence, intensity, and duration of feeling states” (as cited in Emotion regulation strategies and effects in art-making, referring to Webb et al., 2012, p. 775)

ÅSTDAŽ (2022) conducted a study on 513 Gen Z university students in Istanbul to study the relationship between social media addiction and emotion regulation skills. Using the

Social Media Addiction Scale and the Emotion Regulation Scale, the study found no significant relationship between social media addiction and emotion regulation.

A study conducted on 57 adolescents (mean age = 16.3 years) investigated how teens use Instagram to regulate their emotions. The researchers found that teens primarily used Instagram to escape, to engage, or to manage the demands of the platform, and were involved in behaviours such as mindless diversion and deliberate acts (Davis et al. 2025).

Stenseng et al. (2025) conducted a study on a sample of 396 people (mean age 25 years). The study discusses self-expansion escapism, i.e. adaptive escapism, and self-suppression escapism, i.e. maladaptive escapism and their relation to the trait of neuroticism and emotion regulation. The study found that maladaptive escapism was associated with more neuroticism and emotional suppression.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the association between Instagram addiction and emotion regulation among Gen Z and millennials.

1.2 Hypothesis

H1: There will be significant relationship between Instagram addiction and Emotion Regulation among GenZ and millennials.

H2: There will be no difference between the results of Gen Z and millennials.

2. Methods

2.1 Sample

A total sample of (N=62) of Gen Z and Millennials in the age range 18-44 was collected from the city of Indore.

2.2 Measures

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Short Form (ERQ-S): The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Short Form (ERQ-S) scale was used to measure emotional regulation in the study sample. The scale was developed by Preece, Petrova, Mehta, and Gross (2023). The scale consisted of 6 items, and the rating scale included Strongly disagree (1), Neutral (4) and strongly agree (7). The sub-dimensions consisted of Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression.

Test for Instagram Addiction (TIA): The Test for Instagram Addiction (TIA) scale was used to measure Instagram addiction in the study sample. The scale was developed by D'Souza, and Bivera (2018). The scale consisted of 26 items, and the rating scale included: All the time (5), most of the time (4), sometimes (3), once in a while (OW), rarely/never (1). The sub-

dimensions consisted of Lack of Control, Disengagement, Escapism, Health and Interpersonal Troubles, Excessive Use and Obsession.

2.3 Procedures

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms, each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardised psychological tests were administered to the participants.

3. Analysis of Data

3.1 Results

Table 1: *N, Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Lack of Control	Disengagement	Escapism	Health and Interpersonal Troubles	Excessive Use	Obsession	Total for Instagram addiction	Cognitive Reappraisal	Expressive Suppression
N	62	62	62	62	62	62	62	62	62
Mean	13.9	16.4	14.0	7.68	3.98	8.90	64.9	10.4	9.84
Standard deviation	4.70	5.22	5.28	3.57	1.94	3.67	19.3	2.66	3.12

Table 2: *Correlation of all variables*

	Lack of Control	Disengagement	Escapism	Health and Interpersonal Troubles	Excessive Use	Obsession	Total for Instagram addiction	Cognitive Reappraisal	Expressive Suppression
Lack of Control	—								
Disengagement	0.704***	—							
Escapism	0.642***	0.676***	—						
Health and Interpersonal Troubles	0.590***	0.641***	0.488***	—					
Excessive Use	0.517***	0.519***	0.484***	0.687***	—				
Obsession	0.225	0.519***	0.363**	0.596***	0.279*	—			
Total for Instagram addiction	0.812***	0.895***	0.819***	0.816***	0.678***	0.622***	—		
Cognitive Reappraisal	-0.234	-0.296*	-0.366**	-0.034	-0.367**	0.033	-0.274*	—	
Expressive Suppression	-0.196	-0.182	-0.153	-0.087	-0.090	-0.232	-0.208	0.269*	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3: *Independent Samples T-Test*

		Statistic	df	p
Lack of Control	Student's t	0.808	60.0	0.422
Disengagement	Student's t	1.422	60.0	0.160
Escapism	Student's t	3.143	60.0	0.003
Health & Interpersonal Troubles	Student's t	0.852	60.0	0.398
Excessive Use	Student's t	1.251	60.0	0.216
Obsession	Student's t	1.613	60.0	0.112
Total for Instagram	Student's t	2.013	60.0	0.049
Cognitive Reappraisal	Student's t	0.142 ^a	60.0	0.888
Expressive Suppression	Student's t	-0.405	60.0	0.687
Note. $H_a: \mu_{\text{GEN Z}} \neq \mu_{\text{MILLENNIALS}}$				

Table 4: *Group Descriptives*

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Lack of Control	Gen Z	31	14.39	17.00	4.90	0.879
	Millennials	31	13.42	14.00	4.52	0.812
Disengagement	Gen Z	31	17.32	18.00	4.98	0.894
	Millennials	31	15.45	17.00	5.38	0.966
Escapism	Gen Z	31	16.00	16.00	4.91	0.881
	Millennials	31	12.06	11.00	4.95	0.890
Health & Interpersonal Troubles	Gen Z	31	8.06	8.00	3.76	0.675
	Millennials	31	7.29	7.00	3.39	0.609
Excessive Use	Gen Z	31	4.29	4.00	2.07	0.372
	Millennials	31	3.68	3.00	1.78	0.319
Obsession	Gen Z	31	9.65	10.00	3.27	0.588
	Millennials	31	8.16	8.00	3.94	0.708
Total for Instagram	Gen Z	31	69.71	72.00	18.32	3.290
	Millennials	31	60.06	61.00	19.39	3.483
Cognitive Reappraisal	Gen Z	31	10.45	11.00	1.96	0.353
	Millennials	31	10.35	11.00	3.25	0.584

