

High School Freshman's Social Media Use



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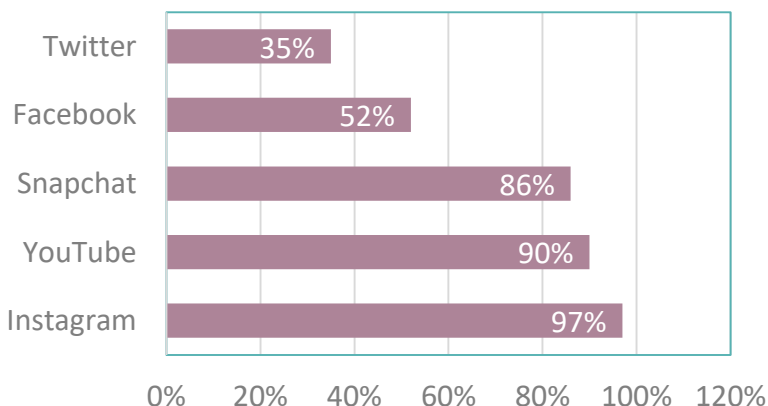
Picture a group of teens silently stumbling down a school hallway or busy street, all of their eyes glued to their phone screen. It makes for a good news story, but it doesn't reflect the real life of real teens. What's most obvious from our study of social media use among high school freshmen? Variety.

Some students *are* glued to their phone, but high school hallways are still full of chatter between classes. And while the first waking thought of some freshmen is how to keep their Snapchat streaks alive, others have no social media accounts. Some students don't even have a cell phone. "My mom thinks I should get one, but I don't see the need," one girl explained. "When my friends want to get a hold of me, they know they have to send me an e-mail."

Most freshmen *are* active on social media. But here, again, variety is the theme. Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube are the dominant social media of the day, but most teens have accounts on several social media—the average was 6 or 7 and ranged from 2 to 14. Many freshmen had multiple accounts on one social medium (see our report on Finstas). They used different accounts or different social media to communicate with different parts of their social network. They might use Facebook to keep in touch with extended family but use Snapchat to send silly photos to close friends.

Having accounts on the most common social media helped freshmen feel connected to everyone at school (see article on "FOMO"). Having other accounts helped them branch out, pursue personal interests, connect with people beyond school, build a more personal identity.

Freshmen had accounts on many social media apps. Here are the most popular:



Most teens reported using social media in healthy ways to build positive relationships and a positive sense of self. Some, however, encountered negative experiences on social media, or confessed that it seemed to take too much of their time and distract them from other activities. At this age, teens still seem to need some adult guidance.

But figuring out the right rules for each student is tricky (see our reports on school rules and parent rules). Given the variety of ways that high school freshmen engage with social media, family rules or parent support need to be adjusted for each child's interests, needs, and maturity level.



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THE (SLIGHTLY) HIDDEN SIDE OF INSTAGRAM

Instagram is the obvious choice of most freshmen for posting something to let everyone know about an important or an exciting event that has happened in their life. That's because most schoolmates have an account on Instagram and because most students have hundreds of peers following their account. But, unlike their experience in middle school, freshmen find that peers expect Instagram posts to be of high quality: something unusual, striking, really funny or entertaining. Students reported dressing up for a photo that would be posted on Instagram, or using editing programs to refine an image before they posted it. The pressure to post something unusual meant that most teens only added to their Instagram page occasionally. The probability that lots of people would see the post discouraged them from posting something that could get them in trouble—something adults would label “inappropriate.”

So, where does one post about every-day events? Where should one place something that only close friends could understand or appreciate? “On your finsta,” freshmen told us. Finstas have an interesting history. Short for “fake Instagram account” finstas originally were created by adolescents pretending to be someone else, often to tease or belittle that person. As that use fell out of favor, adolescents transformed finstas (also known as “spam accounts”) into private accounts, meant to be seen by only a select number of trusted peers.

There is pressure to only post socially acceptable content on public accounts. One student said, “... one time I posted something on my spam account, and someone was like, ‘Why would you put that on your [Snapchat] story?!’, and then they’re like, ‘Oh, wait; it’s your spam account. No big deal.’”



In our sample, finstas (or similarly restricted accounts on Snapchat) were more common among girls than boys—over 70% of girls, versus just 15% of boys, said that they had one. Although students said their finstas were just for close friends, on average they had about 50 followers. These accounts provide a more comfortable, less judgmental posting environment than “rinstas” (their “real,” or main Instagram account), which generally had a larger, broader audience.

Students create finstas for different reasons. They share memes, inside jokes, and unedited selfies. They generally feel less pressure to appear likable, interesting, and attractive on their finsta accounts. Many students said they felt they were posting more of “the real me” on their finsta.

