

Instagram Teen Accounts Are Missing the Mark

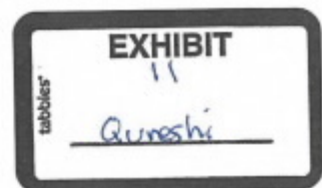
RESEARCH AMONG YOUNG TEEN INSTAGRAM USERS



HEAT
INITIATIVE 

 ParentsTogether
ACTION

DESIGN
IT FOR
US



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Quantitative Methodology & Research Design

This report presents the results of a national quantitative research study which collected self-reported data from 800 respondents aged 13-15 who have used Instagram in the past 6 months. The survey took approximately 12 minutes to complete and was conducted from August 8 to 18, 2025.

Participants were recruited from a panel list, directly through parents or guardians who gave permission for their child to participate in the research study. After a set of basic screener questions, participants were then asked to verify what their current birthdate was on Instagram. This ensured we were reaching young teens whose accounts were supposed to have heightened safety settings through their Instagram Teen Accounts. To ensure a representative sample nationwide, data was weighted to age, gender, race, and geography based on U.S. Census data. The margin of error is $\pm 3.46\%$ for the entire sample.

Participants were asked about 7 different experiences they may have had on Instagram in the past 6 months. Throughout the report, these experiences are referred to as "unsafe content and unwanted messages." The specific phrasing is as follows:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Graphically violent or bloody content or memes | 5 Hate speech, racist, or discriminatory content or memes |
| 2 Self-harm content or memes | 6 Unwanted messages or contact from another user |
| 3 Content or memes related to buying, selling, or using drugs or alcohol | 7 Content or memes related to eating disorders or body shaming |
| 4 Unwanted sexually suggestive content or memes | |

Given the sensitive nature of the questions asked in this research, help resources were provided to all participants in the event they wanted to learn more about the survey topics or needed professional support to talk about these issues.

Please note:

This report uses the terms "young teen users" and "13-15-year-old users" interchangeably to describe the participants in the study. Data points marked with an "*" indicate base sizes less than n=100.

Executive Summary

In 2021, Meta whistleblower Arturo Béjar oversaw the [Bad Experiences and Encounters Framework \(BEEF\)](#) while consulting at Meta to assess teen experiences on Instagram. Meta's internal research revealed that nearly 13% of users aged 13–15 reported receiving unwanted sexual advances within a single week and over 19% had seen unwanted sexual or nude content—figures that Meta was not reporting publicly. Béjar warned Meta executives, including Mark Zuckerberg, about these harms in 2021 and testified before Congress in 2023.

In response to growing concerns about child safety online, Meta launched Instagram Teen Accounts in late 2024. These accounts automatically apply to users under 18 and include features like private profiles, restricted messaging, content filters, and parental supervision tools. Teens under 16 cannot change privacy settings without parental consent, and parents can link their accounts to monitor interactions, set screen time limits, and filter content. These changes were designed to give parents more control and teens a safer experience on the platform.

Despite these updates, research from the [5Rights Foundation](#), [Design It For Us](#), and [Parents Together](#) this year has found that Instagram Teen Accounts still expose young users to significant risks. In real-world case studies using avatar (test) accounts, researchers found that teens were quickly recommended adult-owned profiles, sexualized content, and other types of inappropriate content — even without seeking it out and undermining the platform's safety claims.

The purpose of this research is to hear from youth directly about their experiences since the launch of Instagram Teen Accounts. Our goal is to gain a better understanding of the scale and frequency of unsafe content and contact risks for younger teens navigating this environment and how the safeguards are or are not working to protect them.

Parents Together, Heat Initiative, and Design It For Us worked with Breakthrough Campaigns to conduct a nationally representative quantitative research study which collected self-reported data from 800 respondents aged 13–15 who have used Instagram Teen Accounts in the past 6 months.

The findings from this study point toward a concerning conclusion: Despite age dependent settings, young teen users today continue to be recommended or exposed to unsafe content and unwanted messages at alarmingly high rates while using Instagram Teen Accounts. Specifically, even after all 13–15-year-olds were migrated to Instagram Teen Accounts, nearly 3 in 5 (58%) young teen users reported having encountered unsafe content and unwanted messages within the last 6 months.

- **Monthly Harms:** Nearly half (47%) of young teen Instagram users have encountered unsafe content and unwanted messages in the past month.
- **Recommended to Unknown Adults:** Half (50%) of young teen users have found that Instagram's "Suggested for You" or "People You May Know" pages recommended accounts of people they did not know but believed to be run by adults.
- **Weekly Exposure:** 37% of 13–15-year-old users experienced at least one piece of unsafe content or unwanted message on a weekly basis, including roughly 1 in 7 who were seeing either self-harm content, unwanted sexual content, discriminatory content, or alcohol and drug content weekly.
- **Desensitization at Scale:** An overwhelming majority said they found their encounters with unsafe content and unwanted messages either disturbing and/or uncomfortable, yet a majority of young teen users that said they ignored unsafe content or unwanted messages did so because they are "used to it now."

