

Critique of the article: “University students’ views on the impact of Instagram on mental wellbeing: a qualitative study”

Intro:

In the following text we will dive into the research paper: “*University students’ views on the impact of Instagram on mental wellbeing: a qualitative study*” by *Laura Moreton and Sheila Greenfield*. I will present a brief summary of the study in question, aiming to give proper context and an objective description of its contents. Afterwards, I will present a critique of said paper not only trying to identify possible fields for improvement and even moments of inappropriate conduct, but also aiming to praise all the exemplary practices found in our selected study. I will also leave you with some closing remarks aiming to give an overall evaluation of the research discussed.

Summary:

This 2022 study by Moreton and Greenfield, published in BMC Psychology, aims to understand the impact that Instagram has on the wellbeing of university students in the UK. This study was brought by an identification of a staggering 94% increase in demand for university level counselling in only 5 years, upon realizing the possible severity of this trend researchers set out to investigate, choosing a qualitative approach. Aiming to not spread their attention too thin the team decided to focus on a single, highly image-centric social media platform: Instagram. This choice was made because even though this platform is extremely popular among undergraduates, existing research had been mostly quantitative, creating a noticeable knowledge gap related to the actual personal and emotional perspectives and experiences of the users.

For their main data collection method the team chose to conduct **semi-structured interviews**, selecting 16 undergraduate students at the University of Birmingham as their sample. To make this selection the researchers employed convenience and purposive sampling, with a particular focus in ensuring gender balance and English fluency. Of course all members were also active Instagram users. All interviews were conducted by a single medical student trained in public health, the sessions took from 20 to 55 minutes and were conducted in a private room of the University’s library building. Afterwards, the collected data was analysed using **Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic analysis framework**. It is also noteworthy that the data collection stage employed essential measures to preserve proper ethical rigor, such as informed consent, anonymization and member validation with up to 87.5% participant confirmation of the findings.

Through the analysis methods presented previously discussed the team was able to identify **five main themes**:

1. Knowledge of Mental Wellbeing

The team quickly realized that the students' understanding of mental wellbeing could be structured with four subthemes: thought and feeling, productivity, good mental health and understanding yourself. Through this the researchers concluded that a majority of the students had a basic understanding of the term mental wellbeing.

2. Social Connectivity

Instagram itself was generally perceived by the students to be positive for their mental wellbeing. This perspective was based on the social benefits they believed Instagram gave them. All students believed Instagram as a platform that helped them to maintain their friendships. Half of the students didn't stop there claiming that Instagram actually created opportunities for them to expand their social circles.

3. The Instagram ideal

All students acknowledge that since Instagram is a platform used to show off to others it creates an unrealistic ideal, which isn't possible to live up to. Those ideals were also divided into five subthemes: portrayal of yourself, the ideal body, portrayal of the perfect life, wealth and enhanced photographs. Most of these categories also came with the identification of the negative effects these standards had on the students, such as distorted ideas of a healthy body shape and sense of reality.

4. Social Acceptance through Quantitative Data

Almost all students believed that social acceptance was directly related with numerical values such as 'likes' and 'followers' with higher numbers associated with greater social acceptance. Through these numbers students believed they could determine their attractiveness, popularity and even likability.

5. Cyberbullying

Unfortunately most students admitted to feeling nervous to post on Instagram due to fear of judgement from others. A further 9 even specified that they believe cyberbullying and "internet troll" on Instagram specifically to be a contributing factor to poor mental well being.

It is noteworthy that for all themes and subthemes presented there was the use of direct quotes from the interviewees to support and exemplify the concepts being explained.

In the **discussion session**, the team states that while Instagram could have positive aspects, such as fostering relationships, it definitely also has the possibility of amplifying

negative behaviours and mindset, such as self-objectification, validation-seeking and social comparison. The authors reveal that this dynamic can compromise wellbeing, principally by creating satisfaction deficits due to the unrealistic standards created by the platform.

The study is rounded up with an acknowledgement of the strengths and limitations of its state as the first qualitative study on this topic and also with a very relevant call for structural change in the counselling options offered to students urging universities to make sure these services properly address social media use, even recommending particularly more research into cyberbullying and the mental effects of the perceptions created by the curated online lifestyles.

Critique:

Ethics & Trustworthiness

This study demonstrated an exemplary level of adherence to the ethical standards we learned this semester. Firstly, formal ethical approval was given by the internal ethics committee of the University of Birmingham, the researchers also guaranteed that every single candidate received a detailed written explanation of the study. Afterwards, they acquired informed written consent and set up proper pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. In my opinion, these represent the bare minimum for ethical practices.

