

Youth Culture Lesson
Finding Teachable Moments in Culture
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Picture Perfect

Measuring Popularity on Instagram

By Paul Asay

What Happened

When it comes to social networks, nothing is as popular with teens as Instagram. More than three-quarters of teens say they use the site (Twitter's a distant second), sharing photos of themselves, their friends and their interests.

Yet some teens and tweens, particularly girls, are using the site as a way to gauge and monitor their popularity—sometimes in ways that can mystify their parents and other adults around them.

Rachel Simmons, cofounder of Girls Leadership Institute, found that girls sometimes trade likes for TBH comments (short for “to be honest”) or a scaled 1-10 rating of something relating to the girl such as a physical attribute. They’ll long to be tagged in photos regardless of whether they’re actually in them. “How many photos you’re tagged in is important,” 12-year-old Charlotte told Simmons. “No one can see the actual number, but you can sort of just tell because you keep seeing their name pop up.”

They’ll use Instagram biographies to indicate who their best friends are; and if a girl has a fight with a BFF, there’s a good chance she’ll cut her out of her biography and maybe crop her out of her Instagram pictures. Many girls use Instagram and other sites as ways to cultivate their personal brands, emphasizing their flirty or adventurous sides that might not show up at school.

Simmons calls Instagram a “Rosetta Stone of girl angst.” She adds that girls can “obsess over their friendships, monitoring social ups and downs in extreme detail. They can strategically post at high-traffic hours when they know peers are killing time between homework assignments. Likes, after all, feel like a public, tangible, reassuring statement of a girl’s social status.”

Talk About It

Of course it’s not just teen and tween girls who might use Instagram and other social networks so strategically. Some guys might use them that way, too. Some teens might not care how they come across on such sites—or use it in entirely different ways.

Are you on Instagram? If so, how much do you use it? Does anything that Simmons talk about sound familiar to you? *How* do you use the site? How do your friends?

Is it important to be popular? What is more important? How important is popularity at your school or with your friends? Do you know who’s popular and who isn’t in your school? Is it something that you have to pay close attention to?

How do you become popular? Do you have to look or act a certain way? Be in with a certain group of people? Be athletic or smart? Have money? Do you have to be well liked by pretty much everyone to be popular?

Do you stress out about what people think about you? Is there a lot of pressure to act or be a certain way? How do you escape that pressure? Are there things you enjoy doing

that you can't talk about because you worry people would look at you differently if they knew?

What the Bible Says

“For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” (Luke 9:25).

“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm” (Prov. 13:20).

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’” (1 Sam. 16:7).

Paul Asay has written for The Washington Post, Christianity Today, Beliefnet.com and The (Colorado Springs) Gazette. He writes about culture for Plugged In and wrote the Batman book, God on the Streets of Gotham (Tyndale). He recently collaborated with Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, on his book The Good Dad. He lives in Colorado Springs with wife, Wendy, and his two children. Check out his entertainment blog at Patheos.com/blogs/WatchingGod or follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.