Moving forward, these findings underscore the overarching need for more effective platform enhancements to better protect young users from harmful online experiences.

YOUNG TEEN USERS' EXPERIENCES ON INSTAGRAM



Young teen users frequently encounter a range of unsafe content and unwanted messages on Instagram.

Of the options tested in this study, a majority (58%) of young teen users said they have experienced at least one type of unsafe content or unwanted message on Instagram in the past 6 months.

% OF YOUNG TEEN USERS WHO EXPERIENCED ANY UNSAFE CONTENT OR UNWANTED MESSAGES IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS



More specifically, unwanted messages or contact from other users (35%) was the most common unsafe experience young teen users reported, followed by discriminatory content (27%). Unwanted sexually suggestive content (23%), drugs and alcohol-related content (22%), and body shaming content (22%) came next, with just over 1 in 5 young teen users having experienced each.

Compared to other types of unsafe content, relatively few (9%) young teen users said they have been exposed to self-harm content or memes. However, this still amounts to hundreds of thousands of 13-15-year-olds, an alarmingly high number in absolute terms.

% OF YOUNG TEEN USERS WHO HAD EACH EXPERIENCE IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS

Unwanted messages or contact from another user	35
Hate speech, racist, or discriminatory content or memes	27
Unwanted sexually suggestive content or memes	23
Content or memes related to buying, selling, or using drugs or alcohol	22
Content or memes related to eating disorders or body shaming	22
Graphically violent or bloody content or memes	15
Self-harm content or memes	9
I have not experienced any of these on Instagram	42

Driven by boys, especially 14-15-year-old boys (23%)

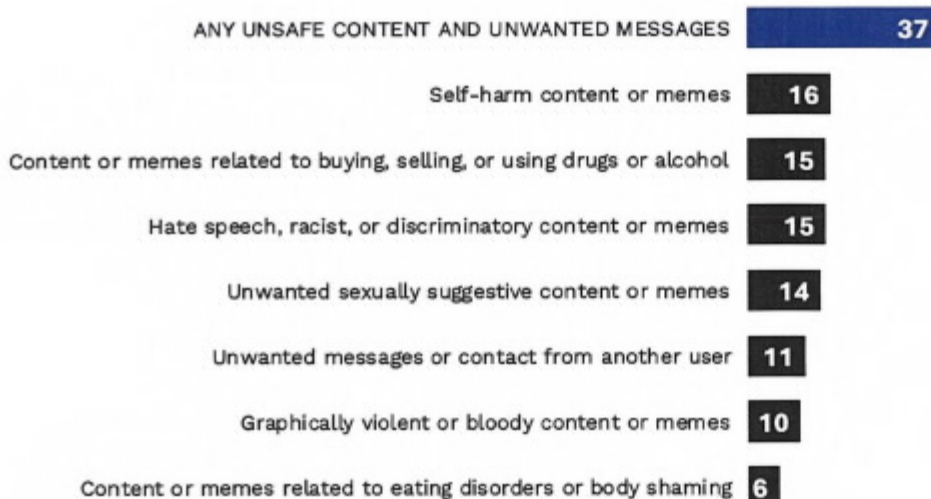
Nearly half of young teen Instagram users have encountered unsafe content and unwanted messages in the past month.

% WHO EXPERIENCED EACH IN THE PAST MONTH



Furthermore, these experiences occur frequently for those who have them, with over a third of young teen users saying that at least one of these experiences happens weekly.

% WHO EXPERIENCED EACH AT LEAST WEEKLY



When asked in their own words how these experiences overall make them feel, respondents described a wide range of emotions.

These types of unsafe content and messages on Instagram evoked emotions ranging from confusion and uneasiness to anger and sadness.

The [unwanted] messages are just annoying. The videos of people getting killed or severely injured make me sad and uncomfortable.

14, Boy, Native American or American Indian, South

It made me feel uncomfortable, because I'm on Instagram to stay in touch with friends and family, not creeps.

14, Girl, African American/Black/Caribbean American, South

They make me angry and sad but there's not a whole lot I can do about it.

15, Girl, White, South

I felt sad and embarrassed. Like something was wrong with me.

13, Girl, White, South

It made me afraid to be female and Asian. I did not feel safe.

14, Girl, Asian or Pacific Islander, Midwest

It made me feel really bad. I felt in a way helpless. I really want to Instagram to remove that account. But I see that they are still up victimizing individuals.

14, Boy, White, South

They were not nice to see. I felt bad about the people that the memes and content were directed at. As for the messages, I was disturbed and felt like my privacy had been intruded on.

