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Honors Thesis

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

by
Josie Rackley

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

School of Communications
Brigham Young University
June 2023

Advisor: Dr. Pamela Brubaker
Honors Coordinator: Dr. Pamela Brubaker

Faculty Reader: Dr. Christopher Wilson

Faculty Reader: Dr. Scott Church

ABSTRACT

DIGITAL HABITS OF GEN Z: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON WHY AND HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS USE INSTAGRAM

Josie Rackley
School of Communications
Bachelor of Arts

This paper explores twelve Gen Z college students' usage of Instagram. Analyses of semi-structured and verbal think-aloud observations identified why and how participants use Instagram. Four quadrants of usage grew from participants' data: Community-driven Creators, socially motivated Gardeners, Digital Scrapbookers, and enlightenment-seeking Observers. These usage quadrants structured the paper. Each quadrant had unique habits and motivations, yet, some themes spanned across all quadrants, such as the themes of mindless usage and The Boredom Paradox. Results have applications for social media marketing research as they relate to studying the nature of Gen Z Instagram usage for understanding young people's lived experiences with Instagram.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my amazing committee, Pamela Brubaker, Christopher Wilson and Scott Church. Each one of you was incredibly supportive and showed me how fun research can be. Thank you to my father, Eric Rackley, who convinced me to do the Honors Program and was by my side from start to finish; you always pushed me to be the best version of myself.

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Introduction

Social media, now more than ever, is a powerful vehicle for engaging with a rich diversity of people, groups, opinions, and communities around the world. Although social media platforms are on the rise, one stands out among the others in its ability to attract young users. Compared to other platforms, Instagram (IG) has seen the most growth over the last seven years among young users and 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 (individuals born between 1997 and 2012) and some Millennials (1981 – 1996) (Dimock, 2019), Instagram is the most used social media platform, with 71% of individuals in that age group saying they use it regularly (Pew Research Center, 2021). Of that 71%, over half of Gen Z adults use Instagram daily (Pew Research Center, 2021). 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 native facility with internet technologies, including social media (Mantooth, 2021, 1).

Generation Z is all too quickly becoming 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. Frost's 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. Gen Z are among the most racially

and ethnically diverse generation yet as well as on track to be the most educated (Mitchell, 2020). Their decisions will likely be informed by the way they experience, interact with, and make sense of the world through internet technologies, including Instagram. Given that Gen Z are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) spending their time online, it is of the utmost importance we study their digital presence to understand the impact they will have in the future.

Research Questions

This study explores how Gen Z college students use Instagram by looking at Gen Z's experience and usage of Instagram. The following research questions reflect this focus:

RQ 1: Why do Gen Z Instagrammers use the platform?

RQ 2: How do Gen Z Instagrammers use the platform?

The first research question refers to motivations and reasons for usage. The second question refers to habits and patterns of usage. When discussing how Gen Z Instagrammers use the platform, I explain how these motivations are manifest in practice. I will discuss aspects like Direct Messages (DM), a private mode of communication between social media users, the Explorer Page, a collection of content based on a user's individual interests and stories which are posts in a slideshow format that last 24 hours.

Current research addresses the broad scope of social media and social networks, explaining how “social media support patterns of information flow and interpersonal communication.” (Ellison, 2015). Other researchers have noted that Gen Z, “not only consume but also create content and information. Moreover, their main channel of

communication is via social media” (Nagy & Kölcsey, 2017). This acts as a gateway into my research findings which connects social media research and Gen Z.

Combining the topics of Gen Z and Instagram is still a relatively new area of study. According to current scholars, “There is not a lot of research that combines topics of Instagram and Generation Z together” (Olejniczak, 2022, p. 353). This gap in research is notable because few sources indicate the behavior of Generation Z consumers in terms of publishing or consuming content on Instagram (Olejniczak, 2022, p. 354). Further, we have research on Instagram as well as research on Gen Z’s digital presence, yet, questions remain, “little research has been done that is specifically related to Instagram or why individuals are motivated to participate in this particular social media network” (Bradley, 2014 p. ii). 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. This research addresses these questions by examining the Instagram usage of 12 current college students at a private university in Utah, United States.

As a Gen Z college student who is an avid Instagram user, I have a set of contextual knowledge and my own assumptions about Instagram and Gen Z. I am familiar with IG on a personal and professional level which structured my perspective and analysis of this data.

Methodology

To answer the research questions that explored how and why Gen Z college students use Instagram, twelve interviews with IG users were conducted. Time limitations and saturation due to similar responses lead to the number of interviews. Interviews explored participants' experiences with and habits on Instagram.

Context and Participants

	Gender	Age	Year in school	From	Avg daily usage	Account status
Participant 1	Female	20	Senior	Utah	1-2	Public
Participant 2	Female	21	Senior	Utah	1-2	Public
Participant 3	Female	22	Sophomore	Arizona	1-2	Private
Participant 4	Male	23	Senior	Arizona	1-2	Public
Participant 5	Female	21	Junior	Utah	1-2	Private
Participant 6	Female	25	Recent Graduate	Pennsylvania	2-3	Public
Participant 7	Female	21	Sophomore	California	1-2	Public
Participant 8	Female	25	Grad student	Utah	1-2	Public
Participant 9	Female	22	Junior	Virginia	1-2	Private
Participant 10	Male	24	Senior	California	4+	Public
Participant 11	Female	18	Freshman	California	1-2hr	Private
Participant 12	Male	22	Sophomore	Utah	2-3 hr	Public

Table 1: Participant information

Given this study's focus on Gen Z, all participants were 18-25-year-old college students who attended a private university in Utah, United States. All participants were high-use Instagrammers who spent 1-4 hours on the app daily and had 500-2,000 followers. The average number of followers was 1,268. Three of the participants were male. Nine of the participants were female. Eight Participants had public accounts. Four had private accounts. All participants have had IG for over five years. Average daily usage was 2 hrs 30 mins.

To recruit for this study, I collected a purposive sample of likely participants through a paid Instagram advertisement that ran for 14 days (Jan 23-Feb 6). I linked a screening questionnaire (Appendix 1) to the advertisement and invited all who were interested to fill out the survey. The survey screened for daily average usage, gender, age, university attendance, location, availability of an in-person interview, and IG handle. The individuals who met the qualifications were contacted and asked to set up an interview. 167 people completed the survey, 48 qualified, and 12 were selected to participate. This is an IRB-approved study.

Data Collection

Data collection consists of semi-structured interviews and a verbal think-aloud observation (Appendix 1). Interviews and observations were conducted at the same time. Semi-structured interviews were designed to understand the participants' perceived habits of Instagram usage. Questions included when, how, and why participants use Instagram. Verbal think-aloud observations allowed participants to verbalize their thoughts as they used Instagram, capturing their in-the-moment Instagram usage, internal thoughts, and

overall habits and experiences. Participants were invited to share their thoughts and experiences as they scrolled through Instagram. I asked them frequently, “What are you thinking?” and “Why did you do that?” Interviews lasted 30-45 min. All 12 participants completed these interviews. Follow-up interviews were conducted in person and electronically to help to clarify and expand comprehension of participants’ responses from the semi-structured and verbal think-aloud interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the methods of constant comparative analysis (Cullen, 2021). I began the analysis by going through each of the transcripts and making notes of the main ideas, quotes, and important insights within each interview. Then I repeated that process, further grouping and separating ideas. These similarities and differences began to emerge in such a way that illuminated four clear quadrants of usage which is the structure for this paper (Figure 1). Constant comparative analysis helped illuminate themes amidst the data that rounded out my understanding of participants' IG usage. In my analysis I intend to develop an in-depth understanding of why and how high-use Gen Zers use Instagram, identifying themes and insights related to their usage. 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.

