An Introduction to Social Media and our Youth

Executive Summary

There is no question that social media is used far and wide by teens and children. With few exceptions, the particular social media platforms used by youth changes rapidly with the passage of time, but there are common trends that parents and trusted adults can be aware of that apply regardless of social media platform.

With the explosion of social media platforms and the rise in mobile device use, youth are capable of being connected to each other almost constantly. This means that they have the capacity to spend the majority of their time and will do a large portion of their social and emotional development online. This can be alienating for parents, but their involvement is critical for their children's safety and proper development.

Teens face many dangers when it comes to social media. These include: cyberbullying, sexual experimentation, misinformation, and privacy concerns. It is important to note that a lot of these risks have offline or more traditional parallels, and that online behaviors are often an extension of offline experiences. As an example, researchers have found victims of cyberbullying are often also bullied in-person.

However, interactions online are fundamentally different and need to be addressed directly by parents. Social media lacks the universal social boundary cues normally present in face-to-face interactions, which can lead youth to easily mistake what is proper behavior for what is not. For example, it is much easier in-person to identify who is nearby and appropriately control what is disclosed. Online, however, what is shared can easily be transmitted to a wider audience than ever intended and without much warning. It is easy for youth to disassociate the implications and consequences of their online behavior.

However, social media is not all bad. At its core, it is a tool used to help people communicate with one another, and this is reflected in how youth view and use social media. Teens use social media primarily for staying in touch with friends they already know, and can use these very same tools to collaborate on school projects, do research, and communicate with family. Social media can educate and equip youth with the tools they need to succeed in the future.

Youth have become increasingly comfortable and familiar with the use of social media. Social media is viewed very pragmatically, as a tool for communicating, and is used quite habitually, with many youth not realizing just how much time they devote to social media. They find nuances among different social media

platforms and find unique audiences and purposes for each one. For example, Facebook is viewed as very "official", with teens preferring to use real information there while carefully monitoring what is posted. Other platforms are seen as less formal and are used more liberally but with less sensitive information.

Despite seeing nuances in social media, youth often are not aware of how accessible the information they share is to the public. It is common for them to operate in public spaces but still maintain a strong expectation of privacy. Youth whose parents have a high level of concern for online privacy tend to share those concerns, but this does not translate to more careful behavior. Youth who are too carefully monitored tend to not experience as many risks online, but lack the experience and skills to fend for themselves. Those who are given more freedom tend to develop the skills and knowledge to monitor their own privacy online, but encounter higher risks. Parents must actively take part in their children's online communication in order to curate a constructive online experience.

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Prevalence of Social Media Use by Youth

- 92 percent of teens age 13-17 go online daily.[1]
- 24 percent of teens are online "almost constantly".[2]
- Almost 3 in 4 teens have a smartphone, while 9 in 10 have internet access on a mobile device at least occasionally.[3]
- 76 percent of American teens say they use social media.[4]
- Facebook remains as the most used social media platform, with 41 percent of teens saying that it is the site they use most often.[5]
- 71 percent of teens report using more than one social network.[6]
  - Teens claim to frequently use social media services such as [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Tumblr](#), [Instagram](#), [Skype](#), and iMessage.[7]
  - Other services teens mentioned using, but not as frequently, include [Twitter](#), [Steam](#), [9gag](#), [Edmodo](#), [Viber](#), and specific online games such as [Minecraft](#) and [Call of Duty](#).[8]
- 33 percent of teens with smart phones use messaging apps. This statistic rises to 46 percent for Hispanic and African-American teens.[9]
- 91 percent of teens use mobile phones to go online[10]
- Experts have found that a large part of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet and on cell phones.[11]
- Researchers agree that teens can benefit from technology use and online engagement; however, doing so also exposes them to privacy-related risks.[12]

[1] Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview." 2015. 5 August 2015. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Monks, Helen, et al. "Young people's views regarding participation in mental health and wellbeing research through social media." *The International Journal of Emotional Education* 7.1 (2015): 4-19. 5 August 2015. <http://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/243268/v7i1p1.pdf>.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Lenhart, Amanda. "Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview."

[10] Ibid.

[11] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families." *Pediatrics: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* (2011): 800-804. 5 August 2015.

[12] Wisniewski, Pamela, et al. ""Preventative" vs. "Reactive:" How Parental Mediation." *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*.

