

# The New York Times

## *The Secret Social Media Lives of Teenagers (extract)*

By ANA HOMAYOUN JUNE 7, 2017

What would motivate such seemingly intelligent teens to behave so recklessly online? Many people — adults and kids alike — view likes, loves, comments and followers as a barometer for popularity, even within a smaller, closed group. Teens can quickly get caught up in the feedback loop, posting and sharing images and videos that they believe will gain the largest reaction. Over time, teens’ own values may become convoluted within an online world of instantaneous feedback, and their behavior online can become based on their “all about the likes” values rather than their real-life values.

There is a very real biological basis for this behavior. The combination of social media pressure and an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, the region of the brain that helps us rationalize decisions, control impulsivity and make judgments, can contribute to offensive online posts.

In a recent study, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that the areas of teens’ brains [focused on reward processing and social cognition](#) are similarly activated when they think about money and sex — and when they view a photo receiving lots of likes on social media. When teens viewed photos deemed risky, researchers found the brain regions focused on cognitive control were not activated as much, suggesting that it could be harder for them to make good decisions when viewing images or videos that are graphic in nature. Teens seeking external validation become intoxicated by sensationalist engagement, sometimes sending compromising photos or comments. Of course, some adults have fallen into the same trap.

Even though 86 percent of teens say they’ve received general advice around online use from their parents, researchers at Common Sense Media found that 30 percent of teens who are online believe their parents know “a little” or “nothing” about what social media apps and sites they use. And yet, teens still say that their parents have the biggest influence on determining what is appropriate and inappropriate online.

Adults need to shift the conversation around teens’ social media use away from a fear of getting caught and more toward healthy socialization, effective self-regulation and overall safety.