

Instagram and Perception of Reality: How Visual Culture Blurs Boundaries between Authenticity and Representation

Instagram ve Gerçeklik Algısı: Görsel Kültürün Özgünlük ile Temsil Arasındaki Sınırları Bulanıklaştırması

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Araştırma Makalesi | Research Article

Başvuru Received: 11.01.2026 ■ Kabul Accepted: 18.05.2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Instagram enables university students to gain practical knowledge edited content and visual effects, filters, and algorithmically curated feeds. The research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to study 20 heavy Instagram users (18-24 years old) who revealed how they understand Instagram as a filtered platform yet accept its perfect images as their life assessment standards. The research shows Instagram functions as a dual reality platform that shows curated content about beauty and success and lifestyle to establish new standards for user self-evaluation and life expectations. The research demonstrates Instagram modifies user reality through three distinct methods including content editing and filter application and social comparison assessment. The research shows women experience more appearance-based stress than men, who hold incorrect beliefs about female appearance and social expectations and status definitions. The combination of virtual and real elements creates emotional effects including anxiety, self-doubt, identity breakdown, and decreased life satisfaction. The research adds new knowledge about digital selfhood and hyperreality and mediatized identity while demonstrating the requirement for media literacy education that teaches students to handle emotional and relational and aesthetic aspects of digital existence.

Keywords: Instagram, Perception of Reality, Digital Identity, Media Literacy, Digital Self-Presentation.

ÖZ

Bu araştırma, Instagram'ın düzenlenmiş içerik, görsel efektler ve algoritmik sunum aracılığıyla öğrencilerin gerçek karşılaşmaları içerisinde nasıl pratik bilgi edindiklerini incelemektedir. Çalışmada, Instagram'ı filtrelenmiş bir platform olarak algılamalarına rağmen kusursuz imgeleri yaşam değerlendirme ölçütü olarak benimseyen 18-24 yaş aralığındaki 20 yoğun kullanıcı, Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz (IPA) yöntemiyle incelenmiştir. Araştırma bulguları, Instagram'ın güzellik, başarı ve yaşam tarzına ilişkin seçilmiş içerikler sunarak öz değerlendirme ve yaşam beklentileri için yeni standartlar oluşturan çift katmanlı bir gerçeklik platformu olarak işlev gördüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, Instagram'ın kullanıcı gerçekliğini üç temel yöntem aracılığıyla dönüştürdüğünü göstermektedir: içerik düzenleme, filtre kullanımı ve sosyal karşılaştırma süreçleri. Bulgular, kadınların erkeklere göre görünüşe dayalı stresi daha yoğun yaşadığını, erkeklerin ise kadın görünümüne dair toplumsal beklentiler ve statü tanımları konusunda yanıltıcı inançlara sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Sanal ve gerçek unsurların birleşimi; kaygı, öz-şüphe, kimlik çözülmesi ve yaşam doyumunda azalma gibi duygusal etkiler üretmektedir. Bu araştırma; dijital benlik, hipergerçeklik ve dolayımlanmış kimlik alanlarına yeni bilgiler eklerken, öğrencilerin dijital varoluşun duygusal, ilişkisel ve estetik boyutlarıyla baş edebilmelerini sağlayacak bir medya okuryazarlığı eğitiminin gerekliliğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Instagram, Gerçeklik Algısı, Dijital Kimlik, Medya Okuryazarlığı, Dijital Benlik Sunumu.

Introduction

Instagram evolved from its original photo-sharing feature into a leading visual communication platform which now controls how people interact through digital media over the last decade. The platform functions as a basic social instrument because it lets users from more than two billion people worldwide establish connections with others. Users can develop their self-perception through visual content on the platform while they evaluate themselves and others, and their surroundings. By integrating visual design, content filtering, and augmented reality features, Instagram creates a virtual environment that blurs the boundary between reality and artificial representation. The platform creates a social environment which transforms how users experience life through its display of life content and its evaluation of life experiences and social status.

Users can now present themselves to others through their cultural practices because Instagram introduced this new feature. Users on Instagram use their carefully chosen images to show their identity through a visually appealing performance-based method which differs from text-based platforms of the past. Users on Instagram use their platform to create perfect online personas through their front-stage performances according to Goffman (1959) while hiding their actual daily experiences. The platform expands Goffman's original concept through its instant visual feedback system and social rating features which display users their performed identity. Users must constantly maintain their online presence through an environment which prioritizes user visibility and social comparison, and validation.

Existing literature shows that users experience emotional changes and develop negative body image and distorted social norm perceptions because of the curated visual content they encounter on Instagram (Bonfanti et al., 2024; Flores-Mata & Castellano-Tejedor, 2024; Moreton & Greenfield, 2022). Users experience exaggerated content on the platform which produces negative

social comparison effects that result in mental health deterioration. University students who are building their identities and social status experience the impact of Instagram's social dynamics that focus on comparison. Research shows that Instagram users who compare themselves to peers and influencers experience decreased body satisfaction and increased self-objectification and depression and lower self-worth (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; R  ther et al., 2023; Tiggemann et al., 2018). The research findings about visual-digital platforms reveal only a small part of the complete psychological and sociocultural changes which these platforms have triggered.

Instagram serves as a platform which allows users to create their own reality in addition to serving as a platform for social comparison. People now experience social life differently because digital platforms through deep mediatization according to Couldry and Hepp (2017) transform their social interactions. Baudrillard (1994) shows that repeated representations which artists enhance become more powerful than actual events in the world. Users on Instagram develop their understanding of reality through filtered faces and enhanced bodies and algorithmically boosted lifestyles and curated happiness which they use as reference points to determine what they consider real and normal and desirable.

Research also shows that users of Instagram maintain their internalization of unrealistic beauty standards which they know Instagram displays through fake content. Current digital subjectivity is characterized by a complex relationship where individuals interact with content they recognize as artificial while processing its emotional implications. Previous research indicate that users recognize editing tools and filters but they continue using these images to assess their body image (Mancin et al., 2023; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). But the studies fail to explain how students experience conflicting forces which affect their perceptions about their life choices and social bonds and their ability to achieve personal success and maintain self-worth.

