

A University Student Reflects on the Good and Bad of Social Networking use by Children and Adolescents

Technology generates both new opportunities and problems.

Students are constantly influenced by the media; even those who aren't very social media savvy are surrounded by it everywhere.

[*Editor's note:* While working with our Center at UCLA,* Jenny Hay decided she wanted to do a paper about growing concerns associated with social networking. What follows is the Center's edited version of that paper. Other Center work on this topic is cited in the reference list.]

Students today are born into a world where they are expected to keep up with the latest and "coolest" devices and use a variety of social media platforms. Reports from the Pew Research Center indicate that 95% of U.S. teens are avid internet and social media members and that 71% use more than one social network site such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Club Penguin, Sims, Vine, Google+ (<http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/teens-and-technology/>).

Some of the Negative Effects

With social networking becoming a dominant feature of daily life, concerns have arisen. Highlighted here are (a) the potential negative impact on development and well-being, (b) cyberbullying, and (c) the reality that what's posted stays online.

Potential Negative Impact on Development and Well-being

Increasing use of social networks by children and adolescents can reduce face-to-face interactions and communication. This may hamper maturation of communication and expressive abilities and harm facets of social-emotional development. In addition, for those who have social anxieties, avoiding face-to-face contacts can become a crutch that interferes with learning better ways to cope.

Dangers to well-being also arise from uses such as "sexting." Sexting is defined as "sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices" (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Media, 2011). In constructing their online image, some youngsters sexualize themselves, which can increase their vulnerability to sexual victimization (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Both boys and girls may put sexually explicit photos and messages online to gain approval and attract attention, paying little heed to possible repercussions and the online longevity of what is posted.

Potential harm also is associated with the impact of self-presentations comparisons on a youngster's developing self-image. This is especially a concern related to those prone to negative feelings about self. Self-presentation often is motivated by a desire to impress and obtain the approval of others. This can lead to constructing posts and profiles to convey a highly favorable image (e.g., mainly stressing one's best assets, fabricating some attributes). As youngsters regularly check the Instagram and Facebook pages of peers (and celebrities and models), they inevitably make comparisons. For instance, when scrolling through their photo "feed" of others, they find many who appear more attractive. It is easy to feel "less than." This can even lead to what has been dubbed "Facebook depression," which is defined as depressed feelings and thoughts that develop after spending a great deal of time on social media sites (Moreno, Jelenchick, Egan, Cox, Young, Gannon, & Becker, 2011).

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A study by Slater and colleagues (2017) provides some findings that have relevance to the impact of appearance comparisons. The researchers randomly assigned girls 8-9 years old to play either an appearance-focused or nonappearance-focused internet game and assessed the impact on body image and career cognitions and aspirations. The findings indicate that the girls playing the appearance-focused game displayed stronger body dissatisfaction and indicated preference for “feminine careers.” The results are interpreted to indicate that the appearance-focused game caused the girls to focus on their femininity to such a degree that it could be detrimental to their body satisfaction and aspirations.

Negative peer influence is another concern. Some teens post wrongful behavior that may lead others to participate in similar acts (e.g., posting photos and discussions suggesting that consuming alcohol, smoking, using recreational drugs, and so forth is fun and creates a cool image). O’Keeffe and colleagues (2011) caution that inexperienced adolescents consuming such social media posts are at risk because they are susceptible to peer pressure, do not fully understand possible consequences of adopting such behaviors, and have limited capacity for self-regulation.

Another often mentioned concern is the influence and appropriateness of online advertising on children and adolescents. A reasonable worry; more research is warranted.

Cyberbullying

Delete Cyberbullying, a Stop Online Harassment Project, states that popular adolescents often use cyberbullying as a method of maintaining popularity or achieving power amongst peers. Children and teens who are less socially accepted are seen as bullying (in person and online) as a way to cope with problems related to psychosocial needs.

The American Academy of Pediatrics defines cyberbullying as “deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person”(O’Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Media, 2011). Examples are online verbal abuse, intimidation, spreading rumors, excluding others, posting embarrassing photos or comments of a person on social media sites. Cyberbullying is the most common online risk for teens. However, Pew Center Research reports that only 17% of online teens report some kind of contact that made them feel scared or uncomfortable; 4% of teens have posted something online that caused problems for them or a family member or got them in trouble at school.

