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Storytelling with Data: Instagram and Teens

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Summary

Teen mental health has been making headlines in 2023. As experts express heightened concern about the state of teen mental health, they often bring up social media and what role it plays in teens' emotional wellbeing. In order to understand public sentiment about this topic and what role Instagram can play in the current climate, I conducted mixed methods research through a survey that collected both quantitative and qualitative data as well as analysis of previous studies. Through this investigation, I identified three major concerns about teens and social media.

Key Research Themes

- Parents worry about teen safety online.
- Lack of control is a top parent concern about social media.
- Teen mental health is an urgent concern to both parents and professionals.



Source: Emmanuel Olguín. *Unsplash*

Instagram Case Study

In 2017, Molly Russell, a 14-year-old girl living in Britain died by suicide. Molly was the youngest of three girls. She enjoyed horseback riding and pop music. Yes, she had mood swings and had been spending more time in her room, but it all seemed like normal teen behavior. Her death was a complete shock to her family, until they got access to her social media.

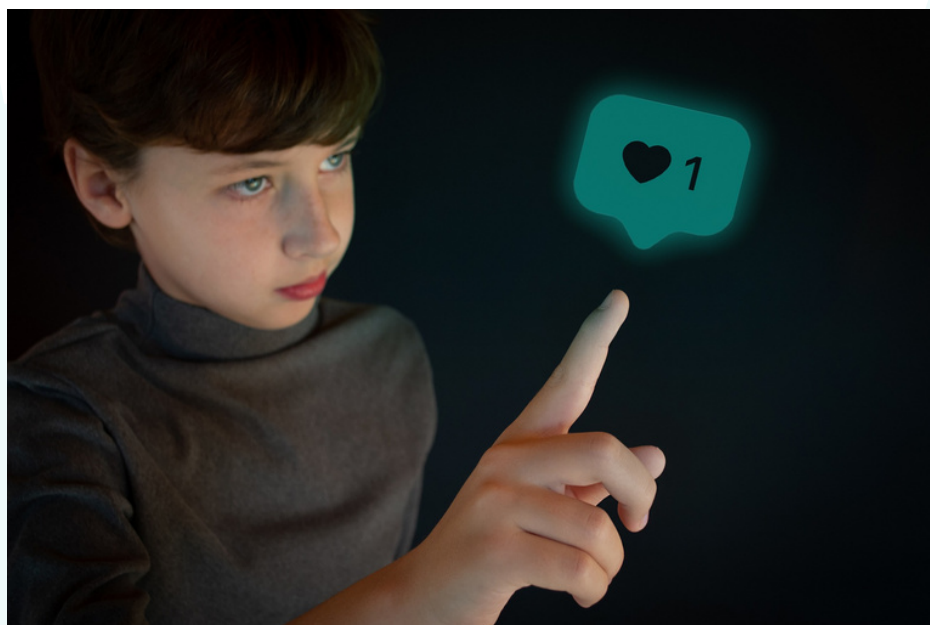
Molly's dad was so upset by what he discovered that he "urged the coroner reviewing Molly's case to go beyond what is often a formulaic process, and to explore the role of social media" (Satariano 2022). The coroner agreed and after a lengthy battle with Meta, was provided with more than 16,000 pages of content from Molly's Instagram account (Satariano 2022). In the six months before Molly died, she shared, liked or saved an average of 12 posts per day about suicide, self-harm and depression (Satariano 2022). When the content was shown at the coroner's inquest hearing, one member of the court had to leave the room because the images were so upsetting (Safi 2022).

The investigation revealed that the algorithms on Instagram had curated a feed of depressive or sad sounding accounts. The platforms were recommending accounts that a person would have known were not good for Molly, but a system only recognized as something that might increase Molly's engagement (Safi 2022). Additionally, none of the content breached Instagram's rules. Ultimately, the coroner determined that Molly "died from an act of self-harm whilst suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content" (Safi 2022).

Current Climate

Since Molly's death, social media platforms, including Instagram, have taken steps to limit harmful content. Instagram has rolled out parental controls, but the features are limited to setting time limits and seeing who a teen is following and who's following them (Howley 2022). Instagram has also produced a "Parent's Guide" to help teens navigate Instagram safely and taken steps such as removing graphic images of self-harm, but parents and experts are still dubious about the platform (Mosseri 2019).

It did not help that four years after Molly's death the *Wall Street Journal* released documents detailing that Instagram had conducted three years of internal research that showed the platform makes "body image issues worse for one in three teen girls" and that "[t]eens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression" (Wells et al 2021). As we all know, the public was outraged. Adam Mosseri (2021), the head of Instagram, publicly announced a pause on the development of "Instagram Kids" (an app targeted at tweens) saying, "We believe building 'Instagram Kids' is the right thing to do, but we're pausing the work."



