

Urgent Attention: Damage to Teenagers' Online Reputation

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Abstract

Past decades witnessed increasing background checks via social media conducted by post-secondary education institutions' admission offices and human resources departments for many companies. As the most active users, adolescents may be tempted to share their personal lives on social media without fully understanding the long-term consequences. The author makes suggestions on how to help teenagers make wise choices when they use social media, maintain positive online persona, protect it from potential damage, and even further strengthen their online reputation.

When high schools employ social media as a way to implement teaching activities, the students use social media in their self-learning. Teenagers tend to be fast learners about technologies. However, as they become more involved in online communication, their teachers have reason to become concerned about issues such as cellphone addiction and falling grades because of computer games, misuse of iPads in classrooms, and so on. Adolescents' online reputation damage and the reasons for it are the problems that we need to address.

Problems Associated with a Negative Online Reputation

The consequences of online reputation damage can be serious. Online reputation damage can have a significant negative effect on students' college applications, job applications, career development, and self-identity. Personal information can easily be obtained by using search engines and, to a certain degree, conclusions about individual applicants' personalities are made by employers looking online (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). An increasing number of employers use profiles and postings on social media to select potential employees. Postings on social media such as Twitter can accurately show a person's tendencies or personality (Orehek & Human, 2017). Employers view applicants' profile information and postings as supplemental information to resumés before interviews. They may also view candidates' Twitter remarks after interviews, in order to see further comments made by candidates about their interviews (Higginbotham, 2017). Several Canadian medical schools check students' profiles as part of the admission procedure (Law, Mylopoulos, Veinot, Miller, & Hanson, 2016). Any negativity, bias, cruelty, lewdness, or rude social trait can be displayed to the world online. Therefore, fully understanding the importance of an online reputation is urgent for our students.

Online reputation can be damaged by clumsy language usage, inappropriate words, personalities revealed by online messages, and misbehaviour. Profiles and postings with spelling and grammar mistakes may affect job interview impressions (Higginbotham, 2017). Other ongoing postings or messages that are closely associated with personal lives can truly present a person's personality and values (Park et al., 2015). Misbehaviors online such as swearing, bigotry, nasty pictures, and sexual insults, or posting negative accounts, could prohibit job hunting and college applications as well (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2014). However, many adolescents post their comments without apparent concern for the consequences. Some teenagers have been suspended (Cambria, 2012) or taken away by police (Bernardo, 2017) because of statements on social networking sites. These suspensions and arrests will inevitably have a significant effect on their career lives, but students often do not fully understand the power of words on social media and the damage that can bring to their and others' lives.

Another underlying reason is that teenagers seem determined to share personal information and can be unaware of the dangers and long-term consequences of oversharing.

Researchers found that 73% of adolescents use social media every day (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). The most popular social media they use are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Myspace, and Tumblr. Teenagers may be obsessed with sharing online because they want to maintain good relationships with peers and further their psychological development by getting instant feedback or attention from others (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Social media is a primary way to “enhance communication among friends and family . . . to maintain social contact outside of their day-to-day face-to-face conversations” (Bryant et al., 2006, as cited in Barnes, 2012, p. 108). Therefore, it is crucial to help teenagers understand the importance of an online reputation and what the consequences can be, if it is bad.

Compared to 43% of employers who decided not to hire certain employees because of the information they found online, around 19% of managers decided to hire certain candidates because of the information they found online (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). Therefore, job hunters can increase the possibility of being hired by making certain postings. Because Internet users spend years on creating and maintaining their ongoing digital footprint, teachers can encourage students to protect and strengthen their online reputation as early as possible, and in this way, they can increase their future employment opportunities.

Creating a Positive Online Reputation

The key aspects of improving teenagers’ online reputation can be listed as follows: case studies and seminars, core netiquettes, Internet skills, and multiple positive online profiles. In order to stimulate students’ awareness of protecting and strengthening their online reputation, schools need to provide case studies and seminars about online reputation management for both teachers and students, including inquiry into the motivational factors that impel people to post personal information online. Teachers’ online behaviour has great influence on students’ ways of using social networking sites (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). Students tend to follow teachers’ examples. A case study is one of the best ways to bring teachers and students into an in-depth discussion. Only when teachers are aware of the risks of online reputation damage and negative consequences, can they teach students, give students appropriate suggestions, and set a positive example for teenagers. Some students may think they have nothing to hide, but they fail to understand that not everything about their lives is appropriate for everyone all of the time, such as the new tattoo they have, who they go out with, where they went, their religious life, and their political opinions. Some things that they believe awesome when they are young may seem in the opposite way when they approach adulthood. During seminars, the teacher can show students some fictional postings in terms of their school life, relationships, work experience, family, religious life, and political comments. Students can be divided into groups. They can discuss what is appropriate, what is not appropriate for postings online, and the reasons for their choices. Those activities can shed a light on their future online behavior and help them to make wise decisions.