Results

The data indicated that each participant's primary approach to using IG was situated in one of four quadrants that represent key usage patterns and habits (Figure 1): Social and Individual; Consume and Produce. Although each quadrant is represented separately for clarity, as Figure 1 demonstrates, participants were located in numerous places within the quadrants. Within the quadrants, some participants were situated differently along the x-axis and y-axis meaning, in comparison to others, they showed more or fewer characteristics of the given axes. Participants in each quadrant did not engage in *identical* IG usage patterns; rather, the quadrants suggest *similarities* among their usage.

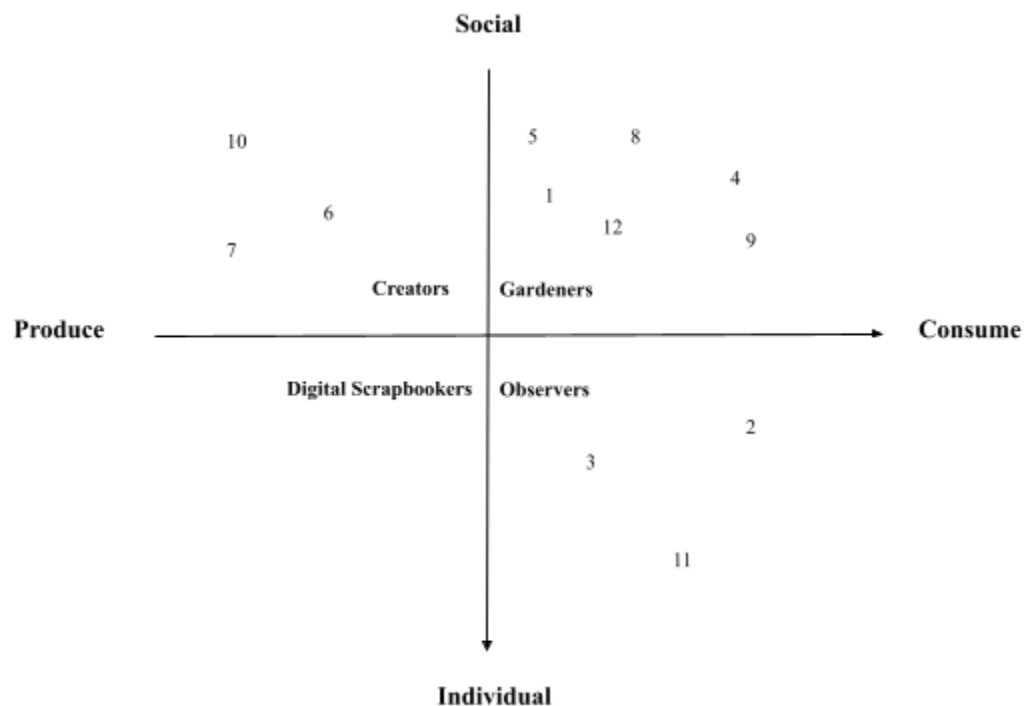


Figure 1: Instagram usage quadrants

Specifically, each quadrant includes behaviors, habits, and intentions that indicate how and why Gen Z college students use IG. Each quadrant is oriented between two axes that inform the primary usage habits of those in the quadrant. The x-axis represents how participants interact with content on IG, on a producer-consumer spectrum. The production end of the spectrum refers to the creation of content such as feed posts, stories, and reels; essentially, any piece of content that is created by the individual. The consumption end of the spectrum refers to taking in, processing, or using information and content found on IG. The y-axis represents how participants use IG on the social-individual spectrum, which represents their usage in relation to other people. The social end refers to an outward expression of usage, engagement with others, creation of a community, and connection. The individual end refers to inward usage for personal gain, benefit, and enlightenment. The social-individual and producer-consumer axes help orient the participants' usage habits, patterns, beliefs, and intentions, which are key to understanding how and why they use IG.

Each quadrant was given a unique name. Creators for social producers, Gardeners for social consumers, Digital scrapbookers for individual producers, and Observers for individual consumers.

Quadrant 1 Social Producers: Creators

The first quadrant defines the social producers who I have labeled Creators. Twenty-five percent of participants shared several characteristics that placed them into this quadrant: community-driven motivations, inspiration-seeking, and content production. When we think of individuals who are in this quadrant we envision

influencers: people who engage with a large number of followers, hold a position of authority, actively post content and produce the self as a brand and commodity (Nouri, 2018, p. 5). Rarely do we discover this other type of influencer; that of the Creator which I have labeled here. Similar to influencers, Creators have an “ability to create communities where users feel more connected to the influencer through higher levels of engagement, authenticity, and reliability.” (Nouri, 2018). Creators, unlike influencers, do not view themselves as influencers. They do not make a living off paid promotions or have the intention of selling their brand. They do, however, hope to be a good influence to others and express they don’t do it for their own gain, but to connect to people who follow them (Participant 7,10). These participants are very social and community-driven on IG and view themselves as creators who produce content they love for others to interact with and love too.

WHY do Creators use IG?	HOW do Creators use IG?
To create communities that offer them a place they can freely create and connect with like-minded individuals.	Creators are highly social on IG and will follow and interact with a plethora of other creators and influencers.
To gain inspiration, seek new forms of enlightenment, and find unique and refreshing content they cannot find anywhere else.	Creators view IG as a creative outlet and use it as such to outwardly express themselves.
To create and produce content as a means to create a community and share their passions.	As a means for inspiration by saving posts and following many accounts.
For intentional, thoughtful usage motivated by the realization of the unhealthy sides of Instagram.	Disinterest in the Explorer Page
	Control of the content they consume and how they consume it through active curation and awareness of mindless scrolling.

Table 2: Why and How Creators Use Instagram

Why do Creators use IG?

One of the key motivations Creators use IG is to create communities: “I get most excited when I can create things with other people or inspire and build a community because I love the community aspect” (Participant 10). Creating communities offers them a place they can freely create and connect with like-minded individuals. They find comfort and validation in those communities and believe if “you work hard enough, you can cultivate a really wholesome side of Instagram” (Participant 6). They value new connections on IG and their usage is motivated by seeing people respond to their content and connect to others in the comment section. Creators believe their followers are genuine and enjoy creating a supportive community filled with people who actually want to be there (Participant 6). They even wish there were better social media apps or IG features specifically for creating stronger, more cohesive online communities (Participant 10). In a word, Creators see IG as a great way to connect with other people whose content they enjoy while also creating content they enjoy too (Participant 6).

