



Social Media Across the Generations: An Essential Primer

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Social media, the manner of conducting social interactions via Internet websites, became the mainstream arena for maintaining relationships and even starting them. Merriam-Webster defines social media as: *forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)*. For the purpose of this article, social media or social networking sites (SNS) include such platforms as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Other SNS worth mentioning are Internet dating sites, however, Internet dating deserves its own treatment. Social media sprinted beyond just becoming a conventional mode of communication in our culture, to emerging as the premier means of communication that transcends gender, demographics, and age groups. It seems that almost everyone engages in some form of social media by visiting SNS.

In terms of **research on social media**, there are three main groups of generations receiving attention: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. These groups receive the most attention by researchers because they comprise the largest groups of consumers. Most marketing campaigns pertain to these generations through SNS. Teens are quite active on social media, as this generation is growing up with social media already in place in their lives. Marketers view adult generations as spending more money than teens, hence marketing tends to focus more on Millennials than any other group. Another group, the Silent Generation, comprises older adults born prior to 1945. Marketing research pays greater attention to the large Baby Boomer and Millennial groups, and pays far less attention to seniors' use of social media, perhaps because they use social media the least amount of any generation. And it's all about marketing – finding out who uses which SNS, what anyone does on social media, what products anyone buys. Social media is a major focus for the marketing industry that tailors marketing to various age groups. Currently, the Millennials range in age from 20 to 36, Generation X ranges in age from 37 to 52, and Baby Boomers range from 53 to 71. The Baby Boomers were the largest generation until they were recently overtaken by the Millennials. Currently, there are 83 million Millennials, 77 million Baby Boomers, and just 65 million Generation Xers.

Facebook may be the most widely used social media platform as it now boasts over one billion users. The greatest use is from consumers between ages 18 to 54. Basically, Facebook is where

we can share what we like, where we go, who is with us, and what we've done. Facebook allows postings of words, images, and videos. "Friends" (people whom you allow to connect with you), follow what you post and can like, comment, or just lurk in the background observing your Facebook activity. For high school and college students, Facebook has grown in popularity as teachers, social groups, and athletic teams all use Facebook as a means to share news, photographs, and other information with others in the group. Adults comprise the largest group using Facebook, and they use it to post pictures of their children, pets, friends, vacations, as well as other aspects of their lives. Currently, Facebook might be the most popular social network overall, but it is more popular with Boomers than Millennials and teens. In 2014, in the United States, Facebook users spent an average of 39 minutes on this SNS alone. More than 75% of Millennials have the Facebook app on their smartphones.

The next most popular SNS is **Instagram**. With over 800 million monthly users, Instagram is like Facebook without the words. Strictly image driven, users post pictures, videos, and memes (images with snappy or intriguing captions that may represent cultural trends). Instead of Facebook friends, users of Instagram have followers. Millennials use Instagram the most, followed by Xers. Teens are most fond of Instagram, and even have different accounts for broad distribution and more selective distribution. The term for the private account is Finsta, for fake Instagram. So young people might have one account for closer friends to share more personal images, and a separate account for their larger group of friends. This is one way teenagers establish a separation from their parents and older generations, by having covert social media activity. It is easy for young people to hide much of their social lives from their parents because the adults remain unaware of many SNS. It also might be that today's generation of teenagers have a particularly wide generation gap parents in comparison to prior generations because the way they socialize is drastically different from that of their parents.

Snapchat is similar to Instagram in that it is entirely image based. The critical difference is that all images on Snapchat disappear in seconds, making it a fleeting, but stimulating experience. A snap is a selfie, other photo, or image. Snaps have optional graphic treatments that enhance and decorate the people and images in more creative snaps. Teenagers use Snaps to communicate and share stories. A story is a running collection of select images that stay in place, but only appear for 24 hours after each image is posted. The more you snap, the higher your status, making this platform a more addictive version of social media. Baby Boomers and Xers use Snapchat far less than teenagers and Millennials. Snapchat is another SNS that eludes adult awareness, allowing teens to engage with others without adult supervision. Snapchat contributes to the growing generation gap between today's youth and adults. Adults spend far less time on this SNS, and seniors spend the least time on Snapchat (unless engaging with their grandchildren).

Twitter provides users with the opportunity to share thoughts in 280 characters. Initially and until recently, users could post only 140 characters, similar to the size of allowable texts. Users may also post images and refer to other tweets and tweeters. Almost half of younger adults ages 18-29 use Twitter. Only 37% of adults ages 30-64 use Twitter, and only 10% of older adults use it. People tend to go onto Twitter for politics, news, and friends. Children and seniors have little activity on this social media platform.

