

Students and Social Media— Beyond Facebook

What apps are students using now that Facebook is “dead” to them?

By Michael Johnston



Facebook no longer rules social media. Today's students like variety and they find it in all sorts of apps for their devices, including their smartphones and tablets. Last year we asked one of our employees, Erin Parker, to put materials together for professional development on school safety involving social media—what to look for and what to check.

The information she gathered is helpful not only for educators in our district, but for the parents of our students as well. We made the information available on our website so parents, community members, and other stakeholders can stay current on “what’s hot.” (This information comes from the commonsensemedia.org article, “16 Apps and Websites Kids Are Heading to After Facebook,” by Christine Elgersma.)

Texting Apps

Kik Messenger lets kids text for free. It's fast and has no message limits, character limits, or fees if you only use the basic features. Because it's an app, the texts don't show up on the phone's messaging service, and parents are not charged for them (beyond standard data rates).

What to know:

- **Stranger danger is a possibility.** An app named *Oink-Text*, linked to *Kik*, allows communication with strangers who share their *Kik* usernames to find

people to chat with. There's also a *Kik* community blog where users can submit photos of themselves and screenshots of messages (sometimes displaying users' full names) to contests.

- **Kids can find friends nearby.** Users within a one-mile radius appear on other users' community lists. Once a username is known, it is possible to make contact through private message.

ooVoo is a free video, voice, and messaging app. Users can have group chats with up to six people for free, and kids often log on after school and keep the app open while doing homework.

What to know:

- **Users can only chat with approved friends.** Users can only communicate with those on their approved contact lists—although there is no guarantee that users are making good decisions about the friends they approve.
- **Kids are often inundated by inappropriate pictures when searching for friends.**

Micro-blogging Apps and Sites

Instagram lets users snap, edit, and share photos and 15-second videos, publicly or with a private network of followers. It also lets users apply fun filters and effects to their photos, making them look high quality and artistic.

What to know:

- **Teens are looking for “likes.”** Similar to the way they use Facebook, teens may measure the “success” of their photos—even their self-worth—by the number of likes or comments they receive.
- **Public is the default.** Photos and videos shared on Instagram are public unless privacy settings are adjusted. Hashtags and location information can make photos even more visible to communities beyond a user's followers if the account is public.
- **Private messaging is now an option.** Instagram Direct allows users to send “private messages” to up to 15 mutual friends. These pictures don't show up on their public feeds. Although there's nothing wrong with

group chats, kids may be more likely to share inappropriate content with their inner circles.

Tumblr is like a cross between a blog and Twitter: It's a streaming scrapbook of text, photos, and/or videos and audio clips. Users create and follow short blogs, or "tumblelogs," that can be seen by anyone online if made public. Many teens have tumblelogs for personal use: sharing photos, videos, musings, and things they find funny with their friends.

What to know:

- **Porn is easy to find.** Pornographic images and videos and depictions of violence, self-harm, drug use, and offensive language are easily searchable.
- **Privacy takes effort.** The first profile a member creates is public and viewable by anyone on the Internet. Users who want full privacy must create a *second* profile, which they're able to password-protect.
- **Posts are often copied and shared.** Reblogging on Tumblr is similar to re-tweeting: A post is reblogged from one tumblelog to another.

Twitter allows users to post brief, 140-character messages—called "tweets"—and follow other users' activities. Teens use it to share tidbits and keep up with news and celebrities.

What to know:

- **Public tweets are the norm for teens.** Though users can choose to keep their tweets private, most teens report having public accounts.
- **Updates appear immediately.** Even though you can remove tweets, your followers can still read what you wrote until it's gone. This can get kids in trouble if they say something in the heat of the moment.

Vine is a social media app that lets users post and watch looping six-second video clips. This service has developed a unique community of people who post videos that are often creative, funny, and sometimes thought-provoking. Teens usually use Vine to create and share silly videos of themselves and/or their friends and families.

What to know:

- **It's full of inappropriate videos.** Clips include full frontal nudity and drug use.
- **Posts are public by default.** Users *can* adjust their settings to protect their posts; only followers will see them, and users have to approve followers.

Self-Destructing Secret Apps

Burn Note is a messaging app that erases text messages after a set period of time.

What to know:

- **It allows kids to communicate covertly.** To discourage copying and taking screenshots, a spotlight-like



system that recipients direct with a finger (or the mouse) reveals only a portion of the message at a time.

