

# Teens Are Being Bullied 'Constantly' on Instagram

 [theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/teens-face-relentless-bullying-instagram/572164/](https://theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/10/teens-face-relentless-bullying-instagram/572164/)

October 10, 2018

Shutterstock



No app is more integral to teens' social lives than Instagram. While Millennials relied on Facebook to navigate high school and college, connect with friends, and express themselves online, Gen Z's networks exist almost entirely on Instagram. According to [a recent study by the Pew Research Center](#), 72 percent of teens use the platform, which now has more than [1 billion monthly users](#). Instagram allows teens to chat with people they know, meet new people, stay in touch with friends from camp or sports, and bond by sharing photos or [having discussions](#).

But when those friendships go south, the app can become a portal of pain. According to a [recent Pew survey](#), 59 percent of teens have been bullied online, and according to a 2017 survey conducted by [Ditch the Label](#), a nonprofit anti-bullying group, more than one in five 12-to-20-year-olds experience bullying specifically on Instagram. "Instagram is a good place sometimes," said Riley, a 14-year-old who, like most kids in this story, asked to be referred to by her first name only, "but there's a lot of drama, bullying, and gossip to go along with it."

Teenagers have always been cruel to one another. But Instagram provides a uniquely powerful set of tools to do so. The velocity and size of the distribution mechanism allow rude comments or harassing images to go viral within hours. Like Twitter, Instagram makes it easy to set up new, anonymous profiles, which can be used specifically for trolling. Most importantly, many interactions on the app are hidden from the watchful eyes of parents and teachers, many of whom don't understand the platform's intricacies.

"There is no place for bullying on Instagram, and we are committed to fostering a kind and supportive community. Any form of online abuse on Instagram runs completely counter to the culture we're invested in — a platform where everyone should feel safe and comfortable sharing their lives through photos and videos," an Instagram spokesperson told *The Atlantic* in September. This week, the company also announced a [set of new features](#) aimed at combatting bullying, including comment filters on live videos,

machine-learning technology to detect bullying in photos, and a “kindness camera effect to spread positivity” endorsed by the former *Dance Moms* star Maddie Ziegler.

Still, Instagram is many teens’ entire social infrastructure; at its most destructive, bullying someone on there is the digital equivalent of taping mean flyers all over someone’s school, and her home, and her friends’ homes.

After a falling-out with someone formerly in her friend group last year, Yael, a 15-year-old who asked to be referred to by a pseudonym, said the girl turned to Instagram to bully her day and night. “She unfollowed me, blocked me, unblocked me, then messaged me days on end, paragraphs,” Yael said. “She posted about me constantly on her account, mentioned me in her Story, and messaged me over and over again for weeks.”

Yael felt anxious even just having her phone in her pocket, because it reminded her of the harassment. “Every time I logged on to my account, I didn’t want to be there,” she said. “I knew when I opened the app, she would be there. I was having a lot of anxiety over it, a lot of stress.”

But still, she hesitated to quit the app entirely. Her friends on Instagram serve as a source of support. Also, quitting wouldn’t stop her tormentor from talking about her, and she’d rather know what the girl was saying. “You know someone’s talking about you, they’re posting about you, they’re messaging about you, they’re harassing you constantly,” she said. “You know every time you open the app they’re going to be there.”

Because bullying on your main feed is seen by many as aggressive and uncool, many teens create hate pages: separate Instagram accounts, purpose-built and solely dedicated to trashing one person, created by teens alone or in a group. They’ll post bad photos of their target, expose her secrets, post screenshots of texts from people saying mean things about her, and any other terrible stuff they can find.

“I’ve had at least 10 hate pages made about me,” said Annie, a 15-year-old who asked to be referred to by a pseudonym. “I know some were made in a row by the same person, but some were from different people. They say really nasty things about you, the most outrageous as possible.”

i hate bullying. one of my classmates whom i considered as my friend made a hate page for my REAL friend on instagram. please advise me. :((( god i hate seeing people suffer. the fact that she actually plays the victim is disgusting. i can’t believe i actually was friends w her.

— marlen loves ari (@holdmyariana) March 23, 2018

Sometimes teens, many of whom run several Instagram accounts, will take an old page with a high amount of followers and transform it into a hate page to turn it against someone they don't like. "One girl took a former meme page that was over 15,000 followers, took screencaps from my Story, and Photoshopped my nose bigger and posted it, tagging me being like, 'Hey guys, this is my new account,'" Annie said. "I had to send a formal cease and desist. I went to one of those lawyer websites and just filled it out. Then she did the same thing to my friend."

The scariest thing about being attacked by a hate page, teens say, is that you don't know who is doing the attacking. "In real-life bullying, you know what's doing it," said Skye, a 14-year-old. "Hate pages could be anyone. It could be someone you know, someone you don't know—you don't know what you know, and it's scary because it's really out of control at that point. Teachers tell you with bullying [to] just say 'Stop,' but in this case you can't, and you don't even know who to tell stop to."