YouTube is a rapidly growing platform in which users upload videos for others to view, comment, and share. YouTube has almost five billion daily views, and 80% of 18-49 year-olds are watching. In fact, “YouTubers” are individuals who post to YouTube and have a significant number of followers. YouTubers can reach near celebrity status and receive considerable attention at conventions by having millions of followers. YouTube has risen in status as the second leading search engine, outranked only by Google, in terms of overall frequency of use. Whereas Google utilizes text as its main source of communication, YouTube offers videos. Users trust YouTube for its endless assortment of hilarious videos depicting anything from animal antics to post-anesthesia freak-outs to instructional videos on how to do almost anything imaginable. Millennials prefer YouTube and go there for both information and entertainment. Millennials prefer only Facebook ahead of YouTube. And since this huge consumer group is heavily on YouTube, advertising on this platform targets this age group. Older generations do not use YouTube the way Millennials do, and do not fully appreciate how Millennials can get lost for hours watching YouTube.

LinkedIn is the professional person’s social media. Users find employers, hire employees, and make business connections via LinkedIn. As such, it is a vehicle used primarily by college-aged people through working adult ages. Approximately 85% of working adults, who are on social media, use LinkedIn, but people over 65 have little use for this platform. Neither do teenagers. Only around 15% of each of these groups uses LinkedIn.

The way people communicate evolved over time. Letter writing was once the standard means of communication, and was utilized exclusively, until the invention of the telephone and then talking on the phone became the main method of communicating. Since the advent of the phone, the most significant change to communication arrived with Internet, email, and the introduction of social media. Many teenagers appear to rely entirely on social media for communication, to the exclusion of live conversation, even when all parties are present. It is quite common to observe a group of young people in a circle, gazing directly at the devices and not the people right in front of them. Parents, educators, and psychologists share concerns that today’s youth are overly involved in social media at the expense of developing critical social skills and competencies. While accessing and successfully navigating social media might support a job search or improve connectivity for athletes on teams, *over-reliance* on social media can impede social development. The benefit to adults and older adults who use social media is that they can identify with current pop culture and can engage in online shopping, dating, and connecting with a variety of others including former classmates, business associates, and friends sharing common interests. Older generations are learning the benefits of engaging in social media, while younger generations are losing the ability to make phone calls, initiate conversations, and read important nonverbal cues.

Overuse of social media can also have a negative impact on individuals. Too much time spent on SNS can interfere with normal every day functioning. People who rely too heavily on social media for socialization risk more than they may be aware. Over-reliance on social media can lead to social isolation, withdrawal, and depression. In fact, there is preliminary research to document that the longer a person spends on Facebook, the greater the likelihood of one experiencing depressive symptoms. Research has also documented that having the tendency to

compare oneself to others – favorably or unfavorably – can lead to depressive symptoms. In fact, a person’s involvement in social media can turn from habit to addiction.

Social media addiction is real. Recently, there is professional discourse regarding **addiction:** to gaming, smart phones, and social media. In some ways, all of these addictions are related. The need to engage in these activities can become so compelling that individuals with one or more of those addictions lose their sense of balance. Rather than engage in their daily activities by going to school, work, and socializing with others, people addicted to social media, gaming, or smart phones simply withdraw into their own worlds, forsaking other important activities and relationships. Typically, these individuals deny there is any such problem, but struggle to live without relying so heavily on their seductive electronic devices. And the devices are seductive, for the more time people spend on them, the more time they want to spend on their devices. Teenagers from ages 15-19 spend at least three hours daily on such SNS as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Adults reportedly spend 20 hours per week on social media. Is it any surprise that approximately 70% of Internet use at work is unrelated to the job? Social media addiction may result in loss of sleep, depression, anxiety, anger management issues, and declining performance at school or work. There is even a new term “phubbing,” which is how people become distracted by cell phone in the presence of their partners. Quite obviously, this can have a negative impact on the users and their partners.

The research on identifying and treating social media addiction is sparse and inconsistent, but consultation with a psychologist could be an important first step if someone is concerned about possible addiction. Furthermore, there are apps for cell phones that can monitor or even restrict access to social media sites for those individuals looking to reduce their access to social media. Developing personal rules such as leaving the cell phone behind during meals, or keeping them out of the bedroom, are helpful strategies to combat social media addiction.

In conclusion, social media offers something for almost everyone from older children through adolescence, adulthood, and seniority. For children, there is the introduction to how kids can interact via social media. They can learn the rules of social media etiquette, what platforms exist, and how to manage time balancing online socializing with other life activities including and especially real life, and socializing with others in person. Teens and young adults rely most heavily on social media for their socialization, using social networking sites to shop, connect, find jobs, get the news, share music, watch engaging videos, voice their opinions, and learn just about anything. Adults of all generations, including Millennials, Generation Xers, and Baby Boomers, are using social media more and more, while seniors are just beginning to engage in smaller amounts. The trend for all age groups is to spend more time on social networking sites. The prospect of becoming overly involved in social media, if not addicted to it, exists across all ages but seems to impact young adults the most. Knowing the risks of spending too much time on social media, as well as maintaining a balanced life with time for in-person, real-time socialization, exercise and rest, can help minimize the risk for forming an addiction to social media.

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