Cyberbullying occurs at all ages, and perpetrators can be hard to identify. Among students, estimates suggest that approximately 15-35% have been victims of online harassment and that 10-20% admit to cyberbullying others (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Among the potential negative psychosocial consequences frequently cited for those cyberbullied are increasing anxiety, feelings of depression, decreased self-worth, hopelessness, isolation from others, and in extreme cases even suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

In 2007, a National Crime Prevention Council report stated: “Most teens believe that people cyberbully either because it’s funny (81%) or they simply don’t like the person (64%) and view the victim as a loser (45%). Nearly six in ten teens (59%) said cyberbullies probably didn’t see the action as a ‘big deal.’ Similarly, nearly half of teens said that cyberbullying happens because the cyberbully doesn’t perceive there to be any tangible consequences (47%) or they wouldn’t get caught (45%)” -- <http://www.ncpc.org/resources/files/pdf/bullying/Cyberbullying%20Trends%20-%20Tudes.pdf> .

What's Posted Stays Online

A growing reality is that social media posts are being accessed and used in evaluating job applications, university admission, internships, and other situations. The consequences of this were highlighted by a 2013 survey that found 1 out of 10 young job applicants were rejected because of content they had posted on social media, including "provocative or inappropriate photos or posts," and "content about drinking or using drugs" (Sherman, 2013).

Most adolescents and children don't give much thought to the reality that what they post on the internet is available to others now and into the future. Pew Research Center findings indicate that teen social media users do not express a high level of concern about third-party access to their data; just 9% say they are "very" concerned. In their survey of students' use of and attitudes toward social networking sites, Peluchette and Karl (2008) found that young males and females tended to be unmindful about conveying a negative image. Significant gender differences were found about the type of information posted and students' comfort with employers seeing this information. Young women, for example, demonstrated more apprehensiveness than males about future employers seeing some of their social network posts, especially those related to alcohol.

But There are Positives!

Research examining benefits of social media has stressed the potential for enhancing social connections and supports and facilitating regular communication and self-expression. Lee (2009) states that the argument for such benefits "is partially based on the potential of the Internet as an interactive medium that can connect people to people while overcoming the barriers of time and place. In addition, the characteristics of the Internet such as anonymity and lack of social cues may facilitate users initiating new relationships." As examples, some children have difficulty making new friends and being online may make it easier; children moving to new locales and schools can keep in contact with friends and family left behind; with proper supervision, online pen-pals can be acquired. In close proximity or from afar, social media can provide opportunities for children and teenagers to maintain social connections, establish new ones, enhance knowledge, skills, and interests, and provide an outlet and support for coping with problems.

Four in ten online teens say they have met someone online who later became a good friend. African-American teens are more likely than white teens to report meeting good friends online; 54% of African-American teen internet users say they have met a good friend online compared with 35% of white teens. Boys and girls are equally likely to report meeting good friends online, but older online teens ages 14-17 are more likely than younger teens to say they have met a close friend online (42% vs. 32%). Teens living in the lowest-income households (earning less than \$30,000 per year) are more likely than those living in the higher-income households (earning \$50,000 or more per year) to say that they have met a good friend online (53% vs. 30%). Internet-using teens living in rural areas are more likely than those living in suburban areas to say that they have met a good friend online (50% vs. 36%).

Pew Research Center

http://www.loooker.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/PIP_TeensSocialMediaandPrivacy_FINAL.pdf

Opportunities for self-expression and sharing also abound – posting photos, videos, information about current events and status, likes, comments, animations, blogs, podcasts, and more. The various platforms enable youngsters to create content and voice their opinions to a large and diverse audience. Interestingly, some especially talented individuals (e.g., singers, actors, artists) have been discovered from their posts on social media.