Inspiration is another motivator for Creators. When asked “Why do you use Instagram?” Each participant responded with the same word, “inspiration.” They expressed how seeing others' posts and accomplishments helped them create and motivated them to produce content as well (Participant 6). Creators are seeking new forms of enlightenment and go to IG to find unique and refreshing content they cannot find anywhere else. Given that community is such an important aspect of social media for Creators, it makes sense that they would be seeking to learn and grow from that community.

Creators, as the name states, create content on IG more than any other group of users. Tautologically, creation motivates Creators. Creators produce content as a means to create a community. Each Creator has a unique form of content creation they are passionate about. Participant 6 is an illustrator and sells her art through Instagram, Participant 7 posts often about her life, and Participant 10 is a poet who posts his poetry online for others to enjoy. Each has a creator mindset, which refers to their desire to produce an array of content such as art, life updates, or poetry. This is a key driver of their IG usage. Participant 10 expressed this clearly when he said, “The reason I post is to share my passion.” They view IG as the best way to share their passions and interests with others while connecting with a wide range of people. This desire to create something unique attracts them to such an app as IG and allows them a space where they can freely create with no limitations.

A common consensus among Creators is the awareness of the unhealthy sides of IG, such as the negative effects of digital stimulation and false advertising. This realization motivates the intentional usage of IG for Creators. As individuals who use IG 2-3 hours a day, they are aware of the unsavory aspects of IG and have experienced it first-hand. Participant 6 said she was grateful she did not grow up surrounded by technology and the digital stimulation experienced by younger people. Participant 10 stated that IG was an unhealthy coping mechanism for him and that he tries to not use it as such. Participant 7 noted that in high school she realized her friends were generating false impressions of themselves on IG and were not who they said they were. Creators realized that IG can have adverse effects on them; they seek more control over their usage. They were hyper-aware of the adverse effects IG can have on them and the

harmful or unhealthy things it can encourage them to do. This informed their intentional – and by their estimation, thoughtful – usage of IG.

How do Creators use IG?

Why Creators use IG provides important context to understand *how* they use the platform. This community-driven motivation for Creators manifests in *how* Creators use IG and their interaction with others. Creators are highly social on IG and will follow and interact with a plethora of other creators and influencers. Participant 10 stated that he follows close to 2,000 accounts and of those only 600 are people he actually knows. Creators actively follow accounts they like in the suggested posts on their feed (Participant 7). Their feeds are filled with content they want to see, content they engage with. Creators will watch videos all the way through, and read long captions because they enjoy engaging with the content (Participant 6). They will engage with small businesses they support and know those interactions boost their engagement while also forcing the algorithm to place similar content on their feed. Interactions with other accounts aid the creation of a community because it connects them with people whose content they enjoy. For them, “the best part of social media is when it becomes social and not media” (Participant 10).

Creators view IG as a creative outlet and use it as such to outwardly express themselves. Participant 7 said she used IG to, “Show the world what I am.” This relates to the creative nature of Creators. Participant 10 said he enjoyed the creation process because it was convenient for sharing with others as well as the best way to advertise yourself online. Creators recognized that Instagram has always been for creators, so they use it as creators should, to generate content for others. Participants 6 & 10 both created

forms of art on Instagram and had similar views of IG as a way to share their creativity with the world. Creators notice that throughout their IG journey, they use many more features now than before. As IG has grown as a social media and more features have been added, Creators are the ones to utilize those features: posting reels, posting stories, liking stories, sharing content in DMs, the list goes on (Participant 6,7,10).

Creators are inspired by others on IG and their usage supports that. Creators follow a broad range of people who are uplifting, such as religious or artistic accounts. Creators are intentional with the people they follow and the content they consume. Participant 6 said, “I follow inspiring and inventive people.” They will intentionally save posts on IG that align with their passions and interests. “ If I want to use this idea in the future, I will save the post” (Participant 6,10). They view IG as a collection of creativity and innovation from which they draw inspiration.

Ironically, the IG Explorer Page was a low-level priority for Creators. Each participant in this quadrant expressed their disinterest in the Explorer Page; they did not use the Explorer Page, and if they did, it was extremely rare. Participant 6 noted that the explorer page is fun, but only once in a while; some content on the explorer page is interesting but for the most part, it’s too much and will lead them down a rabbit hole of scrolling (Participant 7). While the explorer page is full of new content which should be appealing to Creators, they note that it’s overwhelming and they don’t know where to begin (Participant 7). Creators intentionally do not use the Explorer Page because they already follow an ample number of accounts. Their personal content is curated well enough so they don’t need to seek content elsewhere. That is, they have everything they need in their own feed (Participant 10).

Excluding the explorer page from their daily usage suggests the importance of control for Creators; specifically, control of the content they consume and how they consume it. Participant 7 is aware that when she is on IG, occasionally she will fall into mindless scrolling. She closes the app when she realizes, “This isn’t what I’m supposed to be doing, I came here for a different purpose.” Creators also actively curate their feeds, which refers to actively and intentionally following and engaging with content they want to see more of. This is done to gain another type of control on IG, control over the content they consume. Participant 7 noticed that the algorithm puts people they engage with more at the front/top of their feed. Creators treat IG similarly to Pavlov's dog; They only “like” content they want to see. They condition the algorithm to curate their feed to their liking. Participant 10 expressed this desire when he said, “I really want to curate my feed” but noted how it was difficult because, “if you don’t interact with a post, [the algorithm] assumes you don’t like [the content].” Intentionally engaging with certain accounts and unfollowing others to curate their feeds demonstrates how much Creators value control of their IG usage and the content they consume.

Quadrant 2 Social Consumers: Gardeners

Quadrant two are the social consumers who I have labeled Gardeners for their proactive and socially motivated IG usage. Just as gardeners check on their plants daily and water and pull weeds as necessary, users in this quadrant viewed IG as a garden. They have made IG usage a daily habit and created a space where they can connect with their friends and work to grow and maintain those relationships. Gardeners do not want to miss out on any new updates from those they follow and suffer from a fear of missing

out. Most of their usage was spent waiting for the next big thing. Gardeners do not necessarily find joy in their daily IG work. Much of it feels dull, mundane, even, but they do it in anticipation of the occasional and exciting blossoms that occur. Gardeners anticipate the growth of their gardens, but it tends to be a slow process. Half of the participants were Gardeners.

WHY do Gardeners use IG?	HOW do Gardeners use IG?
To maintain existing relationships with family and friends because IG supports interpersonal interactions.	They are highly social with their friends and family.
As a means to converse face-to-face, by showing friends videos or talking about things they saw on IG.	They produce as a way to socially connect with others in hopes others will post too.
Because they have a fear of missing out (FOMO) and seek connection to not miss happenings in the digital scope.	They have a high usage of DM's to socially connect to friends and family.
As maintenance to “see what’s there, and see what happens”	They do not prioritize the Explorer page.
Disconnect between the expectations of using IG to keep up with loved ones and the reality that those people don’t post as often as they would like.	

Table 3: Why and How Gardeners Use Instagram

Why do Gardeners use IG?

