

Honors Thesis Proposal:

Digital Habits of Gen Z: A Qualitative Study on How College Students Use Instagram

Brigham Young University

**Working title:**

Digital Habits of Gen Z: A Qualitative Study on How College Students Use Instagram

**Project Purpose:**

The purpose of this research is to identify how college students in the Generation Z (Gen Z, born between 1995 and 2010) demographic use Instagram. My first research question is, how do Gen Z Instagrammers use the platform? I seek to focus my study on an important but under-examined population of users. Although the habits of high-use, Gen Z Instagrammers have received limited attention in the research literature, they remain an active, potent force on the platform. Around 71% of Americans ages 18 to 29 say they use Instagram (Atske, 2022). Of that percentage, 59% say they use Instagram daily (Social Media Fact Sheet). This demographic of high-use Instagrammers includes Gen Zers that spend between 1-3 hours on the app daily and have 500-2,000 followers.

With this study, I want to develop an in-depth understanding of how high-use Gen Zers use Instagram, identifying themes and insights related to their use. These insights will address a second research question, why do Gen Z Instagrammers use the platform? These insights will emerge from semi-structured interviews and verbal think-aloud interviews of participants' in-the-moment Instagram use. These data-driven insights will shed light on the experiences of the younger generation and their usage of Instagram, offering clarity on this demographic and a path for future research.

**Project Importance:**

Social media, now more than ever, is a powerful vehicle to engage with a rich diversity of people, groups, opinions, and communities around the world. Social media platforms are on the rise, but one stands out among the others. Instagram is one of the most used platforms in the world, right after YouTube and Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2021). For its part, Instagram stands out among other social media platforms in its ability to attract young users. Compared to other platforms, Instagram has seen the most growth over the last seven years among teenagers. In 2015, 52% of American teenagers used Instagram. By 2022, 62% used Instagram (Atske, 2022). Moreover, Instagram is the top photo-sharing social media app among Gen Z (Atske, 2022).

At only 12 years old, Instagram is making its mark as a valuable, perhaps indispensable, social media platform for young adult users. In the 18-29-year-old age demographic, which includes Gen z and some Millennials, Instagram is the most used social media platform, with 71% of individuals in that age group saying they regularly use Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2021). Of that 71%, over half of Gen Z adults use Instagram daily (Pew Research Center, 2021). Although Instagram is a central part of the Gen Z social media experience, there is limited research about this particular demographic, particularly how they use Instagram. There haven't been many studies about the habits of Gen Z on Instagram, and given this platform is on the rise among Gen Z, it is important to understand this generation's usage habits and experiences to better connect with a generation whose decisions will shape the future.

Gen Z is the first generation that has had access to the internet in their early years of life. Generation Z, or Zoomers, is the first generation to 'zoom' the internet, referring to the short attention span many have and the speed at which they develop facility with internet technologies. Some other names for this generation are the iGeneration, digital natives, and the internet generation (Linde, 2021, 1). The very names of this generation show how differently they engage with and use technology than past generations. Looking at how these Zoomers specifically use Instagram will offer greater insight into patterns of their digital habits as well as implications of their future social media and digital technologies usage.

Moreover, Generation Z will all too quickly become the decision-makers and change-makers of the future as evidenced by the election of Maxwell Frost, the first Gen Z politician, to the U.S. House of Representatives whose legislative priorities include issues close to the lives of his fellow Zoomers – student debt, livable wages, health care, and gun control (Jlenniferliu, 2022). The future of politics, economics, and businesses will rise and fall on the decisions made by members of this generation. Given that Instagram is such a big part of this generation's online usage, it is fitting to study how this generation uses Instagram to open an approach for future research and reveal perspective about Gen z's online habits and usage.

### **Project Overview:**

The landscape of social media is ever-changing, especially among young people who often are on the leading edge of this space (Atske, 2022). This qualitative study will identify how Gen Z specifically uses Instagram to, for example, lead, connect, or create. There is clearly

something about Generation Z that is starkly different from the previous generation as it relates to online habits, preferences, and usage.

Instagram is an ecosystem of programs, pictures, words, and videos that have a profound hold on younger generations. There is something unique about this generation and how they use this social media platform and the implications that may suggest. This paper will look at how members of the Gen Z population use Instagram through qualitative research methods.

I intend to use quantitative data from Pew Research studies on social media usage among Gen Z to offer background and generational context. Current research looks at overall social media usage, percentages, numbers, and statistics; few studies, however, dive into the habitual patterns of usage and the “how” behind it all. I desire to research past the numbers and into the minds and lives of Gen Z. This paper will offer deeper insight into the thoughts experienced, actions taken, and habits of Gen Z while on Instagram.

I will collect a purposive sample of Gen Z participants through social media ads. The individuals that I will interview will meet the following qualifications which I will identify through a screening survey.

- 18-25 years old (the adults of the Gen Z population)
- Currently attending college or recently graduated
- Located in Utah
- Native fluency in English
- Have had an Instagram account for at least three years
- Average daily usage of 1-3 hours
- Have 500-2,000 followers

This demographic represents key characteristics of the higher-user Instagrammer, the ones who will offer the most insight into how Gen Zers as a whole use Instagram.

This research will include interviews as the main qualitative methodology. One 30-40 minute interview will be conducted with 10-15 participants. The interview will have three sections, first, a 10-15-minute semi-structured background interview will be conducted to understand the interviewees’ background and perceived habits of Instagram usage. Every question listed below will not be asked but customized for individual responses. The questions are as follows:

### Background

Where are you from?

What's your major?

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

How would you describe your relationship with social media? Why?

What is your favorite social media app?

Why do you use social media?

