

# Conduits of Chaos: Social Media and Intersections of Home, School, and Community Cultures

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*Abstract: Social media are a cultural leveler. Most students have cell phones, through which they may post and/or view cyberbullying threads, hate diatribes, and recordings of fights. Such posts create a toxic and symbiotic culture that seemingly transcends race and income. Closer examination suggests that social media and digital devices can be turbulent conduits that spew neighborhood chaos into schools, intersecting community and school events. We describe the experiences of students who had negative experiences with social media across the demographic spectrum and consider how these experiences reflect school, home and community. We see social media as a conduit for what we are calling chaos or turbulence. By that, we mean volatility that causes significant stress among school stakeholders, affects the physical and/or emotional safety of stakeholders, and disrupts the stability and smooth operation of the school.*

# Background

Over the past decade, humans have significantly changed the ways that they spend their leisure time and communicate. Much emphasis has turned to the use of social media for both formal and informal communication. Nah et al. (2021) describe the positive uses of social media to promote storytelling and other communications across both urban and rural communities. Several scholars have described the positive interactions of African American youth and digital media (Compton-Lilly et al., 2023; Lewis-Ellison et al., 2020). While social media have many positive characteristics and opportunities, these media also hold the potential for spreading negativity and distrust and creating significant disruptions (Anderson et al., 2022; Orben et al., 2022; Twenge & Martin, 2020). Arguably, the most significant changes have come in the use of leisure time and conversion to social media among adolescents, who spend significant amounts of time, including several hours a day or more, either viewing or actively communicating on various social media platforms.

Studies are mixed regarding the general impact of social media on teens' lives. Indeed, a majority of teens report positive experiences in using social media, saying they believe that it improves their self-concept and worldview (Anderson et al., 2022). Most teens believe that social media helps them build communities in ways not possible with face-to-face communication (Vannucci et al., 2020). Studies also indicate that because of their developmental level, adolescents are especially prone to use social media more often and be more directly influenced by their experiences (Orben et al., 2022; REMS, 2024). Forty-one percent of teens with the highest social media use rate their overall mental health as poor or very poor (DiAngelis, 2024). Over 90% of educators feel students' mental health is a serious issue ([National Education Association, 2024](#)). Educators report that student use of social media leads to cyberbullying and underdeveloped social skills ([National Education Association, 2024](#)). The U.S. Surgeon General has called for warning labels and restrictions on social media platforms ([Murthy, 2024](#)).

U.S. teens spend an average of 4.8 hours a day using seven popular social media apps, with YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram accounting for 87% of their social media time. Thirty seven per cent of teens say they spend five or more hours a day, 14% spend 4 to less than 5 hours a day, 26% spend 2 to less than 4 hours a day, and 23% spend less than 2 hours a day on these three apps (DiAngelis, 2024). Many states and districts have begun to restrict students' use of cell phones in schools. Seventy-two per cent of U.S. high school teachers say cellphone distraction is a major problem in the classroom ([Hatfield, June 12, 2024](#)). At least 15 states have passed laws or enacted policies that ban or restrict students' use of cellphones in schools statewide or recommend that local districts enact their own bans or restrictive policies ([Prothero et al., 2024](#)).

Despite these restrictions, parents generally want their children to have access to a cell phone in school. The primary reason parents want their kids to have cellphones at school is so they can reach them in an emergency (National Parents Union, 2024; [Anderson et al., 2024](#)). Two-thirds support a cell phone ban in class ([Anderson et al., 2024](#)). A third supports banning all phones in school ([Anderson et al., 2024](#)).

Meanwhile, student threats on social media continue to escalate. A common activity is sexting, "The sending and/or receiving of sexual images, videos, or texts within the peer network" (Foody et al., 2023, p. 10). Another activity is cyberflashing, "The unsolicited sending of nude or sexual images ... typically met with a negative reaction from the receiver" (Karasava et al., 2023, p. 1). In addition, online threats to schools and students have become commonplace, with arrests happening daily ([Atterbury, 2024](#); [REMS, 2024](#)). Often fueled through social media, school shootings are rampant. As of October 8, thirty school shootings have resulted in injuries or deaths ([Education Week, 2024](#)).