Current research has recognized some of the reasons individuals use social media: to pass time, maintain relationships, keep up with current trends, and gather social information (Quinn, 2016, p. 61). My study recognizes these motivations and builds upon them, giving context to the specific motivations and how they manifest in daily IG usage. One of the key characteristics of the Gardeners is they use IG to maintain existing

relationships because to them, IG supports interpersonal interactions. Past research on US adult usage of social network sites (SNS) has helped us understand that Facebook and other SNS, “provide an ideal platform for relationship maintenance interactions to occur quickly with multiple others” (Ellison, 2014, p.858). People online are invested in social relationships which, “highlights the importance of actively contributing to and maintaining personal relationships. (Ellison, 2014, p.858).

My research highlights Gen Z college students’ relationship maintenance on the social network site Instagram. Gardeners are there to stay connected with family and friends. IG is a necessary factor in the interpersonal relationships Gardeners value and, “provide[s] an easy way to maintain a relationship” (Participant 12). Participant 4 stated that relationships with friends and staying connected are important to him: “If I don't know what's going on with their lives, and I don't engage with them, then after a while, we'll get out of touch.” Relationship maintenance is important: without it, relationships will dwindle. Similarly, Participant 9 expressed that “the more I comment on IG or interact with them on IG, the closer I am to them in person.” There is a clear indication that Gardeners view IG as a means to connect with friends so their real-life interactions will be that much stronger. In other words, interactions on IG function as, “a relationship builder” (Participant 4). Participant 5 expressed a similar idea stating, “I’ve strengthened my relationship with people in my life on Instagram.” They notice that when they are connected to their friends and family on IG, that connection transcends digital space and informs real-life interactions.

Often Gardeners will use IG as a means to converse face-to-face, by showing friends videos or talking about things they saw on IG. They see IG as a means to connect

with people not only digitally but physically and face-to-face. Participant 5 noted that she will save content on IG to show others in in-person conversations. In addition to IG supporting interpersonal interactions, interpersonal interactions also support IG usage. Participant 9 said, “If I’m spending more time with someone in person then I’ll be more likely to interact with them on social media.” IG seems to be an important way participants interact with others, even if they are not together in person, “If you’re not with your friends all the time, seeing what they post is second best” (Participant 1). In a digital world where IG supports the majority of Gen Z interactions, social media is a preferred way to connect with others if face-to-face interactions are not possible.

As socially motivated users, Gardeners have a fear of missing out (FOMO). All participants in this quadrant sought connection and tried to not miss what was going on in the digital sphere. Participant 4 expressed this intention. He said, “I don’t want to feel like I’m missing out, I want to stay up to date.” This concern of missing out was apparent in the rest of the Gardeners. For example, Participant 5 said, “If I’m off for a week then I miss so much.” Participant 9 said she liked, “Being in the loop.” She found comfort in knowing what was going on with her friends on social media. Participant 12 noted that the fear of missing out stemmed from the fact that if everyone else was on IG, then they probably should be too. Gardeners wanted to be on the “in” and partake of big moments that happen on social media. Participants 5 and 8 called important moments on IG “social media phenomena.” Examples of social media phenomena include the Egg and the Ice Bucket Challenge. These are big moments people tend to remember and are likely to stick in the collective consciousness of social media users. These big moments in social

media history are exciting to be part of and Gardeners are eager to witness and experience them.

Connected to the FOMO that motivates Gardeners' usage, this group of users lacks intention when opening IG. They go on for maintenance to “see what’s there, and see what happens” (Participants 4, 1). They express there is no specific reason they go on IG, but this need to do it, this habit to go on because it’s there and they know things are happening keeps them coming back, “I do it just to do it and it doesn’t feel like I have a purpose to go on”(Participant 9). The Gardners also have this habit of waiting. They go on IG because they have an anticipation of something happening. Participant 5 stated, “Sometimes I’m waiting for a friend's engagement or an announcement.” This idea of waiting perfectly aligns with the very nature of gardeners. They are in constant anticipation of growth and new exciting things happening. They gain satisfaction by checking on their IG’s even if nothing big or memorable happened there, “I don’t leave feeling super happy or sad, I’m up to date and that's it” (Participant 5). However, occasionally that flower will bloom or that person will post a big life event and that’ll make all the waiting worth it.

Among Gardeners, there is a disconnect between the expectations and reality of IG usage. For Gardeners, there is a tension between wanting to keep up with loved ones on IG and the reality that those people may not post as often as Gardeners would like. Although Gardeners' expectations are not always met on IG, they keep going back, day after day, seeking the connections they need and want. Instagram's mission statement is to, “Capture and share the world’s moments.”(Moritz, 2016). Gardeners tend to interpret this at a local level by wanting to be a part of the noteworthy events of their close friends

and family. Their expectations of going on IG to keep up with friends and family and be connected is not met the majority of the time. This paradox of unfulfilled consumption has two roots. The first is a lack of content from people they are close to. Participants 5 and 1 expressed disappointment that their friends do not post much. “I go there to be connected but still don't feel connected because [my friends do not post] as frequently as [I do]” (Participant 5). This unfulfilled connection and updates often lead Gardeners to feel disappointed. Participant 8 said, “I hope that friends have posted, but am disappointed when they don't or I see different people's posts.” The second root of this disconnect is related to the algorithm. Participant 12 said, “In relation to posts I want to see, I don't see as much as I would like. The algorithm is weird like that.” These users note that IG does not do a good job of showing what they want to see. Just as gardeners hope for a new blossom to sprout, Gardeners of IG hope for something that doesn't happen every day. They seek these meaningful connections with ones they are close to, but those connections only happen occasionally (Participant 9, 5).

How do Gardeners use IG?

Gardeners are incredibly social with their friends and family on IG, which is seen through the way they engage with content and the frequency of that engagement. Participant 1 stated, “Every time [people] post a question box, I love to respond.” Others note that they will like everything on their feed page reasoning, “If I'm not gonna like your stuff, why am I following you?” (Participant 4). Gardeners use IG as an easy way to feel socially involved when they don't have much to do. Some are so socially involved on IG they go as far as to like content just because they like the profile it's coming from, “I love interacting with others, I want to give them a like because I like them, but I don't

pay attention to the post” (Participant 8). Similarly, others will finish watching all the stories in their feed because they want the little circles around the profile pictures to be gone (Participant 9). This highly social behavior reflects the maintenance-driven nature of Gardeners. They go on and act out of habit. They have habituated themselves on IG to connect with friends, and that has created this highly socially-involved behavior.

Gardeners noted a shift in usage from consumption to production as a way to socially connect with others. At the beginning of each participant’s IG journey, they used the platform for consumption and more personal usage. Others said it was a means to keep tabs on friends in high school (Participants 1, 4). However, each experienced a shift in usage around college when they started using IG as a means of production. Participant 4 noted that as a college student, “I can post things and let [my friends] know what I’m up to.” Others express the same idea that now IG is a means of sharing updates on their life (Participants 1,9,5). With this shift from consumption to production the question arises, “Why are these individuals in the consumption quadrant?” This is where the reason for production comes in. Gardeners view producing content as a means to maintain their relationships online, they do it to be social and as a means to help others feel more connected with them. Digital production maintains Gardener's connection to others. The majority of their usage is consumption. The production of content is a means to connect with others and motivate close friends to post too because that is what they want to see. They also note that there are many more features to use on IG now than there were in high school. With more features, there is also an increase in time spent on the app as well as engagement with those features. This increases their social engagement on the app.