The use of anonymity has been seen to help many children and teenagers in revealing uncomfortable traits of themselves and gaining social support. For example, with respect to adolescents who are in the process of questioning their gender or sexual orientation, Michikyan and Suárez-Orozco (2016) state: "there must be a certain comfort in knowing that online spaces-anonymous or less anonymous-exist that enable them to construct a narrative of the self, which gives meaning and some order to her or his complex life". Many adolescents use social media to confide in others, meet people who have endured the same confusions, and even use these sites to ultimately reveal their true gender or sexual orientation to their friends and family.

Social networks such as Facebook allow peers to collaborate outside of class while brainstorming ideas together. In addition, posted content and news can stimulate thinking, new ideas, and curiosity.

The Pew Research Center reports that social networks play an important role in education. 62% of online teens reported acquiring news about current events and politics online. 31% of online teens get health, dieting or physical fitness information from the internet, while 17% of online teens access health topics that are hard to discuss with others such as drug use and sexual health topics. 98% of parents' teens who own cell phones say a major reason their child has the phone is that they can be in touch.

Research also suggests that online connection with peers for social support can decrease stress and may be a vital venue for children who do not have a secure support system at home (Leung, 2007). Bessiere and colleagues (2008) report that "using the Internet to communicate with friends and family was associated with declines in depression. This finding is comparable to other studies showing that social support is beneficial for well-being and lends support to the idea that the Internet is a way to strengthen and maintain social ties." The work of researchers such as Ito and colleagues (2008) and Lee and colleague's (2009) indicates that online interactive activity can promote cognitive, physical, and social development.

A Few Recommendations

The prevalence and use of social media is expanding. It is imperative that parents, educators, administrators, pediatricians, and policy makers focus on encouraging and supervising appropriate use, support opportunities for positive benefits, and guard against potential problems. Some recommendations are included in the Center resources cited at the end of this document. And, of course, a Google search will yield a host of additional resources. Below are a few recommendations Jenny highlighted in her paper to maximize benefits and minimize problems.

- Parents and teachers need to keep up with the rapid changes related to technology, its uses, and impact.
- Then, they need to teach, guide, support, monitor, and, when necessary, enforce.
 - >Information about what is appropriate and safe to do online must be taught in developmentally and motivationally appropriate ways by parents, teachers, and others who work with children and adolescents.
 - >Potential dangers, bad behavior, and consequences must be conveyed (e.g., giving special attention to problems related to making social comparisons, peer pressure, hurtful and untrue gossiping, cyberbullying, sexting).
 - >Direct supervision of social media use is called for until it is clear the child is mature enough to be online alone.

- >Periodic monitoring usually is wise (e.g., “friend” the child on their social networks to see what’s posted). At the same time, it is important to avoid being seen as overly invasive.
- >Time online probably is best handled by engaging the youngster in learning time management related to major facets of their day.

While a healthy parent-child relationship is built on open, warm, and trusting communication, maintaining such a relationship can be difficult with some adolescents. Yet it is essential for encouraging responsible social media use and for enabling youngsters to relate when they experience online problems such as cyberbullying or encounters with strangers. Timing and context also are important (e.g., don’t wait for a problem to arise, find a mutually good time and a familiar and comfortable place to talk about online risks and experiences).

Concluding Comments

Younger and younger kids are acquiring social media sites. Many concerns have been documented. However, the potential positives must not be ignored. As today's social media savvy children grow into tomorrow's social media savvy adults, parents, educators, pediatricians, and policy makers must increase efforts to promote proper online use and counter harm.

With appropriate attention to facilitating learning and development, appreciating children’s rights, and promoting their sense of responsibility, social network sites can be used as a powerful tool for enhancing learning and development, as well as youth expression and their participation at school and in society.

A bit of humor from the Internet –

Social Media Explained

- Twitter – I’m eating a #donut
- Facebook – I like donuts
- Foursquare – Here is where I eat donuts
- Instagram – Here’s a vintage photo of my donut
- YouTube – Here I am eating a donut
- Linked In – My skills include eating donuts
- Pinterest – Here’s a donut recipe
- Last FM – Now listening to “Donuts”
- Google + – I’m a Google employee who eats donuts

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Also see, the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find entitled:

>Technology as an Interention Tool – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/techschool.htm>