

Chapter 52

Social Media and Student With Disabilities: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, social media has become an increasingly prevalent, being the daily form of communication and entertainment for a majority of individuals. Social media and networking sites are not designed to appeal to a specific type of personality and are designed to benefit many. The students of Generation Z respond positively to teaching styles that incorporate technology-based learning, and frequent communication or feedback. Gen Z students with disabilities are entitled to the same opportunities and experiences as their peers without disabilities. This includes being exposed to various forms of social media to discover alternative ways to communicate, interact with the community, find information and access entertainment. While other members of Generation Z possess the capability to pick up a smart phone or computer, create a social media account and figure out the functions independently, students with disabilities may require explicit instruction, strategies and practice with social media usage.

INTRODUCTION

There is an estimated 77% of the United States population engaged in one or more forms of social media use (Statista, 2018). Social media is the broad term used to describe “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” (Merriam-Webster, 2004). The influence of social media and networking can be observed across many settings in our society, both private and public. From sending a private text message to a friend or contacting a colleague through

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a professional email to sharing a post with the public eye via Twitter or Instagram. Social media can provide multiple opportunities, such as building relationships, sharing expertise, increasing visibility of content, educating oneself and staying connected to others at all times (Friedman, 2014). In the past decade, social media has become an increasingly prevalent, daily form of communication and entertainment for a majority of individuals. Giving people the ability to interact quickly and easily with each other, no matter the distance between them.

Unsurprisingly, social media usage and knowledge differs by generation. “Generation Z” is often known or referred to as the first group of “social natives” (Hill Holiday Media, 2018, p. 3). Generation Z is composed of individuals born from the mid-1990s to early 2010s, who have grown up being exposed to the rise of technology, the internet and social media. According to Darla Rothman (2016), “This generation is tech-savvy and prefers to communicate using social media over direct contact with people. They are the first generation born into an integrated and globally connected world, where the Internet has always been available” (p. 2). Recent studies have shown that over 90% of Gen Z members use a least one social media platform (Hill Holiday Media, 2018, p. 4).

In addition to technology, “social natives” have been around to experience an economic recession and the effects of global warming. Generation Z witnessed communities rebuilding themselves after natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. As well as experiencing the national changes that followed the 9/11 attack and the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, Generation Z has also been present to experience the election of the United States’s first African-American president and the largest number of women and minorities holding political positions. As a group, they are often characterized as extreme multi-taskers, always looking for the next (mostly electronic) interaction or source of information. They are individuals whose brains are wired to prefer visual imagery over auditory instruction. In terms of learning and the workplace, Gen Z can produce effective results in a shorter period of time compared to older peers (Rothman, 2016, p. 2-5). Perhaps most telling though, is the common description of Gen Z as the babies who held their parents’ smartphones and figured out the functions before they became toddlers.

While Generation Z is clearly a technologically adept group, greatly skilled in a variety of tools and applications, there are still individuals in this generation from under-represented groups who are not afforded the same social media access or opportunities as their peers. Individuals with disabilities or special needs are often neglected in terms of acceptance and inclusion. According to Anderson and Perrin (2017):

The amount of time people spend online and their comfort level with technology also varies by disability status. Disabled Americans are less likely than those who don’t have a disability to report using the internet on a daily basis (50% vs. 79%). They are also less likely to say that having a high level of confidence in their ability to use the internet and other communication devices to keep up with information describes them “very well.” (39% vs. 65%)

This can further be observed based on the lack of social media skills being taught within students with disabilities least restrictive environments (LRE). Students with disabilities may be in need of additional support to learn how to properly develop and implement necessary technology skills. As well, being taught how social networking skills can benefit their disability and the medium can be used to their advantage. As social media and networking embeds itself even more deeply in our society, the need to prepare all students, especially those with disabilities, for a technologically advanced world should be recognized by schools and educators.

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