ISSN: 2181-3337 | SCIENTISTS.UZ VOLUME 5 ISSUE 7 JULY 2026

IN WHAT WAYS DOES EXPOSURE TO PEER LUXURY CONSUMPTION ON INSTAGRAM SHAPE THE EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF TEENAGERS WITH PART-TIME JOBS?

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DOI: 10.67620/sai.57b0002

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how exposure to peer luxury posts on Instagram relates to the educational and career aspirations of teenagers who hold part-time jobs. It introduces the Aspiration Gap — the tension between a teenager's current life and the desirable lifestyles they see peers display online — as a proposed mechanism linking social-media exposure to decisions about education versus work. Drawing on an anonymous online survey of 200 adolescents aged 15–18 who work part-time and use Instagram, the study finds that the Aspiration Gap was widely reported and that three factors were associated with its direction: family background, patience (intertemporal discounting), and job type. Education leaning was more common among respondents from families that expected education, those classified as more patient, and those in skill-based jobs (about 70–85%), whereas work leaning was more common among respondents from families that needed money, those classified as more impatient, and those in labour-intensive jobs (about 75–80%). The findings extend the application of Social Comparison Theory and Conspicuous Consumption from emotional responses to reported life decisions. Because the design is cross-sectional and based on self-report, the results describe associations rather than causal effects; future work should test these patterns with experiments and longitudinal studies.

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Keywords: *Aspiration Gap; Instagram; social comparison; conspicuous consumption; intertemporal discounting; teenage part-time employment; education versus work; adolescent aspirations.*

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Introduction

A 17-year-old named Lola works fifteen hours a week at a local café. After her shift, she opens Instagram and sees a classmate posting a $99 meal at a fancy restaurant. Images like these fill her feed every day, and the scene is not unusual. Instagram has become a central part of teenage life, where carefully edited photos of seemingly perfect lives are the norm. At the same time, a growing number of teenagers hold part-time jobs in food service or family businesses — often their first experience of earning and spending their own money. They are also at an age when they must begin thinking about what comes after high school: college or full-time work.

Research has shown that upward social comparison on Instagram can make people feel worse about themselves. In a key study, Vogel and colleagues (2014) asked participants to view fabricated social-media profiles. Some profiles were designed to look highly successful — healthy habits, many likes and comments, and exciting activities — while others were less appealing. After only a few minutes, participants who viewed the successful profiles reported significantly lower self-esteem. Their mental state

was affected not by how much time they spent on social media, but by comparing themselves with someone who seemed better off. This finding matters for the present research because it shows that even brief exposure to a peer's idealised life can create a negative self-comparison. However, Vogel's study stopped at measuring feelings. We know less about whether such comparisons change what teenagers actually want out of life. For example, when teenagers with part-time jobs see luxury posts from peers, what — if anything — happens to their plans for education and work? This study builds on that gap by exploring how exposure to Instagram luxury posts relates to teenagers' educational and career aspirations.

By listening to teenagers themselves, this study explores what I call the Aspiration Gap — the tension teenagers feel between their current life (what they earn from a part-time job, their daily reality) and the luxurious lifestyle they see peers display on Instagram. When this gap feels large, it may push some teenagers toward wanting immediate money through work while motivating others to pursue education as a longer path to that lifestyle. Understanding this gap may help explain how Instagram luxury posts relate to teenagers' future choices about education and work. This leads to my central research question:

In what ways does exposure to peer luxury consumption on Instagram shape the educational and career aspirations of teenagers with part-time jobs?

Literature Review

To answer this question, I draw on two foundational theories. The first is Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Festinger argued that people have a drive to evaluate themselves, and that they often do so by comparing themselves with others. When we compare ourselves with people who seem better off, we can feel inadequate. On Instagram, teenagers often see peers with luxury goods, which can create upward comparisons that may affect their self-perception.

The second theory is Conspicuous Consumption, first described by Thorstein Veblen in 1899 and revisited in modern scholarship (Trigg, 2001). Veblen observed that people buy and display luxury items to signal status and wealth rather than solely for practical use. On Instagram this is highly visible: many users post designer goods, exotic vacations, and other markers of success. Not all such posts are purely for status — they may also reflect self-expression, humour, or ordinary sharing — but for teenagers viewing them, the impression of wealth and success is often hard to ignore, and these images can become a benchmark for what a "good life" looks like.

