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## CHAPTER 3

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# Social Media and Student Identity Development

Very little attention has been given to how social media influence student development, although these sites and services are central to the lives of our students. There is a stark disconnect between student use of social media websites and the use of and interest in these sites by student affairs professionals. Of course, some student affairs professionals are true champions of social media; however, these individuals are few and far between. There are also student affairs professionals and other educators with explicit animosity toward the sites and services; these individuals are also few and far between. Most student affairs professionals fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum—anywhere between having a passing interest in social media, to more active use, to thinking that these technologies might be beneficial to students. What is missing in this ecosystem are student affairs professionals who understand how student behaviors on social media are connected

to students' overall development and how to put into practice strategies that help students along their developmental paths.

Generally, educators take a prescriptive approach in the rare instances when they do teach students about social media. A typical strategy is to discuss why “oversharing” is bad and how it could hurt a student’s future career prospects. While the pitfalls of sharing personal information online *should* be discussed, they need to be placed within a broader context of supporting student learning and development. When student affairs professionals take such a cynical approach, they are viewing student technology use from an *adult normative perspective*, by which they define what is appropriate based on their own expectations and norms; these expectations are no doubt influenced by popular media portrayals of social media as detrimental to youth development (see table 3.1). Perhaps an adult normative perspective is warranted at times and in certain situations; however, like other forms of education, there must be a balance. If we tell students how to behave on *their* social media sites without considering their psychological, emotional, and sociological relationship to the sites, then we’ve already lost them.

Unfortunately and surprisingly, by the time youth get to college, they have been the recipients of many adult normative messages about social media. For instance, social media sites are banned in almost all K-12 schools. The implicit message is that

**Table 3.1.** Differences between the adult normative and youth normative perspectives

	<b>Adult normative</b>	<b>Youth normative</b>
<b>Viewpoint</b>	Adult experience	Youth experience
<b>Approach</b>	Prescriptive	Inquisitive
<b>Beliefs about social media</b>	Negative	Balanced
<b>Source of information</b>	Self	Other

these sites are nonacademic in nature and can only serve to distract from the educational mission of the school. Additionally, policies in K-12 school districts ban educators from using social media with their students. Again, the implicit message is that the only reason that educators would use social media with students is to cross a boundary in the teacher-student relationship. These implicit messages, fueled by popular media stories about the evils of social media, get communicated to students.

A few years ago when I published a paper on the relationship between student use of Facebook and academic performance, I spoke to many campus newspaper reporters. These reporters were very interested in my finding that *how* students used Facebook was a stronger predictor of grades than time spent on the site (see chapter 2; Junco, 2012) and that Facebook use, in and of itself, was not related to poorer academic outcomes. Most of these reporters shared my results with their friends before contacting me, and every one of them said how they and their friends were all surprised. They said that they had heard many media reports about how Facebook *causes* students to have lower grades. In other words, these students had accepted the adult normative view that Facebook was harming them academically.

Student affairs professionals and other educators must ask themselves what harm they are doing by telling students that something they do daily, as an integral and normal part of their lives, is harming them. It's as if educators have subconsciously accepted the proposition that each and every one of our students is an addict, so in subtle ways we shame students for making social media such a significant part of their lives. Imagine how students feel being on the receiving end of such messages, especially from educators whom students trust yet who have no idea of what students' online world is like. Indeed, it is highly likely that one of your students is alive today because of a support system developed on Facebook that helped the student through a challenging time.

The time has come to move away from the adult normative perspective and see how social media use can, and does, support student psychosocial development. With this understanding, we can begin to reframe student social media use and understand its benefits and pitfalls. Only when we truly empathize with our students' experience can we educate them about how best to use social media to support their growth. Up to this point, I've been discussing taking an unempathic adult normative perspective in relation to social media; however, imagine if student affairs professionals behaved this way with students in other domains. For instance, imagine a residence hall director who tells residents to go to sleep at 8 pm because it's what the director does. Social media are no different. Indeed, one mistaken assumption adults make when engaging in the adult normative perspective is that what happens on social media bears no relationship to what happens in the real world. Not only is this a philosophical falsehood, but there is research to show that is not the case. For instance, students who are more extroverted in the offline world are also more extroverted on Facebook (Bachrach, Kosinski, Graepel, Kohli & Stillwell, 2012; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim & Goh, 2011; Ross et al., 2009; Seidman, 2012).

By the time most students reach college, they have spent countless hours using social media. What youth are doing online is quite consonant with established models of human personality and identity development, such as those proposed by Erikson (1968) and Chickering and Reisser (1993). Unfortunately, most educators believe that youth are only using these sites for pointless activities. Many even state that youth use social media for "socializing," as if social interactions, in and of themselves, were pointless (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010). This adult normative view of youth social media use is far from the reality of the benefits students get from these sites. Youth actually use social media to engage in and support a critical maturation

task, *identity development*. Imagine a young person who is coming to terms with a gay sexual identity but, because of geographic location, has no offline space to explore this facet of identity without suffering serious social or physical consequences. It is only through online exploration of this identity that the young person can engage in healthy development. But how exactly does this happen? This chapter connects traditional models of youth identity development with the identity work that youth are engaging in on social media.

In order to understand just how social media use influences and is congruent with student identity development, it is first important to review the relevant theories. An exhaustive review of all models of student development is beyond the scope of this book in general and this chapter in particular; however, student social media use will be examined in relation to Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development; the Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1998) and Sue and Sue (2003) Racial and Cultural Identity Development (RCID) model; D'Augelli's (1994) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development; and Chickering & Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student identity development.

## IDENTITY FORMATION

*Identity* is a "conscious sense of individual uniqueness" and an "unconscious striving for a continuity of experience" (Erikson, 1968, p. 208). Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development includes eight stages through which healthy individuals pass during their lives. Each stage has a *virtue* (strength), the favorable outcome of the resolution of the tension between the internal self and external environment within each particular life stage challenge. The virtue for the fifth stage in this model is *fidelity* and is reached through successful navigation of the *identity versus role confusion* duality. Youth pass through the fidelity stage typically