Connected to the highly social nature of the Gardeners is the regular usage of Direct Messages or DM's. The first thing Gardeners will do when opening the app is check their DMs. Gardeners have their notifications on and will often open the app when they receive a message from a close friend. They make it a priority to check DMs first and answer people there. A lot of their daily usage is spent sending people videos. Participant 5, for example, said "Most of the time when I'm on the app, it's me sharing things with [my friends]." Gardeners also use humor to cultivate relationships. They are adamant about checking DMs and sending funny videos because they want to maintain that connection in a simple and convenient way. Often, others sharing content motivates Gardeners to engage on IG. When close friends send participants content in the DMs, they will get notified and immediately open the app. In a word, Gardeners' IG usage is reliant on and sparked by their friends' usage.

Interestingly, Gardeners do not prioritize the Explorer page. Participant 1 noted, "My ads are targeted well enough to me, I don't need to go looking for more." IG is seen as a place to connect with current friends, not a place to seek something new or something else beyond that. Many Gardeners note that their Explorer Page holds limited value for them: "The top posts are interesting and curated, but the rest of the Explorer Page isn't interesting" (Participant 5). The needs they have are not fulfilled with the Explorer Page. If they interact with the Explorer Page, it is often the last thing Gardeners do when using IG. The Explorer Page is a feature of last resort, to be used when Gardeners get bored with their feeds.

Quadrant 3 Individual Producers: Digital Scrapbooker

No participants are represented as individual producers, or as I label them, Digital Scrapbookers. This quadrant is an oxymoron, drawing attention to the contradicting ideas of production and more personal, individual usage. Importantly, the existence of quadrant three surfaces some complex questions about IG usage. Users who produce on IG tend to be outward looking, or social. Therefore, what do producers look like with a more internal, or individual, focus? Whereas Creators produce content to create community, Digital Scrapbookers likely produce content for themselves and ones close to them as a means of memory collection and documentation.

Given the internal orientation of individual producers, IG may not offer them the affordances they want. Instagram, by nature, is a social and consumption-heavy platform filled with ads, addicting reels, and ample amounts of content. Individuals who use social media like a Digital Scrapbook likely have more serviceable alternatives that meet their memory-orientated needs. Facebook or a more memory-collective social media platform may be a better fit. This may be a method different generations use social media, such as Millennials or Gen X rather than Gen Z.

Quadrant 4 Individual Consumers: Observers

The fourth quadrant draws attention to individual consumers, who I label Observers. Twenty-five percent of participants identified as Observers because their IG usage was highly personal and focused on themselves. They aimed to consume content for personal entertainment or education and were selective with their content engagement and interaction. Observers go to IG for enlightenment, not connection. Observers have

Lurkers come to mind. Lurkers engage in passive consumption of social media content, they go on, scroll, read, consume, and then get off (Mousavi & Roper, 2022). Observers are similar to Lurkers because they have a high rate of consumption when on IG. They desire information, and entertainment and seek to be incognito. Observers differ from Lurkers because they tend to engage and participate online, but they are highly selective with their engagement. Observers, though similar in usage, are intentional and more social Lurkers.

WHY do Observers use IG?	HOW do Observers use IG?
Peer pressure from society and friends makes them feel obligated to use IG.	Individually, for their own personal interests, enlightenment, and education not for engagement.
They need a mental break and seek refuge through mindless scrolling.	High use of Explorer Page for consumption of content they enjoy.
To NOT connect with friends but rather to explore things they enjoy. Newness attracts Observers.	Active curation of content they want to see and intentional control through muting and unfollowing people.
	Highly selective with their engagement and interactions with other accounts and content.
	Observers post almost exclusively on their stories. Stories were appealing to Observers because of their convenience and low level of commitment.

Table 4: Why and How Observers Use Instagram

Why do Observers use IG?

Each of the Observers' journeys with IG looked extremely similar. All of them created their first IG account in 6th grade because of social pressure. Participant 11 stated, "All my friends had an Instagram so I wanted one." Bandwagoning is a common phenomenon in social media circles. It signals interest in being "in on" the developing

trends with others we admire or care about, especially at the beginning of a new, fun digital platform; Observers, “[Don’t] want to be left out” (Participant 3). Participant 3 explained how everyone in middle school had an IG in her small town. Being on IG, for her and her friends, gave them status among their peer group. They felt pressure not from a particular person, but from a whole group of people similar to them, acting and behaving in a certain way, so she followed. Participant 2 explained how her friends finally convinced her to get on IG by making an account for her. She had less of a choice than Participant 3 and was nonetheless shepherded, or one might say strong-armed, into the world of IG by her friends. To Observers, sometimes IG seems like an obligation, something that they need more than want. “I feel obligated to respond,” said Participant 3. This obligation came, partially, from outside pressure.

Observers also said they open IG when they need a mental break. Participant 2 for example, said, “Typically the times I go on [IG] are when I’m brain dead.” Others said IG numbs their minds, which is soothing and relaxing. Participant 11 said, “For me, Instagram is a time when you don’t have to think about the crazy stuff that’s happening. You can just do whatever.” For Observers, IG was a refuge from the chaos of the world and their often stressful and complicated college lives. The stress and anxiety of life can all be forgotten on Instagram. As Participant 11 explained, IG is a place to go, “If I want to disconnect.” Some may see the irony in a platform full of pictures, videos, and content constantly fighting for your attention as a place of refuge.

Importantly, all Observers expressed that they do *not* go on IG to see updates from friends. Participant 2 stated, “I hardly ever use IG to check up on people.” What started as the main reason they got the app is now seen as unimportant for Observers.

Going to IG to seek new enlightenment is unique to Observers. Though IG is a “social” media platform, Observers are rarely social on the platform. Updates from friends do not fulfill their needs and wants from the app. Participant 3 said, “I don't really want to see updates of friends anymore, to be honest. It seems fake and not genuine.” Participant 11 said connecting with friends or seeing updates was less relevant than, “explore[ing] things I like.” Observers, in a word, seek to personally gain something from their IG usage. Most of the time it's entertainment or education.

How do Observers use IG?

Observers experienced a shift from social to individual users over the years. At the beginning of their journeys with Instagram, Observers noted they used it mainly for posting and keeping up with friends and family: “At first I used it to keep track of what’s happening socially” (Participant 11). During the early years of IG, social media was still a new concept. Over time Observers’ usage shifted to be more individual. Participant 11 said, “I've kind of just used it to just see what's happening in the world.” Participant 2 explained that at first, she used IG for posting and more social experiences, then it turned into a place to consume content for more personal reasons. Participant 3 noted, “ I feel like before I was using it to see what my friends were posting and it wasn't really like that big of a deal. Now I’m following influencers and I'm watching it for funny videos.” Instagram started as a means to keep up with friends, but now there is so much more information to consume and content to take in.