- **You don't have to have the app to receive a Burn Note.** Unlike other apps like Snapchat, users can send a Burn Note to anyone, even those who don't have the program.

Snapchat is a messaging app that lets users put a time limit on the pictures and videos they send before they disappear. Most teens use the app to share goofy or embarrassing photos without the risk of them going public. However, there are lots of opportunities to use it in other ways.

What to know:

- **It's a myth that Snapchats go away forever.** Data is data and whenever an image is sent, it never truly goes away. For example, the person on the receiving end can take a screenshot of the image before it disappears.
- **It can make sexting seem OK.** Users might be encouraged to share photos containing sexy images because they think the photos will disappear.

Whisper is a social “confessional” app that allows users to post whatever’s on their minds, paired with an image. With all the emotions running through teens, anonymous outlets give them the freedom to share their feelings without fear of judgment.

What to know:

- **Whispers are often sexual in nature.** Some users use the app to try to hook up with people nearby, while others post “confessions” of desire. Lots of eye-catching nearly nude pics accompany these shared secrets.
- **Content can be dark.** People normally don’t confess sunshine and rainbows; common *Whisper* topics include insecurity, depression, substance abuse, and lies told to parents, employers, and teachers.
- **Although it’s anonymous to start, it may not stay that way.** The app encourages users to exchange personal information in the “Meet Up” section.

Yik Yak is a free social-networking app that lets users post brief, Twitter-like comments to the 500 geographically nearest *Yik Yak* users. Kids can find out opinions, secrets, rumors, and more. Plus, they know all these comments have come from a 1.5-mile radius.

What to know:

- **It reveals your location.** By default, the user’s exact location is shown unless they toggle location-sharing off. Each time the app is opened, the GPS updates the location.
- **Some schools have banned access.** Some teens have used the app to threaten others, causing school lock-downs and more. Its toxic to a school environment, so administrators are cracking down.

Chatting, Meeting, Dating Apps and Sites

MeetMe, although not marketed as a dating app, does have a “Match” feature whereby users can “secretly admire” others, and its large user base means fast-paced communication and guaranteed attention.

What to know:

- **It’s an open network.** Users can chat with whomever is online, as well as search locally, opening the door for potential trouble.
- **Lots of details are required.** First and last name, age, and zipcode are requested at registration, or you can log in using a Facebook account. The app also asks permission to use location services on users’ mobile devices, meaning they can find the closest matches wherever they go.

Omegle is a chat site (and app) that puts two strangers together in their choice of a text chat or video chat room. Being anonymous can be very attractive to teens, and *Omegle* provides an easy opportunity to make

connections. Its “interest boxes” let users filter potential chat partners by shared interests.

What to know:

- **Users get paired up with strangers.** That’s the whole premise of the app and there’s no registration required.
- **This is *not* an app for kids and teens.** *Omegle* is filled with people searching for sexual chat.
- **Language is a big issue.** Since the chats are anonymous, they’re often much more explicit than those with an identifiable user might be.

Skout is a flirting app that allows users to sign up as teens or adults. They’re then placed in the appropriate peer group, where they can post to a feed, comment on others’ posts, add pictures, and chat. They’ll get notifications when other users near their geographic area join, and they can search other areas by cashing in points. They receive notifications when someone “checks” them out but must pay points to see who it is.

What to know:

- **Skout is actually OK for teens if used appropriately.** If teens are going to use a dating app, *Skout* is probably the safest choice, if only because it has a teens-only section that seems to be moderated reasonably well.
- **There’s no age verification.** This makes it easy for a teen to say she’s older than 18 and an adult to say she’s younger.

Tinder is a photo and messaging dating app for browsing pictures of potential matches within a certain-mile radius of the user’s location. It’s very popular with 20-somethings as a way to meet new people for casual or long-term relationships. There is a gay and lesbian version called *Grindr*.

What to know:

- **It’s all about swipes.** You swipe right to “like” a photo or left to “pass.” If a person whose photo you “liked” swipes “like” on your photo, too, the app allows you to message each other. Meeting up (and possibly hooking up) is pretty much the goal.
- **It’s location-based.** Geolocation means it’s possible for teens to meet up with nearby people, which can be very dangerous.

Being Aware

Being aware of what’s going on in the world of social media and sharing that information with all the district’s stakeholders can go a long way toward ensuring a safe learning environment—and safe community.

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