

## Romantic Relationships and Instagram Use among University Students

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### Abstract

**Statement of the Problem and Purpose:** Romantic relationships may be a source of behavioral and psychological strain, while the use of Instagram may also have positive and negative influences on university students' relationships. However, whether there is a relationship between university students' romantic relationship statuses and behaviors on Instagram remains an unanswered question. The current study explores whether there is a relationship between romantic relationship status and behaviors on Instagram among university students.

**Method:** A descriptive and correlational research design was used in the study. The sample group consisted of 603 students enrolling in the BA programs of a state university in Turkey. A questionnaire was used to gather data on the numbers of posts, followers, followings, time spent on Instagram, and the active and passive behaviors exhibited. Kruskal-Wallis Test was preferred to see the possible relationship between the variables.

**Findings:** The study concludes that romantic relationship status and Instagram usage are statistically significantly related. Within this scope, university students who do not have romantic relationships prefer showing less active behaviors.

**Implications for Research and Practice:** It was recommended that university students should raise their awareness of the relationship between romantic relationship status and Instagram use and behaviors exhibited. Qualitative and experimental studies should be carried out to better understand the relationship between romantic relationships and behaviors exhibited on Instagram by university students.

**Keywords:** University students, Romantic relationship, Instagram

### Turkish Abstract: Üniversite Öğrencilerinde Romantik İlişkiler ve Instagram Kullanımı

#### Özet

**Problem Durumu ve Amaç:** Romantik ilişkiler, davranışsal ve psikolojik zorlanmaların kaynağı olabilir. Ek olarak, Instagram kullanımı, üniversite düzeyinde öğrenim gören gençler üzerinde olumlu ve olumsuz etkilere neden olabilir. Ancak üniversite öğrencilerinin romantik ilişki durumları ve Instagram kullanırken sergiledikleri davranışları arasındaki olası ilişki henüz cevapsız bir soru olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Buradan hareketle mevcut çalışma, üniversite öğrencilerinin romantik ilişki durumları ve Instagram kullanırken sergiledikleri davranışları arasında bir ilişki bulunup bulunmadığını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Yöntem:** Çalışmada betimsel ve korelasyonel araştırma deseni kullanılmıştır. Örneklem grubu, Türkiye'de çeşitli devlet üniversitelerinin lisans programlarında öğrenim gören 603 katılımcıdan oluşmaktadır. Veri toplama aracı olarak, katılımcıların paylaşımlarının, takipçilerinin ve takip ettikleri hesapların sayısı, Instagram'da sergiledikleri aktif ve pasif davranışlar ile ilişki durumunu sorgulayan bir anket kullanılmıştır. İki değişken arasındaki olası ilişkileri görebilmek için Kruskal-Wallis Testi kullanılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Çalışmada, romantik ilişki durumu ile Instagram kullanımı arasında istatistiksel açıdan anlamlı ilişkiler olduğu bulgusuna erişilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, romantik ilişkisi olmayan üniversite öğrencileri daha az düzeyde pasif davranışlar sergilemektedir.

**Araştırma ve Uygulama için Öneriler:** Çalışmada, üniversite öğrencilerinin romantik ilişki durumu ve Instagram kullanımı arasındaki ilişkiler açısından farkındalık geliştirmeleri önerilmektedir. Romantik ilişkiler ve Instagram'da sergilenen davranışlar arasındaki ilişkilerin daha iyi anlaşılması için nitel ve deneysel çalışmaların yapılması önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Üniversite öğrencileri, Romantik ilişki, Instagram, Sosyal medya

## **Introduction**

Romantic relationships constitute a vital role among university students due to several reasons. First and most importantly, romantic relationships involve love, caring, and intimacy and provide interactions between individuals (Collins, 2003). Second, romantic relationships may influence cultural values essential to their lives (Gómez-López et al., 2019). Third, the experience gained from romantic relationships includes a psychological and social development process for their future relationships and lives (Connolly et al., 2014). In brief, romantic relationships result in effective communication, positive interactions, achievement of individual and shared goals, and secure attachments. Nevertheless, they may also potentiate fluctuations in negative mood (Rogers et al., 2018) and associate with externalizing behavioral problems and higher levels of depression (Chen et al., 2009). To this end, it can be stated that romantic relationships may positively and negatively affect well-being of university students.