Dangers and Concerns from Social Media

- Teens can find social media to be addictive, time consuming, and a negative experience, which can lead to feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, and embarrassment.[13]
- There are frequent online expressions of negative offline behaviors, such as bullying, clique-forming, and sexual experimentation.[14]
- Research suggests that audience size—the amount of people and who sees what is posted online—can be quite unpredictable and that users simply do not receive enough feedback to predict their audience size well.[15]
- Visible signals of audience size—friends, likes, comments—vary widely and do not strongly indicate the audience of a single post.[16]
- Only 18 percent of teens take the time to customize which of their friends can see their Facebook posts.[17]
- Adolescents can encounter inaccuracies during searches and require parental involvement to be sure they are using reliable online resources, interpreting the information correctly, and are not overwhelmed by the information they are reading.[18]
- Some teens who have engaged in sexting have been threatened or charged with felony child pornography charges.[19]
  - Additional consequences of sexting include school suspension for perpetrators and emotional distress with accompanying mental health conditions for victims.[20]
- Social media fads can pose threats to the health of children and young adults. For example the "cinnamon challenge" involved inhaling or swallowing cinnamon, which can cause serious health complications.[21]
- A significant amount of teenagers do not use or are aware of privacy settings within each social media platform.[22]

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[13] Widén, Gunilla, et al. "Mixed Emotions in Active Social Media Use – Fun and Convenient or Shameful." *iConference*. iSchools, 2015. 1-14. 5 August 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/73460>.

[14] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

[15] Bernstein, Michael S., et al. "Quantifying the Invisible Audience in Social Networks." Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. New York, NY: ACM, 2013. 21-30. 5 August 2015.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Madden, Mary, et al. "Teens, Social Media, and Privacy." 2013. 5 August 2015. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/05/21/teens-social-media-and-privacy/>.

[18] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Korioth, Trisha. "Teens land in ER after taking 'Cinnamon Challenge'." *AAP News* 22 April 2013. 5 August 2015.

[22] Monks, Helen, et al. " Young people's views regarding participation in mental health and wellbeing research through social media."

- It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain anonymity and privacy as more tools and more data become available to cross reference the information that is shared. A small amount of information posted across different platforms can add up to disclose even more information than was intended.[23]

Cyberbullying

- Cyberbullying is quite common. It may happen to any young person, and may cause profound psychosocial outcomes including: depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and, tragically, suicide.[24]
- According to experts, cyberbullying usually occurs in the context of in-person bullying.[25]
- 78 percent of studied teen suicides were of adolescents who were bullied both in-person and online, while only 17 percent were targeted online only.[26]
- Between 20 and 40 percent of children have experienced cyber bullying.[27]
- Females have a higher risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying than males, while a majority of cyberbullies are male.[28]
- There is a larger occurrence of cyberbullying victims who have developed into bullies. Additionally, there is also a higher occurrence ofbullies who are victims as compared to traditional bullying.[29]

Positive Aspects of Social Media Use

- Social media use is an activity which can benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and even technical skills.[30]
- Teens primarily use social media primarily for maintaining existing friendships, with meeting new people as a secondary use.[31]
- Teens can find social acceptance, support, and a feeling of belonging through social media use.[32]

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[23] Saunders, Benjamin, Jenny Kitzinger and Celia Kitzinger. "Participant Anonymity in the Internet Age: From Theory to Practice." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 12.2 (2015): 125-137. 5 August 2015.

[24] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

[25] American Academy of Pediatrics. "Cyberbullying only rarely the sole factor identified in teen suicides." *ScienceDaily* 20 October 2012. 5 August 2015. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/10/121020162615.htm>.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Aboujaoude, Elias, et al. "Cyberbullying: Review of an Old Problem Gone Viral." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 57.1 (2015): 10-18. 5 August 2015.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

[31] Agosto, Denise E. and June Abbas. "High school seniors' social network and other ICT use preferences and concerns." *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 47.1 (2010): 1-10. 5 August 2015.

- Students can use social media to communicate outside of school to collaborate and exchange ideas about assignments.[33]
- Mobile technologies have produced multiple improvements in youth health care such as: increased medication adherence, increased disease comprehension, and fewer missed appointments.[34]
- Facebook users value authentic portrayal of the self, to the point of ostracizing friends they know offline who do not use photographs of themselves as profile pictures.[35]

Youths' Usage and Perspectives on Social Media

- 13 years is the age set by Congress in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which prohibits a website from collecting information about users under 13-years-old without parental permission.[36]
- Falsifying age has become a common practice by many preadolescents and some parents. Parents must be thoughtful about this practice to be sure that they are not sending mixed messages about lying.[37]
- Teenagers have shared that they often do not read a site's Terms of Service before use.[38]
- Facebook users view Facebook as an "official" space, like the Census or an application, where legitimate information should be entered.[39]
- Teens view social media in pragmatic manner—as a tool for quick and easy communication—rather than as an opportunity to experiment with new technologies.[40]
- There is a tendency to use social media habitually rather than for a rational or irrational decision.[41]
- Teens are often surprised with the frequency with which they use social media when tasked to monitor their social media habits.[42]

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[32] Widén, Gunilla, et al. "Mixed Emotions in Active Social Media Use – Fun and Convenient or Shameful."

[33] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

[34] Ibid.

