**Social networking**

**Since the turn of the century, social networking has become an integral part of the way people communicate and share information.**

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL NETWORKING**

The development of social networking websites such as Facebook and Instagram has altered the way that people communicate and interact with each other. However, even before social networking websites became popular, the internet was used for social interaction, with people chatting online and swapping ideas and information.

In 2002, social networking started to reach a critical mass. The rise of Web 2.0 meant that more and more people were delving into the online world. Friendster was one of the first social networking websites to offer the functionality that users have come to expect

from sites like Facebook, allowing people to publish content, add friends and send messages to each other. Within several months, Friendster had attracted over 3 million users—the potential of this new medium was obvious.

**SOCIAL NETWORKING AND PRIVACY**

With the increased use of social networking websites, never has the way people communicate been so public. In giving people the power to publish and share content, issues surrounding privacy have surfaced, with users expressing concerns that their private details are being exposed or shared among undesired networks. The other side of the privacy argument is that the internet is, by its very nature,

a public forum and users of social networking websites should only publish information that they are comfortable sharing with a potentially wide and diverse audience.

The launch of Myspace in 2003 brought social networking into the mainstream as users signed up to interact with their friends and their favourite musicians. By November 2005, Myspace boasted 26.7 million users and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation purchased it for US$580 million. By the end of 2008, Facebook had eclipsed Myspace as the largest social networking website on the internet with 200 million unique users. By 2016, this figure had reached 1.79 billion.

Given the dominance of Facebook, rival social networking services have attempted to provide different experiences for users. Instagram became popular thanks to its exclusive focus on images and videos. Snapchat’s temporary images and stories gave users a different experience. Twitter has continued to endure with its focus on 140-character microblogging.

Regardless of platform, social networking has transformed the way that we communicate with friends, family, celebrities and elected officials.

**Learning activity**

Find the terms and conditions for two popular social networking sites, such as Facebook and Instagram. In your own words, describe what they say about:

* **the intellectual property of material that you post**
* **your responsibilities when using the social network**
* **who your information will be shared with.**

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING**

Social networking allows its users an unprecedented ability to connect with friends and family. The benefits of social networking for teenagers are well documented. In a 2011 literature review titled ‘The benefits of social networking’, researchers from the Inspire Foundation, Murdoch University and the University of Western Sydney documented the positive impact that social media can have on the lives of teenagers.

■  Media literacy: The use of social media results in higher levels of media literacy, which involves not only technical skills but also a critical understanding about information and its credibility. Interaction with social media is more likely to develop in its users an understanding of how to create and share content, including images and video.

■  Informal knowledge and skills: While schools and universities are leveraging social media to engage learners, the use of social media also promotes the independent development of knowledge and skills. While using social media, teenagers often engage in collaboration and self-directed learning using a variety of platforms and services—everything from Wikipedia to YouTube.

■  Creativity: Social media also encourages creativity as users become involved in blogging, photography, animation, video production and podcasting.

■  Connecting with peers: Prominent social media researcher and academic Dana Boyd has written extensively about how social media allows teenagers to connect with their peers. In ‘Why youth (heart) social network sites’ she explains how teens use social media to ‘hang out’ with friends, develop a sense of identity, learn social cues and negotiate public life.

■  Strengthening friendships: Considerable research has also found that social media allows teens to form stronger friendships. In the real world there are often barriers to hanging out with friends, which might include access to transport or the availability of safe spaces to gather. Social media overcomes these barriers and gives teenagers the opportunity to socialise any time they want to.

■ Creating new friendships: According to the report, social media allows teens to form friendships based on mutual interests or values. These types of friendships are particularly valued by teenagers who suffer from illness or disability who may find it diff cult to form friendships online.

■ Community: Social media allows people not only to strengthen real-world communities but also to form new groups based on shared interests. People might, for example, form online communities based on a shared love of popular culture, such as films or television.

■ Political engagement: Social media provides opportunities for teenagers to become aware of social and political issues and also become involved in lobbying governments and corporations to achieve change.

