

# ONLINE COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA

Charles Barthel, Graduate Research Assistant  
Sreedhar Upendram, Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics  
Maggie Albro, Agriculture & Natural Resources Librarian

In this module, students should learn:

1. The basics of social media for senior citizens
2. Knowledge about cyberbullying
3. The basics of social media for K-12 students
4. The basics of email
5. The basics of netiquette
6. A basic knowledge of influencers
7. What happens when you post information to social media sites
8. The common types of phishing, scams, and hacking and how to respond to them

The internet and the rise of social media have radically altered the ways people communicate and interact with each other. The impact of social media on our society is still being studied, especially with regards to elderly populations and youth, but one thing is clear, social media has changed the mode and methods of communication in the 21st century. It is important to understand these new forms of communication and learn the best practices for representing yourself and communicating with others online.

## Social Media for Senior Citizens

Social media has made it easier than ever to connect and communicate with friends and family. Maintaining an active social life is incredibly important for everyone, but it is especially important for senior citizens. Social media provides seniors with convenient, easy-to-use, social engagement activity that can be done without leaving the house. Studies from the American Psychological Association have shown that social media usage has been linked to improved moods within senior citizens. Studies also have found senior citizens who consistently use social media are more likely to engage in activities that support their overall well-being (Comfort Keepers). This section, using the lesson plan “Social Media for Senior Citizens: An Introductory Course,” should provide seniors with an understanding of what social media is, the various sites that can be used and information about how best to protect themselves from scams and phishing attacks. The types of information that will benefit seniors is different from that of younger students. Seniors often benefit most from teacher-based, in-house training on how to set up accounts, how to post, and how to find friends.

## Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has been defined by UNICEF as bullying that uses digital technologies as its primary means of transmission (UNICEF). Cyberbullying can take place on many different digital platforms and is defined as being a repeated action which aims to scare, anger, or shame the target of the negative actions (UNICEF). Students should be given examples of the types of behavior that are classified as cyberbullying so that they can not only recognize when they are being bullied but also recognize the types of behaviors that should be avoided. These behaviors include, but are not limited to,

- Spreading lies about a person on social media
- Posting embarrassing photos of a person
- Impersonating a person using fake accounts
- Posting hurtful, abusive or threatening messages, photos, or videos with the intention of hurting the person

Some lessons and information that is important to let younger students know about cyberbullying:

- Do not engage with cyberbullying; think twice before commenting or sharing
- Always consider how your actions could affect the other person
- Report any cyberbullying that you witness to the platform
- Treat others with respect and dignity
- Remember that not everything that is posted on social media is real

Inform the students that if they are a victim of cyberbullying they should not be ashamed or scared to speak to a trusted adult in their life. The answer to stopping cyberbullying is not always easy, but by speaking to a trusted adult it is likely that a solution can be developed for the problem. Also, indicate that there are steps that can be done by the victim of the cyberbullying attacks such as blocking the individual or individuals who are attacking them, reporting the incidents to both the platform and/or the school, and speaking to a counselor who can help aid the individual being targeted. The UNICEF webpage on cyberbullying lists many platform-specific anti-bullying tools that can be used to defend against cyberbullying.

## Social Media for K-12 Students

The educational needs for K-12 students regarding social media look very different from those of the senior citizen students. Younger students are much more tuned into technology

and social media; therefore, teaching them the basics about these topics might be unnecessary. The most important lessons for K-12 students are geared towards teaching them how to ensure that they are safe and responsible online. The types of safety that need to be addressed with students are:

- The importance of protecting your personal information and the information of others
- Keeping passwords safe and protected
- What is OK to share vs. what is not OK to share
- Only follow and interact with people you know
- Keep profiles set to private
- Be wary of strangers; do not meet up with strangers that you have “met” online

Teach students that posting on social media creates a digital footprint that will travel with you for your lifetime. Therefore, it is important to take great care in how you present yourself and act online, as what you do online can have real-world consequences.

## Types of Social Media

Social media as a term is used as a catch-all for many different types of social interaction sites and platforms, but within this term there are many different types and platforms of social media. It is helpful to get an understanding of the differences that exist between various forms of social media. In this section, we aim to outline the most popular types of social media (social networks, discussion forums, image-sharing networks, blogging, interest-based networks and video hosting networks) and the most commonly used social media platforms.

- **Twitter (X):** The platform formerly known as Twitter, now X, has been one of the most popular social media platforms for a while. The platform is primarily composed of short, text-based messages. The platform is used by many celebrities, politicians, and businesses, and, therefore, has been used to connect to celebrities, friends, and a real-time news source for many users.
- **Facebook:** Facebook was one of the first social media sites where users create a personal profile, connect with friends and family, and join groups for like-minded people.
- **Instagram:** Instagram is an image-based social media platform that allows for commenting on the image posts. Instagram has become increasingly popular with younger generations.
- **TikTok:** TikTok is a social media platform that is composed primarily of short videos. The site is one of the most popular social media platforms, especially among younger generations. The platform is a source of entertainment, information, news, and more.
- **Reddit:** Reddit is a text-based forum-style discussion board. Posts are made to specific community groups that have specialized or niche interests. Reddit can be an excellent source to use when learning about a new topic or exploring new hobbies. It is composed of user-generated content, so you should always practice caution and use your information evaluation tools to vet the information you receive from other users.

## Email

Email is one of the most common forms of digital communication. Email is a commonly used form of communication in work, school, and for personal communications. Email is so ubiquitous in so many different areas that it is almost a necessity to have an email account and the basic skill sets that allow you to send and receive email. This module should walk users through how to set up an email account and the basic skill set of sending emails. You should bring up the concepts taught in the “netiquette” section regarding the basic etiquette and digital communication best practices that should be adhered to when using email.