### What the law can (and can't) do about online harassment

Aside from hate pages, teens say most bullying takes place over direct message, Instagram Stories, or in the comments section of friends' photos. "Instagram won't delete a person's account unless it's clear bullying on their main feed," said Hadley, a 14-year-old, "and, like, no one is going to do that. It's over DM and in comment sections."

Mary, a 13-year-old who asked to be referred to by a pseudonym, said that relentless bullying on Instagram by a former friend gave her her first-ever panic attack. It started, Mary said, after she made the cheer team and her former friend did not. "She would DM me, or when I was with my friends, if they posted me on their Story, she would [respond] and say mean stuff about me since she knew I would see it since I'm with them," Mary said. "She would never do it on her own Story; she'd make it seem like she wasn't doing anything."

"There was literally a group chat on Instagram named Everyone in the Class but Mary," she added. "All they did on there was talk bad about me."

On Instagram, it's easy to see what people are up to and whom they're hanging out with. For teenagers who are acutely aware of social status, even a seemingly innocent group photo can set a bully off. Teens say that tagging the wrong friend in a photo can unleash a bully's wrath. Every location tag, comment, Story post, and even whom you follow or unfollow on your finsta (a secondary Instagram account where teens post more personal stuff) is scrutinized.

"Lots of bullying stems from jealousy, and Instagram is the ultimate jealousy

platform,” Hadley said. “People are constantly posting pics of their cars, their bodies. Anything good in your life or at school goes on Insta, and that makes people jealous.”

Many high schools have anonymously run “confessions”-style Instagram accounts where users submit gossip about other students at school. For instance, an account like Greenville High School Confessions will pop up with a bio asking followers to “send the tea,” i.e., gossip. Students will follow the locked account and submit texts of people saying bad things about one another or gossip they’ve heard about people at school. The account admin or admins will select the juiciest rumors and blast them out on Stories or on the main feed, sometimes even tagging the student’s handle.



rhs\_confess



26 posts

307 followers

199 following

Follow



RHS Confess

DM to confess - Anonymous Posts



<p>Heard David w got caught fucking Amanda w @ Bella's party 🍷🍷</p>	<p>Cole played Kendall Peterson for izie lol</p>	<p>Who else think Rynne is thick as fuck</p>
<p>Katrina D. is hot asf and I wish I could get with her.</p>	<p>I really like crystal, and want to ask her to hoco. But idk how she will respond and I don't want it to change anything between us.</p>	<p>I also like Natalie and am in her band class and I'm willing to fight whoever the other person that likes her</p>
<p>Natalie Hanson is in my math class and is always looking gorgeous I wish she knew I liked her</p>	<p>hoco nominations this year are 🤔</p>	<p>Sergio A. &amp; Griffyn S. Gave each other head at MOA while Griffyn was still with his current gf and he's still with her bc she doesn't believe it</p>

When someone who runs a school's confessions account doesn't like you, it can feel like the whole school has turned against you. "There was a page made called DTS.gossip, the initials of our school," Riley said. "The account was made to post rumors and crap about people in my school, but a lot of them were about me."

Rory, a 15-year-old, said that confessions accounts had gotten so out of control at her high school that administrators had banned taking photos of other students on campus. "People at my school would ... expose drama or make up stuff, Photoshop people's faces, bully them basically. It's all anonymous."

### The teens who post the same thing every day on Instagram

But Rory said that the no-picture rule hasn't really curbed bullying. Not long ago, someone posted an entire diss track saying awful things about a 15-year-old girl to SoundCloud, which students promptly set as the link in their Instagram bio.

"I think a lot of kids get really invested in drama," Riley said, "with beauty gurus, YouTube, stuff like that. When it happens at school, they're very interested in it. It's fun. Which is horrible."

In Rory's case, Instagram has been both the catalyst and the medium for bullying. When she was 13, she was featured on the official Instagram account of Brandy Melville, a popular teen clothing brand.

"Tons of people from my school saw it immediately and started to make memes of me, calling me anorexic," she said. "Then there were others suggesting I wasn't thin enough. On their finstas, people were posting these mean things, people I thought I was friends with. I would block their finstas and they would tag my main account."

But even in the midst of the worst bullying, teens say they're wary of logging off. Rory is still active on the platform, though she only uses one account.

"Everyone has friends from Instagram," said Liv, a 13-year-old. "Everyone makes friends that way. It's inevitable. Everyone does it." Some teens did say they'd deactivate or take a break if their parents forced them to, but quitting forever "wasn't an option."

"You can message someone on insta 'Hey, you're a bitch' so easily," Liv said. "People need to think more about what they say before they say it, even if it's a DM you forget about and log off. The person you sent that message to, it can impact them. You can really screw someone's life up."

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).