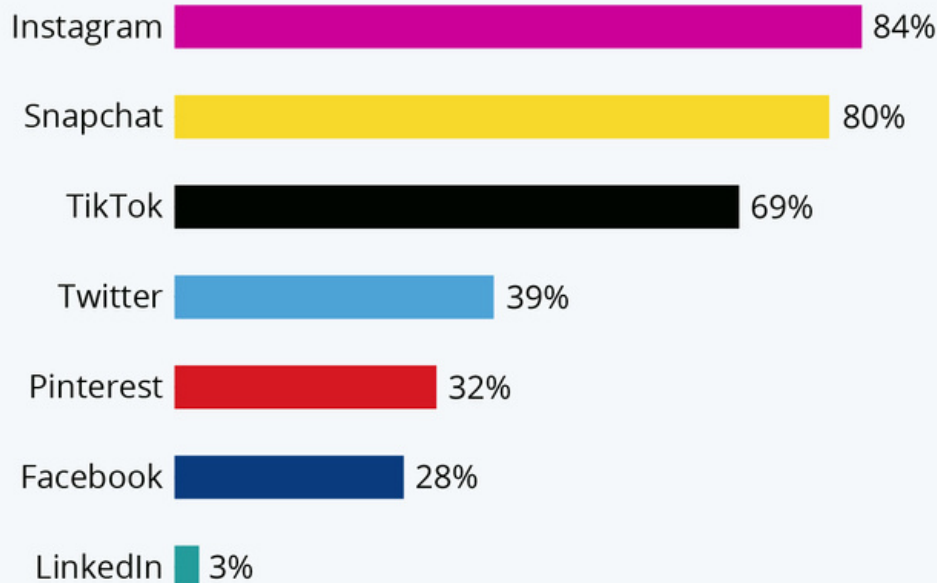
Source: Victoria Watercolo. Pixabay

Not All Press Is Good Press

Social media and the effect it has on teens has been in the news a lot lately. US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, recently told CNN that “based on the data [he’s] seen 13 is too early” for teens to use social media and “pitting adolescents against Big Tech is just not a fair fight” (Gordon and Brown 2023). Murthy also suggested that parents need to “band together” to not allow their kids to use social media until age 16 or older (Gordon and Brown 2023).

Instagram is the most used platform by teens across all social media, with 84% of teens using it at least once a month. Not only is it the most used, but a study conducted by Lurie Children’s hospital found that Instagram was also the most concerning social media platform for parents (Lurie 2020). Because of this, Instagram stands a higher chance of being hurt by the surgeon general's call to action.

% of U.S. teens who use the following social media platforms at least once a month



Based on a survey of 9,800 U.S. teens with an average age of 15.8 years conducted in Q3 2020

Source: Piper Sandler



Is age just a number?

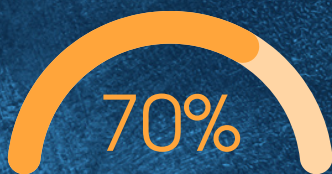
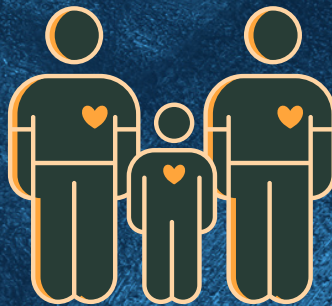
PARENTS OF TEENS QUICK FACTS

83% OF PARENTS THINK 16-18 IS
A GOOD AGE TO START
USING INSTAGRAM

Parents, regardless of age, gender, and personal experience with Instagram, agreed that Instagram was not suited for younger teens.

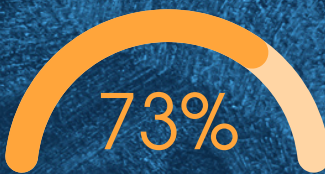


"I worry about whether they are wise enough to be able to make wise choices about the variety of content they may encounter and the affect it will have on their emotional/social well-being."
-Mother of a teen



PARENTS ARE UNLIKELY TO LET THEIR TEEN HAVE AN INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

Parents were not specifically asked the age of their teen, but short answer responses indicate that most respondents had younger teens.



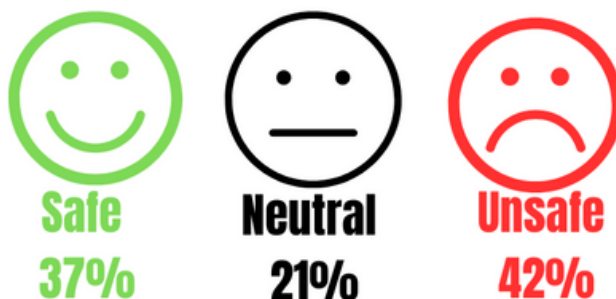
PARENTS EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Self-esteem was the number one mental health concern with many parents mentioning body image issues and bullying.

Survey data of parents of teens indicates that most parents agree with the surgeon general as 83% of respondents chose 16-18 as an appropriate age for a teen to begin using Instagram. Currently, Instagram allows teens to create an account at the age of 13. When asked about Instagram developing an app for tweens, 76% of parents opposed the idea with answers varying from "nervous" to "extremely concerned" to calling the idea a "gateway drug." All of this indicates that Instagram Kids is not very viable in the current climate. It would be better for Instagram to focus on developing better safeguards for teens in the existing app if they want to build trust between parents and experts.