The study also draws on intertemporal discounting, the tendency to value a smaller, immediate reward over a larger, delayed one (Frederick et al., 2002). Classic delay-of-gratification research (Mischel et al., 1989) found associations between children's willingness to wait for a larger later reward and subsequent outcomes; delay discounting has also been linked to educational attainment in adolescents (Lee et al., 2013; Golsteyn et al., 2014).

A growing body of recent work links these ideas to social media. Thoumrungroje (2018) showed that intensive social-media use is associated with materialism and heightened spending, while Lajunen and Olsen Haug (2023) found that Instagram use relates to lower self-esteem through social comparison. Studies focused on young people report similar patterns: exposure to influencers and peers on Instagram is associated with materialism (Dávila & Casabayó, 2025) and conspicuous consumption (Li et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025), and with how adolescents build identity and status online (Noon, 2020; Butler, 2024). One experimental study links Instagram use to both higher materialism and students' learning motivation, suggesting that exposure to luxury imagery may relate directly to educational engagement (Otto & Thies, 2024). However, most of this research focuses on mental health or on emotional and consumption outcomes, and examines college students and adults. Few studies ask whether social media affects real-life decisions such as choosing between education and work, and fewer still focus on a group that is just beginning to earn and spend money while still deciding its future: teenagers with part-time jobs. This research addresses that gap.

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Methodology

Research design. This study used a cross-sectional online survey with a mainly quantitative design and one open-ended question. The aim was to examine associations between exposure to peer luxury posts on Instagram, the Aspiration Gap, and teenagers' aspirations toward education or work.

Participants. The sample consisted of 200 adolescents aged 15–18 who held part-time jobs and used Instagram. Responses were collected through an anonymous questionnaire distributed online using Google Forms. More responses were received than were analysed; test entries and incomplete submissions were removed, leaving 200 valid responses. Because the questionnaire was written in both Uzbek and English and used Uzbek currency (so'm) in one item, participants were predominantly based in Uzbekistan.

Instrument. The questionnaire contained fifteen items presented bilingually in Uzbek and English. The items measured: how often respondents saw peers post expensive items (Q1); whether they compared their own life with those posts (Q2); the emotions the posts evoked (Q3); how large they felt the gap was between their current life and the lifestyle shown (Q4, the Aspiration Gap); how much they desired that lifestyle (Q5); their family's expectations after school (Q6); whether their family currently needed the money they earned (Q7); intertemporal discounting through a monetary trade-off (Q8: 1,000,000 so'm today versus 2,000,000 so'm in one year) and through willingness to study four more years for a better career (Q9); the orientation their job encouraged (Q10); whether luxury posts had prompted them to work more hours at the expense of studying (Q11) or to study harder (Q12); their actual plan after school (Q13); the path they believed led fastest to the lifestyle they saw (Q14); and an optional open-ended reflection (Q15). Basic demographic details, including part-time job type, were also collected.

Classification of the three factors. Family background was derived from Q6 and Q7 (expects education / needs money / mixed). Patience (intertemporal discounting) was derived from Q8 and Q9: respondents who chose the larger delayed reward and agreed that further study was worth the wait were classified as patient, and those who chose the immediate reward were classified as impatient. Job type was taken from the demographic item and grouped into skill-based roles (for example, tutor, sports coach, retail or shop assistant, and cashier) and labour-intensive roles (for example, delivery, construction, and café or family-shop work). Each respondent's overall leaning — toward education, toward work, or being conflicted or unsure — was based primarily on their stated plan after school (Q13), supported by Q10, Q11, Q12, and Q14.

Ethics. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. No names, phone numbers, or other identifying information were collected, and respondents could stop at any time. Informed consent was obtained through an agreement item at the start of the survey ("I have read the conditions above and agree to participate"); for participants under 16, verbal parental consent was recommended. All responses were used only in aggregated form and solely for research purposes.

Analysis. Responses were summarised using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulated by family background, patience, and job type. The single open-ended item (Q15) was reviewed thematically to illustrate how respondents described the Aspiration Gap in their own words.

Findings

Among the 200 respondents, education- and work-leaning patterns varied by three factors: family background, patience (intertemporal discounting), and job type. The results are summarised in Figure 1 and Table 1.