Expressive Suppression	Gen Z	31	9.68	10.00	3.35	0.602
	Millennials	31	10.00	10.00	2.91	0.523

4. Discussion of Results

This study aimed to explore the link between Instagram addiction and emotion regulation among Gen Z and Millennials. The results found out several significant relationships among the variables. Expressive suppression was significantly positively correlated with cognitive reappraisal ($r = .26, p < .05$). Cognitive reappraisal was significantly negatively correlated with disengagement ($r = -.29, p < .05$), escapism ($r = -.36, p < .01$), excessive use ($r = -.36, p < .01$), and total Instagram ($r = -.27, p < .05$). Total Instagram addiction was significantly positively correlated with lack of control ($r = .81, p < .001$), disengagement ($r = .89, p < .001$), escapism ($r = .81, p < .001$), health and interpersonal troubles ($r = .81, p < .001$), excessive use ($r = .67, p < .001$), and obsession ($r = .62, p < .001$). Obsession was significantly positively correlated with disengagement ($r = .51, p < .001$), escapism ($r = .36, p < .01$), health and interpersonal troubles ($r = .59, p < .001$), excessive use ($r = .27, p < .05$). Excessive use was significantly positively correlated with lack of control ($r = .51, p < .001$), disengagement ($r = .51, p < .001$), escapism ($r = .48, p < .001$), health and interpersonal troubles ($r = .68, p < .001$). Health and interpersonal troubles were significantly positively correlated with lack of control ($r = .59, p < .001$), disengagement ($r = .64, p < .001$), escapism ($r = .48, p < .001$). Escapism was significantly positively correlated with lack of control ($r = .64, p < .001$), disengagement ($r = .67, p < .001$). Disengagement was significantly positively correlated with lack of control ($r = .70, p < .001$). The results found out that Gen Z individuals reported higher escapism than millennials ($t=3.14$). The results also indicated that Gen Z individuals reported higher total Instagram addiction as compared to millennials ($t=2.01$).

The findings showed a significant negative correlation between cognitive reappraisal and various dimensions of Instagram addiction, including disengagement, escapism, excessive use, and total addiction scores. This suggests that individuals who engage more effectively in cognitive reappraisal tend to report lower levels of problematic Instagram addiction. These results support the first hypothesis, indicating that difficulties in emotion regulation are related to higher levels of Instagram addiction.

Additionally, the independent samples t-test showed significant differences between Gen Z and Millennials in escapism ($t=3.14$) and total Instagram addiction ($t=2.01$), with Gen Z participants scoring higher on both. These results partially reject the null hypothesis,

suggesting that while both generations use Instagram, Gen Z relies more on the platform for emotional support. This generational difference may reflect the fact that Gen Z, having grown up in a digitally saturated environment, uses social media not only for connection but also as a way to manage emotions and avoid discomfort. The findings align with the study published by Herrero-Báguena et al. (2025) in *The Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, which reported that addiction to Instagram affects users' emotional fatigue and stress, largely due to their lack of control over the time spent on the app. Similarly, the present study's results indicate that Gen Z participants' higher addiction levels may arise from escapist tendencies and difficulties in managing their emotions. These results have important implications for understanding generational patterns in emotional coping and digital behaviour. Gen Z's higher levels of Instagram addiction suggest a growing need to promote digital mindfulness and emotional understanding among younger users. Educators, parents, and mental health professionals can play a key role in raising awareness about healthy digital engagement and encouraging alternative coping strategies such as physical activity, reflective writing, or in-person social interaction. In line with Herrero-Báguena et al. (2025), programs aimed at improving self-control over time spent online may help reduce the emotional fatigue linked to excessive Instagram addiction. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution because of the study's relatively small and region-specific sample, which limits how broadly the results can be applied. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples to further investigate the psychological factors behind Instagram addiction and emotion regulation across different age groups.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between Instagram addiction and emotion regulation among Gen Z and Millennials. Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms and has a significant impact on daily life, especially for younger users. Emotion regulation means managing and responding to emotional experiences effectively. The researchers used standardized scales to assess Instagram addiction and emotion regulation among 62 participants aged 18 to 44. They looked at the link between Instagram addiction and emotion regulation and compared Instagram addiction levels between Gen Z and Millennials.

The findings revealed a significant negative connection between cognitive reappraisal and Instagram addiction, as well as disengagement, escapism, and excessive use. Gen Z individuals reported much higher levels of escapism and total Instagram addiction compared to Millennials. This suggests that Gen Z is more engaged with and emotionally reliant on the

platform. The results indicate that Gen Z relies on Instagram more for emotional regulation, especially through escapism.

Based on these findings, Gen Z individuals should become more aware of their social media habits. They can benefit from practicing digital mindfulness and developing healthier coping methods, like physical activity, creative outlets, or reflective journaling, to manage their emotions. Encouraging a balance in digital use, building offline social connections, and promoting emotional understanding could help decrease the reliance on online spaces for emotional support. Future interventions might focus on combining media literacy with emotional regulation training for younger users.

However, the study's findings are limited due to the small sample size, which may affect how widely they can be applied. Future research should aim for larger and more diverse groups to validate and expand these results.

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