The majority of Observers' usage is on the Explorer Page. During data collection, each Observer started their IG usage with the Explorer Page. Participant 2 said she rarely checks out her feed and will consume content like Reddit posts, screenshots of tweets, or

funny text conversations on the Explorer Page. Similarly, Participant 11 will mainly use IG to consume content such as posts with blocks of text, Twitter & Reddit reposts, and art accounts. Participant 3's consumption of content on the Explorer Page aligns with her interests and is "Focus[ed] on things I'm trying to get better at or something I'm passionate about." The reason Observers consume content on the Explorer Page is because they, "can get actual information from it" (Participant 3). Observers are there to consume on a very personal level content they find interesting, enlightening, and educational rather than to interact with others.

Along with the usage of the Explorer Page, Observers also actively curate their feeds. Observers are extremely aware of who they follow and who follows them and have a habit of muting and unfollowing people. Participant 3 stated they have muted a lot of people and in that have, "curated my feed to be something I want to see." Participant 11 expressed this same idea that she blocks people's stories that she doesn't want to see and will frequently declutter her followers. In doing this, Participant 11 has created her "own little corner of the internet" to accommodate her interests.

Using the Explorer Page religiously and actively unfollowing/muting people are contradictory usage habits. If the majority of their usage is on the Explore Page, an individual consumption aspect of IG – why are Observers concerned with their followers, which represents a more social aspect of their IG experience? This may be informed by Observers' need for control over their IG experience. Since the majority of their usage is consumption, they want the content they are consuming to be high-quality, or highly relevant. The fact that they are more individual with their usage shows they only want to

see things that offer them satisfaction. In this place of refuge, Observers do not want random content that doesn't fulfill their needs.

Unlike Lurkers, Observers are highly selective with interactions. Participant 2 explains how she will never like or comment: “I don’t want people to see what I’m liking, it seems a little invasive. I don’t want to like a dumb meme and others to see it and think it's stupid.” Similarly, Participant 11 said she does not comment on or like a post unless it is noteworthy. She also does not send a lot of content to friends. This “incognito” approach to their IG usage indicated a level of aloofness not shared by those in other quadrants. However, it's not that Observers don’t interact online, they are simply more selective and intentional with their interactions. Observers seek to consume content that benefits them and will follow profiles where they can get relevant and quality information, which suggests a high level of intentionality in their use of IG for personal benefit.

Observers, though detached socially on IG, do post almost exclusively on their stories. Participant 2 said, “My friends and I post on our stories more. It’s a quick and easy way to update.” Participant 3 said she posts on her story a lot because it is a way for her to express her random thoughts. These temporary slideshow posts were appealing to Observers because of their convenience and low level of commitment. Stories last for 24 hours, which offers Observers the comfort and ease of posting without the responsibility of a feed post, which often requires more work and is seen as “a big deal” among participants. Observers rarely post in their feed, which is more permanent and lasting. Participant 2 said she is more cautious of what she posts in her feed and has not posted since June 2021: “I don’t think about it anymore. I don’t take pictures and there's no

content worth sharing.” Participant 11, similarly, does not post on her feed. In a word, Observers are drawn to the convenience and low commitment offered by IG stories, and express disinterest in the permanence of feed posts.

Master Themes

How: Mindless & Subconscious Usage

Through the analysis, there was a habit that stemmed across all quadrants. An involuntary habitual usage of IG was seen among seventy-five percent of participants; the majority of each quadrant expressed this idea. When talking about the involuntary usage of IG, I am referring to an instinctive type of usage that becomes intuitive and thoughtless. Participants used the word “mindless” when describing their IG usage. I describe it as subconscious as well because there is a lack of awareness and suppressed feelings that are instinctive and habitual.

Many described their usage as mindless while on the app (Participant 4,5,7,8). Certain aspects of IG are mindless for participants: scrolling through stories, the explorer page, and even the feed (Participants 4,7,8). Participant 2 is motivated to open IG for mind-numbness and experiences this subconscious phenomenon that has become a thoughtless habit of opening the app for a few seconds, scrolling, and then closing it: “It doesn’t make sense, but that’s a thing I do” (Participant 2). Participant 6 expressed this same idea, “I’ll open it for 2 seconds every 10 minutes, open and close it and open and close it.” This habit of opening IG, closing it, and opening it again is also seen in Participant 10 who said that he seeks dopamine and IG is a good place to find that. Usage like this can be related to something like a hamster wheel, there is a lot of movement, but

participants are not getting anywhere. The very motivations for opening the app are reflexive to participants, and they are not sure why.

Cheap dopamine is an outcome of this mindless motivation to use IG. While on IG participant 2 said she would scroll and laugh at a video, move on, and laugh at something else. After 2 hours of this, she said, “You laughed a lot, but can you remember any of it?” (Participant 2). This is passive entertainment, a temporary hit of humor and dopamine that is fun at the moment but flees as soon as they scroll past. This temporary entertainment is what keeps people coming back, it’s addicting and unsustainable yet creates a cycle of passive consumption and usage. Participant 6, who has ADHD, expressed that the brain is looking for the dopamine hit so often it becomes a subconscious act to seek it.

Participants are aware their usage is mindless but still fall victim to the act of mindlessly scrolling. Often participants will think something like, “I should get off” and then a new video pops up that keeps them scrolling longer (Participant 8). Instagram will often draw users in and they cannot help but keep scrolling. This is largely due to the newness of the content presented. Participants recognize this, they know they probably should not be scrolling for hours on end, but it keeps them there, passively consuming, leaving with nothing. Usage like this requires no thought or mind; it is repetitive and habitual (Participant 7). Rather than being mindful, IG usage is mindless, lacking brain power, which participants stated was a reason they use IG, “I go on there to not think” (Participants 2,3,12). Many classify their mindless usage as a habit. Instagram has become such a big part of their daily lives, opening the app is second nature, a comfort habit (Participant 9,12)

Connected to this passive entertainment use of IG is a lack of intention.

Participants noted when they go on IG they do not go there with a purpose: “A lot of times I don’t go in with an intention or don’t really know what I’m doing, it’s just kind of mindless” (Participant 5). Participant 12, similarly, said, “I don’t go on with any pre-existing expectations.” Lack of intention leads participants to get carried away with passive usage, usage that leads to mindless consumption and as some described it “a loophole” or “endless scrolling void”. Often if participants hop on the app without a particular purpose in mind, they are more likely to mindlessly scroll. Even with some intention, mindless scrolling seems inevitable. Participant 4 stated, “I’ll go on to see the updates from friends and most of the time I’ll get carried away in other things.” Here ‘other things’ refers to mindless consumption and scrolling.

Why: The Boredom Paradox

Boredom is a common motivation seen among participants; boredom of Instagram, and of the content they are consuming. Mindless usage of IG causes participants to get bored and leave the app. Yet, boredom motivates the majority of participants’ IG usage. The Boredom Paradox (BP), a term I have coined, refers to the paradoxical behaviors of participants on IG. Put simply, boredom motivates the usage of IG but also drives users from the app. Participants will open the app when they are bored but find themselves getting bored on the app which causes them to leave.

