

Instagram: Finsta!? Rinsta!?

Part 1

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Instagram (now owned by Facebook) has been growing by about 200 million users a year for 2 years now and currently has approximately 1 billion worldwide users¹. It is a social media platform similar to Facebook, WhatsApp (owned by Facebook), Snapchat, and YouTube (Snapchat and YouTube will be briefly discussed in our Introduction to Technology, 6th grade - weekly email series). While YouTube might be used by teens more often than Instagram, Instagram is fast becoming the current online go-to place for teens to connect and socialize with each other.²

Anyone can create an account on Instagram (although the age restriction is officially 13, there are no age verification steps!). They can use their real name, a fake name, or someone else's name. A fake Instagram account can be referred to as a Finstagram account or Finsta, and a real Instagram account can be referred to as a Rinstagram account or Rinsta. Finstas can be used by teens not only to be someone they are not, but to allow them to have a second account that remains hidden from parents and certain friends, creating a more private platform where there is even less reason to think before you post. If someone else's name is used, and that person finds out about it, they can report it, and eventually the account can get removed. However, it takes a while, and Instagram is notorious for not keeping the person who reports the issue, abreast of the situation. You can imagine what kind of harm can come from one person pretending to be another person on these online social platforms.

Instagram makes it very easy to open accounts, have multiple accounts, and follow other accounts. An account can be made private, requiring a request to follow it, and an approval from the account owner. Accounts can be public as well for anyone to see. Every account features how many posts it has (usually pictures and videos with comments below), followers it has, and how many people or other accounts are following it. This can create additional pressure for teens to post pictures and videos they normally wouldn't, to entice more people to "follow" them. Furthermore, everyone following a particular account-user has access to all the other user names that are following that account, and all the other users that account is following. Each account-user name is shown with a quick click option to follow those other users. Additionally, hashtags or the # sign can be added to any post (the account owner simply comments on his/her own post with #andwhateveryouwant). This creates a new shortcut to that particular post, and other users can connect their own posts to that same hashtag shortcut. This all creates an incredible platform for connecting people and content in an extremely fast and user-friendly way.

Stay tuned for part 2 where we will explore additional features with potential for harm, as well as suggest a healthy path moving forward.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>

² <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

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Part 2

As mentioned in part 1, Instagram's platform and features make it impressively efficient and simple for mass connectivity. Some additional features include, disappearing messages (similar to what made Snapchat unique), and direct messages that are more hidden from other users. An Instagram user can also create a "story" which allows them to create a short slideshow of messages, pictures and videos when clicked on. All of these quick connectivity options and content sharing features make Instagram extremely popular among teens. They also create an environment that can be dangerous and damaging even unintentionally.

Many kids have multiple Instagram accounts. A child can give the user name and password to a separate account (possibly not monitored by adults) to a whole group of friends, allowing them all access to post content there. This then becomes a "friends" or "grade" account. Every person with access can choose for that account to follow other accounts. When a different person then views the friends/grade account, they will see every other account that this account is following. Unfortunately but not surprisingly, Instagram has many highly inappropriate and objectionable accounts; thus one person may introduce the whole group to these other inappropriate accounts. This can fast become a damaging slippery slope.

If parents are going to allow their kids on social media, the privacy settings should be turned on, and location should be turned off (this is a basic safety issue!). Perhaps most importantly, parents should be involved. This applies to all technology and non-technology related aspects of a child's life. The more a parent randomly and consistently goes through the child's social media or YouTube account together with the child, the more the parent will see and understand. This should not be done primarily as a punitive process, but rather as a way to connect to your child in a productive way. Similarly, if a parent is allowing their child a videogame system, play a game or two every so often with the child. This can build the relationship and allow you the best vantage point to actually see and understand what your child is doing and involved with. Open, non-threatening conversations can then be had with the child regarding why certain platforms or content won't be allowed. Hopefully the child will then feel comfortable to come back and discuss aspects he/she may not be sure of.

However, I do feel that a platform like Instagram is still well within the limits of what we as parents in the Orthodox community can restrict from our children. There are still many children who are not on such social media platforms, and it only becomes a problem when a large percentage of a particular grade or class is. This can be reversed through parents joining together to restrict such usage, and in general I would encourage grade/class parents to get together and discuss technology and its challenges every so often. There are still many parents who are successful in restricting online gaming, YouTube, and most other aspects of technology, BH! Still, many parents feel that some of these are impossible to curb given where we are at societally. We are fortunate to live in a more sheltered and balanced community and I believe we can still limit a platform like Instagram and those like it, at this point in our communal evolution. The potential dangers far outweigh the additional social and entertainment outlets such a platform provides.