

The Effects of Social Media on College Students

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Distractions have always been a part of college life. From parties and movie nights to phone calls and emails, students have always found a way to unwind and connect with their peers. Not until social media burst into the mainstream did procrastination finally become a dangerous word. This paper will analyze the effects of social media on college students and their goals of higher education, exploring both the pros and cons of keeping up online.

The definition of social media is fluid and rapidly changing with the variety of sites available. One definition of social media is that of "a web-based service that allows individuals to: construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Nguyen, 2013). Although this is a fairly accurate statement, every single person interviewed for this paper replied with the exact same answer: "Facebook."

To develop a background for just how widespread Facebook is in popularity there are a variety of statistics. Of the 500 million users that Facebook boasts, fifty percent log in every day, totaling to about 700 billion minutes per month spent logged in, scrolling down the news-feed and posting statuses. Forty-eight percent of 14-18 year olds stated that they check Facebook as soon as they wake up, twenty-eight percent of them doing so before they even get out of bed (Med. News, 2012). This desire to be in constant connection results in a generation that is more detached from the social and emotional aspects of reality. Face-to-face interaction is no longer necessary and although no studies have found a direct link between Facebook usage and depression, there have been noted cases of increased anxiety and apathy in adolescents (Jelenchick).

To gain a sense of how this directly affects education, a survey was created and distributed throughout a variety of classes on the University of Hawaii at Hilo Campus. The questions were as followed: (1) What is your age? (2) Which social media sites do you actively participate in using? (3) How many hours per day do you spend on each of these sites combined? (4) How would you say social media has affected your study habits? (5) How would you say social media has affected your personal/social life? (6) Can you comfortably go without social media sites for more than a day?

The age range of interest was that of the seventeen to twenty-two year olds. This provided data from a generation with adequate experience in both social media and higher education. Ninety-two percent

of survey takers were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, allowing for a convenient glimpse into the ideal age-range.

When asked how often they check in on social media sites, thirty-nine percent claimed an average of one to two hours per day, with the remainder noting that they logged in sporadically throughout the day. This correlates with another study by CourseSmart, a leading textbook company based in California. When interviewed, four in ten college students said that they could not go ten minutes without checking a mobile device (Zucker, 2011). In another on-campus study, interviewees said that Facebook was the first thing that they checked before studying, spending at least forty-five minutes of their time on social media sites (Dias, 2009). This data implies that social media sites, take slight precedence over academic pursuits when it comes to college students.

However, mere numbers do not always provide the most valuable information. For this survey, students were asked to summarize their insights and feelings toward social media, allowing for a more insightful result. When asked how they felt social media was affecting their study habits, fifty-three percent said that the effects were detrimental, while twenty-eight percent claimed that social media sites did not affect their study habits at all. Only fourteen percent referred to the benefits of social media, stating that it helped them with academic achievements and allowed them to access information for school-related projects. The effects of social media sites on the social/personal part of life were almost the exact opposite. Fifty percent were happy with the benefits; social media allowed them to keep in touch with family members and friends from back home, or to make new friends more easily than they would in face-to-face conversations. Seventy-eight percent of the one hundred survey takers answered "yes" to the final question: Can you comfortably go without social media sites for more than a day?

The more specific benefits and downsides of social media sites were also illuminated in this survey, based on side notes penned by some particularly eager survey takers. Aside from bridging the gap between old friends and family members back home, several individuals specifically stated that Tumblr has "helped define [my] style", while another said that Facebook allowed them to "ask classmates for help on homework" and "make connections with new friends". While not all of the benefits are purely academic, they do provide a creative outlet for many students to express themselves, allowing for a healthy mental and emotional well-being.

The ability to foster a healthy self-image is a strong factor amongst social media site users, and self-affirmation is a big part of sites such as Facebook and Instagram. Self-affirmation is defined as "the process of bringing to awareness essential aspects of the self-concept, such as values, meaningful relationships, and cherished personal characteristics" (Hancock). In other

words, many social media sites are a quick and easy way to receive compliments or flattery, which in turn boost a user's self esteem. As college is often a difficult transition for many students both freshman and upper classmen, an outlet of reassurance can be beneficial to their overall feelings towards academic life.

On the other hand, complaints of "social drama" and a lowered sense of self-esteem were reported. Users can choose what information they share with others, picking out only the most flattering photos, highlighting prime vacation experiences, and flaunting their relationships for their social circle to see. The "ugly" side of social media peers is rarely shown, and so it is assumed that their lives are better than one's own. Where one "like" can make your day, a snarky comment can ruin it. Emotional turmoil seems to be part of the package when it comes to these sites, therefore they must be used with caution.