Literature on Instagram's curated realities lacks sufficient investigation into how gender affects users' interpretations of these content types and indicates that men now maintain strict standards about female physical appearance and attractiveness and lifestyle presentation which they learn from Instagram content. Women analyze digital social metrics by tracking messages and likes to study online social behavior yet these digital metrics do not show actual relationship potential or attractiveness. Instagram creates new social expectations which affect how men and women view relationships and judge their partners and their own self-value.

Evidence indicates that Instagram use causes particular psychological effects but scientists need more theoretical and empirical evidence to confirm these findings. Research studies use Instagram as a factor which affects established psychological variables including self-esteem and anxiety levels. The current research lacks understanding about how young adults experience Instagram through their subjective experiences because it fails to study their image interpretation methods and their methods for handling feelings of inadequacy and their ability to distinguish between online and offline realities. While the blurring of boundaries between authentic and curated content is theoretically acknowledged, there is a need for methodological approaches that explore the subjective understanding of this phenomenon. The research method of Phenomenology provides an effective solution to address this knowledge gap. Through its focus on lived experiences and meaning creation processes phenomenology enables researchers to study how people understand digital environments and how these understandings affect their self-perception and their understanding of reality. The dual process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enables researchers to understand how participants create meaning from their experiences while also analyzing the ways researchers interpret this meaning creation of meaning. The research applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to uncover the psychological and social processes

through which Instagram transforms university students' understanding of reality.

This research investigates visual content because it serves as a fundamental element for creating contemporary human understanding. To reach its goal, this research investigates three fundamental questions about visual media effects on modern human perception:

Research Question 1: How do Instagram users perceive the representations of life presented on the platform?

Research Question 2: How does Instagram influence users' perception of reality, particularly through curated representations, filters, and augmented reality features?

Research Question 3: How does the blurring of boundaries between reality and virtuality shape users' digital experiences?

This research also extends Instagram research by moving away from individual psychological results such as body satisfaction to study how people perceive reality. Second, it delivers gender-based phenomenological research which demonstrates how men and women react to Instagram representation standards in distinct ways. Lastly, the research establishes Instagram as a hybrid reality system which unites visual culture with algorithmic visibility and social comparison to create a space where reality and representation merge into one. The research provides new insights about digital visual spaces that form modern self-identity while creating a basis for advanced media literacy programs which focus on emotional and relational and identity-based aspects of digital existence.

Literature Review

Young adults who experience social and psychological changes use Instagram as their main platform to communicate visually and build relationships and define their identities. Through its visual nature Instagram creates effects that

reach further than user profiles to modify how people view attractiveness and achievement and social expectations and their entire perception of reality. The review combines theoretical and empirical evidence from five connected research domains which study Instagram as a visual system and its impact on social norms and algorithmic effects and users' psychological responses to comparison and their use of filters and augmented reality and their interpretation of digital content through gendered lenses. The research develops a complete theoretical framework to analyze how Instagram's edited visual content affects university students' understanding of reality.

Instagram as a visual culture system

Instagram now serves more than one billion users across the world while maintaining its leadership role in worldwide youth culture (Aslam, 2025). The visual nature of Instagram has established images as the main tool for people to express their identity and social connections and personal values through their online presence. The Instagram platform according to Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2023) creates an environment where users focus intensely on their physical appearance and how they present themselves to others. Users need to establish one digital identity according to van Dijck (2013) through their purposeful selection of online content which determines beauty standards and generates social visibility.

The visual nature of Instagram distinguishes it from text-based platforms because it establishes a communication space where users focus on attractive images instead of genuine storytelling. According to Tufail et al. (2022) and Eldem and Elibol (2017) university students use Instagram to create perfect online personas through the omission of their regular and unattractive daily activities. According to Sharma et al. (2022), Instagram users employ colorism, social comparison, and lifestyle presentation to reshape their understanding of social reality.

By centering visual representations in everyday practice, Instagram constructs an imagery-

based world that aligns with Debord's (1994) conceptualization of the 'society of the spectacle,' where lived reality is increasingly superseded by its own representation. This shift ensures that social interaction is mediated primarily through the control of the gaze and the aesthetics of the image.

Research studies demonstrate that visual culture produces adverse psychological effects which affect human beings. Multiple views of flawless images lead viewers to develop body dysmorphia and body dissatisfaction which results in decreased self-esteem (Rüther et al., 2023; Chiaghana et al., 2024). University students in Moreton and Greenfield's (2022) qualitative research linked their Instagram activities to social expectations about physical attractiveness and professional success and social involvement which led to mental health issues. The research conducted by Flores-Mata and Castellano-Tejedor (2024) showed that Instagram usage among young adults leads to negative impacts on their self-esteem and body image.

Bonfanti et al. (2024) performed a meta-analysis to demonstrate that people show more social comparison behavior after seeing perfect images because it results in decreased body satisfaction. Users of Instagram develop their personal beauty standards by viewing the perfectly presented content that appears on their feed. According to Sekarlangit et al. (2022), the image-based design of Instagram lets users view how their lives compare unfavorably to others who show inspirational content.

The fast growth of Instagram turned it into a platform which unites how people show their identity with their life aspirations and their social expectations. Research on platform motivations shows Instagram functions independently from Facebook and Twitter because it depends on visual content and users spend time improving their images (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2019). University students use Instagram for purposes that extend past entertainment because they also use the platform to confirm their social

position and show their individuality (Eldem & Elibol, 2017).

Research demonstrates that social media platforms establish deceptive social standards through content selection which follows user perceptions of standard behavior (Robertson et al., 2024). Research also shows that users view Instagram content as more attractive and polished than their actual life experiences according to Tiggemann and Anderberg (2019).

