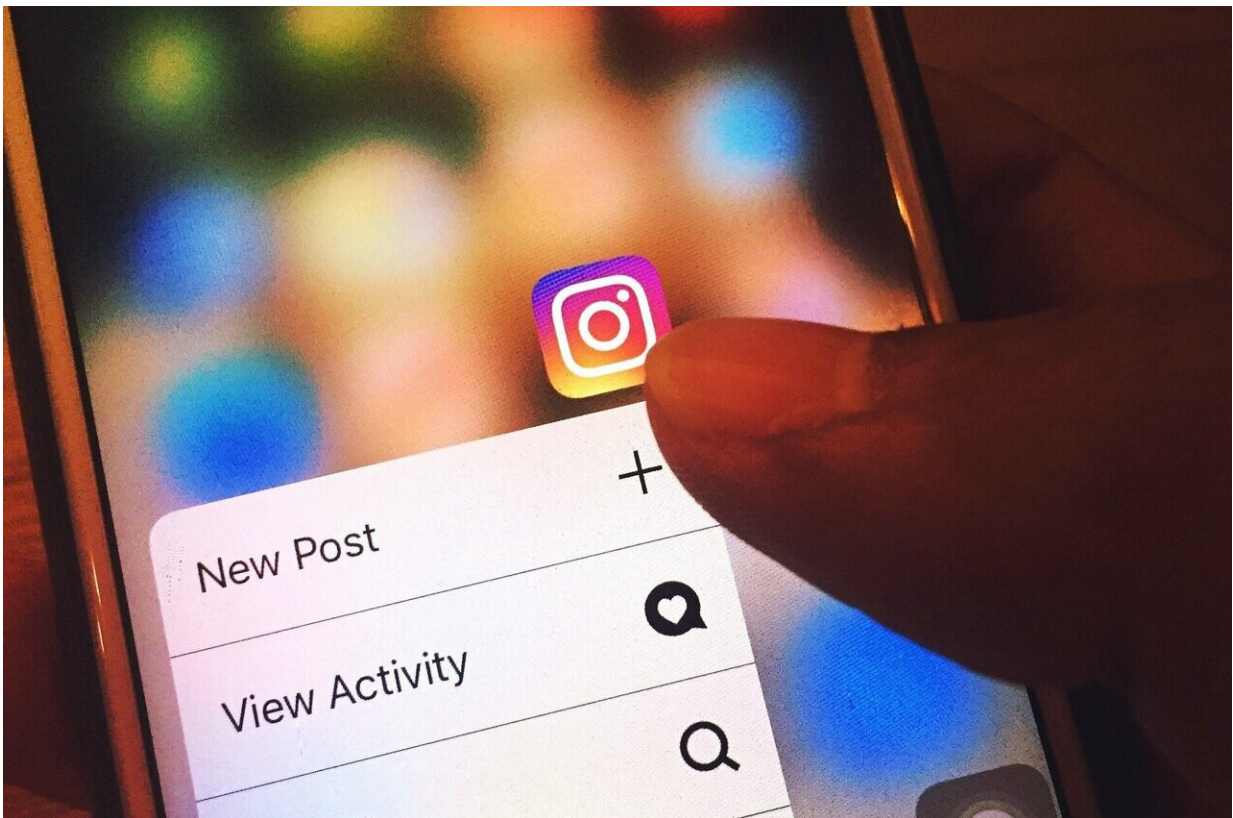


Even on Instagram, teens mostly feel bored: Researchers offer design recommendations

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Concern that social media is driving the teen mental health crisis has risen to such a pitch that the majority of states in the country have [filed lawsuits against Meta](#) (which owns Instagram and Facebook) and the

U.S. surgeon general [called last month for warning labels on platforms](#), similar to those on tobacco.

New research from the University of Washington finds, though, that while some teens do experience [negative feelings](#) when using Instagram, the dominant feeling they have around the platform is boredom. They open the app because they're bored. Then they sift through largely irrelevant content, mostly feeling bored, while seeking interesting bits to share with their friends in direct messages—the most constant source of connection they found on the platform. Then, eventually bored with what researchers call a "content soup," they log off.

