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Technical Writing

Social Media Use Throughout Generations

Creating a narrative that social media has destroyed the "younger generation's" ability to interact socially is a very attractive idea, but often oversimplifies a very complex situation. To say that a single source has sucked the life out of an essential skill seems shortsighted. Although it appears that the rise of social media has led to the destruction of social skills among young adults, teenagers, and children, there are many more factors that contribute to this doomsday perception. For decades the "current generation" has constantly complained about "upcoming generation" with statements that generalize. This cycle of criticism is often unhealthy. It is more accurate to look at persons of all ages to see how they interact and affect each other. By looking at these cross-generational interactions, it is easier to see whether or not young adults, teenagers, and children have lost social skills compared to the norm and if that loss is due to social media or other unconsidered factors. In this essay, there will be a discussion around the impact social media first had on society, the general view on how this impact affected a "younger generation," how social media usage relates to mental health, and how culturally the view on mental health has changed.

There is no historical day that announced the start of the rise of social media, but there are some historical events. In 2003, MySpace was introduced to the world as one of the first platforms that people recognized as social media. This was not the first community that existed online. The internet itself was created to help facilitate communications between groups of people. MySpace was unique for its popularity and its ability to share non-specific information with the world. The concept of sharing more specific and seemingly random life details, or updates, was not a main point for the internet. Thus, with MySpace, a new form of social interaction was born. Following MySpace were various other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter which only amplified this new form of social interaction.

While this revolutionary new use for the internet was introduced, a generation of people was growing up in this new era. The term "millennials" was coined by Neil Howe and William Stauss in attempt to label this generation (Millennials). Unfortunately, as with every generation that has been labeled, negative generalizations arose. It was assumed that millennials were a group of kids who were narcissistic, selfish and lacking in social skills. Although it's hard to pinpoint where exactly these generalizations came from, some of these negative stigmas may have come from selfies and social media updates. The selfie, a photograph of oneself, is thought to be self-centered as the person is taking a picture of themselves rather than other people or the environment around them. Combine this narcissistic photo with social media, and fellow peers will see profiles plastered with selfies. In other words, social media appeared to be all about the user and how great their life is. Compare this to the blogosphere, which gave the internet articles about diverse topics and self-reported stories, and it is easy to see why a social media profile is viewed as shallow and narcissistic. Suddenly, millennials were kids who preferred commenting on a profile update rather than going up to the person and have a conversation with their supposed "new friend."

Looking at a younger group of people through the lens of this negative narrative was very easy to do, especially when there were news articles and magazines constantly reinforcing the negative consequences of social media use. Since social media use was a new phenomenon, it was impossible to have any scientific evidence to back up these negative claims. Regardless of the lack of information, it is still possible to find people today convinced that there are very negative effects of social media that will strike all young people even though they have no research to reference. The only thing that was objectively true is the behavioral change in people when using social media. This new behavior was a novel activity that had never existed before. Admittedly, this is a very scary concept. Human society drastically changed from looking around at their environment to almost always looking down at a device. It is easy to see why news sites reported such negative effects, but they did not initially understand the full picture.

Ironically, few news articles talked about the hypocrisy of labeling a younger group of people as narcissistic when the older group made the platform. Also, few people talked about social media use across all ages, not just the group labeled as millennials. At the end of 2008, 59% of people aged 18-29 were using at least one social media site (Social). At the same time 28% of people aged 30-49 were also using at least one social media site (Social). The rise of social media did not just have a significant impact on one group of people. This observation is even more evident when looking at social media use in January of 2018, where 88% of people aged 18-29 and 78% of people aged 30-49 use at least one social media site (Social). To claim that social media is the sole source of a loss of social interaction for millennials would not make sense. This claim would have to include other groups as well or make exemptions for all the other generations.

Although there was widespread use of social media between demographics, it appears that the media's focus on millennials was so strong that it might have also influenced the minds of the academic world. There are many studies focusing on high school and college age student's mental health related to social media use, but it seems harder to find studies on mental health relating to social media use for people in their thirties and forties and older. This distinction is important, as the effects that scientists are observing for a younger group don't necessarily translate across all ages. Also, since mass social media use has not existed for long (at most since 2003), it is hard to definitively conclude any causations on mental health with the little data available. A correlation was found by the university professor and psychiatrist, Igor Pantic, when he reported that "in our recent study in a high school student population, we found a statistically significant positive correlation between depressive symptoms and time spent on [social networking sites, or] SNS" (Igor, 2014). Although this study does not show a direct relation to a loss of social interaction skills, it does point towards a state of mental health that could hinder socialization. Igor Pantic did point out: "however, it should be stressed that there is still no conclusive evidence that use of Facebook and other SNS causes depression or even a single symptom of depression" (Igor, 2014). There are no definitive

answers, but studies like the one Pantic has conducted do show that social media sites might have a role to play in the negative narrative young users have obtained.

Mental health is an important factor that news media outlets don't talk about as much. In the early 20th century in America, going to a counselor was seen as a shameful activity or something only rich people could afford. Stereotypes were much more prominent. At the turn of the 21st century a lot of progress had been made surrounding these issues. In fact, a lot of progress has been made within the last decade, as TV shows and movies are starting to incorporate mental health more accurately into the narrative (Carter). Sometimes, that accurate narrative even uses mental health as the main obstacle for a character as seen in Season 2 of Marvel's Hulu Original series *Runaways* (Runaways); this accurate portrayal was not as common in 2003 and therefore film and TV outlets may have not realized the unethical delegitimization of a generation that may have been struggling with mental health rather than blatant narcissism. Just the integration of an accurate depiction of mental health into a modern TV series shows how much progress society has made toward generally accepting mental health.

As explained, the rise of social media and its role it played on all people is a very complicated issue. Human interactions with technology changed so drastically in such a short amount of time making it understandable that many people thought the change in behavior was bad. Concluding that the behavior was antisocial and harmful was reasonable as it caused people to post seemingly-self-centered pictures of themselves and removed a layer of communication that was highly valued in many cultures. Unfortunately, a lot of this bad behavior got associated with a group of people labeled as millennials even though most age groups were significantly affected. These negative stigmas came so fast that it outpaced the research that could be done to either confirm or deny the conclusions of various media outlets. A rush of new technology helped people create the claim that younger groups lost an essential part of social interaction when in reality the situation was much more complicated. Since there is still research to be done, we will not have a definitive answer until

sometime in the near future. For now, it is best to stay skeptical and try to keep the whole picture in mind: benefits and drawbacks included.

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