Social norms, algorithmic amplification, and the construction of digital reality

Users on Instagram establish social norms through their content but the platform's automated system also determines how these norms develop. Cialdini and Jacobson (2021) explain that social norms consist of typical behaviors and opinions which most people in a group normally follow. The content users see on Instagram exists mainly because of algorithmic selection which creates artificial behavioral patterns. The Instagram algorithm selects content based on visual appeal and emotional impact and engagement potential which creates false social standards that differ from actual human conduct and physical characteristics.

Schoenmueller et al. (2020) show that users on social media platforms tend to share only their most extreme experiences when writing reviews. The Instagram algorithm selects the most dramatic aesthetic content which creates false impressions about typical human appearance. The "funhouse mirror" effect which Robertson et al. (2024) describe in their research shows digital platforms create fake social standards which users think represent real social norms.

The research conducted by Kumar et al. (2023) establishes strong evidence about how digital systems create deceptive representations of actual reality. Kumar et al. found out that toxic content originates from 3% of accounts yet these accounts create most of the toxic material found online. The small number of toxic accounts creates

the dominant atmosphere in online communities through their toxic content. The research by Kumar et al. (2018) also found that 1% of users create most online community disputes. The research shows that Instagram's feed presentation creates deceptive views of reality because it shows only selected content which distorts users' perceptions of attractiveness and success and desirability.

Research indicates Instagram creates stronger appearance-based comparison behaviors which affect users most between 18 and 24 years old. Research studies have proven that university students who spend more time on Instagram develop negative body image because they compare themselves to others (Chiaghana et al., 2024; Ruiz et al., 2022; Tufail et al., 2022). Users develop negative self-perceptions after viewing perfect images from influencers and their peers and their friends on social media (Sattarpanahi et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2022). Users also develop negative self-perceptions according to Beenen (2021) after watching perfectly edited content that shows unrealistic life situations. Users develop social meanings about success and attractiveness and social value through their interpretation of displayed images. Research also shows that social media comparison activities result in body image problems and eating disorders according to multiple studies which employed meta-analytic methods (Bonfanti et al., 2024). The research conducted by Akintola (2024) shows that Nigerian university students develop lower self-esteem after watching content which focuses on physical appearance.

Users who compare themselves on Instagram experience decreased life satisfaction and develop more doubts about themselves (Sarnoto & Rahmawati, 2025). Research on TikTok shows that users who view fitness content with perfect images develop unrealistic body expectations. Yau and Reich (2019) explain that teenagers feel social media requires them to develop strategic visual content which follows Instagram's established visual standards. Users on Instagram follow social norms to present themselves because they want

to prevent social rejection and keep users active on the platform. Instagram functions as a system which improves existing social standards and uses algorithms to improve visual content which establishes fake social norms.

Social comparison, self-esteem, and the psychology of digital evaluation

Research findings show that Instagram platform usage creates comparison behavior between users which produces negative impacts on their body image and mental health. The research of Trifiro and Prena (2021) and Johar and Hasbullah (2024) and Akintola (2024) demonstrate that Instagram usage intensity directly leads to decreased self-esteem levels. The research by Flores-Mata and Castellano-Tejedor (2024) showed that people who compare themselves on Instagram multiple times experience decreased body satisfaction.

The study by Pedalino and Camerini (2022) demonstrates that Instagram browsing activities which do not include posting or interacting lead to decreased body appreciation especially when users view influencer content. The research shows that Instagram users base their self-worth assessment through visual content they view.

The study by Tiggemann et al. (2018) used experimental methods to show that users who receive many “likes” on Instagram will compare themselves to others more frequently and develop negative body image perceptions. The research demonstrates that Instagram metrics generate new analytical data which users can understand. Users check their engagement statistics to determine their value and popularity which leads them to develop new self-views and emotional reactions.

The person-specific media effects model, as demonstrated by the research of Kivranoglu and Caglar (2021), shows that Instagram users experience varying degrees of negative effects, even though the overall impact appears minimal. The model explains how Instagram can create significant problems for certain users while having

little or no effect on others.

Young women according to Young et al. (2022) face an unavoidable situation on Instagram which leads them to feel insufficient and forces them to match societal beauty standards. Sattarpanahi et al. (2024) demonstrate how Instagram displays unattainable beauty standards which determine what society considers attractive for women. Research findings indicate that Instagram users perform continuous self-assessment and assessment of others through their evaluation of edited content and numerical data.

Filters, augmented reality, and the emergence of hyperreality

Instagram creates cultural effects through its built-in filter and AR capabilities which originated from its platform. The digital and physical worlds merge through filters which create symmetrical faces and smooth skin and brighten eyes and transform body shapes. The research by Mancin et al. (2023) demonstrated that female students who used filters developed negative body image and their self-objectification increased. Tiggemann and Anderberg (2019) investigated Instagram image effects on body image through their study which proved that flawless images generate body dissatisfaction yet displaying authentic content with perfect images decreases negative responses. The research shows that filtered pictures lead people to develop abnormal beauty standards which they use as their personal beauty benchmarks.

The pursuit of digital flawlessness through filters resonates with Byung-Chul Han's (2015) critique of the ‘transparency society’, where the digital aesthetic excludes ‘otherness’ and natural imperfection in favor of a curated, narcissistic reality. In this context, the filter is not merely an optional enhancement but a tool for creating a hyper-visible and positive digital existence

Users actively use filters to create digital versions of themselves which match Instagram beauty standards according to some studies (Sukmayadi

& Yahya, 2019; Suhada et al., 2022) Research shows filters have moved beyond their basic purpose to become essential identity creation tools which people use to build their personal identities. Research studies reveal how people experience mental and emotional effects when they depend on edited pictures. Suhada et al. (2022) show that young women develop a negative view of their natural looks because they see filtered images for so long. Instagram enables users to create performative identities through its algorithm-based reward system according to van Dijck (2013). The digital enhancements studied by Baudrillard (1994) through his concept of hyperreality help explain how these digital enhancements affect human perception. Hyperreality emerges when artificial representations surpass actual reality in importance. The platform Instagram has made filtered images the dominant form of self-expression which now serves as the standard for how people want to be seen by others. People experience their digital selves through AR features which change their appearance for others and their personal perception of themselves.