14, Boy, White, South

It made [me] feel sad and insecure and I wanted to do something about it.

13, Boy, African American/Black/Caribbean American, West

They all make me feel sad and upset. I don't like it. The violence really bothers me. It's hard to forget some of the images.

15, Girl, White, South

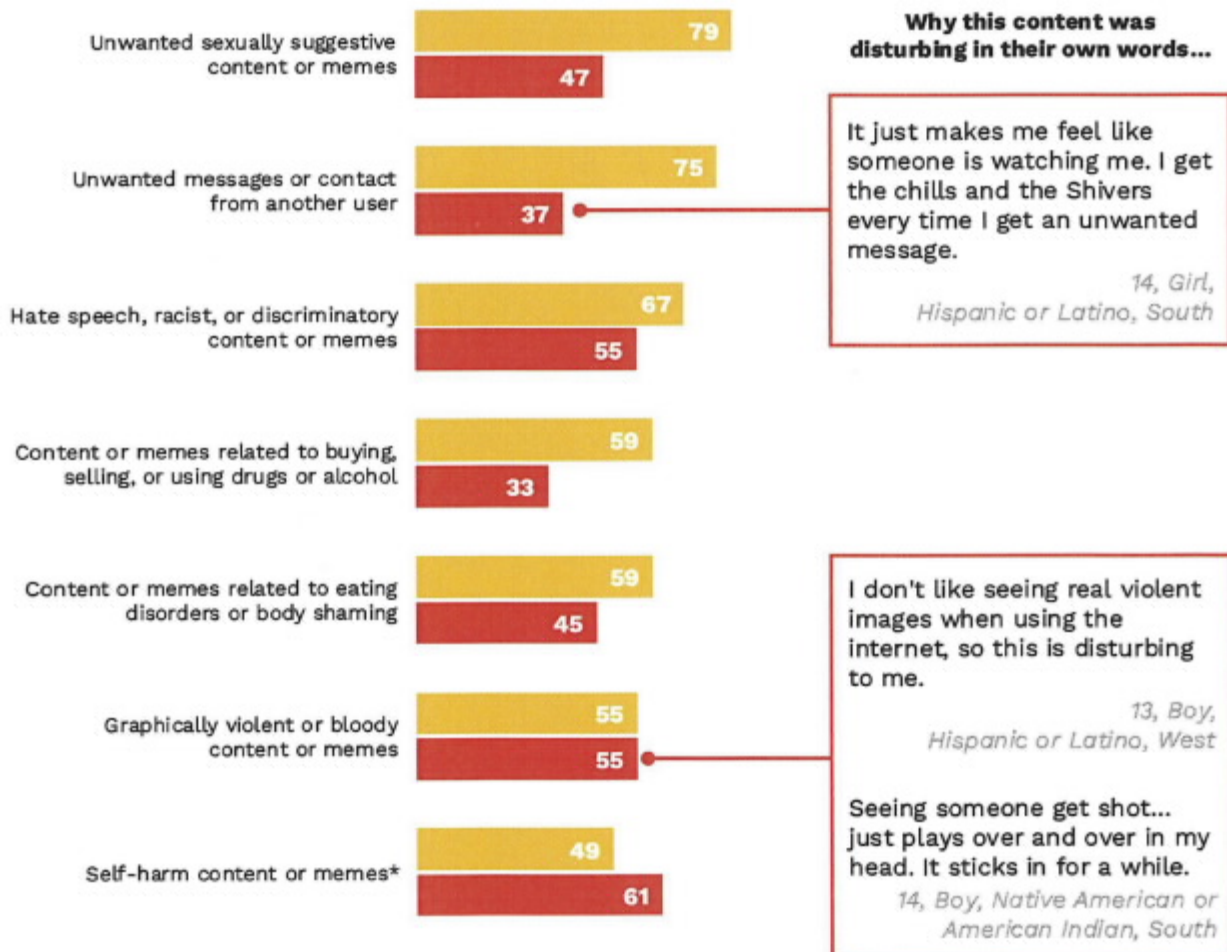
For most young teen users who have seen unsafe content and unwanted messages, being exposed to this makes them feel uncomfortable and/or disturbed.

For each experience participants reported having, they were asked a follow-up question to better understand how specific experiences made them feel.

An overwhelming majority said they found their encounters with unsafe content or unwanted messages either disturbing and/or uncomfortable. Unwanted sexually suggestive content or memes (79%) and unwanted messages from other users (75%) were the most likely to make young teen users uncomfortable, while self-harm content (61%), discriminatory content (55%), and graphically violent content (55%) were most commonly disturbing for 13-15-year-old users.

