Internet usage has dramatically increased over the past decade, and adolescents, or digital natives as they are sometimes called, are readily immersing themselves in life online. In the past ten years, teens’ use of the internet has risen from just under 75% of teens in 2000 to over 93% in 2009 (Lenhart et al., 2010). With so many teens online and able to access the array of offerings it provides, it is important that we understand how youth incorporate the internet into their lives. The goal of this introductory article is to provide a general familiarity with digital natives’ use of social media, including potential benefits and concerns, to lay the groundwork for the articles that follow.

TEENS’ SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Social media is an aspect of the internet which allows individuals and groups to create and publish online content, share the content, and interact about it. Different types of social media include:

- Social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Myspace;
- Blogs (Blogspot, Wordpress, Xanga) and microblogs (Twitter);
- The creation and sharing of photos, videos, and artwork on sites like YouTube or Flickr;
- Online Gaming (World of Warcraft);
- Virtual worlds, which are online communities wherein the participant creates an identity and interacts with other community members, usually in a game-type format.

With 73% of online teens using social networking sites (see Figure 1.1), it is clear that social media is becoming an integral part of teens’ communications with their peers and the outside world (Lenhart et al., 2010). Of these online teens using SNS, 91% say they mostly use the sites to keep in contact with friends they frequently see, 82% use the site to keep in touch with someone they rarely see, 72% make social plans, while 44% say they use them to meet new people (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Figure 1.2 shows various SNS methods teens use to keep in contact with their friends.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Because of its ability to enhance connections by making them easily accessible, social media can yield many benefits for youth, including providing a virtual space for teens to explore their interests or problems with similar individuals, academic support, and strengthening their online communication skills and knowledge. One positive aspect of online communities is that youth can use
them for academic assistance and support. There exists a wide variety of websites, like Dweeber.com, dedicated to helping with homework. KidZui, an internet browser designed for use by youth, created a homework assistance aspect that incorporates social networking. These avenues offer peer and adult assistance with homework and understanding academic concepts.

Youth participate in social media within the contexts of two primary "genres": friendship-driven and interest-driven.

Many teens also look to online communities to find inclusion and support on the web where they may not find it in the offline world. These community websites are geared for different groups of teens, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth (www.queerattitude.com), teens of different religious affiliation (www.jvibe.com or www.lifeteen.com), and youth with mental health problems (www.copecaredeal.org), to name a few. Websites of this nature offer a venue for youth to discuss relevant issues with peers, gain access to resources, and more or less create a safe environment for youth to sound off on deeply personal issues. An example of youth being benefited by such sites was recently examined by Australian psychologists, Drs. Suvena Sethi and Andrew Campbell, who conducted a study on the effectiveness of online self-help depression sites for youth (Sethi et al., 2010). They surveyed rural and urban youth with mild-to-moderate depression who used websites like Mood Garden, MoodGym, and Beyond Blue. This study examined these sites’ efficacy in helping youth cope with depression, especially when the teen used the site in conjunction with offline therapy. Sethi and colleagues found that more interactive sites, such as MoodGym, were the most helpful for teens suffering from mild to moderate depression, and a combination of online, interactive sites and offline, traditional therapy was most effective in treating depression.

Not only are teens looking to the web and social media for support in identity or mental health issues, but they are also seeking answers to health questions online. According to the Pew Internet study, 31% of teens go online to search for health information (Lenhart et al., 2010). Seeking information online provides youth the opportunity to learn more about sensitive topics, such as sexual health, drug use, or mental health issues, that are often difficult to discuss with adults or peers. This online information seeking affords them anonymity and the chance to be candid with questions. Adults can facilitate this proactive behavior by guiding teens to trustworthy sites, like www.youngwomenshealth.org for young women or www.youngmenshealthsite.org for young men.

Social media creates an atmosphere in which teens can learn from their peers about communication norms and cultures. In a study funded by the MacArthur Foundation, Ito and colleagues (2008) found that youth participate in social media within the contexts of two primary "genres": friendship-driven and interest-driven. Friendship-driven genres are defined as holding the “dominant and mainstream practices of youth as they go about their day to day negotiations with friends and peers” (p. 9). Such friends can include peers from school, sports teammates, religious group friends, and other activity peers. These online communications largely reflect teens’ daily interactions with people within their physical lives. Interest-driven genres of participation are a bit different, as they focus on particular hobbies and interests or niche communities. Unlike the friendship-driven genres, interest-driven genres disregard social structures often found at teens’ schools and instead focus on their social circles expanding based on interests and activities. In both of these types of genres, youth are

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**Figure 1.1**

**Teens' Social Media Usage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use SNS</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Worlds</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Content</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr (2010).

**Figure 1.2**

**Teens' Interactions with Peers on SNS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send Group Messages</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Private Messages</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on Friend's Picture</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send IMs or Texts Through Site</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on a Friend's Page or Wall</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join Groups</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lenhart & Madden (2007).
a part of the peer-based learning process as they “can both produce and evaluate knowledge and culture” (p. 39). This is important to teenage development, as youth will be able to use these learnings later in life to succeed in academic, social, and professional settings.