### Instagram usage

Tell me about your journey with Instagram. When did it start? How did it go from there?

Describe the time you first got Instagram. What was that like?

What drew you to get an Instagram? What was appealing (or not appealing)?

Tell me the story of an important moment with Instagram.....the first time you had a post get a lot of likes, your first 100 followers, what was that like?

When do you find yourself on Instagram?

Why do you go on Instagram?

How does Instagram help you do \*customize based on the previous answer\*?

What do you use when on Instagram? (explorer page, DM, posting, stories, reels?)

Give them a situation: You're doing homework and you decide to open Instagram, (what drives you to go on) what are you thinking? (where is Instagram on your phone, which screen)

Next, a 10-15-minute verbal think-aloud will be used to understand interviewees' Instagram usage, internal thoughts, overall habits, and experiences. The prompts and questions are listed below.

- Tell me more.
- Why did you do that?
- What else?
- What did you think of.....?
- Were there any thoughts that you didn't share?
- Tell me about your thoughts as you scroll.

- Is there anything else that you'd like to say about how you scroll through Instagram?
- Other than verbalizing your thinking, is this how you normally scroll through Instagram?
- How are you feeling as you scroll?
- What are you thinking as you scroll?
- Why did you go there?
- What is your thought process as you scroll?

Lastly, a 10-minute reflective interview will be conducted to conclude any lingering thoughts and ask participants more in-depth questions about their usage.

- How did you feel about this experience?
- Was there anything you were thinking or feeling that you didn't share?
- Would you describe this as a typical experience?
- Did you accomplish your goal?
- What have you gotten out of your time on Instagram?

It will total a 30-40 minute interview session. These interviews will be conducted with 10 people for a total of 10 interviews. The proposed research will identify trends, habits, and navigation patterns to determine how Gen Z uses Instagram.

I'll use grounded theory to analyze the interview data. Grounded theory is a foundational qualitative data analysis process that provides researchers with tools to identify inductive, data-driven codes to answer qualitative research questions (Cullen, 2021). Detailed analysis will allow me to carefully examine the data through several careful reads, looking for language and behaviors that may be relevant to my question.

**Thesis Committee:**

1. Faculty Advisor/Honors Coordinator: Dr. Pamela Brubaker
2. Faculty Reader: Christopher Wilson
3. Faculty Reader: Scott Church

## **Qualifications of Thesis Committee:**

### **1. Faculty Advisor/Honors Coordinator: Dr. Pamela Brubaker**

- a. Pamela Brubaker is an Associate Director for Graduate Studies in the School of Communications. She also serves as the Honors Thesis coordinator in the School. Brubaker received her Ph.D. in mass communications from The Pennsylvania State University (2012), her M.A. (2002) and B.A. (2000) in communications from BYU and her A.A. from Rick's College (1996). She currently teaches undergraduate courses in public relations research and strategic communications campaigns at BYU. Her research focuses on the impact and use of social media for strategic communication campaigns, political communications, etc. Dr. Brubaker has seven years of professional public relations experience in the technology industry, including positions in corporate and agency settings. She has published articles, essays and book chapters focused on social media, digital culture and much more.
- b. Dr. Brubaker was my first introduction to Public Relations and Communications. I took her COMMS 235 class my Freshman year and knew I wanted to do PR. She has been a constant in my journey as a Public Relations student and will make a great advisor for my research.

### **2. Faculty Reader: Christopher Wilson**

- a. Christopher Wilson is Associate Director for Undergraduate Studies. He received a Ph.D. in mass communications from the University of Florida (2014). He received an M.A. (2009) in mass communications and a B.A. (1999) in communications from Brigham Young University. Wilson worked as a public relations professional for 12 years. From 1999 through 2004, he worked in a variety of public relations capacities for West Valley City. From 2004 to 2011, he worked as the public relations manager for the BYU Museum of Art. Wilson has taught the introduction to public relations and public relations writing and production courses. His research interests focus on public relations management and strategy. He has published in the Journal of Public Relations Education, the Journal of Communication Management, Public Relations Review, and the Public Relations Journal. He has won top paper awards for his research from the International

Institute for Public Relations Research Conference and the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication.

- b. I took Dr. Wilson's Strategic Planning COMMS 336 class my first semester as a PR student. It was a rigorous class, but I learned so much about Public Relations from Professor Wilson that will offer great insight into the writing process as well as strategic qualitative methods.

### **3. Faculty Reader: Scott Church**

- a. Scott Church received his Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has taught courses in popular culture, business communication, public speaking, public discourse, music, and media studies. His research primarily uses critical theory, aesthetics, and media ecology as analytic lenses for social media and mediated popular texts. His recent research has been published in The Information Society, The Journal of Information Technology & Politics, The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies and the upcoming book Ancient Rhetorics + Digital Networks.

### **Project Timeline:**

1. December 2 - Thesis proposal submitted to Honors
2. December- IRB approval
3. December 19 - Begin the recruitment process
4. January 16-Apply for graduate
5. January 23- Gather qualified individuals
6. January-February- Conduct interviews
7. February 15- Deadline to apply for graduation
8. February-March-Analysis of data
9. March 13- First draft complete
10. March 27- Second draft
11. April 17- Final draft
12. April - Turn in Thesis Defense Information Form
13. April - Thesis Defense

14. April -Advisor turn in Thesis Submission Form
15. April 27-Honors Graduation Ceremony
16. May 12- Thesis Defense Information Form
17. May- Submit Final Thesis PDF, Final to Print & Mail, and Upload to Scholars
18. May -Turn in Thesis Poster

**IRB Approvals:** Yes, the IRB application is in the process of being completed and approved.

**Funding:** No

## Reference

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