The study tracked the experiences of 25 U.S. teens moment by moment as they used the app. Teens leaned on a few techniques to stabilize their experiences—such as using likes, follows and unfollows to curate their feeds, and racing past aggravating content. The researchers used these results to make a few design recommendations, including prompts to cue reflection while using the app or features that clarify and simplify how users can curate their feeds.

The team [presented](#) its research on June 18 at the ACM Interaction Design and Children Conference in Delft, Netherlands.

"A lot of the talk about social media is at the extremes," said lead author Rotem Landesman, a UW doctoral student in the Information School. "You either hear about harassment or bullying—which are real phenomena—or this kind of techno-utopian view of things. Companies like Meta, among others, seem to say they are thinking about well-being constantly but we've yet to see concrete results of that. So we really wanted to study the mundane, daily experience of teens using Instagram."

To capture this in-the-moment experience, the team first trained the

participants in mindfulness techniques and had them download an app called AppMinder. The simple interface, which the researchers developed, would pop up five minutes after the teens started using Instagram and have them fill out a quick survey about how they were feeling emotionally and why. The pop-ups came once every three hours. Teens were supposed to use Instagram and fill out at least one response a day for seven days, though many submitted multiple responses each day.

Finally, researchers interviewed teens about their responses and had them open Instagram again and narrate how they were feeling in real time and explain how they were experiencing certain features.

"We saw teens turning to Instagram in moments of boredom, looking for some kind of stimulation," said co-senior author Alexis Hiniker, a UW associate professor in the iSchool. "They were finding enough moments of closeness and connection with their friends on the app to keep them coming back. That value is definitely there, but it's really buried in gimmicks, attention-grabbing features, content that's sometimes upsetting or frustrating, and a ton of junk."

Much of what Instagram's algorithm served up was not what the teens were looking for. Yet they'd keep wading through hundreds of posts to find a single meme or piece of fashion inspiration to share with their friends. Overall, they found the most value in the app's direct message function, not in this scrolling.

Because they found value in specific experiences, teens employed several mitigation strategies to focus their time on the app:

- Trying to curate their feeds to emphasize posts that made them feel good rather than bad or bored, by following, unfollowing, hiding and liking
- Scrolling quickly, skipping or logging off when content made

them feel bad

- Toggling Instagram features—hiding like-counts, turning off certain notifications—to reduce negative emotions

"Instagram's push notifications and algorithmically curated feeds forever hold out the promise of teens experiencing a meaningful interaction, while delivering on this promise only intermittently," said co-senior author Katie Davis, a UW associate professor in the iSchool.

"Unfortunately, it's much easier to identify the problem than to fix it. The current business model of most [social media platforms](#) depends on keeping users scrolling as often and for as long as possible. Legislation is needed to compel platforms to change the status quo."

Based on their findings, the researchers offered three design changes to improve teens' experiences:

- Notifications, like those from AppMinder, that prompt teens to consider what they're on Instagram to do and to reflect in the moment
- Features that make curating feeds easier, such as a "This is good for me" button that clearly highlights positive content
- The use of data to track signs of well-being and its opposite—for example, tracking when users skip past content or log off and pairing this with other data

This summer, the team will take the data from the study and examine it with a separate group of teens, aiming for further insights and recommendations.

"It is not and should not be the sole responsibility of [teens](#) to make their [experiences](#) better, to navigate these algorithms without knowing how they work, exactly," Landesman said. "The responsibility also lies with companies running social media platforms."

Additional co-authors include Jina Yoon, a UW doctoral student in the Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering; JaeWon Kim, a UW doctoral student in the iSchool; Daniela E. Muñoz Lopez, a UW doctoral student in psychology; and Lucía Magis-Weinberg, a UW assistant professor of psychology.

More information: Rotem Landesman et al, "I Just Don't Care Enough To Be Interested": Teens' Moment-By-Moment Experiences on Instagram, *Proceedings of the 23rd Annual ACM Interaction Design and Children Conference* (2024). [DOI: 10.1145/3628516.3655812](https://doi.org/10.1145/3628516.3655812)

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