■ Wellbeing: The report argues that research into social media indicates that the combined effect of its impact on media literacy, learning, creativity, connectivity, friendship, community and political engagement has a positive in influence on teenagers’ overall wellbeing.

Critics of social networking have suggested that this technology might actually result in social isolation. A 2013 study at the University of Michigan titled ‘Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being in young adults’ found that increased use of social networking results in a reduced sense of wellbeing.

**SELFIES, REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY**

The rise of social network resulted in selfies becoming a normalised ways of people representing themselves. The construction of a selfie reflects a great deal about your personality and how you want to be perceived. Some theorists suggest that these representations are empowering, others argue that they simply perpetuate the stereotypes found in mainstream media.

In 2014, *TIME* published an article by Jessica Bennett titled ‘Our bodies, our selfies: the feminist photo revolution’. In the article, Bennett argues that young women are empowered by social media to redefine what is beautiful and resist traditional representations of gender and body image. In contrast, Erin Gloria Ryan at *Jezebel* argues that selfies merely perpetuate the idea that appearance is what matters most about women. She argues that most selfies don’t celebrate achievement, empowerment or success, usually focusing exclusively on the face.



**FIGURE 2.3.2** According to the *Salon* article ‘This is your brain on selfies’, the average millennial will take about 25,000 selfies in their lifetime.

Although selfies provide the promise of empowerment, these representations are still subject to the pull of mainstream media images. In a 2015 study titled ‘How gender-stereotypical are selfies? A content analysis and comparison with magazine adverts’, Nicola Doring, Anne Reif and Sandra Poeschl studied a random sample of 500 selfies uploaded to Instagram by both men and women. The photographs were analysed using a set of gender display categories developed by Erving Go man. Go man argued that women in advertisements are often described as passive, powerless and submissive through their posture and body language. The study found that selfies of both men and women not only reflected stereotypical representation of gender but were more prevalent in selfies than in traditional advertising.

**AUDIENCE AS PRODUCT**

Social networking is big business. By 2016, Facebook was worth US$350 billion, Instagram was worth US$35 billion and Twitter weighed in at US$23 billion. Given that these companies provide their products for free, users often don’t think about how these tech behemoths make money. Like broadcast television and newspapers before them,

the audience is the product, which is sold to advertisers. In the case of social networking, however, these companies have a very detailed picture of users thanks to the flood of information that they provide every day.

Social networking sites know your name, gender, location, likes, dislikes, friends, family and political beliefs and can build up a detailed understanding of your personality by

analysing what you post, like and share. This information is then used to provide companies with targeted advertising.

In 2013, media theorist and author Douglas Rushko announced that he was leaving Facebook. In an article titled ‘Why I’m leaving Facebook’ he wrote:

Facebook does not exist to help us make friends, but to turn our network of connections, brand preferences, and activities over time—our ‘social graphs’—into a commodity for others to exploit. We Facebook users have been building a treasure lode of big data that government and corporate researchers have been mining to predict and influence what we buy and whom we vote for. We have been handing over to them vast quantities of information about ourselves and our friends, loved ones and acquaintances. With this information, Facebook and the ‘big data’ research firms purchasing their data predict still more things about us—from our future product purchases or sexual orientation to our likelihood for civil disobedience or even terrorism.

The information you give social networks feeds into algorithms that curate your social media experience, ensuring you will return and continue using the service.

**ONLINE HARASSMENT**

As social media has spread, there have been a number of high-pro le online harassment cases. Gamergate was an online hate movement targetting prominent female game developers and journalists, notably Zoë Quinn, Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian. Following Kotaku’s allegedly biased reviews of her game Depression Quest, Zoë Quinn received ongoing harassment via social media including a death threat and rape threats. The Gamergate hashtag and hatred spread under the pretence of addressing political correctness and integrity in gaming journalism. Game developer Brianna Wu also became a target of online harassment after she weighed into the debate surrounding the issue. Anita Sarkeesian—who examines the problematic representation of women in popular culture through her YouTube series Tropes vs Women—also became a target

of this campaign of online harassment. Social media sites have been slow to address these issues of harassment. It wasn’t until 2016 that Twitter allowed users to mute posts based on hashtags, emojis and keywords.