Safety Concerns

Parent Feelings about how safe Instagram is for teens.



When asked how safe Instagram is for kids, 42% of parents indicated that Instagram was unsafe for teens. Qualitative data revealed that parents worried about exposure to explicit content, bullying, and sexual predators. The last two both relate to concerns about anonymity on the platform.

One mother reported that there were several anonymous accounts related to her teen's high school. Most of the accounts were meant to be funny like @awestbathroomshoes that takes pictures of shoes under bathroom stalls or @ghs_sleeping.page which features photos of students sleeping in class. However, even well-meaning accounts can be problematic. The @ghsvirgins which seeks to promote "spiritual purity and a sin-free life" highlights a "virgin of the week," but the account often does so without the featured person's permission. A surveyed mother said her teen was featured on the account and while he "was chill about it" she could see how it could be "totally upsetting" to other teens to have something like that publicly posted.

Lack of Control

Despite their worries about Instagram, over 50% of parents said that the number one benefit of Instagram was connection. Still, when asked directly, 17% of parents could not list a single benefit to Instagram. Many of these parents did not see a benefit to social media in general, but those that were opposed to Instagram specifically gave some context to parent hesitation about the app. One survey respondent when asked to list the top benefit of Instagram said:

"NOT instagram. My kid found an artist community on Tumblr and are very happy there. With Tumblr it's still possible to only see posts from people you follow. I would not recommend that unless the parent/child relationship is strong and open enough that kiddo feels comfortable talking about anything and everything they're concerned about."



Parents Say the top Benefits of Instagram are connection and Creativity

Parents top concerns about Instagram were related to mental health.



This statement reflects a concern shared by 55% of survey respondents. While parents were not asked directly about whether they wanted more control over their teen's Instagram feed, when asked what safety features Instagram should have, over half of parents indicated they would like better control over what type of content their teen was viewing. This ranged from blocking explicit content to only seeing content from accounts they follow.

Parental Controls Precedence

Other companies have released features that allow more parental controls, such as YouTube allowing parents to create supervised accounts for their teens and tweens (Beser 2021). While these supervised accounts still rely “on user input, human review, and machine learning” they are a step forward in giving parents more control over what their children and teens are being exposed to (Clark 2021).

Mental Health Crisis

A 10-year CDC study published in February of this year, reveals that “all indicators of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors increased” in teens in the last decade (CDC 2023). The director of the CDC said that in 30 years of collecting data the CDC has never seen “this kind of devastating consistent findings” and there is “no question young people are telling us they are in crisis” (Tanner 2023).

Mitch Prinstein, the chief science officer at the American Psychological Association (APA), told the Senate Judiciary Committee that there are many factors contributing to this crisis and social media is definitely one of them. In his testimony, he also called for “legislation that creates a requirement that social media companies protect the well-being of child users” (Prinstein 2023).

Pew research indicates that “parents have a range of concerns when it comes to their teenagers using social media, with access to explicit content and time-wasting ranking among those at the top of the list” (Gelles-Watnick 2022). While both of those concerns came up in my survey, 73% of respondents listed mental health issues as a top concern and 35% of parents listed it as the reason their teen was not on Instagram. Often mental health was mentioned in addition to time wasting or access to explicit content and was expressed as concern about body image, unrealistic expectations, depression, anxiety, peer pressure, and bullying. An American Medical Association study found that “high levels of social media use over four years was associated with increased depression – and each one-hour increase in the average time students said they spent on social media was associated with an increase in the severity of depression symptoms within that same year” (Boers et al 2019).

An Opportunity

Instagram has an opportunity to act and help solve this crisis. If Instagram is proactive, the company will be seen as an ally in protecting teens. It is important for Instagram to be aware of current events and understand parental concern. If Instagram prioritizes ways to protect teens' mental health, they can be part of the solution instead of becoming a target for blame.

In order to protect teens and be an ally in fighting the teen mental health crisis, Instagram needs to allow for more filtering options on teen accounts. When asked what types of features Instagram should have for teen accounts, the top suggestions from parents were:

- parental controls
- blocking/filtering explicit content
- only being able to see posts of the accounts they follow



Source: Anthony Tran. *Unsplash*

Recommendations



Source: Karsten Winegeart.
Unsplash

While Instagram revenues are largely connected to algorithms that show users content they are not subscribed to, Instagram has an ethical responsibility to prioritize more control for teen accounts. Making this a priority is also good business and will keep Instagram competitive in the current climate as it builds trust between the company, parents, experts, and even teens. When we look at long-term viability of our company, making teen mental health a priority is the best move for Instagram.

In order to accomplish this, three things should happen:

1. Increase parental controls to include ability to block accounts or certain types of content.
2. Improve explicit content filters for teen accounts.
3. More feed control for teen accounts.

As these changes are developed, parents and experts should continue to be engaged in the conversation to ensure Instagram is truly listening to those most invested in safeguarding teens' emotional wellbeing.

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