

# What Types of Photographs Do Teenagers “Like”?

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## ABSTRACT

Instagram is a popular photo-sharing application. Viewers interact with those who post photographs through registering “likes” and making comments. This experiment investigated what kinds of photos teenagers “like.” Two teenagers created and selected photo stimuli of different types and posted them to their existing Instagram accounts. In this way, the authors ensured a high degree of ecological validity. The research design called for 16 photos in each of the following eight categories: peer, romantic relationship, solo activity, selfie, family, violence, nature, and food. In the categories of peer, romantic relationship, solo activity, selfie, and family, half the pictures included the person posting and half did not. Hypothesis 1 states that the pattern of “likes” would reflect adolescent developmental issues: as a group, peer relations, romantic relations, identity formation, and independence from family would receive the most “likes.” Hypothesis 2 states that photos that included the person posting gather more “likes” than photos that did not. Both hypotheses were confirmed by the pattern of “likes” elicited by the posted photographs. Thus adolescent Instagram use, like the adolescent use of other social networking tools, indicates that the same developmental issues are expressed online and offline. The fact that teens prefer Instagram photos in which the person posting appears (as shown by the increased amount of “likes”) indicates that the narcissistic tendencies of creating and editing a social network profile are driven not just by the individual; they are also driven by the audience.

## KEYWORDS

“Likes”, Adolescent Development, Instagram, Social Network Site, Teen Issues,

## INTRODUCTION

The issues that teenagers deal with on social media are the same issues that they are dealing with offline. This parallel has been shown for teen chat rooms, MySpace, and Facebook (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Salimkhan, Manago, & Greenfield, 2010; Sherman & Greenfield, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004). Thus, there is reason to believe that important adolescent issues will strongly influence what pictures are “liked” on Instagram, an increasingly popular photo-sharing application.

Research has shown that the issues that are relevant to teenagers are the following: Achieving new and more mature relationships with peers of both sexes (Duke & Kreshel, 1998); developing intimate relationships (Collins, 2003); achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults (Ling, 2005); finding one’s identity (Erikson, 1968); and developing socially responsible behavior in order

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to become a responsible member of the community (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). It is therefore expected that these teen issues will be reflected in selecting which photos to “like” on Instagram.

There is also evidence that social media are an influence for self-focus. For example, for children and teens, age 9-15, active use of a social network site predicted self-focused (as opposed to other-focused) aspirations (Uhls, Zgourou, & Greenfield, 2014). For college students, simply editing one’s social networking profile led to more positive self-views: higher scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory in one experiment, higher self-esteem in another (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012). On the idea that Instagram functions as a social network, our question was whether self-focus in posted photographs would be appreciated by followers, the Instagram term for members of one’s Instagram audience. If so then, more “likes” for photos including the person posting would be expected; and this was one of our hypotheses.

## **INSTAGRAM AS A SOCIAL NETWORK SITE**

Online pictures have been around since the early 90’s, but only with social media has it been possible for the average person to share their photos. Created in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, Instagram is a smartphone app where people can post photos, look at other people’s photos, and comment and/or register their “likes” on photos. By Fall 2014, 76% of teens were using Instagram (Blaszczak-Boxe, 2014). This percentage has stayed constant through 2017 (National Opinion Research Center, 2017). Because Instagram is so popular with teens, it is important to study the responses to Instagram photographs of the teen audience, the topic of this study.

Going beyond photo sharing, Instagram has begun to be recognized as a social network site. The first hard data on this point was the finding that a social stimulus, the presence of at least one face, increases “likes” by 38% and comments by 32% in a sample of one million Instagram photos (Bakhshi, Shamina, & Gilbert, 2014).

Sherman and colleagues (2016) have recently carried out the first study on Instagram and adolescents. They investigated how the teen brain responds to the quantity of “likes” photos have elicited, as well as to the act of “liking” a photo. A simulation of Instagram in an fMRI scanner was developed to explore both neural and behavioral responses. The major neural finding was that reward centers of the brain were activated in the process of both “liking” a photo and seeing that others had frequently “liked” a photo, particularly a photo that they themselves had posted. Photos shown with more “likes” were more frequently “liked” by participants compared with photos shown with fewer “likes.” This study provides a first idea of why Instagram is achieving popularity with teenagers and its influence on behavior. The next question is, what kind of photos do teenagers “like?” It is this question that our study addressed through a naturalistic experiment. We combine experimental control with ecological validity by utilizing two teenagers’ own Instagram accounts and follower networks for purposes of data collection.

## **HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

### **Hypothesis 1: Category Differences in “Likes”**

Teenagers use social media to deal with issues that are important to them, and it is predicted that this will also be the case for the relatively new social medium of Instagram. Four of the photo categories represent issues that are of special importance to teenagers: Pictures of peers represent the issue of achieving new and more mature relationships with people of the same age of both sexes. Photos of romantic relationships represent the issue of forming intimate relationships. Pictures of someone taking part in a solo activity represents identity exploration through developing skills and finding out what one is good at. Photos of selfies represent self-presentation, an important part of identity formation.

Therefore, we predict that pictures in these categories will elicit the most “likes.” We are not claiming that the categories form a conceptually homogenous set – only that these categories have

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