**CONCERNS RELATED TO SOCIAL MEDIA**

Along with the positive aspects of youth utilizing social media comes an array of concerns. With over 63% of youth accessing the web daily, it is no easy task to constantly monitor their behaviors online—much in the same way parents and teachers cannot be with teens in person at all times to see how they behave offline (Lenhart et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important that we educate youth about the dangers of using social media and ways to minimize those risks, which can include faulty advice, encouragement of negative or harmful behaviors, exposure to cyberbullying, and publishing too much personal information online. According to a survey of 285 teens by researchers at the University at Buffalo and the University of Maryland (Chai et al., 2009), youth who have been educated about responsible internet use by parents, teachers, or peers are more likely to practice safe online behaviors, including maintaining an adequate level of privacy. Parents were found to be the most influential on their youth’s decision making regarding online safety. Thus, it is important for parents and educators alike to be aware of potential negatives and, most importantly, be equipped to teach youth how to manage their online presence.

It is important that we understand how youth incorporate the internet into their lives.

As mentioned earlier, approximately a third of teens consult the internet for health advice, which can be a great opportunity. However, when accessing these health forums and websites, youth can also be exposed to advice from individuals who are not properly educated on certain topics, such as sexual health, nutrition, and drug information. Along with this often erroneous information, youth are accessing websites that coach teens on harmful behaviors, such as eating disorders, self-injury, and suicide. Researchers at the Lucille Packard Children’s Hospital conducted a survey of youth with eating disorders to see how many visit “pro-ana” or “pro-mia” sites. These sites offer tips and techniques on ways to successfully lose weight using harmful methods and are often populated by teens with eating disorders. The results showed that 36% of these teens had visited these websites, while 53% of parents were unaware their child was visiting these sites. Of the teens who visited these sites, 98% reported learning new techniques for their eating disorder (Wilson et al., 2006).

Not only are teens able to access incorrect or negative health information online, but youth are now also utilizing social media to bully and harass one another. Cyberbullying, according to StopCyberbullying.org, “is when a child, preteen or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen or teen using the internet, interactive and digital technologies or mobile phones.” Kimberly Mitchell, of the Crimes against Children Research Center, discusses cyberbullying later in this issue in our Q & A with her. She notes that 9% of youth ages 10–17 report having been harassed online in the last year, while 32% of online teens report having been targets of online bullying at least once in their lifetime. Methods of bullying include:

- Spreading rumors online
- Posting mean or hurtful comments online
- Forwarding private messages
- Making threats, either online or through a phone call or text, of physical harm
- Posing as victim online
- Posting a mean or hurtful picture of someone online

Another concern regarding social media is whether or not youth are maintaining an appropriate identity with reasonable levels of privacy. Over half of online teens keep an online profile, and the majority of those limit access to their profile in some way (Lenhart, 2007). Of those whose profiles are more accessible to strangers, 46% report providing a little or a good deal of false information on their profiles. Figure 1.3 illustrates what kinds of contact information or identifying information teens post on their profiles. While teens are seemingly aware of the privacy of their own page, it is important for them to also consider the levels of privacy of their friends’ pages. What teens post on peers’ pages or in forums can be viewed and even shared by others. As parents and educators teach teens appropriate internet usage, it is important to remind them to maintain a respectful presence online to avoid any harm to their future. This includes vigilance about what pictures are being posted of them, how private their comments are, and what they publish in blogs about their personal activities.
CONCLUSION
As we look at the patterns of teens' behaviors around social media compared with the many positive and potentially negative results these behaviors can yield, it is evident there is much room for parents and educators to be involved in teaching youth conscientious internet use. Teens can learn ways to appropriately search the internet for accurate health information (while also being taught about offline resources), how to maintain respectful relationships with peers on social networking sites, and the importance of preserving a respectable and sufficiently protected online persona. However, parents, educators, and even teens themselves, should be open to the many possibilities that social media and online networking can open up to them. Beyond merely interacting with one another, teens can experiment with new types of creativity on content sharing, learn how to problem solve and deal with conflicts in virtual worlds, understand new and changing methods of communicating to prepare them for post-secondary experiences, and explore aspects about themselves and their lives that the offline world might not allow them to. Creating a balanced and well-informed pattern of online behaviors should be a priority as youth and adults move forward together in this increasingly technology-oriented world.

Throughout the rest of this issue, authors and interviewed experts will further discuss the ways teens conduct themselves online and how those might vary by gender, age, and socioeconomic status, and offer insight into why parents should and how they can become more involved (without being overbearing) in their child's online experience. This issue also features book reviews evaluating different publications which purport to offer advice and wisdom on topics, such as online romance for teens, the effects of social media on teens' leisure and extracurricular activities, how technology can be used to enhance academic settings, and teen girls' interactions with technology. Our goal is to empower adults to help create online environments that both nurture and support healthy social media experiences for youth while also minimizing any risks associated with the freedom of the internet.

Brooke Lusk received her bachelor's degree in Psychology from Austin College in Sherman, Texas. As the Database and Media Manager for The Prevention Researcher she is in charge of maintaining social media and connecting digital immigrants with digital natives.

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References