However, the team didn't stop there, going a step further and making sure to include the participants in practices to improve the study's **trustworthiness**, more specifically through credibility. As previously mentioned they made use of **member validation**—giving their participants the opportunity to review the identified themes. This in itself is already a great practice to guarantee that participants don't feel offended or misrepresented, one that is made even more significant due to the amazing 87.5% of participant response rates. Additionally, the distribution of the analysis between two researchers created use of **triangulation**, avoiding unnecessary expression of personal biases. Finally even the interviewer kept a reflexive journal, making sure to critically document how her personal experiences may have helped shape her enquiry style.

With all this said there is still an aspect that, even though acknowledged in the paper, might have silenced some perspectives. I am talking about the exclusion of 2 participants that had uninstalled Instagram due to its negative effects on their wellbeing. Although this went against the sampling criteria, since they weren't users, it might have filtered out some of the most informative and critical perspectives available. I believe this should have been reintroduced in the discussion section, reflecting on the trade-off the team decided to make, improving the transparency.

Research Design & Sampling

The previously introduced research design (semi-structured interviews with a qualitative framework) felt extremely appropriate leaving me with no comment on a better option. This choice made sure the team could get in depth while maintaining flexibility, ensuring that participants could truly give the most of their experiences, feelings and opinions. The use of Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis feels compatible and appropriate given the context, creating a systematic path for the creation of the presented themes and structures.

However, regarding sampling the same level of praise cannot be given. Let's start by remembering that the sampling method used was a **mixture of convenience and purposive sampling**. The selected sample size of 16 doesn't seem inappropriate for a qualitative study. However, I was left with questions regarding **data saturation**, since the paper never clearly stated whether or not this state had been reached, a critical piece of information we are just not given.

Furthermore, there is space for legitimate concern related to the single-sight sample present, since all students interviewed were from the same university. Even though this is acknowledged by the authors as a limitation it doesn't feel like an impossible barrier to overcome, being easily avoided simply by recruiting across more universities. Additionally, although it is notable that the researchers had in consideration gender balance, there is nearly no information about other relevant variables such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status or field of study. These problems piled up in my mind, bringing to me principally the question of why this study claims to be about UK students in general instead of presenting itself within the context of this specific University.

Data Collection & Analysis

As previously mentioned the methods for data collection and analysis felt extremely appropriate in themselves. I can't think of a better approach than semi-structured interviews and the use of private rooms within a familiar area coupled with the qualifications of the interviewer as a medical student with previous knowledge in the specific area of public health, make for an amazing combination. What I lament, however, is that the paper failed to give us access to the full interview guide or even the outlining sample questions, again another failure in terms of transparency. As for the analysis the final results presented do feel extremely reasonable and are properly backed with quotes from the students. Still I believed the paper could have been improved by providing the reader with the full coding tree or at least the initial codes, helping understand the process that the researchers went through.

Interpretation, Impact & Presentation

I believe this is one of my aspects of this study. Firstly, as I have already mentioned multiple times, but I truly believe the highlight given to the themes and subthemes by always pairing them with direct quotes from the participants adds a lot to the reading experiences. This inspired confidence that the statements were well thought out and based on the actual conversations had with the students. The researchers also did a good job at avoiding overgeneralizations, remaining faithful to the original data and most importantly acknowledging both positive and negative experiences with Instagram. This gave me a feeling of security that this study hadn't been overrun by personal biases. Moreover, the discussion session always seems to be conducted with logic, drawing appropriate conclusions about the complex relationship between the discussed platform and wellbeing. In this area there were only two points I believed this paper was lacking in. Firstly, the use of visual aids such as thematic maps. Although there is the use of a singular diagram it didn't feel particularly useful either making it so the interpretation was left mostly to reading. Lastly, I felt a lack of connection with the previous research. Even though I need to acknowledge that this is the first qualitative study of this area, I still felt there was little interaction with previous works or theoretical frameworks that could have better supported this study.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study felt extremely relevant and with a good timing, feeling a clear knowledge gap in a topic with increasing relevance. Its design, thematic structure and use of individual voices of participants make it, in my opinion, a great example of what qualitative research should be and feel like. However, of course, this doesn't make it a study without flaws or space for improvement. The lack of details regarding aspects such as certain diversity of the participants, data saturation and analytical progression create room for transparency oriented improvements. Still, I felt that these weaknesses don't outweigh its strengths in areas such as ethical rigor, practical relevance and balanced interpretation. Overall, I felt that this was a successful paper, serving as a good first step for the qualitative exploration of the very important area that is the effect of social media on wellbeing.