Gendered interpretations of curated digital content

The way people understand Instagram's carefully designed content depends heavily on their gender identity. The research by Hill and Öz (2024) demonstrates that college women who view perfect body images develop negative body image and decreased self-confidence. The research by Kim and Kim (2025) demonstrates how male exposure to cultural beauty standards leads them to establish unattainable beauty standards for women.

The research by Casale et al. (2024) showed that Instagram problematic use results in decreased body investment and self-care activities but produces distinct outcomes between male and female users. The research by Limniou et al. (2025) about TikTok content shows that users' fitness ideal internalization patterns depend heavily on their gender identity.

Users create their digital identity through emotional responses to online content according to Vieira (2025) yet their gender determines their ability to recognize social validation indicators. Research shows that men form false beliefs about their appearance because they get digital attention but women fail to recognize male interest (Yau & Reich, 2019). Sarnoto and Rahmawati (2025) demonstrated through their study that social media users develop self-doubt because of deceptive content which creates unattainable expectations. Literature shows Instagram produces gendered effects which influence users to evaluate their life quality and physical appeal and their self-worth.

Methodology

The research design of this study uses qualitative phenomenological methods to investigate how Instagram creates university students' real-world understanding through their personal experiences with Instagram content editing and algorithmic feed presentation and social media comparison activities. The research method of Phenomenology works best for this goal because it studies how people experience and make sense of their daily life events instead of tracking established measurement variables (Finlay, 2014; Andrade et al., 2023). This approach allows for a detailed examination of how users navigate the cognitive and emotional tensions arising from their interactions with digital representations. The visual culture of Instagram allows researchers to analyze user experiences of authenticity and representation through their daily activities by implementing phenomenological inquiry as their research approach.

The research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its analytical method because of this epistemological perspective. The research method IPA draws its foundation from phenomenology and hermeneutics and idiography to study how people understand important life events (Smith et al., 2009). The research method requires participants to assess their personal experiences which the researcher

will study through their own interpretation of these experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The research method of IPA works best for studying intricate social cultural events including Instagram usage because users create their online selves while they compare others and shape their reality through digital tools. The research benefits from IPA's idiographic method which demands researchers to study individual cases first before they can discover shared elements between cases (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Participants

Following the recommendations for IPA and phenomenological research, the study employed purposeful criterion sampling to recruit heavy Instagram users (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). The research included participants who were university students between 18 and 24 years old and active Instagram users who consumed posts and stories and reels and influencer-generated content on a regular basis. The study included 20 university students, consisting of 11 female participants (55%) and 9 male participants (45%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 21.1 years ($SD = 1.8$). Participants represented diverse academic backgrounds, including social sciences and humanities (40%, $n=8$), communication and media studies (25%, $n=5$), business and economics (20%, $n=4$), and engineering and technical fields (15%, $n=3$), creating an information-rich sample appropriate for phenomenological inquiry.

Instagram usage intensity was notably high across the sample. Six participants (30%) reported using Instagram for 2-3 hours daily, nine participants (45%) for 3-5 hours, and five participants (25%) reported spending more than 5 hours per day on the platform. Regarding content production, 17 participants (85%) reported posting content at least once a month, while three participants (15%) posted less frequently.

In terms of content consumption, 16 participants (80%) reported following influencers or public figures regularly, while four participants (20%)

primarily followed friends and acquaintances. All participants identified themselves as active users who accessed Instagram multiple times daily and regularly consumed stories, reels, and feed posts.

The diversity of engagement levels and demographic backgrounds made the participant group suitable for exploring how Instagram shapes university students' perceptions of reality through lived experience.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences with Instagram. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Kastamonu University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee, and additional permission was granted to conduct the research at Bozkurt Vocational School of Higher Education. The researcher explained both the research goals and participant rights to all students before starting the study while they received written consent from each participant. The research participants received two guarantees that their study responses would remain confidential and their identities would stay protected through anonymous participation and they could leave the research at any time without facing any adverse consequences.

The researcher conducted individual interviews which took place in peaceful environments where participants could feel at ease either through face-to-face meetings or protected video calls. The research team conducted interviews which lasted between 60 minutes and 90 minutes to let participants share their entire experiences through longer storytelling sessions. The research design used semi-structured methods which maintained interview consistency through standardized questions while allowing researchers to perform extensive investigations of newly discovered subjects. The research interview included particular open-ended questions which aimed to discover participants' mental operations regarding Instagram content and their emotional

responses to Instagram elements including edited posts and algorithm-driven visibility and lifestyle and success depictions.

The research questions were created to progress from direct personal experiences toward general observations about authenticity and self-presentation and gender-based marketing strategies and mental health issues. The study's three research questions received support from the data collection instrument which followed a progression from concrete experiences to general reflections about authenticity and self-presentation and gendered targeting and mental health. The researchers obtained permission from participants to record their audio responses which they used to verify the interview data. The researchers conducted verbatim transcription of all recorded material before multiple reviews of the transcripts to maintain the exact words which participants had spoken. The researcher documented field notes during all interview sessions to document both the interview setting and his initial reactions to the collected data and the emotional responses of participants. The researcher used reflexive journaling to identify personal assumptions during data collection because this method helps phenomenologists follow their research principles.

Data Analysis

The research data underwent Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for analysis. The researcher performed multiple transcript readings to fully understand the statements made by participants (Finlay, 2014). The researchers needed to start by recording both descriptive information and language patterns and their initial conceptual framework which Larkin et al. (2006) stated for analysis. The research notes enabled researchers to identify core themes which described how each study participant understood how Instagram transformed their understanding of reality. The research used IPA's idiographic method which needed individual case evaluation before researchers could evaluate these cases against each other (Smith et al., 2009; Smith &

Shinebourne, 2012).