On the other end of the social media spectrum are sites such as Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, Imgur, YouTube, and Pinterest. As these sites are mostly video and image based, the small amount of contact between users is generated only through the comments section of the websites. Although negativity is always present, it is less of a threat than it is on Facebook. Comments from anonymous users who do not share a personal tie tend to have less of an emotional impact than comments of a similar nature from close friends or personal acquaintances. In fact, the general layout of image-based sites nurtures a more positive and stress-free environment, allowing users to relax, vent, and relate with one another from different sides of the globe, as many survey takers stated.

One clear example of this sense of community is on the popular site Imgur (pronounced "imager"). Imgur is a collection of the most viral and recent images in circulation on the Internet. In fact, the majority of the popular images you see everyday originate on Imgur. Upon creating an anonymous account, one can upload any image. Based on an "upvote/downvote" system of points the images either thrive in popularity or remain unseen by the majority of the site users. The most popular images receive "front-page" status, which grants a rank amongst the variety of images seen on the homepage of the site (Imgur). Negativity is rare on Imgur and arguments are often handled tastefully. The majority of posts are celebratory images whose subjects range from engagements to memorials to family outings and inspiring stories. This allows for a website that encourages relaxation and positive thinking – traits that Facebook may occasionally offer, but cannot guarantee.

It is within sites like these that the majority of the benefits of social media arise. When asked about the pros and cons of social media usage within the given survey, thirty-four percent of students stated that image-based sites such as Tumblr and Instagram give them daily inspiration and help them express themselves comfortably. On the other hand, the same percentage

of students also added that sites such as YouTube and Imgur encourage procrastination. After all, with multiple on-campus opportunities to gain access to computers and Internet connection, it is not very difficult to open up a webpage with of the most recent music video between studying for finals and writing an essay.

When asked how they regulate their Internet usage, the majority of students were seemingly speechless. Many stated that they simply turn off their electronic devices, while others admitted that they don't attempt Internet regulation at all. In the words of an anonymous survey taker, "Going on Tumblr helps me to relax when I'm stressing." Although it seems as though students may just be mindlessly procrastinating, data such as the previous quote provides an insight on patterns between students and social media that implies a subconscious type of self-preservation. In an attempt to calm them and conduct their required studying, students turn to online conversations, images, and videos as a mental and emotional crutch to cope with the constant pressure and stress of pursuing a higher level of education.

Multitasking is a key aspect of procrastination and many students have mastered it. While a small percentage of students claimed to actively participate in the usage of a single social media site, the majority (just over sixty percent) admitted to using two or more sites simultaneously. Based on a random selection of volunteers, it has been observed that the average combination of websites in use while a student studies follows as such: Facebook, an image-based site (mainly Tumblr and/or Imgur), a search-engine (such as Google or Bing), and a handful of miscellaneous websites based on the assignment at hand. Students claim that these social media or extracurricular sites help them take breaks while studying, and allow them to relax and release stress.

Based on the data at hand, it seems that there is no definite answer when it comes to the use of social media sites and their effect on college students. The majority of the data tends to sway on the side of the benefits (broadening of social circles, ability to branch out to new ideas) and the downsides are everyday life experiences whether or not you decide to check in on your favorite website for the day. The only common factor was that many users who reported strong benefits also logged in an average of one to two hours a day, maximum. This implies that regulating online time is an important part of healthy social media usage. As with any other indulgence, moderation is key.

The goal of college is to further your education, but distractions are inevitable. Social media brings with it new distractions – a way to forget about your surroundings, procrastinate, and lose track of time in a way that past generations would never have imagined. The Age of Information has created portals into the minds of one's peers. The benefits of social media outweigh the downsides only in specific cases, but overall it has become nothing more than a distraction – albeit a

seemingly welcoming one – to young adults trying to make their way through college.

In conclusion, the effects of social media on college students are mixed; with the good comes the bad and vice versa. While there are definite downsides (anxiety, procrastination, and lowered self-esteem,) there are also strong benefits (self-affirmation, stress release, and easier ways to communicate) and therefore, there are no definite rules about how social media should be handled. Only the ability to self-regulate the amount of time spent on these sites each day can determine the effects on the social and educational aspects of the life of the average college student. The issue is not the tool, but how the tool is used.

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