Being used more frequently than other social networking tools by university students, Instagram also has an essential place in their lives since it is mainly used to maintain relationships (Diener et al., 2017). Moreover, it increases interactions with others (Booker et al., 2018) and gives opportunities for socializing and meeting new people (Antheunis et al., 2013). In other words, university students prefer Instagram to stay connected with people they care about or are interested in (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). On the other hand, Instagram may also adversely affect individuals' life satisfaction and well-being through social comparison and emotional contagion (Choi & Kim, 2020). It should also be stated that it can potentially affect university students' romantic relationship-related behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Baldwin-White & Gower, 2021).

In conclusion, romantic relationships seem important for university students regarding effective communication, positive interactions, achievement of individual and shared goals, and secure attachments. On the other hand, using Instagram may positively and negatively influence university students' relationships, as mentioned above. Thus, whether or how there is a relationship between university students' romantic relationship statuses and the use of Instagram is a question that should be clarified in a research context, as can be inferred from the research synthesis presented below.

## Literature Review

A limited number of studies focus on the potential relationship between social media usage and romantic relationships. For example, Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) investigated how adolescents perceived romantic relationships experienced and expressed through social media. They found that social media was notable in relational information seeking and expressing romantic interest. After noting the importance of examining factors that influence perceptions of healthy relationships and consent even on social media because of high rates of sexual assault on college campuses, Baldwin-White and Gower (2021) examined how college students navigated romantic and sexual relationships. They found that social media had more of an influence on perceptions of healthy relationships. Last, Sharabi and Hopkins (2021) explored couples' behaviors on Instagram regarding their relationship, and it was found that there was a relationship between relational quality and engagement in a relationship on Instagram.

Research also indicates a negative relationship between Instagram use and romantic relationships. For instance, Len-Ríos et al. (2016) analyzed how adolescents perceived the effects of mass media on their conceptions of romantic relationships. They found that they perceived Instagram and Facebook as largely negative. In another study, Bouffard et al. (2021) focused on the negative consequences of Instagram use on relationship quality and how the increased use of social media and negative relationship consequences might trigger social media addiction. The results revealed that increased Instagram usage reduced relationship satisfaction and increased conflicts. Abbasi (2019) also examined the relationship between social media addiction and infidelity-related behaviors and the influence of age on this connection and found that addiction to social media sites predicted infidelity behaviors. Last, Ridgway and Clayton (2016) explored whether body image satisfaction predicted Instagram selfie posting. They found that body image satisfaction was sequentially associated with increased Instagram selfie posting and Instagram-related conflict that related to increased negative romantic relationship outcomes.

Rare studies appeared on the relationship between romantic relationships and behaviors exhibited on Instagram. First, Lee et al. (2019) focused on the roles of narcissism and self-esteem in predicting attitudes toward behaviors in romantic relationships. They found that participants with high narcissism showed positive attitudes toward interactions with potential and current romantic relationships on Instagram. In a mixed-method study, Fejes-Vékássy et al. (2020) investigated how relational factors influence the use of Instagram. They found that

the characteristics of Instagram activities significantly differed at the beginning and end of romantic relationships.

### **Overview of the Current Study**

As previously emphasized, romantic relationships may be a source of behavioral problems and higher levels of depression. Similarly, using Instagram may also positively and negatively influence university students' relationships. However, for several reasons, whether there is a relationship between university students' romantic relationship statuses and behaviors exhibited on Instagram remains an unanswered question. First, studies on the issue did not directly focus on Instagram but on other social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. Second, while studies mainly dealt with adolescents, a limited number of studies focused on university students. Furthermore, while studies on the relationships between romantic relationships and Instagram use among adolescents mainly show negative results, prior research does not provide evidence about positive and negative relationships between the two variables regarding university students. In other words, the number of studies on relationships and Instagram use and behaviors is relatively limited to draw conclusions about the mentioned issue. With these concerns in mind, the current study aims to explore whether there is a relationship between romantic relationship status and behaviors exhibited on Instagram among university students and asks the following research question:

- Do the behaviors exhibited on Instagram differ in accordance with romantic relationship status among university students?

