Educating: “Think before you post”

We live in a generation where anyone with Internet access can type in your name in a search engine and more than likely among the first links to come up will be a social networking site link. Social media keeps expanding and therefore it’s transforming the way that we as a society communicate with each other. Social media platforms can be seen being utilized from businesses, personal branding, politics, and education to even religion. We have evolved into the digital era. As social media has risen to popularity so have the obvious concerns that many parents of the digital generation are being faced with in regards to these technological advancements. Many scholars have therefore looked and analyzed the rising and ongoing issue of youth online participation in social networking sites. Assistant professor from the University of Maryland June Ahn states in her article “The Effect of Social Network Sites on Adolescents’ Social and Academic Development: Current Theories and Controversies”, “as youth are connected to these global online platforms a frightening prospect for parents and educators have risen” (1435). It has been clearly manifested that social networking sites have managed to grow extensively within a relatively short period of time, and there seems that we as a society are still learning how to fully appreciate and utilize them in order to create a safe online environment or more importantly the understanding and implementation of e-safety when participating in online communities. Although, many scholars like Ahn have stated that there are clear concerns like cyberbullying or other online threats in regards to youth online participation, she alongside other scholars also acknowledge the potential of social networking sites if used appropriately and if users are able to practice e-safety accordingly. In the article “E-Safety and Web 2.0 for children aged 11-16” the authors although first acknowledging the issues of youth online participation then advocate that “children can gain confidence from creating and maintaining an online persona, from publishing online and gaining approval and from developing hobbies with like-minded people” (M. Sharples et. al, 72). Therefore, the two opposing views have evolved into an ongoing debate; although there are obvious problems with social networking sites there also social development benefits that many scholars have also acknowledged about the immense potential of youth online participation. Hence, we as a society should consider in what ways can we educate younger generations to participate safely and effectively through social media platforms by implementing proper e-safety education, and awareness in order for youth to suitably apply critical thinking through their social media engagements. Parents should take an active role in the participation and monitoring of their children’s online engagements, as well as a formal approach for digital media

literacy should be taught in the education system by not only informing children about e-safety, but by teaching ways to utilize and implement social media skills in their lives.

Nowadays the instant gratification of knowledge is attained by the fast access of information at our fingertips through the instant connection that social media offers, it is clear that it has transformed the way we as a society choose to communicate via multiple online platforms. Unlike previous generations, children are growing up along side with these technologies as a way of communication and lifestyle. Ahn discusses in her article " The Effect", the reasoning's and motivations that are driving younger generations to want to participate in these online platforms. She makes the comparison of the congregations of older generations by wanting to gather at parking lots or malls, "teens gather in networked public places for a variety of purposes, including to negotiate identity, support one another, gossip, collaborate, share information, goof off. They go there to hang out" (1438). Essentially, social media platforms provide exactly that to its users; therefore, children are participants of social networking sites because their fellow peers are participants. According to Ahn, there appears to be a need and desire to develop personal and social identities, in which they are certainly able to attain through the participation of these online platforms.

However, with the easy participation that these online communities offer, there are obvious risks that allows for users to engage in. In recent years we have been able to observe and witness poorly made decisions of adolescent users when using these online platforms. There was a recent controversy that stirred around the media a couple months ago about three men sexually assaulting minors. They appeared to pose as minors in the social media application known as Skout in order to connect with minors and convince them to meet. Although the men were eventually apprehended for their appalling crimes, they have managed to cause great distress in the lives of their victims and victim's families. There is also the story of a 14-year-old boy who accidentally sent a pornographic picture to the wrong recipient, the recipient decided to put the picture of the boy on their personal Myspace page, which caused the young boy to fall into depression by the immense humiliation he received from peers, and ultimately pushed him to make a drastic attempt to commit suicide. We can learn from these examples that they were obvious poor judgments and decisions, as Kelda Wallis mentions in "Social Media Etiquette: How to behave and stay safe online", " There needs to be some consistent guidance for young people using these tools of communication […] I don't think for a minute this is an easy nut to crack. Providing the right information to equip young people in the new medium is difficult, but we should take an essential first step to help them avoid making mistakes that could have a real-life impact" (8). These examples serve to

support the problematic concern that parents and educators have come to consider in regards to youth participating in these online communities. By educating children about the hazards of risky online behavior in these platforms, they can learn to avoid being subjected to such unfortunate cases.

In the article, "Assessing Middle School Students' Knowledge of Conduct and Consequences and Their Behaviors Regarding the Use of Social Networking Sites" scholars Stacey L. Kite, Robert Gable, and Lawrence Filippelli look at the empirical data of a survey to develop an understanding of the poor current knowledge of middle school students pertaining their engagement in social media, and their awareness of the consequences of their actions pertaining cyberbullying, Internet predators, online threats, among overall social media activities. The results of the survey was quite surprising and suggests more parental involvement and formal education on these online platforms, according to the survey; " 10 percent of the 588 students of the survey had been bullied via a social media platform, 63 percent did not fully understand the potential risk of Internet predators, and only 44 percent of the children indicated that they would tell a teacher, parents, or another adult if they felt like they were being threatened or contacted via a stranger" (161). When observing the data, although 10% may not seem like a large quantity, it is still disheartening that 10% out of children who were surveyed were being bullied by some way through a social media platform, which equivalents to 58 students out of 588 that are being bullied nonetheless. Or than more than half of the children, aren't fully knowledgeable about the risks of encountering an online predator. It is clear that more education on the risk of cyber behaviors is needed by the observation of the survey.