Figure 1 shows the overall distribution of choices. Of the 200 teenagers, 92 (46%) leaned toward education, 78 (39%) leaned toward work, and 30 (15%) were conflicted or unsure. In other words, a slight majority still preferred education, but a substantial minority — nearly 40% — leaned toward immediate work.

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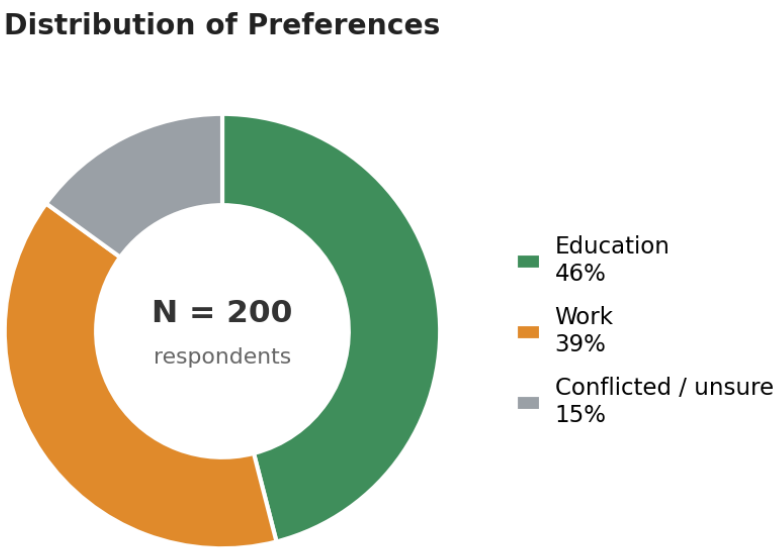


Figure 1. *Distribution of preferences among the 200 respondents: 46% leaned toward education, 39% toward work, and 15% were conflicted or unsure.*

Factor 1: Family background. Respondents from families that "expected education" leaned toward education more often (72%) than those from families that "needed money" (only 12% leaned toward education, while 80% leaned toward work).

Factor 2: Patience (intertemporal discounting). Respondents classified as patient were overwhelmingly education-leaning (85%), while impatient respondents were work-leaning (78%); the mixed group was roughly evenly split. This pattern is consistent with intertemporal discounting: respondents who valued future rewards more tended to lean toward education, while those who chose the immediate reward tended to lean toward work.

Factor 3: Job type. Respondents in skill-based jobs (such as tutor, sports coach, or retail assistant) leaned toward education (about 70% on average), whereas those in labour-intensive jobs (such as delivery, construction, or café or family-shop work) leaned toward work (about 75% on average). This suggests that the kind of part-time job a teenager holds may be associated with how they perceive the value of education relative to immediate income.

Table 1 summarises these subgroup patterns.

Subgroup	Dominant leaning	Approx. share
Family background		
Expects education	Education	72%
Needs money	Work	80% (12% education)
Patience (intertemporal discounting)		
Patient	Education	85%
Impatient	Work	78%
Mixed	Split	~50/50
Job type		
Skill-based (tutor, coach, retail)	Education	~70%
Labour-intensive (delivery, construction, café/family-shop)	Work	~75%

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Table 1. *Dominant leaning and approximate share by family background, patience level, and job type.*

The Aspiration Gap

Across the 200 responses, a pattern emerged: the tension between current and desired life — what I call the Aspiration Gap — was reflected in responses about future plans. In the open-ended responses, some teenagers described this tension directly. One representative response, paraphrased to protect anonymity, stated that the respondent saw peers with nice cars and clothes, wanted the same lifestyle, but was unsure whether to work now or attend college.

Discussion

These results are consistent with Social Comparison Theory and Conspicuous Consumption. Respondents reported comparing themselves with luxury posts and wanting the status items they saw. However, these theories alone do not explain why some leaned toward work and others toward education. That is where the Aspiration Gap and intertemporal discounting come in.