WHEN YOU HAD SEEN OR RECEIVED THESE ON INSTAGRAM, DID YOU PERSONALLY FIND THE EXPERIENCE EITHER UNCOMFORTABLE OR DISTURBING?

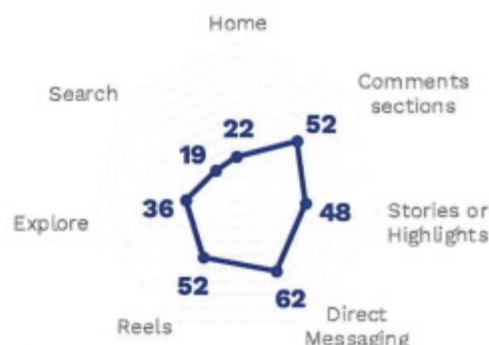
% who selected either response among those who had each experience



Direct Messaging, Reels, Comments sections, and Stories are the Instagram services where young teen users are most likely to encounter unsafe content and unwanted messages.

Unsafe content and unwanted messages are very commonly experienced on Direct Messaging (62% of those with any experience), but this is largely driven by unwanted messages specifically. After Direct Messaging, unsafe content is most commonly experienced on Reels (52%), Comments sections (52%), and Stories or Highlights (48%). Search, on the other hand, was the least likely place for kids to have these experiences, highlighting that this issue isn't a result of kids looking for this kind of content, but rather a problem with Instagram's algorithmic content curation.

% WHO SAID THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED ANY UNSAFE CONTENT OR UNWANTED MESSAGES ON EACH INSTAGRAM SERVICE



This suggests a larger systemic issue. These are not one-off encounters instigated solely by motivated bad actors; rather, there appears to be an algorithmic function pushing unsafe content to young people, turning isolated incidents into a more pervasive experience.

TOP 3 INSTAGRAM SERVICES WHERE YOUNG TEEN USERS ARE BEING EXPOSED TO UNSAFE CONTENT AND UNWANTED MESSAGES

Among those who have had each experience

	#1	#2	#3
Unwanted messages or contact from another user	Direct Messaging (80%)	Comments sections (31%)	Stories or Highlights (12%)
Hate speech, racist, or discriminatory content or memes	Comments sections (59%)	Reels (43%)	Stories or Highlights (40%)
Unwanted sexually suggestive content or memes	Direct Messaging (44%)	Reels (38%) Comments sections (38%)	Stories or Highlights (36%)
Content or memes related to buying, selling, or using drugs or alcohol	Reels (57%)	Stories or Highlights (46%)	Comments sections (31%) Explore (31%)
Content or memes related to eating disorders or body shaming	Reels (60%)	Stories or Highlights (42%)	Comments sections (34%)
Graphically violent or bloody content or memes	Reels (52%)	Stories or Highlights (38%)	Explore (34%)
Self-harm content or memes*	Reels (57%)	Stories or Highlights (51%)	Comments sections (38%) Explore (38%)

While Direct Messaging is most likely to draw unwanted messages (80%) and unwanted sexually suggestive content (44%), Comments sections are the most common location for hate speech (59%), along with the second most common location for unwanted messages (31%) and unwanted sexually suggestive content (38%). Reels, on the other hand, is rife with content related to eating disorders (60%), drugs or alcohol (57%), self-harm (57%), and graphic violence (52%).

UNWANTED MESSAGES AND CONTACT

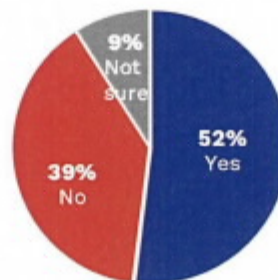


In daily interactions with the platform, young teen users are regularly receiving follow requests from unknown adults.

Within the past 6 months, more than half (52%) of 13-15-year-old users have received a follow or follow request from a person they didn't know that they believed to be an adult.

Among those that did receive a request, almost 2 in 5 (38%) users accepted that request, which can lead to a plethora of potentially harmful situations.

HAVE YOU RECEIVED A FOLLOW REQUEST FROM AN ADULT YOU DIDN'T KNOW?



Among young teen users who have received a follow request

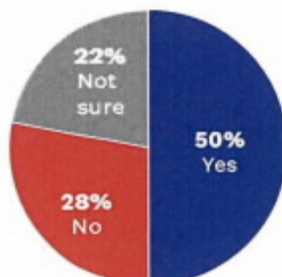
38% Accepted

57% Did not accept

4% Unsure

Instagram Teen Accounts are facilitating interactions between young teen users and adults, making matters worse.

DID INSTAGRAM'S SUGGESTED FOR YOU OR PEOPLE YOU MAY KNOW PAGES RECOMMEND ACCOUNTS OF ADULTS?



