The three types of content teens post online

By Ariane Beeston

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If you're the parent of a social-media obsessed teen, then pay attention: new research suggests that adolescents think very carefully about the content they're posting online in an effort to appear "attractive" "well-liked" and "interesting". And they invest a lot of effort ensuring posts meet these three criteria.

"Teenagers aren't just posting carelessly; they're surprisingly thoughtful about what they choose to reveal on social media," said lead author Joanna Yau. "Peer approval is important during adolescence, especially in early adolescence, so they're sharing content that they think others will find impressive."

As part of the study, published in The Journal of Research on Adolescence, Yau and co-author Stephanie Reich, conducted a number of focus groups involving 51 adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years. Discussions centred on how aware teens are of their "audience" and how they presented themselves on Facebook and Instagram.

"Findings suggest that teens, who are developmentally able to perceive a situation from the third-person perspective and who value peer approval, purposefully share content to appear interesting, well liked, and attractive," the authors note.

The teens in the study also explained that using these social media platforms provides them with a chance to think about - and even strategise - about they way they want to present themselves in online spaces.

And girls - in particular - spend a lot of time trying to get it right.

Teenage girls are more likely to ask for advice from their peers to ensure the most flattering picture is used, the most appropriate filter selected and the best caption published. But when it comes to girls, the team effort doesn't end there. According to Reich and Yau, girls also enlist their mates to like and comment on their posts to "boost their popularity index," often doing so during peak traffic periods. In contrast, however, boys don't seem to be asking their mates if they look better in Valencia or Clarendon, or to like their picture once it's up.

But all this pondering, strategising and consulting has its downsides - it can take the fun out of posting online.

"We found that some teens invested great effort into sharing content on Facebook and Instagram and that what may seem to be an enjoyable activity may actually feel tedious," Yau says. The social rules in the online world, she notes, require a higher level of "sensitivity", than those in face-to-face communication.

In other words - it's complicated.

"Even interesting and positive posts can be interpreted negatively," says Yau, explaining that sharing something like news about college admissions can come across as "pretentious and prideful."

Yau and Reich also note that as teens get older they're more likely to consider the perspective of their audience when deciding what to post, "which is consistent with the finding that perspective taking continues to develop throughout adolescence."

Psychologist and founder of Digital Nutrition Jocelyn Brewer, says she's not surprised by the findings. "We live in a world where reputation rules", Brewer says. Given many kids - and adults of course - worship the "insta-famous" and their perfectly curated lives, Brewer says adolescents are simply mimicking that in how they post, as well as how they seek approval for what they post. "Pre-approval as well as online approval – how meta!" she laughs.

Brewer notes that the findings also show that kids are listening to social media safety advice.

 "It seems we have at least taught enough 'digital citizenship' that many kids understand the concept (albeit a false one) of a 'digital footprint' (it's not a footprint that might wash

or be blown away it's a tattoo, relatively permanent unless you go through a long removal process) and the idea of putting your best self forward online," she says. "Stopping to think about what you post is again a 101 lesson that we hope is being absorbed."

But, there is a downside to this, too. "There might be some over-thinking and curation that happens which might mean posts aren't authentic or real. That said, kids are pretty savvy to posts (esp from brands) which are off the mark."

If parents are concerned about what their kids are posting online, however, Brewer has a number of suggestions:

"Conversations and using examples is the best way we can help teach kids about the impacts of posts and the various ways they're perceived," she says. "To a large degree it's a developmental thing, so you can't rush it, but you can lay foundations through communication and teaching critical thinking skills."

But what exactly does that entail?

Brewer says it's about using real-life examples "to leapfrog into conversations about how these might be good/bad or improved and what some of the implications might be - helping kids see the things that their brains can't automatically see or think ahead to yet, which is usually where the online mistakes are."