Boredom motivates seventy-five percent of participants’ usage. All participants stated that when they are bored, they open IG. Boredom usually occurs when they are standing in line, waiting, have nothing else to do, have a free moment, or are bored with the current task at hand. Participant 12 referred to IG as a “boredom filler.” Participant

10 noted that this boredom occurs because enrichment is needed: “I’ll be bored and want to switch to another task. IG is just another available task.” IG has placed itself as the perfect resource bored Gen Zers use, it is convenient, comfortable, and habitual. This motivation to open IG stems from feelings of boredom, and when those feelings arise, it’s a habit for participants to fill that boredom with IG.

Not only does boredom motivate the usage of IG, but it also drives participants off the app. Participant 1 said she does think boredom drives her off IG, “I don’t scroll on IG for very long most of the time because it does get boring after I see what I want to see.” Participant 4 said boredom drives him off IG, “If I’ve been on for a while, I’ll just be scrolling and after a while, I’ll see things that don’t pertain to me anymore.” Participant 8 said she will often open IG, not see anything that engages her right away, close the app and then find herself opening IG again a minute later only to remember that she was bored. This Boredom Paradox has two main causes, mindless scrolling and a lack of variety.

This mindless scrolling is due to the volume of ads on the IG feed. The algorithm fills the feed with ads which, for all participants, is not what they are there to see. Participants note that their friend's posts are usually at the top of their feed and as they keep scrolling, it’s more businesses and ads that they are less interested in. Participants express, “Once I reach that point I get bored and I get off” (Participant 1). Along with mindless scrolling due to ads, lack of content variety also causes boredom among participants which drives them off IG.

A lack of variety is due to the consistency of similar content. Participants noted that “If I’m seeing a lot of the same content, I get bored” (Participant 5). Participant 5

noted that if all the people she follows have all been to a concert, party, or home for the holidays, “it gets boring because everyone is posting about it” (Participant 5). This lack of variety in content can be due to the frequency of usage. If participants go on several times a day, they note they most likely don’t get the content they want. This unfulfilling usage leaves participants bored and ultimately drives them off the app they went to for fulfillment in the first place.

Discussion

Considering Gen Z’s native facility with technology and their increasingly important economic, political, and consumer power, scholarly attention to their social media behaviors and practices (Olejniczak 2022; Huang 2018), remains minimal. Specifically, there remains a lack of empirical research committed to exploring how and why this demographic uses Instagram. This paper helps fill this gap and extends current social media research by identifying specific habits and motivations. This begins to round out our understanding of an increasingly influential demographic’s digital presence. The quadrant framework, an unexpected finding, (Figure 1) that arose through analysis of participant data helped identify broad usage patterns based on their experiences and motivations. This brought to life an understanding of this under-studied demographic.

Creators were community-driven, inspiration seekers who produced content as a means to create a community. Participants fell into this quadrant because they were motivated by new engagement and connection with new people on IG. They gained inspiration from engagement with others. They treated IG as a way to outwardly express themselves. This is important because “Self-expression is about giving voice to one’s

unique view of the world” (Bradley, 2014, p. 13). This outward expression meant Creators would most likely have the most social influence among other users; they were the ones seeking those connections and interactions and whose behavior brought others together. They were giving voice to themselves and others similar to them. Creators will foster great connectedness and belonging in the digital realm.

Gardeners were social, FOMO-motivated users who sought to maintain and cultivate existing relationships through high usage of DMs, exclusive use of the Home Page (not the Explorer Page), and posting. Gardeners were closely connected to their friends and family digitally; IG was a maintenance resource to bridge interpersonal relationships. Half of the participants were Gardeners because they were motivated by personal engagement. They required social interactions and, “social media has become a preferred medium for communication” for Gardeners (Subramanian, 2017, p. 70). They did not seek new interactions. This meant that the only way users in this quadrant would expand their usage is if they were creating more real-life connections and relationships. Though this was a small sample size, it can translate to broader assumptions about certain types of Gen Z IG users.

Digital Scrapbookers were difficult to define given no participants fell into this quadrant. Scrapbookers produced content but their motivations differ from other quadrants. Rather than producing content to create a community like Creators or to update like Gardeners, Scrapbookers produced for personal purposes or enlightenment. No one fell into this mysterious quadrant because Instagram may not be a place users can fill the needs of individual production. This is important for future research because there may be individuals who use Instagram in this particular way that need to be studied and

understood. Anecdotally, I know individuals who would likely qualify as Digital Scrapbooks because they use IG, in part, to document their personal experiences and often review their posts primarily to relive these moments. These individuals tend to have limited numbers of followers, all of whom they know intimately and are family.

Observers were highly individual, selective, and intentional users who exclusively used the Explorer Page and valued the low-level commitment of stories. Observers sought a level of anonymity on IG, they enjoyed being there without really being there. Participants are in this quadrant because they seek personal growth or entertainment. This is important because it showed that a good portion of this demographic valued education over engagement. They seek to personally benefit from social media.

Mindless Usage & The Boredom Paradox

Mindless Instagram usage was a trend apparent in the majority of participants. Mindless usage may be a symptom of the digital hunger the younger generation experiences. New York Times writer, Ezra Klein, expressed the effects media had on him: “My brain, I realized, wasn’t just drifting. I was hungry” (Klein, 2022). He described mindless and passive usage as itchy. His mind needed more, but it wasn’t getting what it needed like an itch that cannot quite be scratched. There was constant seeking, scrolling, and clicking until he was right back where he started. Mindless social media usage promotes this neediness — this hunger—yet, doesn’t satisfy it. “Even when I was away from my computer, I yearned to check email, click links, and do some Googling. I wanted to be connected” (Klein, 2022). This longing for connection, enlightenment, and anything to offer a bit of something different is exactly what participants in this study

experienced while using IG. They were seeking something but were unclear about what exactly.

Past research has described the hypothesis of “Passive social media use,” and the monitoring of other people's lives without engaging in direct exchanges with others. Studies done on Facebook usage note that “passive usage of social network sites is more frequent than active usage”(Verduyn, 2017). Similar to my study, the majority of participants' IG usage is passive, perhaps mindless. This browsing induces upward social comparison, which, subsequently, provokes envy (Verduyn, 2017, p. 274). However, my study showed that passive social media usage provokes feelings of boredom rather than envy which caused the majority of participants to open IG as well as leave IG.

Boredom's dual influence on individuals to log on and log off is what I call The Boredom Paradox (TBP). Whelan (2020) argued that “One of the reasons why many people engage with social media is to avoid boredom” (p. 869). However, when it comes to the participants in this study, there is more to the boredom that is experienced. This was apparent among participants because IG is not offering the affordances and fulfilling the gratification users are seeking. Users were seeking enlightenment, entertainment, and engagement, yet were only left with boredom which motivates them to leave the app.