Among young teen users who were recommended adult accounts

22% Followed them/sent follow request

41% Visited account's profile

48% Ignored situation

Instagram's own tools and algorithms are putting 13-15-year-old users in potentially harmful situations – 50% of young teen users have found that Instagram's "Suggested for You" or "People You May Know" pages recommended accounts of people they did not know but believed to be run by adults.

These recommendations, which come from Instagram directly, can lead young teen users to interact with accounts they believe to be run by adults. Among the 50% of young teen users that were recommended these adult accounts, 51% of them interacted with the adult account in some way, with 41% visiting the profile and 22% following them.

Unwanted messages are coming in a variety of forms and are predominately from accounts young teen users believe belong to adults.

Among the 35% of 13-15-year-old users who have received unwanted messages or contact on Instagram in the past 6 months, almost 3 in 5 (58%) said that contact comes from users they believe to be adults, while another 22% said they aren't sure.

HOW OLD WAS THE USER WHO YOU RECEIVED UNWANTED MESSAGES OR CONTACT FROM?

Among those who experienced unwanted messages or contact

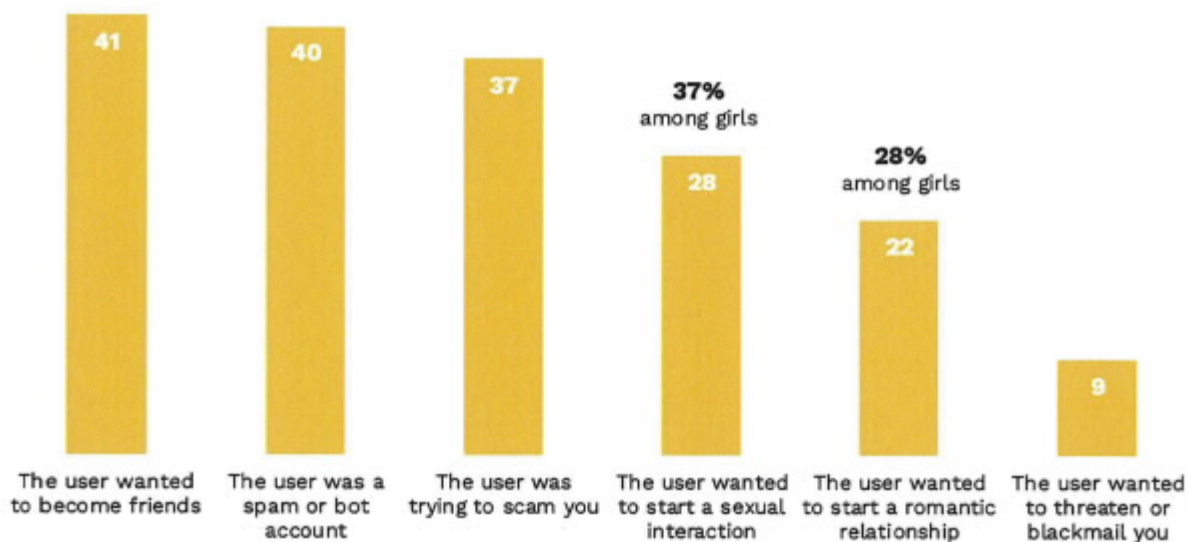


While 41% of young teen users believed that the users who initiated the unwanted messages or contact just wanted to become friends, large numbers felt that the users had more insidious intentions.

For many who experienced it, the unwanted message came from an account that young teen users thought was trying to spam or scam them (53%). But nearly 2 in 5 (39%) felt that the user wanted to start a sexual interaction or romantic relationship. The prevalence of sexual and romantic intentions was notably more common among girls: 37% of girls who had received an unwanted message said they believed the user wanted to start a sexual interaction with them (compared to 20% of boys), while 28% said the user wanted to start a romantic relationship with them (compared to 16% of boys).

THINK ABOUT WHEN YOU RECEIVED UNWANTED MESSAGES OR CONTACT FROM ANOTHER USER ON INSTAGRAM. PLEASE INDICATE WHY YOU THINK THE USER CONTACTED YOU.

Among those who experienced unwanted messages or contact



On Instagram, 13-15-year-olds are more likely than not to say that unwanted messages or contact from other users make them feel uncomfortable.

A majority also said unwanted messages make them feel annoyed (55%). This was followed by feelings of fear, anxiety, and frustration as reported by 1 in 5 (21%) young teen users. Only 11% said they were indifferent to the contact they received, which further highlights that these unwanted interactions are more than simply an inconvenience for young teen users.

HOW DID THE UNWANTED MESSAGES OR CONTACT FROM ANOTHER USER MAKE YOU FEEL?

