

The Secret Social Media Lives of Teenagers

By ANA HOMAYOUN



Earlier this week, Harvard University revealed that it had rescinded admissions offers to at least 10 students who shared offensive images within what they thought was a private Facebook group chat. The students posted memes and images that mocked minority groups, child abuse, sexual assault and the Holocaust, among other things.

It is easy for parents to be left wondering, “What were they thinking?”

Over the past few years, memes — usually images or videos with text often meant to be funny or sarcastic in nature — have become one of the most popular ways, along with photos and videos, that youth communicate on social media. While some of that communication can be positive, allowing teenagers to explore their own identity development and find a sense of belonging, it can also get teens in trouble.

Sharing videos, images and memes creates the opportunity for an instantaneous positive feedback loop that can perpetuate poor decision making. In an environment where teens spend around nine hours using some form of online

media every day, it doesn't take long for them to be influenced by an "all-about-the-likes" sense of values that can potentially lead to life-altering decisions.

I've spent nearly two decades working with teens on organization and time-management in the heart of the Silicon Valley, and many teen girls tell me they have a real Instagram account ("rinsta") for a wider audience and then keep a "finsta" (friends-only or "fake" Instagram) for their closest friends.

Many teens use shortened versions of their names or aliases for finsta accounts, which they often see as an opportunity to share a less edited, less filtered version of their lives. They might spend a lot of time trying to capture the perfect Instagram photo for the "rinsta," which reaches a wider general audience, while a finsta might reveal, as one high school sophomore girl declared, "my innermost thoughts." Like the teens in the Harvard Facebook group chat, those using finsta accounts can have a false sense of confidence to say and do things they might not want a wider audience to see.

And because so much of today's teen social media use is rooted in a fear of getting caught, many teens have detoured their online activity to different ways of cloaked communication. Closed and secret Facebook groups are one way teens (and adults!) privatize communication to a select group — a closed group feels more private because it allows an administrator to approve new users and monitor content. Secret Facebook groups remain unsearchable, and members can only be added or invited by another member. Another trick is to use hidden apps like Calculator% and Calculator+ that look like regular calculators, but require users to enter their passcodes to reveal a back storage area containing private photos.

Also popular with secretive teens are storage apps like Vaulty, which allows users to hide photos and videos, and also has a "mug shot" feature, which takes a photo of anyone who tries to access the app using an incorrect password. Vaulty's most clever trick? Users can create two passwords for one vault, with each password tied to specific levels of access. So, a parent who insists that a teen hand over the password still might be getting limited access. Some teens just hide apps within folders on their phones. Parents wondering if their children are hiding something might look for a cleared search history and an unexplainable spike in data usage as potential red flags.

The ready availability of tools to hide teen social media use can be problematic, leading teens to overshare images, videos and commentary. But that privacy has long been proven to be unreliable, because information shared within a private group can be easily captured in a screenshot and shared with a wider audience. The notion of privacy online is only as reliable as teens' relationships with other

users, and that combined with general privacy concerns provides little guarantee that online information will ever be kept secret. In the case of the Harvard students, administrators found out about images and messages shared within a private group chat, highlighting how easily information shared behind digital walls can quickly become more public.

What would motivate such seemingly intelligent teens to behave so recklessly online? Many people — adults and kids alike — view likes, loves, comments and followers as a barometer for popularity, even within a smaller, closed group. Teens can quickly get caught up in the feedback loop, posting and sharing images and videos that they believe will gain the largest reaction. Over time, teens' own values may become convoluted within an online world of instantaneous feedback, and their behavior online can become based on their "all about the likes" values rather than their real-life values.

There is a very real biological basis for this behavior. The combination of social media pressure and an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain that helps us rationalize decisions, control impulsivity and make judgments, can contribute to offensive online posts.

In a recent study, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that the areas of teens' brains focused on reward processing and social cognition are similarly activated when they think about money and sex – and when they view a photo receiving lots of likes on social media. When teens viewed photos deemed risky, researchers found the brain regions focused on cognitive control were not activated as much, suggesting that it could be harder for them to make good decisions when viewing images or videos that are graphic in nature. Teens seeking external validation become intoxicated by sensationalist engagement, sometimes sending compromising photos or comments. Of course, some adults have fallen into the same trap.

Even though 86 percent of teens say they've received general advice around online use from their parents, researchers at Common Sense Media found that 30 percent of teens who are online believe their parents know "a little" or "nothing" about what social media apps and sites they use. And yet, teens still say that their parents have the biggest influence on determining what is appropriate and inappropriate online.

Adults need to shift the conversation around teens' social media use away from a fear of getting caught and more toward healthy socialization, effective self-regulation and overall safety. This would be all the more important if a bill that was just overwhelmingly passed in the House becomes law. The bill could make it a

felony — punishable by 15 years in jail — if teens send consensual nude photos of themselves.

Some parents try to monitor their teen's social media use with apps of their own. Bark, an app that monitors accounts on 20 different social media platforms, along with iOS and Android texting and email accounts, alerts parents to potentially risky behavior. TeenSafe links teens' phones directly to their parents' phones, and allows full-fledged supervision of phone calls, emails, texts, social media use and geolocation. But such high-level monitoring runs the risk of breaching trust with teens at a crucial developmental time.

Another option is to help young social media users realize that their online and real-life experiences are more intertwined than they may think. Parents might, for example, cite current events, like the Harvard episode, to remind them that nothing online is ever completely private and talk to them about the ways private information can become public. Using open-ended questions will help encourage children to identify and develop their own values and standards around appropriate online behavior. Helping them think through how they might react or behave in certain scenarios can give them the confidence to make better decisions under pressure. Because in the end, teens' online life choices can have real-world outcomes – as those students whose admittance at Harvard was rescinded learned the hard way.

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