The researcher used abstraction and subsumption and contextualization methods to discover connections between different themes which resulted in the development of eight superordinate categories including hyperreal representation and algorithmic influence and social comparison and curated authenticity and perceived unreality and identity negotiation and aspirational lifestyle projection and emotional ambivalence. The researcher documented all interpretive choices through reflexive memos which also tracked how their initial assumptions affected the research process (Berger, 2015). The research results were organized through five core themes which emerged from the analytical process into: curated life displays and comparison practices and unattainable standards which lead to letdowns and the fusion of actuality with digital content and their effects on psychological well-being.

Trustworthiness and rigor

The research followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria which included credibility and dependability and confirmability and transferability to establish trustworthiness. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data via repeated transcript readings, member checking with several participants who confirmed that preliminary themes reflected their experiences, and peer debriefing with qualitative research colleagues to challenge assumptions and refine analytic coherence. The research team implemented a complete audit system which tracked all methodological choices and coding activities and theme construction and reflective comments and provided complete verbatim transcripts to maintain data interpretation accuracy (Shenton, 2004). The researcher used reflexive journaling and bracketing techniques (Finlay, 2014; Berger, 2015) to improve confirmability which allowed them to base their interpretations on actual participant statements and common patterns between cases instead of personal prejudices. The research established transferability through its detailed descriptions of study participants

and their environments and their social media activities (Geertz, 1973) which enabled readers to determine how well the study results would apply to comparable research groups.

Findings

Research Question 1: How do Instagram users perceive the representations of life presented on the platform?

The research results showed that most participants believed Instagram displayed perfect life images which did not match real existence. All study participants agreed that the platform shows only a carefully chosen set of perfectly edited and strategically presented moments which do not match real-life experiences. The research findings from this study confirm earlier studies which demonstrate that users of Instagram use the platform to show their genuine selves by selecting their content carefully (Yau & Reich, 2019; Trifiro & Prena, 2021). The participants acknowledged Instagram shows fake content yet they stated these fake representations create powerful emotional effects. As one female participant stated, *“Even though I know Instagram is not real-life, I still feel affected by what I see there”* (Female, 20). The study by Tiggemann and Anderberg (2019) shows that users develop cognitive-emotional dissonance because they understand the content is fake yet they experience emotional distress.

Multiple participants stated that Instagram shows false images of reality which present an ideal version of how life should exist. The platform operates as a cultural environment which establishes norms instead of serving as an unbiased presentation area according to phenomenological analysis. One male participant explained, *“Everything looks so perfect there... it doesn't represent real-life at all, but it still feels like what life should be”* (Male, 21). This mirrors the “funhouse mirror effect” discussed by Robertson et al. (2024) shows how people learn to recognize filtered images which they eventually use to judge what reality looks like.

The research findings from RQ1 show that people from different genders have different views about these representations. The male participants in the study analyzed Instagram content based on their perceptions of luxury and material comfort and social status. As one male student explained, *“Girls look at the luxurious lives of others -women wearing expensive clothes, taking expensive vacations- and they start expecting to have a similar life”* (Male, 22). The female participants in this study concentrated their attention on perfect beauty standards and complete physical perfection because they stated *“Boys view women who have flawless bodies yet they want us to match their appearance”* (Female, 20). This gendered differentiation resonates with Casale et al. (2024) and Limniou et al. (2025), who found that social media imposes distinct aesthetic and lifestyle expectations on women and men. The research findings show that users agree Instagram shows unrealistic content but the content meanings and resulting social pressures vary between male and female users.

Research Question 2: How does Instagram influence users' perception of reality, particularly through curated representations, filters, and augmented reality?

Findings for RQ2 show that Instagram reshapes users' perception of reality through three interrelated mechanisms: visual curation, filters and augmented reality, and comparison-based meaning-making. These processes echo the literature on hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994), digital aesthetic norms (Mancin et al., 2023), and algorithmic visibility (Kumar et al., 2023).

Participants consistently reported that Instagram creates a “new normal,” causing ordinary life to appear insufficient. Curated content establishes heightened standards of beauty, success, happiness, and lifestyle. One female participant explained, *“You see people your age travelling, buying things, living big lives... and you think, why am I not like them?”* (Female, 21). This aligns with Bonfanti et al. (2024), who highlight the dissatisfaction produced by constant upward

comparison.

Filters emerged as one of the strongest findings under RQ2. Although participants agreed that filters were a form of deception, every participant admitted to using them. One participant stated, *"It is hard not to go unfiltered when everyone else is using filters"* (Female, 19). Another noted, *"Filters are a kind of deception, but everyone uses them, so I use them too"* (Female, 21). This indicates that filters have become a social norm rather than an optional enhancement, reinforcing Mancin et al. (2023) argument on "filter-based self-discrepancy."

A striking finding is that filtered images gradually reshape self-perception. Several participants reported feeling dissatisfied with their real appearance after becoming accustomed to filtered versions of themselves. One participant described, *"When I see myself without a filter now, I don't like it... because I got used to the filtered version"* (Female, 22). This is consistent with Robertson et al. (2024) notion of "hyperreal embodiment," in which digital images begin to surpass lived bodily identity.

Gender differences again played a role: women experienced filters as a beauty mandate, while men felt filters constructed unrealistic expectations about female attractiveness. As one female participant noted, *"Boys think girls should look like the filtered version. It becomes their standard for attractiveness"* (Female, 20). This supports Sattarpanahi et al. (2024) findings on beauty-based competitive pressures amplified by digital manipulation.

The analysis indicates that social comparison processes on Instagram are deeply bifurcated by gender, extending beyond physical appearance to encompass the perception of social and romantic opportunities. This creates a "limitless opportunity" mirage where both genders perceive the other as having an unfair advantage in the digital ecosystem.