We describe the experiences of students who had negative experiences with social media across the demographic spectrum and consider how these experiences reflect school, home, and community. We believe the focus of teens on specific platforms is ubiquitous. Our observations are that when negative posts become hostile, they move symbiotically and simultaneously to affect the home, community, and classroom. These disruptions are often significant, resulting in violence on campus and in the neighborhood. We apply several frameworks that help us understand the data. These include Bandura's social learning

theory (Bandura, 1971); social capital theories (Zhang et al., 2021); and the co-construction model (Vannucci et al., 2021). According to these models, teens are active participants in choosing their platforms, messages, and communities. Thus, they may become immersed in a symbiotic cycle in which they become both aggressors and victims. Studies suggest that because of their neurological development, teens are especially prone to not only engage in but also seek risky and sometimes aggressive behavior that they would be less likely to demonstrate face-to-face (Centers for Disease Control, 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Vanucci et al., 2021).

We see social media as a conduit for what we are calling chaos or turbulence. By that, we mean volatility that causes significant stress among school stakeholders, affects the physical and/or emotional safety of stakeholders, and disrupts the stability and smooth operation of the school. We have adapted our view of volatility, turbulence, and chaos from Shaprio and Gross (2013), who discuss the effects of events that cause chaos and turbulence within schools. We see the concept of intersectionality as a tool to demonstrate the interactions of events within school, home, and community (Collins, 2019). We see the application of the concept of intersectionality as a unifying tool to demonstrate the interactions of events within school, home, and community. Collins (2019) observed, "Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people and in human experiences" (p.2). We display that interaction of forces in Fig. 7.1.

**Figure 7.1**

Intersections of social media with home, school, and community



# Research Questions

Through this exploratory study, we sought to answer the following research questions:

How are teens' social media postings  
related to significant events in their school;  
related to significant events in their homes;  
and related to significant events in their communities?

## Methods

Our research team is composed of three individuals: Two African American women and one White man. Shaquanah serves as a curriculum specialist in a school in a major city in the Southeast that serves primarily African American and impoverished students. Alyncia works as a dean in a midwestern college. Jim is a retired principal who works as an independent hearing officer in a Southeastern school district with more than 80,000 students, 59% of whom are White and 75% of whom are classified by federal guidelines as impoverished.

This analysis began through extended conversations about our observations of the effects of social media on the behavior of middle and high school students. During periodic meetings, we discussed incidents regarding students' use of social media and the detrimental effects on school climates. We then scrutinized redacted notes and proceedings from more than 100 discipline hearings. As we analyzed incidents, we saw similarities among the characteristics and patterns of incidents. We are sharing narratives based on these analyses and our personal observations. These are, admittedly, subjective rather than empirical observations. Nonetheless, we posit that our discussion presents a range of experiences typical of youth, including African American teens, who utilize social media for both negative and positive ends.

## Results

Our analysis revealed the following themes:

- Phones are Ubiquitous Tools to Plan, Record, and Share Incidents
- Students access digital media to arrange sexual and violent liaisons.
- Students apply sexting as both a threat and an amusement.
- Insulting, bullying, and threatening are pervasive online.
- Arguments become recursive events cycling among home, community, and school.
- Parents are sometimes Active Participants

## Discussion

We argue that social media is a cultural leveler that influences the learning of youth. Conflicts begin either digitally or physically, in either the community or the school. Lines are blurred between physical school and community. Social media has become the new community that transcends physicality. Almost all students, regardless of income or ethnicity, have access to mobile phones and digital media. Intersectionality suggests that the infusion of social justice initiatives can transform groups into more equitable communities by creating powerful opportunities for cultural change, communication, and understanding. Thus, we see opportunities for social media to support resilience and build opportunities for transformation for all communities.

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