

News.com.au

<http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/parenting/study-finds-instagram-is-the-perfect-platform-for-teenage-self-representation/story-fnjco7gt-1227428949183>

Study finds Instagram is the perfect platform for teenage self-representation

JULY 5, 2015 8:06AM



19-year-old Instagram star Mimi Elashiry.

BROOKE LUMSDEN news.com.au

IT MAY come as a shock to some of us over the age of 20, but it turns out that teenagers use Instagram for more than just duck-faced selfies and bro pics from the latest music festival, and it could be actually be good for their mental health.

Researchers from [Pennsylvania State University](http://www.psu.edu) have found that teens are using the photo-sharing app as a space for self-expression and conversation more than adults. Conducting a study analysing the posts of 27,000 users of different ages, the researchers were surprised to find that teens actually post less photos than adults do, and what they do post is more related to their mood and emotion.



Teens are more likely to post pictures that relate to mood and emotion, according to a new study. Picture: Indy Clinton Source:Instagram

At a time when they are often struggling with their own identity, sometimes trialling different looks or personalities, the behaviours adolescents displayed on Instagram supported the idea that they see social media as the perfect platform for self-representation. As a result, they are more expressive about themselves and the images they share than adults are, using tags, comments and bios to spread that expression further.

Clinical psychologist Sally-Anne McCormack says that it's crucial for teens to have an appropriate space for self-expression, as one of the factors in depression and anxiety is that people keep to themselves and don't express their emotions. "They don't talk about how they're feeling, and that's why we see psychologists now," Sally explains.

"What research tells us is that we need to be talking a lot more, we need to be expressing ourselves, and so having some type of avenue for sharing things like artwork and writing — we're expressing something that we're feeling."



Cody Simpson's 17-year-old sister Alli Simpson is a big fan of Instagram. Source:Instagram

When these feelings are put out into the big wide world however, it of course creates vulnerability, and can influence others — an important aspect for teens to keep in mind when it comes to what is being expressed. With the research finding that teens focus heavily on attracting more and more followers, even explicitly asking for them, it continues to make their online world wider, creating a bigger audience for what they are putting out there.

“They need to be aware and mindful of it being a public space,” Sally-Anne says. “When you get lots of followers, you are potentially influencing other people. We have this potential to have such a big influence on people we’ve never met and people we don’t even know we’ve influenced,” she explains.

When living in an age of putting so much of ourselves into the online world, it can be common for teens to even do this when struggling with negative emotions. Sally-Anne says that it’s important to consider this when sharing about self-harming or suicidal thoughts, and what plans we may have to act on these. “That’s not helpful at all, and it’s not helpful for a community to read,” she says.

“Sometimes there could be copycats, there could be someone who’s triggered themselves by reading something like that.”



On social media we have the power to influence people we’ve never met, so positive images can be a good thing. Photo: Mimi Elashiry Source:Instagram

While sharing these thoughts is essential, Sally-Anne says that it’s important to narrow the audience. “I think that self-expression is good in a private setting with loved ones, or at least a restricted audience to people who care about you because they’re the ones who will support you if you’re feeling down. If you want to complain about your parents not letting you watch television in bed — those sorts of things are fine, but I think if it’s a step too far, those things are better kept to a close support group.”

Sally-Anne says using positive methods to show parts of themselves is vital to teen wellbeing however, and having the ability to share words, photos and videos on Instagram allows them to use types of expression suitable to them. She suggests writing stories and acting in online videos as a great way for teens to explore issues, regardless of how irrelevant the content may seem.

“It’s important to express yourself and get your emotions out and communicate it rather than bottling them up inside,” she says. “So I think that’s really healthy, I think it’s really positive. The danger can be when we go in a negative direction, but certainly neutral or positive, or just exploring issues is really powerful and positive. As long as we’re not teaching someone to hate by doing it.”



Photo: Mimi ElashirySource:Instagram