

How teenagers navigate the nuances of social media, and what adults can learn from them

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For older generations, social media might feel like a specific and often new way of interacting—markedly different from meeting in person or talking on the phone. For most teenagers, though, it is part of an

interconnected social landscape. They may not necessarily need to distinguish social connections as either online or offline. These can be fluid across digital and physical spaces.

But there are nuances to interacting on social media—and [teens are often acutely aware](#) of them. Social media accounts are often characterized by what is known as [context collapse](#). This means that there are multiple different types of audience in a single context. A post on Instagram or TikTok might be viewed by friends and other teenagers, but also teachers, parents or family members.

Understanding audiences

When posting online, teens will be negotiating these audiences, perhaps aiming a post at their friends, but making sure the content is still appropriate for other types of audience.

This, in some cases, might explain why teenagers (like many others) may be drawn towards more [protected or private channels](#). These include Snapchat group chats, WhatsApp groups or close friends lists on Instagram.

Parents might think their teen is being secretive by using closed channels like this. But the social connections which can occur here are likely to be the most authentic and valuable in terms of building connections with friends. These smaller or more self-contained types of social connections may also encourage more [active types of social media use](#), such as voice messages, replying to threads and video calls.

[Psychological evidence](#) suggests that more active types of social media behavior are related to greater perceptions of social belonging, when compared to more passive types of social media engagement, such as simply scrolling through a feed. These active kinds of social media use

could support teens' expression of their identity, and therefore, feelings of [social support](#) and belonging.

Social media can also present teens with opportunities for [experimentation and discovery](#). For example, for those who identify as LGBTQ+, joining relevant social media groups can provide them with an opportunity to explore their own identity and gain [social support from others](#).

Beyond this, curating their own [social media accounts](#) can help teenagers build their identities. In many cases, the teen may be reclaiming ownership of their identity from how it might have been built and curated by their parents.

Social cues

On the other hand, the way social media makes the subtleties of friendships and peer relationships explicit can create difficulties.

Features and functions such as "remove friend" or "follow," provide concrete markers on the boundaries of relationships or connections that don't exist in the offline world. "Likes" and "reactions" from others [provide feedback](#) which can affect a teen's perception of whether they are receiving social approval or validation.

An absence of these cues, or inactivity within social interactions, such as being [left on read](#) or a post going unliked, might feed into perceptions of social disapproval or worse still, feelings of social rejection.

This may have particular significance for teenagers because [peer relationships](#) hold crucial importance in adolescence. Teenagers typically value the [opinions and approval](#) of their friends and peers more than others, such as their parents or siblings.

What's more, teenagers typically place particularly high value on [social approval](#). This means that they may be more sensitive to whether or not they have validation from their peers on social media. It might also explain why higher social media use in adolescence has been linked to [lower life satisfaction](#).

In many ways, there are lessons we can learn from how [teenagers](#) use social media. In general, they appear to be much better equipped than their older counterparts to self-censor and curate the various aspects of their identities across different channels. This suggests they are much more socially aware and attuned to the way these are interpreted by various audiences.

Teenagers' ability to move fluidly between online and offline environments may make them better than [older adults](#) at recognizing that how they behave on social media may have direct social consequences in the real world.

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