[35] Cirucci, Angela M. "Facebook's Affordances, Visible Culture, and Anti-anonymity." *Proceedings of the 2015 International Conference on Social Media & Society*. New York, NY: ACM, 2015. 1-5. 5 August 2015.

[36] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

[37] Ibid.

[38] Monks, Helen, et al. " Young people's views regarding participation in mental health and wellbeing research through social media."

[39] Cirucci, Angela M. "Facebook's Affordances, Visible Culture, and Anti-anonymity."

[40] Agosto, Denise E. and June Abbas. "High school seniors' social network and other ICT use preferences and concerns."

[41] Widén, Gunilla, et al. "Mixed Emotions in Active Social Media Use – Fun and Convenient or Shameful."

[42] Ibid.

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- Research suggests that social media audience size can be quite unpredictable and that users simply do not receive enough feedback to predict their audience size well.[43]
  - o Facebook users consistently underestimate their audience, guessing their audience is only 27 percent of its actual size.[44]
  - o Facebook users typically reach 61 percent of their friends each month with posts.[45]
- Anonymous interactions often mirror the characteristics of regular interactions. For example, researchers found that in groups where participants knew who each other were, they worked better as a group when they included female members. Researchers found this to also be true when groups were anonymous and group members did not know the gender of others.[46]
- In 2011 there were protests in Chile regarding the cost and quality of public education. Researchers found a positive relationship between youth social media use and participation in this social movement.[47]
- Many teenagers view the differences in anonymity and privacy between social media, and make conscious decisions of how they use each accordingly.[48]
- For teens, a widely held view is that the contextual environment determines what is okay to share and what needs to be kept private. Privacy becomes situational rather than immutable.[49]
- Researchers have found a disconnect between teens' stated privacy concerns, level of awareness, and the vast amount of information they share on social media.[50]
- 20 percent of teens have sent or posted nude or seminude photographs or videos of themselves.[51]

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[43] Bernstein, Michael S., et al. "Quantifying the Invisible Audience in Social Networks."
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Song, Hyang-gi, et al. "The hidden gender effect in online collaboration: An experimental study of team performance under anonymity." *Computers in Human Behavior* 50 (2015): 274-282. 5 August 2015.
[47] Scherman, Andrés, Arturo Arriagada and Sebastián Valenzuela. "Student and Environmental Protests in Chile: The Role of Social Media." *Politics* 35.2 (2015): 151-171. 5 August 2015.
[48] Monks, Helen, et al. " Young people's views regarding participation in mental health and wellbeing research through social media."
[49] Saunders, Benjamin, Jenny Kitzinger and Celia Kitzinger. "Participant Anonymity in the Internet Age: From Theory to Practice."
[50] Wisniewski, Pamela, et al. ""Preventative" vs. "Reactive:" How Parental Mediation."
[51] O'Keeffe, Gwenn S., MD, Kathleen Clarke-Pearson and Council on Communications and Media. "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families."

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- It is common place for information to be reposted, retweeted, and shared in various ways, reaching a wider audience than what may have been originally intended.[52]
- Many social media users operate in public spaces but maintain a strong expectation of privacy.[53]
- Some social media users attempt to overtly publicize themselves online, viewing their audience as a fan-base, and aim to build popularity.[54]
- According to research done at the Pennsylvania State University in 2015[55]:
  - Teens perceive interacting with strangers or having uncomfortable online interactions as the most alarming type of privacy risk, but neither of these two behaviors involved parental mediation.
  - Only disclosure of sensitive information by teens was associated with higher levels of parental mediation.
  - Teens who are more concerned about privacy ask for more advice about privacy from others. They also took more corrective actions in terms of privacy, such as deleting posts with too much disclosure.
  - Teens who disclose more sensitive information—such as pictures of themselves, their phone numbers, or email—and have engaged in more risky interactions—such as communicating with strangers or viewing inappropriate ads—also tend to take more corrective measures.
  - Risk-taking behavior was found among teens seeking advice, but those who sought advice were more likely to have taken corrective measures.
  - A higher level of supervision from parents over teens' online activity was associated with teens seeking advice more frequently.
  - Remedial and corrective measures for teens, such as deleting posts or posting fake information, appear to be risk-coping behavior for teens who have already encountered online risks.
  - It is easier for parents to see milder risks taken by teens, such as posting pictures of themselves or sharing their location, but much more difficult for them to notice risks such as interactions with strangers.

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[52] Saunders, Benjamin, Jenny Kitzinger and Celia Kitzinger. "Participant Anonymity in the Internet Age: From Theory to Practice."
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Wisniewski, Pamela, et al. ""Preventative" vs. "Reactive:" How Parental Mediation."

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The information in this document has been compiled by Santiago Vanegas Marino, intern at the Office for the Protection of Children and Young People at the Catholic Diocese of Arlington. The information contained in this document is for educational purposes only. It does not necessarily reflect the opinions or beliefs of the Catholic Diocese of Arlington or any of its affiliates.