Therefore, there is a need that parents should take on a more active role in the development of their child's online behaviors. Paris Storm and Robert Storm address this in their article "Growing Up with Social Networks and Online Communities" about the large number of participation of underage children engaging in online communities violating against the required age to become members of these online communities, " There are over 5 million children that are ten or younger with Facebook accounts" (49). Parents should take responsibility to make sure their children are safe from potential dangers or threats. Although a parent is responsible for the well-being of their child, there is an understanding about the lack of technological savviness that some parents may not be educated on, a survey study conducted by the Learning Science Research Institute scholars M. Sharples, R. Graber, C. Harrison and K. Logan state in their article " E-safety and Web 2.0 for Children aged 11-16", "at times it is inevitable about a digital divide pertaining parents and their knowledge about social media" (79), which can be a factor to

the lack of children's understanding of e-safety when they participate online. Although, I do not deny the fact that Paris and Robert Storm do make a valid point by explaining the importance of parents taking a responsibility to educating their children about e-safety, or that "E-safety and Web 2.0" explains the lack of technological understanding of some parents. Obviously not every parent may take on a responsible role in their children's lives, nor they might even be in their children's lives at all. This is why it is important to look at the educational alternative, which may scholars also embrace.

Social media can be utilized as a way to teach children through Web technologies and through these teachings implement proper e-safety awareness to children through the education system. In the article "The Effect" Ahn previously discusses about the desire and need of youth to participate in these communities; however, she also acknowledges that social networking sites allow youth to develop friendships, interact with friends and acquire new skills (1435). It appears to be a repeating benefit that many scholars have stated pertaining the debate of youth online participation. Hence, it appears that a proper e-safety education and social media awareness is becoming more commonly seen in the education system.

According to Will Richardson from *Educational Leadership,* he discusses in his article, "Publishers, Participants All" about the way that the entire communications field is transforming into a digital portal. He addresses this by using the current job market and the Internet carbon-footprint that can be easily accessed by a Google search engine, according to him:

> We live in a world where everyone checks. This is the world in which public is the new default. We need to help students understand more than just the safety and ethics of participating online; we also have to give them opportunities throughout the curriculum to find and follow their passions and publish meaningful, quality work for real global audiences to interact with (22).

It is clearly evident that as times evolve so do the way that people adapt to different technologies and the way that they implement them into their lives. Therefore, it is no surprise to see that some schools have decided to do just that, and implement social media e-safety through their curriculums and school policies. Ron Schachter from "The Social Media Dilemma" advocates that, by elementary school there should already be some form of initiation in educating children about e-safety and social media awareness. He uses an elementary Virginia public school teacher Paula White as an example about how educators are utilizing these online tools, as a way to introduce the complexities of connecting via these online communities, even if it means allowing for the children to use a pseudonym. She notes, " I believe having kids create a safe pseudonym allows me an

opportunity to teach them even more about safety. They will join websites with their real names anyway, so when that happens, I can teach them or at least set them up to learn how to do that and engage in these communities safely" (25). Although, there are obvious flaws and lack of education of current social media users, this serves to understand the current dilemma about poor online behaviors and the ways that people are trying to tackle the issue and educate younger generations about e-safety.

As we have progressed into a digital literacy society, we have been able to see the successes that these social media platforms hold depending on the way that the user utilizes them. In " Publishers, Participants All", it mentions two young adolescents that have been able to become quite accomplished by proper social media outreach and personal branding of themselves:

> 14-year-old Monik Pemecha has over 17,000 followers on Twitter, he has attained his own website (www.etiole.com) which is filled with timely articles and posts about his passion, technology. There is also Tevi Gevinson, who created her own fashion blog "The Style Rookie" at age 11; at 16, she now has a huge following of 50,000 daily readers, has appeared in various TV show fashion segments, and has even traveled with *Vogue's* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour to multiple fashion shows (26).

It is quite evident that social media has definitely transformed the way that people have been able to attain fame and recognition for their talents and find lifetime opportunities. The previous examples are just two of the many young adolescents that have not abused these technological advancements but have been able to utilize them effectively and given a contribution through their skills and interests to a large mass audience through social media platforms. We should move towards a society that has an understanding and education about these digital platforms, if it's clearly manifested that these online communities have served us and impact our communication fields.

As it is more prevalent to see children use iPhones, Androids, tablets, and Web technologies it is easy to predict that the use of social media sites will keep advancing. Social networking is part of our everyday lives whether we take appreciation of it or not. We live in an interconnected society, we are the creators of content, and once we decide to press enter or send that content lives throughout the World Wide Web. There are also ways in which we can become educated about how to behave, act accordingly and/or avoid risky behavior when participating in these online communities. The issue of social media etiquette should definitely not be ignored, but should be educated. Parents, educators, political leaders, anyone wanting to work for a creation of better awareness of social media usage should consider in ways that social media Internet e-safety and

awareness should be implemented in children's lives and education. It really boils down to the way people critically think about the way they utilize these platforms. By having some knowledge of digital media literacies and e-safety at a younger age in the education system and guidance at home, we could move to seeing less risky online behavior and possibly create a change in the way that future social media users will approach these online platforms.

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