



DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY / OVERVIEW

Social Media



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Summary

The everyday experiences of today's young people, particularly teenagers, are shaped by their use of technology and social media. A growing body of research in this area indicates that teenagers are increasingly connected to the online world and their online social networks.

The effect of social media on teenagers

Experiences of social media content may differ, but there are some consistent concerns about teenagers' social media use around the impact of screen time on teenagers, their safety and privacy both online and offline, and their exposure to and experiences of cyberbullying.

Screen time can negatively affect students

Research consistently demonstrates that technology use and screen time affect students' behaviour, attention, and ability to sleep. Using screens before bed tends to delay the time that students actually go to sleep, thereby decreasing the amount of sleep that they get. Additionally, the light that screens emit can disrupt students' circadian rhythms. For some, the content that is consumed – stimulating or scary video games, movies, or TV shows – can further engage the brain and release adrenaline, exciting the body and inhibiting the onset quality of sleep. Public health guidelines recommend limiting the amount of time people use technology, especially young people.

Furthermore, device use and engagement with social media are shown to cause distraction and to impact on social interactions. In a recent study, the majority of teens surveyed said that they are distracted from doing homework by social media, and almost a third said that notifications or text messages to their phone had woken them up at night. While teenagers prefer to communicate with their friends through social media or texting, almost half of those surveyed in the same study reported that they feel frustrated with their friends for using their phones when they spend time together.¹

Student safety and privacy need to be protected online

Teenagers' safety and privacy are of utmost concern to parents and increasingly to schools. Despite age restrictions on social media (which is 13 for most of the main platforms), a recent large-scale study found that many underage children continue to use social media and lie about their age in order to do so. While some parents expressed continued concern about their child's exposure to inappropriate content online, others helped their children to circumvent these age restrictions and access the content they seek. Many parents were also concerned about how their child's online activity and the digital footprint it creates may affect their future academic or job opportunities. When it comes to privacy concerns about teenagers talking to strangers online, 63% of parents of younger teens and 48% of parents of older teens said they were very concerned about interactions with strangers online.²

It is imperative that parents and teachers educate teenagers about the dangers associated with social networking, particularly when it comes to safety and privacy. Privacy settings should be strong, as teenagers tend to share information of a personal nature with their social media audiences, and especially strong if that information could be traced back to them. Parents and teachers should also work with teenagers to set the appropriate privacy settings on each social networking site or app, as these settings can be difficult to navigate.

Cyberbullying has negative social emotional effects on both victims and perpetrators

Cyberbullying is a concern of parents, teachers and teens, and is a growing public health crisis around the world. A major study found that 88% of teens had witnessed mean or cruel behaviour on a social network site, while 15% of teens had experienced harassment themselves and 21% had participated in harassing others. These negative online interactions can lead to negative offline consequences: of the surveyed teenagers who use social media, 41% had had an experience on a social network site that resulted in a face-to-face argument or verbal confrontation, the end of a friendship, a problem with their parents, feeling nervous about going to school the next day, or a physical fight with someone else because of something that happened online.³ Victims of cyberbullying report a number of negative social emotional consequences including increased anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal behaviour. Perpetrators of cyberbullying are more likely to report increased use of drugs and other substances as well as increased aggression.⁴

Social media in the classroom

As social media are a ubiquitous part of daily life, particularly among secondary school students, some members of the edtech community argue that teachers can leverage off their students' existing behaviour to harness social media for learning. While there is some evidence to suggest that using social media in a learning context can scaffold communication skills and build classroom community, there is scant literature exploring the effectiveness of using social media on content learning, and prior investigations into this area have generally been of low quality. There is a growing need for more convincing and robust evidence in this area.

There is some evidence that social media have the potential to develop important skills and build community among students. Social media are digital tools characterised by participation, collaboration, sharing, networking, distribution, and customisation. These features are related to important skills that schools are keen to develop in their students such as collaboration, communication, digital literacy, citizenship, creativity and productivity. Utilising social media in the classroom can provide an alternative way for students to engage with course content, and can be a way to elicit deep thinking, reflection, and conversation from students when they are required to engage critically with what they engage with online.