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

The sample group in the study consisted of 603 students enrolling in the BA programs of a state university in Turkey. The participants were 510 female (84.6%) and 93 male students (15.4%). The gender distribution reflected the overall population at the university. The mean score for their age was 20.87 in the range of 18 and 25. The sample group consisted of 143 first-year (23.7%), 167 second-year (27.7%), 177 third-year (29.4%), and 116 fourth-year students (19.2%). The rationale behind participant selection was that they had Instagram accounts. The mean score for the number of posts on their profile pages was 16.3. In addition, the mean value for the number of followers was 369.6. Similarly, the mean score for the number of followings

was 347.6. Finally, participants stated that they spend an average of 131.3 minutes a day on Instagram. Regarding their romantic relationship status among university students, 313 participants (51.9%) did not have any experience with romantic relationships, while 87 students (14.4) had romantic relations in the past. The number of students who flirted was 22 (3.6%), whereas 181 participants (30.0%) stated they had romantic relationships.

### ***Tools***

Three data collection tools were used in the study. First, a background questionnaire interrogated the participants' gender, age, and departments. Second, a one-item questionnaire was used to collect data on the participants' romantic relationship status. Third and last, a questionnaire was used to gather data on the numbers of posts, followers, followings, time spent on Instagram, and the active and passive behaviors exhibited.

### ***Procedure***

After IRB approval, an online version of the tools with a text that aimed to inform the participants about the purpose, significance, and methodology of the study and voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality was prepared. Next, the online form was shared via Google Forms. Finally, only Instagram users were invited to complete the form via Google Classroom.

SPSS software was used to analyze the data gathered. First, the mean scores for age, the number of posts, followers, followings, and time spent on Instagram were calculated. The reliability coefficients and percentages of variances were computed. The reliability coefficient in Cronbach's Alpha was .83 for active behaviors and .88 for passive behaviors. In addition, the reliability coefficient in Cronbach's Alpha regarding the questionnaire was .90. The % of variance was 60.6 for active behaviors, 70.6 for passive behaviors, and 63.43 for all behaviors. The values regarding reliability coefficients and the % of variance indicated the questionnaire had an acceptable level of reliability and validity. Finally, the Kruskal-Wallis Test was preferred to see the relationship between romantic relationship status, Instagram use, and behaviors exhibited.

### **Results**

According to the values in Table 1, romantic relationship status and Instagram usage seem interrelated. For instance, the participants who flirted had the highest number of posts on their profiles ( $p=.00$ ), the highest number of followers ( $p=.00$ ), and followings ( $p=.00$ ) when compared to those who did not experience relationship, had a romantic relationship in the past

and now. On the other hand, time spent on Instagram in minutes a day did not show a significant difference in relationship status.

**Table 1**

*Romantic Relationship Status And Instagram Use (Kruskal-Wallis Test)*

Instagram use	Romantic relationship status	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig.
Number of posts on the profile	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	270.99	21.61	<b>.00</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	326.68		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	355.52		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	337.26		
Number of followers	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	261.18	38.03	<b>.00</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	352.26		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	394.66		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	337.17		
Number of followings	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	275.43	18.10	<b>.00</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	328.07		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	391.84		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	324.50		
Time spent on Instagram in minutes a day	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	293.22	5.47	.14
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	340.03		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	279.16		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	301.68		

According to the values in Table 2, most of the active behaviors exhibited on Instagram seem significantly correlated with romantic relationship status. In this regard, romantic relationship status was significantly related to active behaviors such as posting on mainstream, posting stories, sharing videos, changing profile photos, writing comments on posts, writing comments on stories, sending emojis on stories, sending messages, video chat, and shopping. However, no relationship was observed regarding voice chat and polling. Speaking specifically, those who did not have romantic relationships got fewer scores on sharing on mainstream ( $p=.00$ ), posting

stories ( $p=.00$ ), sharing videos ( $p=.00$ ), writing comments on others' posts ( $p=.00$ ), sending messages ( $p=.00$ ), using video chat ( $p=.00$ ). On the other hand, those with romantic relationships changed their profile photos more frequently ( $p=.01$ ). Moreover, those who had romantic relationships in the past and now got higher scores on sending emojis in stories ( $p=.04$ ). Last, flirted ones and those who had romantic relationships in the past reported higher scores on interest in video chat ( $p=.00$ ) and shopping ( $p=.03$ ).