Some parents are aware of their child’s finsta but are usually denied access. One student said, “On your finsta, there are not as many people, so [friends] may say something that is not so appropriate... I don’t want to get into trouble for what my friends say and do.” While it was less common, some students capitalized on the privacy afforded by finstas to post pictures of themselves and their friends participating in illegal activities. But for the most part, finstas are a healthy way for freshmen to escape the constant judgment of peers and adults, share candid thoughts with close friends, and discover their real self.

FOMO (FEAR OF MISSING OUT) DRIVES MANY STUDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA HABITS

A lot can happen in the lives of teens during a weekend or even over the course of a day at school. Social media make it easy to spread the news of all these events quickly and broadly. Being aware of all the latest news and gossip means you can contribute to conversations wherever peers meet up. It also signals that you're accepted, part of the group. That's why many teens—almost half of our sample—expressed a fear of missing out (FOMO) on something important if they don't check their social media frequently.

"Every day I worry about that (FOMO)," one of the freshmen in our study confessed. "Yeah, just like to keep up with everybody else. It's not a bad thing to know what's going on with everybody else."

Students talked about FOMO in two different ways. One way was about their ***not being informed***. Something happened in the peer group and they didn't know about it; they weren't prepared to discuss it or respond to it. The other way focused on their ***not being included***. Pictures went up on Instagram of everyone at a party or concert and they weren't in the picture; they hadn't been invited. The best way to avoid being left out is to make sure you know what's going on.

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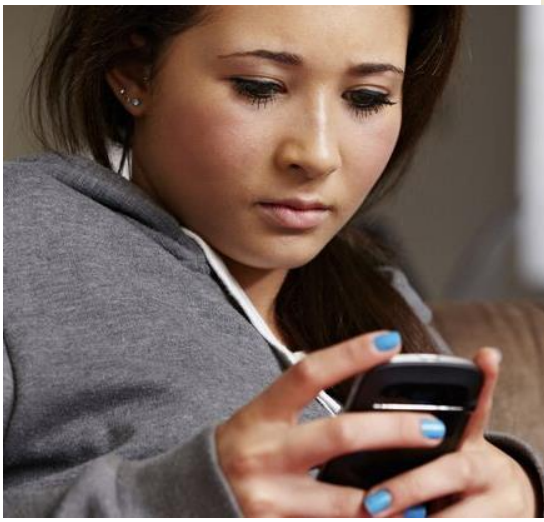
This was a major reason why students dreaded being separated from their phone, either because their phone privileges were taken away or the phone broke or they were on some type of trip where they couldn't use their phone to access social media. One student observed, "It feels like I'm disconnecting, almost, from the rest of my friends and they are doing stuff without me or something." Coming back to social media after this type of break "feels like you've missed a lot," another freshman explained. "Then, when you get back on you keep scrolling, scrolling, scrolling to see everything that happened."

But not all of the teens we talked to were in the grips of FOMO. Explaining her cell phone use, one freshman said, "I need my phone for stuff, like communication with family, or if I'm out with someone. But, social media, I could live without it." Other studies suggest that FOMO is particularly prominent among teens who are preoccupied with popularity or who are anxious about how much peers accept them and care about them. Because popularity and peer acceptance are major issues for freshmen, especially just as they transition into high school, it's not surprising that FOMO was a prominent theme in our interviews.



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“BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU POST,” FRESHMEN ADVISE

“Just be careful what you say and what you post because people are watching.”

Adults are one important source of advice to teens about use of social media, but what are teens telling each other? At the end of their freshman year, we asked the students in our study what advice they would give to next year’s freshmen about how to handle social media in high school. Their answers reveal a lot about the pressures they felt and practices they adopted.

A common theme in their advice concerned the use of social media to gain popularity or acceptance. Students said they would tell freshmen not to worry so much about likes and followers. As one participant put it, “Just post what makes you happy. Likes don’t equal popularity.” Such comments reveal how deeply our participants were concerned with being noticed, fitting in, finding friends when they started high school. FOMO (fear of missing out) seemed to be lurking behind their use of social media early in freshman year.

But these students also suggest that this concern dissipates over time. Asked in the spring how their use of social media had changed over the course of freshman year, many students said they were more relaxed about it now. Once they found their friendship group they weren’t as concerned about what everyone else thought of their posts.

Students’ most frequent advice involved warnings to be careful what you post. They used such phrases as: “pretend everyone in your family is seeing it”; “don’t say something mean or hurtful”; “try not to get into arguments or drama.” One student cautioned, “Just be careful with what you say and what you post about because people are watching and they will judge you. If you post something mean about another kid, they will stand up for them and they will call you out.”

