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Facebook: Is it Still Cool Among Young People?

By Robert Hugh Farley, MS

Facebook has become the 21st century "brag book" for parents and grandparents to tout the photos and accomplishments of their adorable children and grandchildren. While many adults are exploring and enjoying the social networking site, where are our young people and children? Keeping abreast of how our children (or the children we serve) spend their time online is essential to helping them create proper boundaries, maintain safe and healthy relationships and avoid potential dangers. It is only by understanding the technologies used by so many young people that we can protect them.



Background

Originally introduced in 2003 as a network for college students and alumni, Facebook is a social networking platform. A high school version was launched in 2006; at this time Facebook became widely accessible to children who must affirm that they are 13 or older (though there is no way to actually verify users' ages), only requiring an email address to register. Although other Internet social networking platforms existed prior to Facebook such as AOL (1997), Friendster (2002) and MySpace (2003), none of these platforms were embraced by the public quite like Facebook. Facebook was cutting edge, yet also extremely user-friendly and also multi-functional.

Facebook was identified as the site that one should utilize to locate old friends, keep in touch with new friends and even identify people who could be potential friends, all with a simple search feature. In some cases, popularity at school or among young people was based on the number of Facebook friends one was able to tally. As of 2012, Facebook purported to have over one billion active users.

However, just as numerous adults began to join the fun of social networking, young people seemed ready to move on to the next social media trend. For many, Facebook's long newsfeed, the public nature of comments, and very fact of their parents' participation, caused teens to look for something new.

The Expanding Landscape of Social Networking

As Facebook became less popular with young people, they turned to social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Twitter is a microblogging service that enables users to send and read short 140 character text messages, called "tweets." Instagram is a mobile photo-sharing and video-sharing application that allows users to take pictures and videos and then share them with others.

Another reason for the trend toward new social media platforms was the progression from the use of a desktop computer to the pervasive use by young people of apps on their smartphones and tablets for

social interaction. Messaging apps offer free private communication, through the use of a cell phone number, for text messaging, face-to-face video conversations and other forms of communication. Young people are able to communicate with people they actually know without using Facebook, which allows less familiar "friends" to see their social interactions.

It is also important to note the rise in popularity of the "selfie," or what some are even referring to as an "ussie," which are self-portraits taken at arm's length with a smartphone, as well as the ever-present accessibility to smartphone cameras with their instant ability to circulate images. Because selfies and other photos may be taken in an awkward or silly situation, one may not want it posted on Facebook for just anyone to view. As a result, one of the most popular photo sharing alternatives is a free cell phone app called *Snapchat*. This app allows one to send a selfie or other photo "snap" to a controlled list of recipients. This problematic program is different from other picture sharing applications because Snapchat photos, or even videos, will self-destruct 2—10 seconds after they are received, making it impossible for parents to know who is communicating with their teens and what they are sharing.

Today a variety of social networking platforms that are easily accessible on smartphones offer some type of anonymity that many young people seem to crave. For instance, *Whisper* is a free app that allows users to send short public messages anonymously and receive replies. Users post messages that are displayed as text superimposed over an image—similar to a greeting card.

Yik Yak is another free app that allows anyone to post anything without attaching themselves to a username. It does not even require a password to log in. The timeline of Yik Yak is similar to Twitter, but without the ability to post photos. It is extremely localized; anyone within 1.5 miles of an app/message can read the post. The use of Yik Yak by a high-school student, for example, could result in other students teasing, maligning, gossiping or even threatening someone else nearby with the bully remaining anonymous.

Highlight is an app that runs quietly in the background of a smartphone, continuously providing and also sharing information about the people nearby - about 100 yards away. When one meets someone who is also running Highlight, the two users may be able to see what they have in common. Highlight has been criticized for its ability to disclose private social networking information to strangers.

Tinder is another location based app that gathers nearby Tinder user's 500 character profile information in an attempt to match individuals who are likely to be compatible. The app allows one to anonymously like or pass by swiping or tapping. If two users like each other then it results in a "match" and Tinder introduces the two users and opens a chat. Tinder has been criticized as being a haven for ultimately creepy exchanges and sexual encounters.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that millions of young people will embrace these and many more innovative apps that exist or are on the social networking horizon. Adults should not be lulled into believing that because they have a Facebook account that they are attuned to today's social networking landscape as it relates to young people and children.

Technology continues to rapidly change. Parents, teachers and all of us who are charged with protecting children must continue our efforts to stay abreast of the many new programs and latest apps that may be used by young people and child molesters seeking to manipulate and sexually abuse children.

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