**GENERATION LIKE**

*Generation Like* (2014), a documentary produced by Douglas Rushko and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), explores the corporations and economic structures that underpin social networking. In 2001, Rushko produced a documentary called *Merchants of Cool* (2001), which explains how large corporations like MTV were pro ting from teenage culture, exploiting kids’ desire to be cool. Social media has changed this dynamic and teenagers now control much of this discourse. Rushko argued that likes, shares and retweets are the social currency of ‘Generation Like’. What people like and share online becomes part of their social identity.

The documentary points out that young people have always wanted attention and validation and internet fame has become a way to attain social currency. It also looks at how social marketing firms use social media to orchestrate publicity campaigns where the audience advertises content for them.

In the documentary, Jane Buckingham, president of trend- forecasting company Trendera, points out that consumers are now taking on the role of marketers by promoting products to each other. The documentary argues that, for Generation Like, abandoning your core values or ethos in return for corporate sponsorship isn’t a concern. Receiving sponsorship from a corporation is seen as an endorsement or indication that you have achieved success.

Kids take the very marketing techniques that have been used on them and use them on one another, all in pursuit of the same prize. It’s the paradox of Generation Like. These kids are empowered to express themselves as never before but with tools that are embedded with values of their own.

**Learning activities**

* **1**Watch the documentary *Generation Like*.
* **2**Describe three ways that teenagers may use social  networking to their advantage.
* **3**Describe three ways that teenagers might be exploited by large businesses in the course of their social networking activities.

**SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM**

Social media represents considerable promise when it comes to achieving social change. The accessibility and immediacy of communication means that it is easier than ever to spread information about social issues and mobilise support for important causes.

Critics have argued that blogs and social networking websites might not be the best way to mobilise support for important social and political causes. Traditional forms of activism, such as writing to elected officials or conducting demonstrations, are usually more effective than simply joining groups on social networking websites or posting on a blog. While this may indicate support for a cause, it is not necessarily the most effective way to achieve social change. For this reason, activism through social media has been dubbed ‘slacktivism’.

Athina Karatzogianni, a lecturer at the University of Leicester, is more optimistic about the impact of social media on activism:

Digital activism has transformed political protest in the last two decades. Smartphones and the internet have changed the way political events, protests and movements are organised, helping to mobilise thousands of new supporters to a diverse range of causes. With such activity becoming an everyday occurrence, new forms of digital activism are now emerging. These often bypass the existing world

of politics, social movements and campaigning. Instead, they take advantage of new technologies to provide an alternative way of organising society and the economy.

**A SHORT HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM**

■  Arab Spring: In 2009 members of the Iranian democratic movement embraced Twitter as a platform to share information and communicate with the outside world. Thousands of users across the globe gave their avatars a green overlay to signify their support for the democratic movement.

■  SOPA: In 2012 the *Stop Online Piracy Act* (SOPA) was due to be introduced to the United States Congress. The proposed laws were perceived to threaten freedom of speech and freedom of expression on the internet. Prominent websites including Wikipedia, Reddit and Google went dark for twenty-four hours to protest the  legislation. Millions of people contacted their local representatives and the United States Congress to express their opposition to the bill. A petition ran by Google attracted 4.5 million signatures. The bill was subsequently abandoned.

■ Kony 2012: Kony 2012 (see Figure 2.3.3) is an online video created by a group of activists aiming to have Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony arrested. Kony is the leader of a guerrilla organisation called the Lord’s Resistance Army, which is responsible for crimes including rape, murder, kidnapping and the forced recruitment of child soldiers. The video was a phenomenal viral success. In less than a week, it was viewed more than twenty- ve million times, throwing the international spotlight on Joseph Kony.