Exploring adolescent social media use and high schools: Tensions and compatibilities

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With 92% of United States teens reporting going online at least once daily (Lenhart & Page, 2015), adolescent life has become networked. Researchers have explored multiple aspects of this dominant component of adolescent life including teen identity development (Boyd, 2015), cyberbullying (Meter & Bauman, 2015), and cyber safety (Agosto & Abbas, 2015). Surprisingly, few researchers have explored how teens’ social media activity and communities interact with a dominant institution in their adolescent lives: the American high school.

If adolescent use of social media is uncharted terrain, the opposite could be argued for the American high school. The American high school has a familiar and uniform structure that has endured for decades and is based on an adolescent life including teen identity development (Agosto & Abbas, 2015). Surprisingly, few researchers have explored how teens’ social media activity and communities interact with a dominant institution in their adolescent lives: the high school.

### Student Findings

Students in the study were active users of multiple social media tools, almost exclusively separate from the formal structure of schooling. Students in the study used numerous online tools in ways reflecting their interests and dispositions. While we found gender differences more likely to participate in online games and female students tending toward image and video-based media, both tended to use more expertly between multiple tools to interact with different communities and engage in different activities. Students described extensive informal learning activities to learn about different cultures, acquire new skills, and build knowledge separate from school.

Students describe little overlap between their informal learning online and the formal learning of schooling. Some describe one or two instructional activities such as using a “twist on Twitter” to learn about organelles in Biology. Generally, there is little overlap.

The main way students are using social media in an instructional context is to create projects for their teams. They describe using GroupMe, Snapchat, Instagram and group texts to discuss coursework with other students and crowdsource answers. “We usually just text each other information or, like, we’ll send, like, a picture of what we’re doing through Instagram or Snapchat or something.”

### Data Collection and Analysis

#### Year 1
- 10th grade students and 12th grade students
  - Students participated in three classes led by the researchers.
  - Students took a survey of their social media use and participated in individual and small-group activities focused on social media tools and students’ networks.

#### Year 2
- Researchers conducted interviews with a different set of tenth (18) and twelfth graders (19) and faculty (17) about their social media use, their informal learning online, and how they used social media at school. These interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes.

### Data Analysis

Researchers used NVivo as the coding software. Coders first identified a priori codes and then each coded two adult and two student files to identify emergent codes. Researchers met biweekly to identify themes and discuss findings.

### Implications

Researchers have documented the disconnect between the formal institution of school and teenage life, but there has been little empirical work documenting the extent and nature of the current divide. Our study suggests that students and adults have vibrant, active and engaging online experiences on social media that are rarely brought into the formal school context. Because they do not overlap with each other online, the adults in particular have little understanding of how students are using social media for positive ends. The adults often cast social media as a source of distraction, shortened attention span, drama and

While social media is a source of distraction in schools, increasingly adults and students are engaging in rich social media experiences entirely separate from the day to day interactions of school. Given how motivated students are, this is an uncharted growth area.

### References


References:

- Agosto, D. E. and Abbas, J. “Don’t be dumb—that’s the rule I try to live by”: A closer look at older teens’ online privacy and safety attitudes. In Media & Society (September 22, 2015).