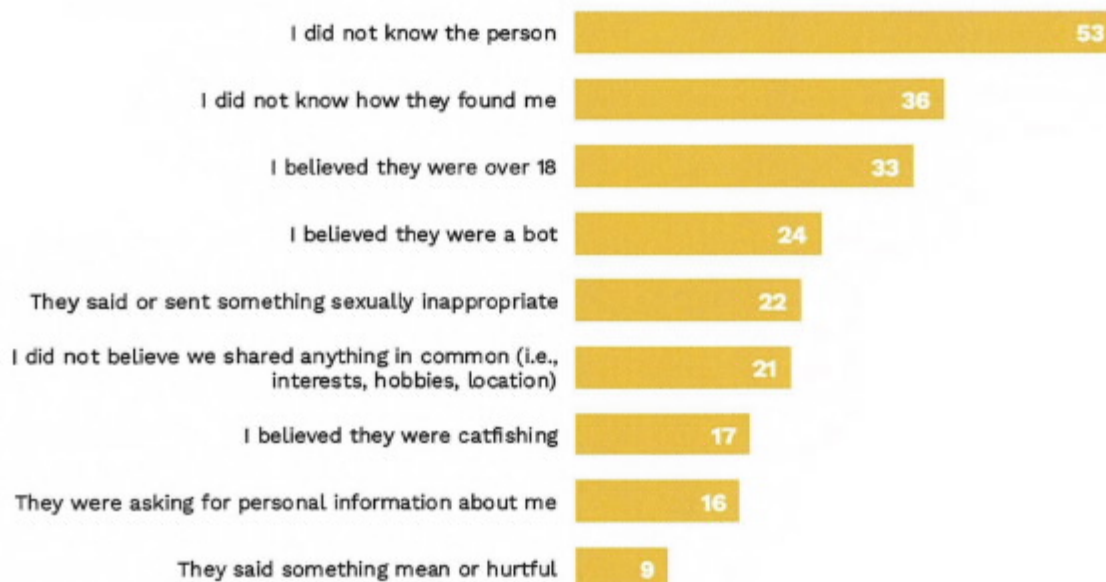
Among those who experienced unwanted messages or contact



For 53% of young teen users, not knowing the person (53%) was the most common rationale for not wanting these interactions, followed by uncertainty around how the other user had found them (36%), and believing the user was an adult (33%).

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES WHY YOU CONSIDER THIS MESSAGE 'UNWANTED'?

Among those who experienced unwanted messages or contact



MANAGING UNSAFE CONTENT & UNWANTED MESSAGES



Almost half of young teen users with an experience are simply ignoring, scrolling past, or closing the app after encountering unsafe content or unwanted messages.

Many young teen users are not blocking or reporting accounts when confronted with unsafe content or unwanted messages, instead opting to either ignore them and keep scrolling or close the app immediately. Specifically, 47% of 13-15-year-old users have had at least one of these experiences and did not take direct action.

For most types of unsafe content, aside from unwanted sexually suggestive or discriminatory content and unwanted messages, ignoring is the most common response, even if combined with other actions like reporting or blocking.

% OF YOUNG TEEN USERS WHO ONLY IGNORED, SCROLLED PAST, OR CLOSED THE APP
Among those who had each experience

Any	47
Hate speech, racist, or discriminatory content or memes	17
Content or memes related to buying, selling or using drugs or alcohol	16
Content or memes related to eating disorders or body shaming	16
Unwanted sexually suggestive content or memes	12
Graphically violent or bloody content or memes	12
Unwanted messages or contact from another user	11
Self-harm content or memes*	7

A majority of young teen users that said they ignored unsafe content and unwanted messages did so because they are “used to it now.”

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO IGNORE IT OR KEEP SCROLLING?

Among those who have experienced any unsafe content and unwanted messages and ignored it or kept scrolling

- 56%** It happens so often that I'm just used to it now
- 30%** I didn't know what else to do
- 9%** I've tried to do something in the past but it didn't work
- 5%** Another reason

Concerningly, 13-15-year-old users appear to be experiencing unsafe content so regularly and across so many facets of Instagram that many feel desensitized, choosing to ignore it rather than take any specific actions to address it.

Almost 2 in 5 (39%) young teen users feel that they don't have the tools or resources to properly address this unsafe content. 30% said they didn't know what else to do, and 9% said they tried something in the past but it didn't work. For a large number of young teen users, Instagram is failing to either educate them on safety tools or follow through when these safety tools are utilized.

Young teen users have come to expect this type of content as a normal part of their online experience.

Beyond a negative emotional impact, many 13-15-year-old users reported changed perceptions of the world around them, such as a more pessimistic view of humanity. Concerningly, many reported feeling that these experiences are “normal.” [Experts](#) have raised concerns about repeated exposure to violent or abusive content in media, saying this desensitization or emotional numbing can reduce empathy, increase tolerance for aggression, and interfere with the development of healthy boundaries.

It made me feel like this is the world we live in and there is nothing that can be said or done to change that.