The Male Perspective (Social Status and Access):

Male participants frequently described a sense of resentment regarding the perceived volume of attention women receive. They interpreted the platform's architecture -specifically direct messages and engagement- as a tool that grants women a "monopoly" on social choices, leading to a perception of women as socially unapproachable or "arrogant".

"I feel like every girl on Instagram has hundreds of guys in her DMs. It makes them feel like they are on a different level, even if they are just normal people in real-life. They have so many choices that a regular guy doesn't even stand a chance". (Male, 21)

The Female Perspective (The 'Supermodel' Mandate): Conversely, female participants highlighted that the endless stream of curated global beauty standards reshapes male expectations. They expressed that men internalize hyperreal, filtered images as a baseline, expecting real-life women to compete with an infinite and unattainable digital ideal.

"Social media makes men think that 'supermodel' beauty is the baseline. Because they see thousands of perfect, filtered faces every day, they expect us to look like that 24/7. They think there is always someone 'prettier' just one scroll away". (Female, 20)

This perception of "limitless opportunity" constitutes a significant digital distortion. While the platform provides a veneer of endless options, it often lacks authentic interpersonal depth, contributing to "identity fragmentation" and "emotional exhaustion". This illusion devalues real-world connections; men may withdraw due to perceived competition, while women face the psychological pressure of being compared to algorithmically amplified standards.

RQ2 can therefore be summarized as follows: Instagram alters users' sense of reality by generating unattainable standards, blurring the line between authenticity and representation, and

embedding filters into the normative visual culture of the platform.

Research Question 3: How does the blurring of boundaries between reality and virtuality shape users' digital experiences?

The research findings for RQ3 show that people experience major identity changes and emotional responses when their online and offline identities merge. The participants mentioned how their social media persona on Instagram had started to differ from their actual personality which they showed in their daily life. One male participant stated, *"Sometimes I feel like the person I look like on Instagram isn't even me"* (Male, 20). The phenomenon described by Johar and Hasbullah (2024) in digital self-fragmentation shows how people create online personas which they present as ideal but these personas create feelings of detachment from their actual selves.

The combination of real and virtual worlds creates emotional distress which leads to higher anxiety levels and makes people feel insufficient and causes them to experience emotional exhaustion. Multiple participants acknowledged that Instagram often left them feeling depleted rather than inspired. One male participant summarized this tension: *"We all know it's fake, but we still become part of it"* (Male, 20). Women reported that their bodies faced increased social demands because of beauty standards yet men reported that their lives were controlled by their need to achieve financial success and social standing and romantic rivalry. A 21-year-old female participant explained to researchers how she found mental comfort through her decision to avoid the platform: *"I find more peace within myself when I reduce my time spent on Instagram"* (Female, 21). Moreton and Greenfield (2022) show how people create ambient anxiety through digital platform comparison according to Hill and Öz (2024) who establish identity fatigue as a medical condition.

The research findings of RQ3 show that the disappearing lines between virtual and real worlds create two effects which both alter how people

perceive things and transform their emotional experiences and their sense of self-value and their expectations about relationships.

Conclusion

The research examined how Instagram shapes students' real-world understanding of reality by studying their personal experiences to answer three research questions which produced five additional thematic results. The research data from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis showed that users experience a complex relationship between their understanding of Instagram's deceptive content and their emotional responses to its visual and social rules. The themes show how Instagram creates different effects which transform and improve users' mental pictures about themselves and others and their environment.

The research investigates user reactions to Instagram depictions of actual life through two primary themes which include Theme 1: Curated Representations of Life and Theme 2: Gendered Comparison Culture. Users understand Instagram images are carefully curated but they use these images to judge their own life quality. People view these representations through their gender perspective because women evaluate how others look but men assess both their social position and their potential to find partners. Users actively use Instagram content to build their understanding of how life should appear based on the research findings.

The study examines how users experience reality when they engage with content that has been edited and filtered and augmented reality technology in Theme 3: Unrealistic Norms and the Emergence of Disappointment and Theme 4: Filters, AR, and the Blurring of Reality. The constant exposure to perfect images through social media creates unrealistic expectations which transform how people assess their physical appearance and their achievements and their way of living. The use of filters together with AR tools generates fresh obstacles which affect how people perceive

reality because these tools show visual elements which exceed what physical environments can display. People develop digital images as their regular references which create an incorrect view of themselves while making their personal differences with others more pronounced.

The third research question about how virtual and real worlds merge to create digital experiences appears in Theme 4 and Theme 5 which study emotional and psychological effects. Users experience growing anxiety and self-doubt and their digital and physical identities merge into multiple fragmented selves which lead to emotional exhaustion. The platform generates psychological responses which impact users' ability to recognize authenticity and their feelings of community and their self-worth independent of its visual appearance.

The five themes show that Instagram serves as a platform which enables visual expression while simultaneously operating as a socio-cultural system which creates and distributes social standards and develops personal identities and organizes emotional experiences. People evolve into two distinct groups which include critics and active participants who fight against systems which endanger their health and personal identity.

Implications

The research establishes new understanding about digital selfhood and hyperreality and mediated identity studies through its analysis of Instagram's ability to create dual mental states in users who recognize platform editing but continue to follow its established rules. The study confirmed previous research about upward social comparison and digital self-discrepancy and gendered media effects but demonstrated how Instagram creates multiple reality levels through its visual standards and platform features and social rules which form a mixed identity space.

The research results demonstrate that people need specific programs which should help them decrease their mental distress from using social

media platforms. Mental health professionals together with counselors and youth practitioners can apply these findings to assist people in identifying and fighting against false visual standards and controlling their comparison habits and creating appropriate digital limits. Organizations which support digital well-being can use this research to create programs which help people manage their emotional work from presenting themselves online.

The research results show that critical media literacy should become a fundamental educational subject which educators and curriculum developers need to incorporate into their programs. Media literacy programs need to teach students about algorithm control of content and media presentation methods and social comparison effects in addition to their digital skills and misinformation education. Students who learn about digital image study and their contexts and who analyze their online presence and social media influence will develop improved social media behaviors and enhanced identity stability.