Still, students remained sensitive to peer norms about social media. They wanted to advise new freshmen to post something at least occasionally. If the period between posts was too long, their peers would lose interest. On Instagram, one should post interesting and exciting events like vacations and holidays, not everyday things. On Snapchat, it was important to our participants that snaps never be left unread.

Finally, freshmen emphasized the need to strike a balance between online and offline interactions. They warned against letting social media take the place of spending time doing things with friends. “Learn how to connect with people in real life, not DMs [Direct Messages on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.],” one student advised.

In the advice that they offered, students displayed a lot of growth in their understanding of how social media shape their lives. They also revealed the maturity and self-confidence that can occur across freshman year.



“Post what makes you happy. Likes don’t equal popularity.”

TEACHERS PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN HOW CELL PHONES ARE USED AT SCHOOL



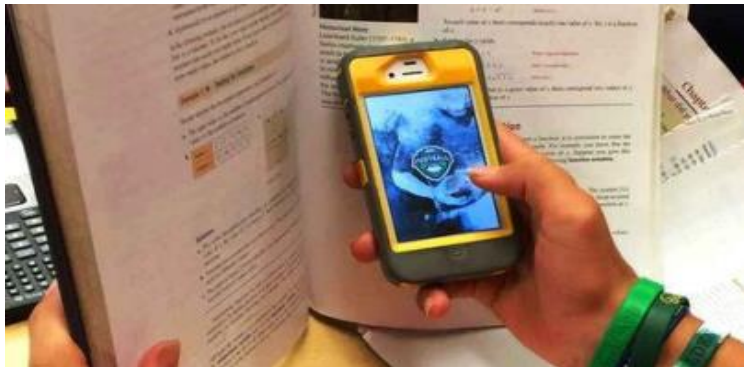
Most students try to follow classroom rules.

Almost 80% said they confined use of cell phones to lunch time, passing time between classes, or study hall.



Most schools recognize the potential for cell phones to distract students from learning. So, they have rules about students' cell phone use. But do students follow the rules? According to the freshmen we spoke to, that depends a lot on the teacher.

Schools often block social media sites on school computers and prohibit use of cell phones during class, unless the teacher requires them for some instructional activity. Some schools go further, prohibiting students from using cell phones anytime on campus except before and after school. But students argue that checking their social media during the school day is important. They need to catch announcements about their extracurricular activities or find out what their friends' lunch plans are.



Most students try their best to follow the classroom rules. Almost 80% of the freshmen in our study said that they confined their use of cell phones to lunch time, passing time in hallways between classes, or study hall. But students acknowledged that they tended to keep their cell phones in their pockets or backpacks rather than their lockers, and they might sneak a peek during class if the teacher wasn't paying attention.

Students also noted major differences in how teachers enforced school rules about cell phone use. They pointed to three basic strategies:

- **No cell phones in class!** Some teachers strictly enforce school policies, sometimes even requiring students to place their phones in a box or classroom cell phone holder at the beginning of the class.
- **Free time use.** Other teachers allow students to check phones during breaks in instruction or when their class work is finished for the class period.
- **Open use.** In some classes, teachers don't seem to care about cell phone use, leaving it up to students to regulate how and when they use their phone.

It isn't clear which of these approaches works best in creating a positive learning environment. Students seemed to prefer classrooms with less restrictive policies about cell phone use, but they also acknowledged that rules are more respected when they are consistently enforced. One student said, "Students use their phones when teachers are not paying attention or if the teacher doesn't really care."

FAMILY RULES: WHAT'S REASONABLE?

Social media can be mystifying for many parents. They didn't grow up using this mode of communication, and the most popular apps and their features change so often that it's hard to keep up with what teens are doing. This makes it difficult to know what rules to set for their child, or how to guide the child to use social media in wise and healthy ways. That might explain the dramatic differences among families in the ways that parents monitored social media use of freshmen in our study.

Some families have several rules and regular checks of the child's social media accounts. "My parents bought the insurance for my phone, so they get to look through my texts and look through my stuff," one student said. "I can't get Snapchat and I'm not allowed to be on my phone past 10:00pm." For other students, there didn't seem to be much monitoring. One freshman commented, "There isn't a lot of rules. My dad just wants us to be able to enjoy life and do better than he's doing right now." Another responded, "My parents pretty much don't care as long as I don't share personal information like 'my name is this, I live here, this is my age.'"