## Netiquette

Netiquette is a combination of “net (Internet)” and “etiquette.” This term is used to describe the socially agreed-upon, acceptable ways of communicating on the Internet and other digital platforms. The lack of face-to-face communication of the internet often leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations; therefore, it is important for students to learn basic digital communication skills that will aid them in their ability to effectively communicate online. You can use the lesson plan, “Responsible Behavior Guidelines for the Internet,” to help students understand and practice proper netiquette.

Some key principles of basic Netiquette:

- Respect: Show respect and grace for others' opinions; do not engage in disrespectful, offensive, or hostile behaviors or tones.
- Be concise and brief
- Do not use all CAPS
- Reread your messages before sending: This step can help you identify language or comments that could be misinterpreted by your audience.
- Do not include any information that you or your family members would not like to see, hear, or read
- Do not share spam or forward unnecessary messages
- Do not engage or support targeted harassment

### **Influencers & Ads**

Influencers are a category of online celebrities who use social media to garner a large following. Influencers are often members of niche communities for which they create content. Influencers play an increasingly large role in both internet culture and youth, who often look up to influencers as role models and the definers of trends. Influencers can be either a positive influence or a negative influence, depending on the type of content that they produce, but regardless, the influence that they wield can play an important role on the mental and physical health of the youth who follow them. It is important to explain the ways social media influencers can affect behavior and the mental health of their followers so that younger students are cognizant of the possible effects of viewing certain content creators. Oftentimes, influencers are being sponsored by companies who use them to advertise their products, which can be an incredibly effective marketing strategy to influence younger audiences. Remind students that they should be mindful of influencers' intentions and be wary of falling for advertisements and marketing campaigns that use famous influencers.

### **What happens to your posts?**

It is important to teach children (as well as adults) what happens when they post something to the internet. Often, children may not be aware of the threat to their safety and well-being as well as the long-term consequences of their internet activity. Students should be taught that their activity and the posts that they make can be archived, making anything they say or post online can exist forever. Therefore, for their own safety, they should be incredibly mindful of what they post, considering how it may be received or viewed both presently and in the future. Inform students that their posts may still exist even after they delete them or their account, others can screen shot or archive that content, and it can be used against them, even messages that are sent privately on the internet can be made public. Therefore, it is incredibly important to practice netiquette and post responsibly. Understanding the "digital footprint" that posting online leaves, students should be better equipped to choose and curate what they post and how they present themselves online.

### **Phishing and Hacking Scams**

Phishing is a type of scam that has gained prevalence in our digital world. Phishing occurs when scammers send a fake text message, email or pop-up message that aims to get people to send personal information, passwords, or financial information to the scammer. The scammers then use this information to commit identity theft or to steal money from their target. It is important to always remember that legitimate organizations will never call, text, or email you asking that you provide personal information to them. Be aware that many of these scams will use threatening language which aims at scaring the individual into providing this information to them. These scams also can be claiming to offer you something

that seems too good to be true. Always use caution and do not open emails or reply to messages that you question or are unsure of. If you have received suspicious messages, be sure to delete, unsubscribe or block the account that sent you the message. If you have fallen victim to a scammer or a hacker, be sure to contact the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Internet Crime Complaint Center at: [www.ic3.gov/complaint/default.aspx/](http://www.ic3.gov/complaint/default.aspx/).

## Conclusion

The internet and digital technologies have radically altered the methods and form of our daily communications. Digital technologies have provided us with a uniquely new world that is much more interconnected than any other period of history. This interconnection has introduced a world of possibility, but it has also introduced new challenges and hurdles that we must address. While senior citizens and the youth of today have different needs when it comes to digital literacy, for both levels of learners, we must stress the importance of responsibility to the other and the consideration of both the short-term and long-term effects of their online activity.

## References

Comfort Keepers (2023). "Seniors and the Positive Impact of Social Media". StackPath.

<https://www.comfortkeepers.com/articles/info-center/senior-health-and-wellbeing/seniors-and-the-positive-impact-of-social-media/#:~:text=Community%20Engagement%20and%20a%20Sense,socialize%20online%20to%20combat%20loneliness/>

Digital Citizenship (n.d.). "Leaving a digital footprint". Digital Citizenship..

<https://www.digitalcitizenship.nsw.edu.au/articles/leaving-a-digital-footprint/#:~:text=Once%20something%20is%20posted%20or,you%20have%20viewed%20or%20created.>

Herbst, M. (2020, January 27). "How to raise media-savvy kids in the digital age". Wired.

<https://www.wired.com/story/kids-digital-media-literacy-tips/>.

Gordon, S. (2022, May 5). "Phishing and online scams: What your kids need to know. Verywell

Family. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/teach-kids-about-phishing-and-online-scams-5248479>.

Lam, J. "Social Media Literacy Basics: Your posts will exist forever. Young Post.

<https://www.scmp.com/yp/report/journalism-resources/article/3072320/social-media-literacy-basics-your-posts-will-exist>.

Office on Aging Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee. "Digital Inclusion".

<https://www.knoxseniors.org/digital-inclusion/>

Rayo, A., Miranda, C., Bungo, L., & Méndez, R. (2022, October 25). "How to recognize and

avoid phishing scams". Federal Trade Commission Consumer Advice. <https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/how-recognize-and-avoid-phishing-scams>.

UNICEF (2022). "Cyberbullying: What is it and how to stop it". <https://www.unicef.org/end-violence/how-to-stop-cyberbullying>.



[UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU](http://UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU)

Real. Life. Solutions.™