There are several arguments for using social media in the classroom. One systematic review found that using social media tools in the classroom was associated with improved exam scores, attitudes, skills, and learner engagement.⁵ There is also an argument that social media can help individuals create relationships that differ from the face-to-face interactions that teachers and students experience in the classroom. Additionally, when social media are used in pedagogically sound ways, students may benefit intellectually, developing skills in analysis, interpretation, critique, and evaluation.

In the increasingly digital world in which students are immersed, social media can expose them to collaboration, ownership, creativity, and a range of genres and perspectives. Importantly, social media platforms can be community learning spaces. Research suggests that students feel a stronger sense of social connectedness in classrooms where social media is used as a supplementary tool. Building a sense of community is critical to students' sense of belonging and overall academic performance, and research has found a positive correlation between integrating social media in pedagogy and improved student communication skills in the classroom and outside it. Using social media also has the potential to boost student engagement.

Moreover, links with students on social media can be beneficial to teachers by facilitating feedback (by allowing a teacher to comment with feedback on a Facebook wall or on Edmodo), providing accessibility outside of school, and allowing them to track student learning. Teachers can set up a social network specifically for their classroom, or use an existing social networking platform to create a classroom page: for example, teachers can use Facebook to create a closed group for their class. However, before using Facebook, teachers ought to consider their school's policy on teacher-student 'friend' connections online, and the age of sign-up (which for most social networking websites is 13).

Some teachers have adopted Twitter in their classrooms, as the platform allows communication in discrete threads and can be used to pose questions or elicit comments from students in a class discussion, which can then be tagged with a unique hash tag for those in the classroom to follow. Following a class hash tag can help filter information meant only for the class. Some teachers are attracted to the character limit of Twitter as it encourages students to practise delivering their point of view in a concise and clear way. Beyond using Twitter for classroom discussions, teachers can use it as a way to remind students about upcoming deadlines and events, and to share articles, videos, and other media that are relevant to the curriculum.

The impact of social media on learning

It is important to note that existing research has not been able to tease out the effect of social media on learning, especially where it has demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of university students' interactions on social media are unrelated to their university studies, and that social media applications are often used merely for passive consumption of content. While there is a growing body of research on social media in the classroom, particularly with regard to social media in higher education learning, it is as yet insufficiently convincing to warrant advocating social media use in secondary schools.

Studies examining Facebook use for learning and academic performance have yielded mixed results, and the research base supporting the use of Twitter is similarly mixed. While early research indicated improved communication between teachers and students on Twitter, a recent study suggests that Twitter is used primarily as a one-way communication channel to push information from the teacher to students, rather than encouraging students to engage with each other and with the content in a dialogue.⁶

One of the most important factors for successful and effective teaching and learning with technology is the teacher's attitude and approach. Research suggests that, for social media to be used as effective learning tools, significant effort in designing, scaffolding, and interacting with students during the process is required. If teachers decide to employ social media as part of their pedagogy, it is essential that they continue to scaffold students' critical thinking skills in order to help them learn how to evaluate the information that is accessed through social media for accuracy and objectivity.

It also is important to note that using social media in the classroom may lead to additional responsibilities for teachers. In addition to challenges related to discipline, when students are tempted to use social media for purposes other than learning during class time, there are also technical and technological challenges, particularly where schools don't have the IT support they need in order to troubleshoot issues. Teachers may have to be their own 'helpdesk' to deal with problems, which can be time-consuming and distracting.

Conclusion

Social media increasingly shape young people's everyday experiences, and this brings both risks and opportunities. Social media have been demonstrated to have a negative impact on teenagers' behaviour, attention and sleep. They have implications for teenagers' privacy, safety and digital footprint, and cyberbullying through online platforms has been shown to be particularly pervasive and pernicious. Social media are being promoted in some quarters as a classroom tool, and, while there may be a positive impact on communication, collaboration and engagement, there is as yet insufficient evidence regarding the benefits for learning to justify the active recommendation of social media use in the classroom. As with the use of digital devices in key curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy, the effectiveness of social media as a tool for learning in the classroom is largely due to the decisions, actions and attitude of the teacher.

Prepared for The Education Hub by Julianne Viola

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Endnotes

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