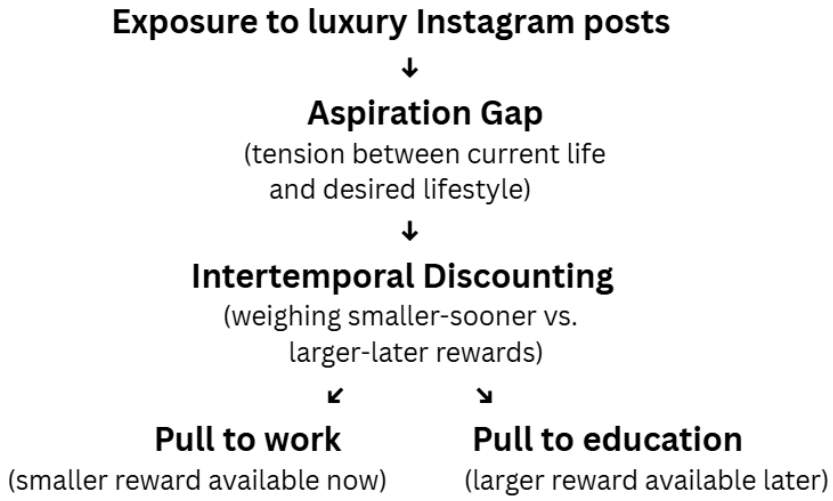


Figure 2. *Conceptual model of the Aspiration Gap and intertemporal discounting. Exposure to luxury posts may be associated with tension between current and desired life. This tension may relate to how respondents weigh a smaller-sooner reward against a larger-later one, corresponding to a pull toward either work or education.*

Family background, patience, and job type were associated with different orientations toward immediate and delayed rewards. Respondents classified as impatient, those from families needing money, and those in labour-intensive jobs tended to lean toward work — the smaller-sooner reward. Respondents classified as patient, those from families expecting education, and those in skill-based jobs tended to lean toward education — the larger-later reward.

These patterns are consistent with existing research on intertemporal discounting in adolescents (Mischel et al., 1989; Frederick et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2013; Golsteyn et al., 2014). The present study applies that work to examine how the Aspiration Gap reported in relation to Instagram luxury posts may be associated with intertemporal discounting in teenage career decisions.

Limitations

Several limitations should be kept in mind. Because the study is a cross-sectional survey based on self-report, it can identify associations but cannot establish causality: the findings do not prove that Instagram luxury posts directly cause teenagers to lean toward work or education. The sample was collected online and was largely self-selected, so it may not represent all working teenagers, and it was drawn mainly from one country. Self-reported attitudes may also differ from real behaviour. Finally, the measure of intertemporal discounting was based on two survey items rather than a full behavioural task.

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Future Directions

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. First, randomised experiments could test causality — for example, by exposing one group of teenagers to luxury Instagram posts and a control group to neutral content, then measuring discounting and career preferences immediately afterward. Second, cross-cultural replication is needed to examine how socioeconomic and cultural variables relate to the Aspiration Gap; extending the study to different national contexts could show whether these patterns hold across diverse populations. Third, larger and more diverse samples, together with control variables such as family income, academic performance, and parental education, would help disentangle the many factors shaping teenagers' educational and career aspirations. Emerging methods that use AI-generated synthetic respondents (Shrestha et al., 2024) may also complement survey research for generating hypotheses, though such simulations still require validation against real human data.

Conclusion

This study suggests that exposure to Instagram luxury posts is associated with how teenagers with part-time jobs think about their future. Across a survey of 200 working teenagers, the reported Aspiration Gap — the tension between current life and a desired lifestyle — varied with whether a teenager leaned toward work or education. Family background, patience (intertemporal discounting), and job type were also associated with the direction of that leaning. Work leaning was more common among impatient respondents, those from families that needed money, and those in labour-intensive jobs; education leaning was more common among patient respondents, those from families that expected education, and those in skill-based jobs.

These subgroup associations were broadly consistent with established theories of social comparison, conspicuous consumption, and intertemporal choice. The findings suggest that the Aspiration Gap is a reported tension associated with Instagram exposure and decisions about education and work.

The next step is to test these patterns in experimental settings. Studies that expose one group to luxury posts and another to neutral posts could test whether the Aspiration Gap causes shifts in career preferences. Even so, the findings suggest that Instagram luxury posts may be related not only to how teenagers feel but also to how they view the trade-off between earning today and investing in education. Parents and educators should be aware of this possibility, and future research should test it directly.

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