Most Common Family Rules:

42% No phones at dinner table or during family time

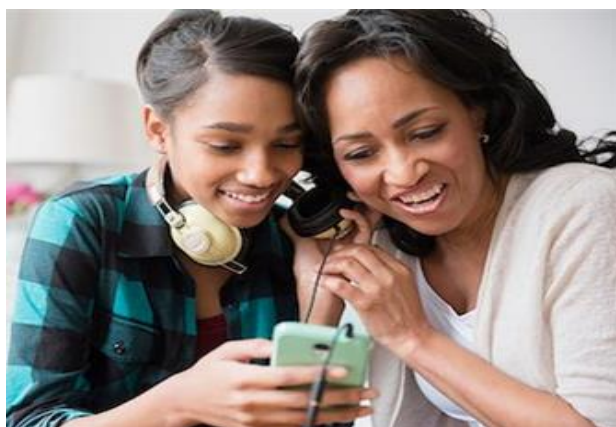
35% Phones must be out of reach or charging from bedtime till morning

20% Only schoolmates or relatives can be friends/followers

There's lots of variability among freshmen in levels of physical, mental, and social maturity. Parents need to figure out what rules are most sensible for their own child's maturity level. And they need to be willing to adjust rules and level of monitoring as the child matures.

Still, most families had some rules, and for the most part, freshmen were accepting of the family rules. In fact, some students whose family paid little attention to their social media use felt that some restrictions could be helpful. "She literally does not regulate anything I do," one teen confessed.

Freshmen were most concerned with what parents monitored or regulated and what they left to the teen to control. Most teens were comfortable with their parents monitoring what they were posting to the public, but they felt that their privacy was invaded when parents checked personal conversations with others.





WHAT SHOULD PARENTS DO?

Based on our study findings, here are 10 suggestions for parents about best ways to guide teens to healthy use of social media.

1. Show interest! Conversations beat

lectures. Look for opportunities to talk about social media with your teen, especially when they introduce the subject. Be interested and inquisitive, not judgmental and preachy. Teens are more likely to respect family rules when they believe parents understand what social media mean to them.

2. FOMO is for real!

For most freshmen, it is critical to feel included, to have friends and sense that they have a group to belong to. Their fear of missing out (FOMO) on what's happening among peers or major activities of friends drives their interest in getting constant updates about what peers are doing. Social media conveys this news, which explains why teens are constantly checking their social media accounts.

3. Teens (and adults) should have turn-off times.

Despite their need to be constantly "in the know," teens do benefit from time away from social media. Teens' mental and physical health can be damaged if they don't get enough sleep or get distracted from family relationships and activities. These are good "turn-off times" for social media. And by the way, the same is true for adults!

6. Rules are okay!

Most freshmen reported family rules that they needed to follow in using social media. Most seemed comfortable having rules, BUT there are important guidelines about establishing, maintaining, and changing rules (keep reading here).

7. Start early, then adjust with age.

It's best to establish clear family rules about social media right when young people begin using social media. These can be strict or extensive when children are still in elementary or middle school. But rules ought to change as children grow and become more mature, more experienced with social media. The goal is to prepare them to regulate their own social media use effectively by the time they graduate from high school.

8. Good rules are for good reasons.

Teens respect rules that have a clear, rational basis. Talking with other parents can help you to decide what seem to be reasonable guidelines for your child to follow. Make sure that you explain the reason for rules to your teen and listen to their questions or objections. Best approach: sit down with your teen and try to generate the rules together, as a team.



4. Help teens understand the long view. They what social media activities get rewarded or punished by peers, but they may need help understanding long-term risks and benefits. Employers, college recruiters, scholarship providers have become adept at discovering what individuals put online, and anything posted has the potential of being reposted.

5. Explain what “inappropriate” posts are. When asked about the “do’s and don’ts” of using social media, teens readily say “Don’t post anything inappropriate.” But many couldn’t answer our simple question, “What would be inappropriate to post?” They may need a calm but candid explanation of *all* types of things that are not appropriate to post.



One thing is clear...
Teens worry far less about losing their phones than losing their parents’ trust.

9. Explain, enforce, except. Rules work best when explained clearly, enforced consistently, and excepted occasionally. The time to explain rules and reach an understanding about them with your child is when the rules are first being made, not when they’re first being broken. Teens appreciate rules that are enforced consistently; they also appreciate knowing that there can be circumstances that call for exceptions to the rule.

10. Watch for changes in mood, activities, relationships. Social media can foster healthy relationships and personal development, but they can also lead to social and psychological problems. If you see persistent changes in a child’s mood, worrisome changes in the activities they are involved in, or shifts in friendships or other significant relationships, talk to your teen about these changes and look to social media as a cause or contributing factor.

About Our Study

This report is based on findings from the Study of Freshmen’s Social Media Use, sponsored by grants to the Director and Co-Director from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The study involved individual interviews both Fall and Spring semester with a diverse but non-random sample of 30 high school freshmen from two school districts in Wisconsin during the 2017/18 academic year.

The study is part of a set of investigations on effects of social media during school transitions, conducted by the Peer Relations Study Group in the Department of Educational Psychology at U.W.-Madison. For more information, see:

<https://website.education.wisc.edu/prsg/>

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