Limitations

The research contains multiple restrictions which need to be recognized. The research design uses qualitative methods which produce detailed results but these findings cannot be applied to other situations. The research sample consisted of university students between 18 and 24 years old who might not represent the experiences of people from different age groups including teenagers and senior citizens. The self-reported data from phenomenological interviews becomes vulnerable to recall bias and social desirability effects. The research investigated Instagram as its only social media platform because other platforms including TikTok and Snapchat would probably create different conditions for reality perception. Social media technology advances at a fast pace which creates difficulties for researchers who need to study new digital behaviors because AI content blocking systems operate within these systems.

Future Research Directions

Future studies can build upon these findings in several ways. Research conducted over several years would study how people develop their identity and mental health and body image perceptions after spending many years with filtered and curated content. Research which evaluates different platforms would demonstrate how their integrated functions result in users experiencing reality through different distortion methods. Research using quantitative methods would study how often people use filters affects their comparison strength which then impacts their mental health outcomes. Scientists need to research multiple cultures because this knowledge helps them understand how cultural values influence digital image perception and visual beauty standard acceptance in different people. Finally, as AI-generated imagery and augmented environments become more integrated into daily digital life, future research should investigate how these technologies further complicate the boundary between virtual selves and lived reality.

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Geniştirilmiş Özet

Instagram ve Gerçeklik Algısı: Görsel Kültürün Özgünlük ile Temsil Arasındaki Sınırları Bulanıklaştırması

Sosyal medya platformları, özellikle de Instagram, görsel temsiller aracılığıyla gündelik yaşam pratiklerini, kimlik inşasını ve gerçeklik algısını dönüştüren önemli dijital alanlar hâline gelmiştir. Görsel kültürün merkezinde yer alan Instagram, kullanıcılarına yalnızca içerik tüketme olanağı sunmakla kalmamakta ; aynı zamanda güzellik, başarı, mutluluk ve ideal yaşam biçimlerine ilişkin normatif çerçeveler üretmektedir. Bu durum, Goffman’ın ön sahne performansı kavramını genişleterek kullanıcıların gerçek günlük deneyimlerini gizlerken kusursuz çevrimiçi personalar yaratmalarına olanak tanımaktadır. Metin tabanlı platformlardan farklı olarak görsel doğası gereği Instagram, insanların sosyal etkileşimlerini derin dolayım (deep mediatization) yoluyla farklı bir boyuta taşımaktadır. Bu bağlamda Instagram, gerçekliğin doğrudan bir yansımasından ziyade, seçilmiş, düzenlenmiş ve algoritmik olarak önceliklendirilmiş temsiller üzerinden işleyen bir deneyim alanı olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Instagram’ın üniversite öğrencilerinin gerçeklik algısını nasıl şekillendirdiğini ve özgünlük ile temsil arasındaki sınırları nasıl bulanıklaştırdığını fenomenolojik bir perspektifle incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmanın temel amacı, Instagram’ın görsel efektler, filtreler, içerik düzenleme pratikleri ve algoritmik sunum yoluyla kullanıcıların gündelik yaşam deneyimleri içerisinde nasıl “pratik bilgi” ürettiğini ve bu bilginin gerçeklik algısını nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ortaya koymaktır. Çalışma, kullanıcıların Instagram’ı filtrelenmiş ve kurgulanmış bir platform olarak fark etmelerine rağmen, platformda sunulan “kusursuz” imgeleri yaşamlarını değerlendirme ölçütü olarak içselleştirdikleri varsayımından hareket etmektedir. Bu yönüyle araştırma, dijital temsillerin yalnızca

bilişsel değil, aynı zamanda duygusal ve ilişkisel etkilerini de görünürlük kılma hedeflemektedir.

Araştırma, nitel araştırma desenlerinden Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis-IPA) yaklaşımıyla yürütülmüştür. IPA, bireylerin belirli bir olguyu nasıl deneyimlediklerine ve bu deneyimlere nasıl anlam yüklediklerine odaklanan, idiografik ve derinlemesine bir analiz sunması nedeniyle tercih edilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında 18-24 yaş aralığında, yoğun Instagram kullanıcısı olan 20 üniversite öğrencisiyle yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma örneklemini, çeşitli akademik geçmişlerden gelen 11 kadın (%55) ve 9 erkek (%45) katılımcıdan oluşmakta olup, katılımcıların yaş ortalaması 21.1 olarak belirlenmiştir. Instagram kullanım yoğunluğu açısından incelendiğinde, katılımcıların %45'inin günde 3-5 saat, %25'inin ise 5 saatten fazla zaman harcadığı ve çoğunluğunun (%80) düzenli olarak influencer içerikleri tükettiği tespit edilmiştir. Araştırmanın güvenilirliği ve titizliği, Lincoln ve Guba'nın inandırıcılık, aktarılabilirlik, güvenilirlik ve onaylanabilirlik kriterleri takip edilerek kapsamlı denetim sistemleri ve yansıtıcı günlük (reflexive journaling) teknikleriyle desteklenmiştir. Katılımcılar, Instagram'ı günlük yaşamlarının ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak kullanan ve platformda düzenli olarak içerik tüketen bireylerden oluşmaktadır. Görüşmeler, katılımcıların Instagram deneyimlerini, platformda karşılaştıkları görsel temsilleri ve bu temsillerin kendilik algıları üzerindeki etkilerini anlamaya yönelik sorular etrafında yapılandırılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler, IPA'nın önerdiği aşamalı analiz süreci izlenerek çözümlenmiştir.