**Table 2**

*Romantic Relationship Status and Active Behaviors on Instagram (Kruskal-Wallis Test)*

Active behaviors	Romantic relationship status	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig.
Posting on mainstream	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	271.59	25.19	<b>.00</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	353.52		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	358.23		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	322.99		
Posting stories	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	284.26	16.76	<b>.01</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	363.92		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	336.55		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	298.72		
Sharing videos	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	279.22	19.69	<b>.00</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	350.82		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	296.57		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	318.58		
Changing profile photo	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	290.33	11.99	<b>.01</b>
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	352.06		
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	328.64		

	I have a romantic relationship.	181	294.88		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	278.93		
Writing comments on posts	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	346.50	13.99	<b>.00</b>
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	312.20		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	319.26		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	278.93		
Writing comments on stories	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	346.50	6.61	<b>.09</b>
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	312.20		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	319.26		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	284.17		
Sending emojis on stories	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	328.95	8.32	<b>.04</b>
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	287.91		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	321.60		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	272.47		
Sending messages	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	353.30	23.61	<b>.00</b>
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	350.68		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	322.48		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	288.78		
Voice chat	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	317.13	7.75	<b>.05</b>
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	362.34		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	310.25		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	280.48		
Video chat	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	336.94	14.3	<b>.00</b>



	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	350.30		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	316.56		
Shopping	I don't have a romantic relationship.	87	312.76		
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	22	329.20	8.99	<b>.03</b>
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	181	324.38		
	I have a romantic relationship.	313	284.16		
Polling	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	297.38		
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	295.75	3.71	.30
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	351.95		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	306.93		

Values in Table 3 show that only two of the passive behaviors exhibited on Instagram and romantic relationship status are interrelated. In other words, romantic relationship status was significantly related to reading messages and viewing who liked posts on the mainstream. In contrast, no significant relationship was found between romantic relationship status and passive behaviors such as viewing posts, viewing stories, watching videos, watching live videos, reading comments on others' posts, reading others' bio info, viewing others' friend lists, spending time for searching and exploring, and viewing who saw stories. Those who had romantic relationships in the past and flirted seemed more interested in reading messages ( $p=.00$ ) and viewing who liked posts on the mainstream ( $p=.03$ ).

**Table 3**

*Romantic Relationship Status and Passive Behaviors on Use (Kruskal-Wallis Test)*

Passive behaviors	Romantic relationship status	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig.
Viewing posts	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	295.49		
	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	311.87	6.62	.09
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	230.18		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	317.24		

		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	290.01		
Viewing stories		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	323.43	4.09	.25
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	298.09		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	312.91		
Watching videos		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	292.05		
		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	325.60	3.35	.34
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	295.36		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	308.67		
Watching live videos		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	308.99		
		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	300.59	3.31	.35
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	339.82		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	286.00		
Reading comments on others' posts		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	302.85		
		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	330.18	5.55	.14
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	240.93		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	294.41		
Reading others' bio info		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	293.89		
		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	331.79	3.70	.30
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	321.66		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	299.32		
Viewing others' friend lists		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	297.50		
		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	326.39	2.42	.49
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	280.86		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	300.64		
Reading messages		I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	287.71		
		I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	355.17	13.47	.00
		I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	358.34		
		I have a romantic relationship.	181	294.30		

	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	294.72		
Spending time for searching and exploring	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	309.52	4.06	.26
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	254.23		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	316.78		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	285.48		
Viewing who like posts on mainstream	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	337.84	8.65	.03
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	348.48		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	307.69		
	I don't have a romantic relationship.	313	286.73		
Viewing who saw stories	I had a romantic relationship in the past.	87	335.92	7.17	.07
	I flirt with someone nowadays.	22	340.57		
	I have a romantic relationship.	181	307.41		

