

## SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract:** The majority of teens have positive online experiences, but some are caught in an online feedback loop of meanness and negative experiences. The majority of social media-using teens say their experience is that their peers are mostly kind to one another on social network sites, but their views are less positive when compared with similar assessments from online adults.

**Keywords:** social media, black teens, how people act online, on social media from how they act in person and at school.

## СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ МЕДИА

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**Аннотация:** Большинство подростков имеют положительный онлайн-опыт, но некоторые из них попадают в онлайн-петлю обратной связи, состоящую из подлости и негативного опыта. Большинство подростков,

использующих социальные сети, говорят, что, по их опыту, их сверстники в социальных сетях в основном добры друг к другу, но их мнения менее позитивны по сравнению с аналогичными оценками взрослых в Интернете.

Ключевые слова: социальные сети, чернокожие подростки, поведение людей в Интернете, поведение людей в социальных сетях лично и в школе.

We asked teens the following question about what they see in social network spaces: “Overall, in your experience, are people your age mostly kind or mostly unkind to one another on social network sites?” Most of the 77% of all teens who use social media say their experience is that people their age are mostly kind to one another on social network sites. Overall, 69% of social media-using teens say their experience is that peers are mostly kind to each other in social network spaces. Another 20% say their peers are mostly unkind, while 11% volunteered that “it depends.” However, in a similar question asked of adults 18 and older, 85% of social media-using adults reported that their experience was that people are mostly kind to one another on social network sites, while just 5% reported that they see people behaving in mostly unkind ways.

While teens across all demographic groups generally have positive experiences watching how their peers treat each other on social network sites, younger teenage girls (ages 12-13) stand out as considerably more likely to say their experience is that people are mostly unkind. One in three (33%) younger teen girls who uses social media says that people her age are mostly unkind to one another on social network sites, compared with 9% of social media-using boys 12-13 and 18% of boys 14-17. One in five older girls (20%) who uses social media says that in her experience people her age are mostly unkind to one another on these sites.

Black teens are less likely to say their experience is that people their age are kind to one another on social network sites. Black social media users are less likely than white and Latino users to report that people their age are mostly kind online. While 72% of whites and 78% of Latino youth say that their experience is that people are usually kind on social network sites, just over half (56%) of blacks say the same.

Teens tend towards negative words when describing how people act online. As a part of this project, we conducted seven focus groups with teens ages 12 to 19 to ask teens more in-depth questions about their experiences interacting with others on social network sites. In the groups, we asked the teen participants questions about how people usually acted online. In some cases, we asked students to tell us about their observations of online behavior and then tell us how they thought people should act in online spaces. In one exercise, we asked the participants to write down words or phrases that they felt captured these concepts. As the word clouds created from the words they shared suggest, teens overwhelmingly chose negative adjectives to describe how people act online. Words that appeared frequently included “rude,” “mean,” “fake,” “crude,” “over-dramatic,” and “disrespectful.” Some teens did use positive words like the frequently mentioned “funny” and the less common “honest,” “clever,” “friendly,” “entertaining,” and “sweet,” but overall the frequency of positive words was substantially lower. Other terms shared by participants could be interpreted differently depending on the context of use – these include the popular term “different” and others like “emotional,” “cautious,” “outspoken,” “strange,” and “open.”

Of the teens who were asked about how they thought people should act online, the responses were substantially more positive and included words like “respectful,” “nice,” “friendly,” “mature,” “peaceful,” and phrases like “mind your own business” and “don’t put it all out there.”

After the exercise, we asked the focus group participants follow-up questions to plumb the discrepancies between the way they had witnessed people acting on social media and how they thought people should act on the sites.

Many teens told us that they just felt like different people on these sites and thought that people they see online often act very differently on social media from how they act in person and at school.

MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL: That's what a lot of people do. Like, they won't say it to your face, but they will write it online...

MIDDLE SCHOOL BOY: I know people who, in person, like refuse to swear. And online, it's every other word.

MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL: I think people get – like when they get on Facebook, they get ruthless, stuff like that. ...They act different in school and stuff like that, but when they get online, they like a totally different person. You get a lot of confidence.

HIGH SCHOOL BOY: [There's] this real quiet girl who go to my school, right, but when she's on Facebook she talks like some wild – like, be rapping and talking about who she knew and some more stuff and you would, like, never think that's her. You would think that's somebody else ...

Teens also identified specific online social spaces — open comment spaces and question and answer sites — that feel particularly unwelcoming:

HIGH SCHOOL BOY: YouTube comments are pretty bad. They're, like, oh my God.

HIGH SCHOOL BOY: I have a friend who came out and he had a Form spring21 and, like, a bunch of people from this school, like, attacked his Formspring and, like, wrote really, really homophobic things on it.

Often teens felt bolder, ruder, or more empowered because they did not fear physical violence in the online space. One middle school girl told us that she

thought people were ruder online “because you can’t hurt anybody online. You can’t punch nobody through the screen.”

MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL 1. “I think I act ruder to online people.

MODERATOR. You act ruder? How come?

MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL 2. Because she doesn’t have to see them, so they can’t beat her up.”

For some teens we spoke with – particularly middle school girls – fights and drama on social media flowed back and forth between school, the street, and Facebook, often resulting in physical fights during the in-person portions of the conflict.

MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL: I read what they were talking about online, then I go offline and confront the person who was saying something to her.

MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRL: ...Like that’s how most people start fighting because that’s how most of the fights in my school happen – because of some Facebook stuff, because of something you post, or like because somebody didn’t like your pictures.

Teens generally report positive personal outcomes from their interactions on social network sites. We asked teens a series of questions about outcomes from experiences they may have had interacting with other people on a social network site (in total, we asked about two positive outcomes and six negative outcomes). The largest group of teens say they have had experiences that made them feel good about themselves and that made them feel closer to another person on a social network. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of social media-using teens say they personally have had an experience on a social network site that made them feel good about themselves and 58% say they felt closer to another person because of an experience on a social network site. In total, 78% of teens say they have had at least one of the two positive experiences we asked about in our survey.

Still, a substantial number of teens report specific negative experiences on social network sites. Fully 41% of social media using teens report having at least one negative experience out of the six unique experiences we measured.

Overall, boys and girls do not show any differences in their likelihood of experiencing either positive or negative outcomes from interactions with other people over social media. Bullied teens and teens who have directly felt meanness and cruelty through social media are more likely to experience any outcome except feeling good about themselves. What follows below is a closer look at the teens who experience different positive and negative impacts on social network sites.

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