13, Girl, White, West

Unsafe. Vulnerable, but not surprised. The Internet is not safe and I knew I would end up seeing something like this.

13, Girl, White, South

It's just how people are.

15, Girl, White, Midwest

Seeing that kind of content made me feel uneasy. Sometimes it normalized stuff that shouldn't be brushed off, and other times it just added unnecessary noise to my feed.

13, Girl, White, Midwest

It makes me uncomfortable but it's part of scrolling the app so I just deal.

13, Girl, White, Midwest

At first it made me feel really weird and uncomfortable. But after a while you kinda get used to it.

14, Boy, White, Midwest

Sometimes they make me feel sad but then I just keep scrolling and forget about it.

15, Boy, Hispanic or Latino, South

The first time it was a little sad but after a while it's just become normal. I just expected it'd be weird to not scroll through Instagram and not see those types of messages.

14, Girl, Hispanic or Latino, South

Furthermore, they expressed feeling let down by Instagram.

Many young teen users revealed that they believe the platform is not doing enough to moderate or remove this type of content or these users on the platform. They also expressed some cynicism towards the platform, stating that they feel the app “doesn't care.”

It made me feel like Instagram is not for children my age.

13, Boy, African American/Black/Caribbean American, Midwest

Instagram needs to do better taking these out.

15, Girl, White, Midwest

I think it's bad IG won't do anything.

15, Girl, White, West

I felt ignored and not taken seriously. The post was not removed and user not banned.

13, Boy, Asian or Pacific Islander, Northeast

It feels less secure, and Instagram doesn't care about the teens.

15, Boy, White and Hispanic or Latino, Northeast

I feel like [Instagram] should do something.

14, Boy, Hispanic or Latino, South

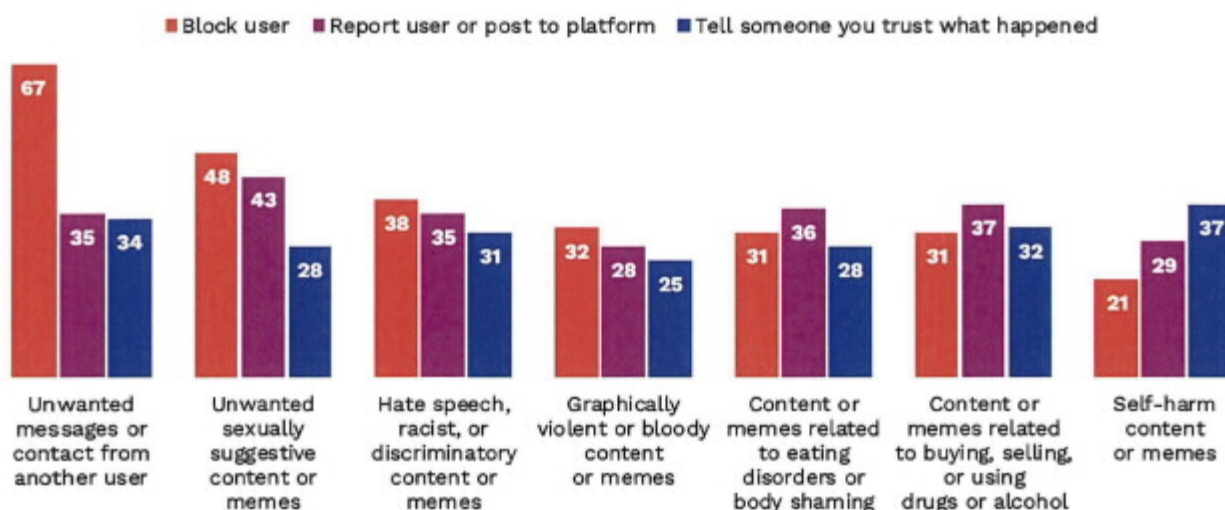
When young teen users come across unsafe content or unwanted messages on Instagram, they are reporting this to the platform less than half the time and talking to people they trust even less often.

Platforms and caregivers are in the dark – most young teen users are not reporting these experiences to the platform or someone they trust. For example, among young teen users who have seen unwanted sexually suggestive content, only 2 in 5 (43%) said they reported the user or post, and a quarter (28%) said that they told someone they trust about it.

While generally more common, even blocking isn't in widespread use. Receiving unwanted messages is the only time a majority of 13-15-year-old users (67%) said they respond by blocking another user.

