

# Instagram pseudonyms help people open up about mental health, research shows

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Instagram should avoid enforcing a real-name policy in order to support openness about mental health, experts have recommended as the UK marks Mental Health Awareness Week.

New research by Dr. Ysabel Gerrard at the University of Sheffield and Dr. Anthony McCosker at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia, has found that 76 percent of a sample of Instagram accounts sharing content about [mental health](#) used pseudonyms to disguise their identity.

The study, published in the journal *New Media and Society*, also showed that 35 percent of posts about depression used dark humour and memes, suggesting that mental health is still difficult for people to talk about.

Dr. Gerrard is a member of the Facebook and Instagram Suicide and Self-Injury Advisory Board—providing expertise to the companies about how potentially harmful content should be regulated. Her findings have led her to recommend that content about mental health, while potentially triggering for some, should not be overly policed.

The research, which looked at use of the hashtag #depressed and other relevant terms on Instagram, found that 38 percent of posts were designed to inspire hope and encourage people to seek support for mental health problems. Just 15 percent showed images of people, including selfies and depictions of self-harm. This may in part be influenced by Instagram's policy of marking #depressed posts as 'problematic', which means search results for this term are limited.

Dr. Ysabel Gerrard, Lecturer in the Department of Sociological Studies

at the University of Sheffield, said: "Our research has clearly shown that people don't feel comfortable talking about depression using their real name and a public account. If Instagram ever enforces a real-name policy, as Facebook has, it would wipe out these safe spaces entirely.

"It was interesting to see the extent to which people use dark humour to talk about depression. This suggests we should actually be taking meme accounts seriously in this context, and Instagram should avoid overly policing content about mental health—unless it actively promotes acts like suicide and self-harm.

"While there has been progress around the way we talk about mental health, our findings show conditions like depression are still difficult to talk about. Allowing people to disguise their identity on [social media](#) is crucial to helping them open up."

The Department of Sociological Studies is at the forefront of digital media and society studies, conducting research into the ways apps, platforms and devices change our social world. Along with the Sheffield Methods Institute and the faculty-wide Digital Society Network, the Department brings together interdisciplinary researchers at the cutting-edge of society-technology interactions, exploring challenging and sometimes controversial topics.

**More information:** Anthony McCosker et al. Hashtagging depression on Instagram: Towards a more inclusive mental health research methodology, *New Media & Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1461444820921349](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820921349)

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