Analiz sonucunda, Instagram'ın kullanıcı gerçekliğini dönüştüren üç temel mekanizma öne çıkmıştır: içerik düzenleme ve filtre uygulamaları, algoritmik görünürlük ve sosyal karşılaştırma pratikleri. Katılımcı anlatıları, Instagram'ın "çift katmanlı bir gerçeklik" sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bir yandan kullanıcılar, platformdaki içeriklerin seçilmiş ve kurgulanmış olduğunun farkındadır ; diğer yandan bu içerikleri ideal

yaşam standartları olarak kabul etmekte ve kendi yaşamlarını bu temsillerle karşılaştırmaktadır. Bu mekanizmalar, algoritmik olarak desteklenen abartılı estetik içeriklerin sahte sosyal standartlar oluşturduğu bir tür eğlence evi aynası (funhouse mirror) etkisi yaratmaktadır. Filtre kullanımı öylesine norm hâline gelmiştir ki, katılımcıların tümü filtrelerin bir aldatmaca olduğunu kabul etmelerine rağmen bu özellikleri sosyal bir gereklilik olarak görüp kullanmaya devam ettiklerini itiraf etmişlerdir. Hatta kullanıcılar, filtrelenmiş versiyonlarına alıştıkça kendi doğal görünüşlerinden memnuniyetsizlik duymaya başlayarak kendi beden algılarını zedelemektedirler. Bu durum, özgün deneyim ile temsil edilen yaşam arasındaki sınırların giderek belirsizleşmesine yol açmaktadır.

Araştırma bulguları, toplumsal cinsiyet bağlamında da önemli farklılıklara işaret etmektedir. Kadın katılımcıların; Instagram'daki görsel temsiller nedeniyle görünüşe dayalı stres, beden memnuniyetsizliği ve öz-değer sorgulamasını erkek katılımcılara göre daha yoğun deneyimledikleri saptanmıştır. Buna karşın erkek katılımcıların; kadın görünümüne yönelik toplumsal beklentiler ve statü tanımları konusunda yanıltıcı kabullere sahip olduğu görülmektedir. Öyle ki erkek katılımcılar, kadınların doğrudan mesajlar ve alınan yoğun etkileşimler nedeniyle sosyal seçimlerde bir tekele sahip olduklarını düşünerek bu "sınırsız fırsat" illüzyonuna karşı bir kırgınlık hissetmektedirler. Buna karşılık kadınlar, platformdaki sonsuz içerik akışıyla beslenen küresel güzellik standartlarının erkeklerin beklentilerini yeniden şekillendirdiğini ve erkeklerin ulaşamaz "süper model" görünümünü temel bir standart olarak içselleştirdiğini ifade etmişlerdir. Bu durum, Instagram'ın yalnızca bireysel değil, toplumsal cinsiyet normlarını da yeniden üreten bir mecra olarak işlediğini göstermektedir.

Çalışma ayrıca, sanal ve gerçek unsurların iç içe geçmesinin çeşitli duygusal sonuçlara doğurduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Katılımcılar, Instagram deneyiminin kaygı, öz-şüphe, kimlik çözülmesi ve yaşam doyumunda azalma gibi etkiler yarattığını

dile getirmiştir. Çevrimiçi personaların gerçek benliklerden giderek uzaklaşması, bireylerde "dijital benlik parçalanması" (digital self-fragmentation) hissi oluşturmakta ve bu da psikolojik tükenmişliğe yol açmaktadır. Bu duygusal etkiler, platformun yalnızca estetik ya da eğlence temelli bir alan olmadığını; bireylerin benlik algısını ve yaşam memnuniyetini doğrudan etkileyen bir sosyo-teknolojik yapı sunduğunu göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda Instagram, Baudrillard'ın hipergerçeklik kavramı çerçevesinde değerlendirilebilecek bir dijital ortam olarak öne çıkmaktadır.

Sonuçolarak bu araştırma, Instagram'ın görsel kültür aracılığıyla gerçeklik algısını nasıl dönüştürdüğüne dair nitel ve derinlemesine bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Çalışma, dijital benlik, dolayımlanmış kimlik ve hipergerçeklik literatürüne katkı sağlamanın yanı sıra, medya okuryazarlığı eğitimiyle ilişkin önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır. Bulgular, medya okuryazarlığının yalnızca eleştirel içerik analizine odaklanmaması; aynı zamanda öğrencilerin dijital varoluşun duygusal, ilişkisel ve estetik boyutlarıyla baş edebilme becerilerini geliştirmeyi hedeflemesi gerektiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu nedenle medya okuryazarlığı programları, öğrencilere sadece dijital beceriler kazandırmakla kalmamalı, aynı zamanda algoritmaların içerik üzerindeki kontrolünü ve sosyal karşılaştırma etkilerini de müfredatlarına dâhil etmelidir. Araştırmancının bulguları değerli içgörüler sunsa da, yalnızca 18-24 yaş grubundaki üniversite öğrencilerine dayanması ve sadece Instagram platformuna odaklanması gibi nitel yöntemin doğasından kaynaklanan bazı sınırlılıklara sahiptir. Gelecekteki araştırmaların, filtreli içeriklerin uzun vadeli etkilerini inceleyen boylamsal çalışmalar, farklı platformları (örneğin TikTok) ele alan karşılaştırmalar ve kültürlerarası farklılıkları inceleyen araştırmalar ile bu alandaki bilgi birikimini derinleştirmesi önerilmektedir. Bu yönüyle araştırma, dijital çağda bireylerin gerçeklik algısını koruyabilmeleri için bütüncül bir medya okuryazarlığı yaklaşımının gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

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Destekleyen Kurum/Kuruluşlar

Supporting-Sponsor Institutions or Organizations

Herhangi bir kurum/kuruluştan destek alınmamıştır. **None**

Çıkar Çatışması

Conflict of Interest

Herhangi bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.
None

Kaynak Göstermek İçin

To Cite This Article

Eserol, N.D. (2026). Instagram and perception of reality: How visual culture blurs boundaries between authenticity and representation. *Yeni Medya* (20), 20-38, <https://doi.org/10.55609/yenimedya.1861437>.