**FOR EACH OF THESE EXPERIENCES, WHEN THIS HAPPENED TO YOU,
DID YOU EVER DO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?**

Among those who had each experience

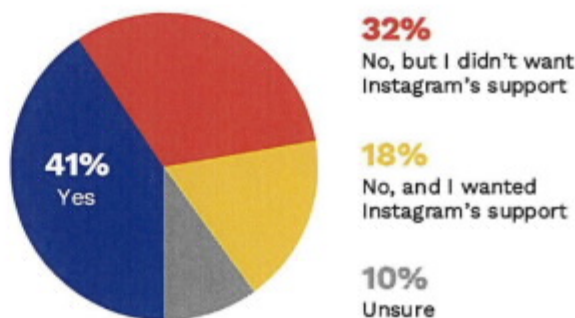


There are many teen users who don't feel Instagram gave them the support they needed.

Given reporting to platforms is not happening at a high rate, it's unsurprising that half of young teen users said they didn't receive support from Instagram after seeing unsafe content or unwanted messages. More concerning, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) who have seen unsafe content or unwanted messages said they did not receive support even though they wanted it.

**WHEN YOU HAD THESE EXPERIENCES ON
INSTAGRAM, DID YOU FEEL INSTAGRAM GAVE
YOU THE SUPPORT THAT YOU NEEDED?**

Among those who have experienced any unsafe content or unwanted messages



INSTAGRAM TEEN ACCOUNT SETTINGS



Despite efforts to make 13-15-year-old Instagram accounts private and supervised, a significant portion of young teen users reported having neither.

Roughly 3 in 10 (29%) 13-15-year-old users said they currently have a public account; about the same amount (30%) said they do not have parental supervision on their Instagram account. Notably, as young teen users age, their likelihood to have public accounts and no parental supervision increases. Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) 15-year-old users' accounts are both unsupervised and public, three times more than their 13-year-old counterparts (6%).

% OF YOUNG TEEN USERS WHO HAVE A PUBLIC OR UNSUPERVISED INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

	Have a public account	Have a public AND unsupervised account	Have an unsupervised account
All	29%	11%	30%
13	26%	6%	18%
14	28%	11%	32%
15	33%	18%	40%

Private accounts and/or parental supervision are not entirely effective for protecting young teen users.

Unsurprisingly, young teen users with public, unsupervised accounts are more likely than others to have been recommended or exposed to unsafe content or unwanted messages in the past 6 months. However, these aren't the only users who have these experiences at an alarmingly high rate – even a majority (54%) of 13-15-year-old users with private, supervised accounts said they have had an experience like this, further supporting the conclusion that Instagram's new safeguards aren't cutting it.

% OF YOUNG TEEN USERS WHO SAID THEY EXPERIENCED ANY UNSAFE CONTENT OR UNWANTED MESSAGES

Public accounts without parental supervision*	71
Private accounts without parental supervision	61
Public accounts with parental supervision	60
Private accounts with parental supervision	54

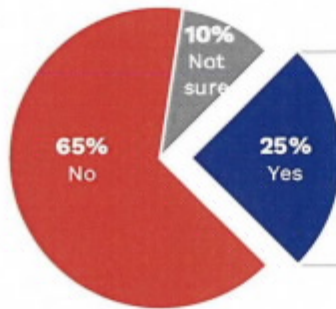
TIME MANAGEMENT WITH INSTAGRAM TEEN ACCOUNTS



Despite claims to encourage those with Teen Accounts to use Instagram less, most young teen users said they haven't noticed this.

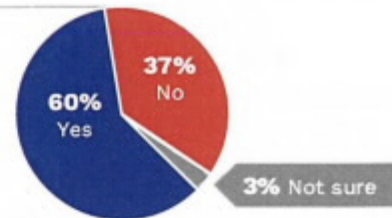
Instagram Teen Accounts claim to help reduce time spent on the app by encouraging teens to close it after they have been on it for 1 hour each day. However, this nudge by the platform isn't resonating – about 2 in 3 (65%) young teen users said they haven't seen a notification from Instagram encouraging them to take a break, with another 10% who said they aren't sure. Even among the quarter (25%) of young teen users who did recall seeing this encouragement, nearly 2 in 5 (37%) said it hasn't resulted in them spending less time on the app.

IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS, HAVE YOU SEEN ANY NOTIFICATIONS FROM INSTAGRAM ENCOURAGING YOU TO TAKE A BREAK FROM BEING ON THE APP?



AND DID THIS ENCOURAGEMENT FROM INSTAGRAM RESULT IN YOU SPENDING LESS TIME ON THE APP?

Among those who said they have seen the notification



The lack of awareness of these daily time limit notifications is not due to low usage of the platform – 53% of all 13-15-year-old users said they are on Instagram at least 1 hour per day, including 11% who say they use Instagram for at least 3 hours per day. Among those that use it for at least 1 hour per day, 60% said they have not seen this sort of notification in the past 6 months.

ON AVERAGE, HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND ON INSTAGRAM EACH DAY?



HAVE YOU SEEN ANY NOTIFICATIONS ENCOURAGING YOU TO TAKE A BREAK?

Among those who use Instagram for 1+ hours / day