Moreover, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) argues that individuals turn to social media to fulfill unmet social and psychological needs (Schaffer, 2020). When an individual member needs an escape, there are specific media available to gratify this need satisfactorily (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010 p. 35). UGT offers broad forms of motivation for media usage, including information, socialization, entertainment, and escape (Huang, 2018, p. 3). For participants in this study, Instagram is the media supposedly gratifying

the need of combating boredom. Boredom is not explicitly stated in these motivations, but is crucial when discussing this generation which, “ is the most exposed to boredom, or, to say it better, they get bored more easily and in a shorter time” (Cervi, 2021, p. 199).

Participants expect IG to fulfill their boredom by seeking entertainment, enlightenment, or engagement. However, participants are not seeming to get the gratification they expect when opening IG. There is a disconnect between the expectation of gratification and the reality of the lack thereof. “Use” and “gratification” are not synonymous in this case. I have found an instance where gratification is not a direct correlation of media use. Participants are using Instagram, but not gaining gratification. It is uses without gratification. Participants are actively choosing Instagram to satisfy their needs, but what happens when those needs aren’t met? What happens when that gratification is nonexistent or a rare occurrence? The majority of participants' usage is unfulfilling and ungratifying, yet they go back, day after day. There is a new possibility for The Boredom Paradox to influence how we conceptualize and use social media and understand why digital gratification is less frequent for younger users.

Practical Application for Practitioners

This type of research can have important applications for future work. Given the lack of research in this area, articulating developing ideas about the habits and motivations of Instagram usage of the younger generation is an important step in mapping out the field of digital usage for further study.

Creators were community-driven users who seek inspiration and new engagement. Engagement with a variety of accounts was a daily habit that was gained

through active control and curation of their feeds. They did not view themselves as influencers but wanted to have a good social impact on people through the content they post. They were creative and self-expressive, sharing their passions in an assertive, non-people-pleaser way. They created their corner of IG where they did what they love and hoped others would enjoy it too. Though Creators did not view themselves as influencers, they did have an influence on the people they follow. There was a sense of belongingness in a shared community that Creators recognized and were passionate about. The following strategies might help nurture Creators' online presence:

- Foster creativity among users by encouraging them to create and produce.
- Connect them to others by promoting a community that aligns with their needs and interests
- Reward creativity and production of content
- Encourage self-expression in their content
- Offer inspiration through a variety of content that aligns with their interests
- Cultivate engagement with new communities

Gardeners were highly social, FOMO-motivated users who sought to maintain existing relationships through high usage of DMs, exclusive use of the Home Page—rather than the Explorer Page – and posting. Digital production maintains a connection to others by involving friends and family in their lives. IG usage supported interpersonal interactions by maintaining relationships in the digital space that translated to real life. A disconnect between the expectation of engagement with others and the reality of not

consuming the content they enjoy was a daily occurrence. The following strategies might support Gardeners' online presence:

- Utilize interpersonal connection by connecting to users personally
- Help Gardeners strengthen their relationships by offering them content they can share with others
- Create shareable content
- Combat their fear of missing out by including Gardeners and making them feel valued
- Validate Gardeners by engaging with their content and showing them you are a real person.

Digital Scrapbookers were theoretically a combination of the production qualities of Creators, and the individual usage habits of Observers. Scrapbookers post content for themselves and a close, even intimate, circle. It is likely these users' followers are immediate family and friends. They treat IG like a diary or personal journal where they can collect and store memories and personal content that they can revisit and relive.

Important questions about this quadrant remain:

- What is the nature of their online (social) interaction?
- What other factors inform their motivations to post on social media?
- Do SNS other than IG fulfill their needs and what are the qualities of these SNS?
- How closely do Scrapbookers align with the social media usage habits of other Gen Z users; or, are Scrapbooker usage patterns more clearly represented by different generations of users?

Observers were selective and intentional users who sought enlightenment through the exclusive use of the Explorer Page. IG was a refuge where they went to disconnect from the world. Observers were not on IG to keep up with friends, rather they seek to consume content that aligned with their interests and passions. They actively curated their Instagram Explorer Page to be filled with content they wanted to see and got satisfaction out of. Peer pressure to stay socially involved motivated their initial usage of IG, and now their usage has shifted to be more individual, focusing on news, entertainment, and enlightenment rather than engagement with others. The following strategies could be used to support Observers' online engagement:

- Focus on learning new information and enlightenment that expands their view of the world
- Teach them things that align with their interests
- Utilize low-level commitment content such as stories
- Attend the novel by creating new, interesting content that has not been seen before

Overall Gen Z Instagrammers had unique habits and motivation. Though similar, participants differ in many ways. These findings suggest that young people's habits and motivations have a connection to how they experience and make decisions in the world, Market and digital media researchers, therefore, might consider the following:

- What is important to Gen Z Instagrammers and how can we fulfill their needs online?
- How can we fulfill Gen Z Instagrammer's expectations?

- How can content posted on Instagram engage the younger generation and meet their expectations?
- What do I know about my Gen Z audience's digital use habits?
- What motivates my Gen Z audience to be online and engage with content?
- How can I differentiate my approach to Gen Z users to maximize their digital experiences?

Future Research & Limitations

Researching individuals' perceived habits and comparing that to the reality of their usage through the usage quadrant would be a topic of future research. This would be done similarly to this study, rather than having myself place participants on the usage grid, participants would place themselves on the grid and explain why. This would offer insight into the disconnect between expectations and reality of participants' usage. Discovering individuals that fall into the Digital scrapbooker quadrant is another topic of interest.

This study had potential limitations. Given the lack of response, qualified participants, and time, my sample size was small. This offered me limited data about this demographic as a whole. In the future, I would collect a large sample size to better represent this demographic. I would also gather an equal amount of males and females. This study included more females than men which offered more insights towards that demographic. I would like to better represent the male population in the future.

Conclusion

The digital habits and motivations of participants in this study shed light on unexposed areas of social media. The usage quadrants offer a unique perspective that taps into the minds of Gen Z Instagrammers. This in-depth analysis of how and why Gen Z college students use Instagram promotes the social well-being of users. It encourages intentional usage of Instagram which can translate to other social media sites. Knowing how Gen Z use IG will influence how they make offline decisions and foster offline relationships. Researchers are questioning how, “Gen Z and their use of social media will shape individuals, organizations and societal outcomes in different situations” (Yadav, 2020, p.116). I have answered some of those questions but also opened many more. This study brings us one step closer to understanding this complex and fascinating generation and their digital habits on Instagram.

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Appendix 1

Qualifications for Participants

- 18-25 years old (the adults of the Gen Z population)
- Currently attending college or recently graduated
- Located in Utah
- 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

Screening Questionnaire

https://byu.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ahMWaEYRox6oOa2

- How long have you been on Instagram?
- What is your average DAILY usage of Instagram?
- What is your gender?
- How old are you?
- Do you currently attend college?
- Do you currently live in Utah?
- Are you a fluent English speaker?
- Would you be available for an in-person interview in the Provo/Orem area?
- What is your Instagram handle?
- Is your account public or private?

Interview Questions

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?)

Verbal Think-aloud Observation Prompts & Questions

- 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?
- What gets you to like a post?
- What gets you to follow someone?

Reflective Interview Questions:

- 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?