### Conclusions and Discussion

In the study, three main conclusions were reached. First, the study concludes that romantic relationship status and Instagram usage are significantly related. Within this scope, university students who flirt send more posts on their profile pages and have more followers and followings when compared to those who have romantic relationships in the past and now and those who do not have romantic relationships. On the other hand, time spent on Instagram does not differ according to romantic relationship status. The second conclusion is that romantic relationship status is considerably related to most of the active behaviors exhibited on Instagram. Within this scope, university students who do not have romantic relationships prefer showing less active behaviors such as sharing on mainstream, posting stories and videos, writing comments on others' posts, messaging, and video chat, when compared to ones who have romantic relationships in the past and now and the ones who flirt. In addition, voice chat and polling via Instagram do not show a significant difference regarding romantic relationship status. Third and last, the study concludes that romantic relationship status is not considerably correlated with most of the passive behaviors except reading messages and viewing who liked posts on the mainstream. In other words, passive behaviors such as viewing posts, viewing stories, watching videos, watching live videos, reading comments on others' posts, reading

others' bio info, viewing others' friend lists, spending time for searching and exploring, and viewing who saw stories do not show a difference regarding romantic relationship status. In brief, it can be stated that active utilization of Instagram mainly differs regarding romantic relationship status.

A summary of the results reached in the study is provided below. Similar to the findings obtained from prior research, the current study shows a significant relationship between social media usage and romantic relationships. However, the study differs from previous ones since it focuses on university students, not adolescents (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016) and Instagram instead of various social networking tools and environments (Baldwin-White & Gower, 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). In addition, the study finds a positive relationship between Instagram usage and romantic relationships, while previous research indicates negative results between the mentioned variables (Abbasi, 2019; Bouffard et al., 2021; Hermida & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020; Len-Ríos et al., 2016; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). The current study is also significant since it concludes that romantic relationship status considerably differed according to active behaviors exhibited on Instagram, while the results of a limited number of studies focus on self-esteem (Lee et al., 2019), jealousy, and relationship satisfaction (Fejes-Vékássy et al., 2020). To conclude, it is evident that this study is significant with its findings since it has revealed the relationship between romantic relationships and active and passive behaviors on Instagram among university students.

Within the scope of the conclusions reached in the study based on the differentiation of Instagram usage and types of behaviors performed on Instagram depending on relationship status, several recommendations can be noted. First and in the broadest perspective, university students should raise their awareness of the relationship between romantic relationship status and Instagram use and behaviors exhibited. This would positively impact relationship quality, satisfaction, and intimacy among ones who experience romantic relationships. Healthy communication should also be prioritized in both Instagram and real-life settings. This would flourish togetherness, autonomy, and competence among partners and provide a balance between virtual and real behaviors. Users should use Instagram to feel comfortable and close within the scope of a secure attachment style (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). In other words, students can raise their awareness of behavioral changes and mood changes that may relate to Instagram use. Second, since the relationship between romantic relationships and Instagram use seem significantly interrelated, teaching programs should include courses on social media

literacy and effective communication. Third, mental health professionals at universities should provide services by considering the social media effects on relationship problems and vice versa. Fourth and last, social networking application developers should consider the link between Instagram and relationship status while developing their applications and adding features. In this way, they can contribute to well-being, romantic relationship, and healthy social media use among university students.

This study is not without limitations. First, the scope of the study was confined to a correlational research design that used the administration of a background questionnaire that collected data on demographic information, a questionnaire that was used to gather data on Instagram use and behaviors. Second, the participants were restricted to 603 students enrolling at various BA programs of a state university in Turkey. Third, the analysis of the data collected was confined to Kruskal-Wallis Test. In other words, cause and effect relationships cannot be inferred due to the correlational nature of this study. Fourth, the data included participants' perceived behaviors exhibited on Instagram. Thus, it should be noted that the data collected were limited to self-report data and perceptions rather than their actual behaviors and activities on Instagram. Fourth, romantic relationship status was limited to four categories in this study, while relationship length and time passed after separation might also relate to active and passive behaviors exhibited on Instagram.

Further research focusing on university students' romantic relationships and behaviors on Instagram is warranted, as studies mainly focus on perceptions. For this purpose, qualitative and experimental studies should be carried out to better understand the relationship between romantic relationships and behaviors exhibited on Instagram by university students. In this way, actual behaviors rather than perceptions will be observed. The effects of social and psychological differences regarding romantic relationships and behaviors on Instagram should also be examined in different research settings. As a final note, research should focus on a comprehensive framework of social media tools and environments in different cultural and educational settings within the scope of romantic relationships.

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