Learning and following core netiquette is another way of protecting and strengthening online reputation. Some of the core netiquettes are civility, respect, and responsibility (Barnes, 2012). We should treat people how they want to be treated. Students need to understand that they should treat people nicely online, as well as in their life experiences. Teenagers most of the time do not ask for permission before they post videos or pictures about others. Teenagers may need to change their names when they become older in order to get rid of hijinks stored on others’ social media sites (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). Teenagers need to know the necessity of asking for others’ consent before they put others’ information online. Also, using standard grammar and correct spelling is an essential part of showing respect to others, especially when they send an email. Students need to follow appropriate format, send emails with a meaningful subject, address the receiver appropriately, keep emails’ content clear, direct and concise, and make sure that they proofread before they click send. Furthermore, students need to know the power of words online, and they need to be responsible for what they put online. A girl

committed suicide because of others' negative comments on her (Barnes, 2012). All of the words, such as personal information, moments, messages, and even email, to some extent are public to anyone all of the time. The Internet allows people to view, follow, screenshot, copy, edit, share, retrieve, and forward information with one tap. Following netiquettes is the basic way for students to protect themselves and others in the online environment, now and as technology continues to change their online identities over time.

Teachers can show students how to use social media settings appropriately to protect themselves, how to search themselves online, and introduce some useful resources to them. People who have a higher level of Internet skills are less likely to suffer the negative consequences resulting from online activities (Litt & Hargittai, 2014). Teachers can choose one or two of the most popular social network sites, and post questions about how to set up certain filters. Students can research, discuss, and answer questions; they can think about when we need to set it up, and why we need to customize those filters. One suggested question is how to choose the audience of certain postings and why we need to choose settings that control access to our activities. Our friends on Facebook can be family members, friends, classmates, co-workers, and others. Some of the postings may be attractive to friends, but may be inappropriate to co-workers (Litt & Hargittai, 2014). In order to avoid potential negative consequences about certain postings, students must learn to group the people they know on Facebook.

Also, teachers can teach students to use search engines and to search effectively themselves. They are encouraged to remove content that may mislead people who read it, and ensure that all of the information represents them positively and correctly. Teachers can also introduce tools for students to check their online reputation, and even companies may provide suggestions and services to maintain online reputation, such as Google Alerts, KnowEm, BrandYourself, and Reputation.com (Merritt, 2013; University of Arizona, n.d.). As educators, we do our best to prepare students for the possible consequences of all online activities.

Finally, students can enhance their online reputation by creating multiple positive online profiles. College admissions officers and employers use search engines and social media to get to know more about application candidates. Deletion of accounts may make people feel that the candidate is unsociable and eccentric (Merritt, 2013). Therefore, teachers can help students to create a true and positive Internet persona to strengthen their online reputation and to enhance their employment prospects. Positive online activities can show students' active participation in social activities and present their qualifications for a college application or a job application. Also, teachers can teach students to enhance their online reputation by providing supplemental proof of their qualifications listed on their resumés (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). Teachers can create a blog for the courses they teach, and also encourage students to share course projects they are proud of, well-written articles on blogs, and social media such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook. Teachers can give assignments such as writing a blog to report students' findings, no matter how small. Through positive sharing, students show their projects, healthy lifestyle, and their passions to potential employers and college admission officers, which can help their accomplishment of academic goals and career goals. Creating positive online profiles, promoting case studies and seminars, boosting Internet skills, and learning core netiquettes will significantly improve the online reputation of adolescents.

Conclusion

The problems in using social networking sites have been increasing. Any damage to an online reputation can have long-term and severe consequences for teenagers' lives. I, as an educator, hold the view that schools should take responsibility for educating adolescents about the importance of their online reputations. Educators can also help teenagers to raise their awareness of the importance of following online netiquette and taking good care of, even

strengthening, their online reputations, because the damage that they can inflict on themselves is online forever.

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About the Author

As of 2017-18, Shengqing Wang is in her first year of the M. Ed. program. She taught English as a foreign language in China, and Mandarin as a foreign language in the United States, both in public high schools. She loves reading and hiking, and is fascinated by foreign language teaching research.