

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

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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. Impoverished African American communities spawned by systemic racism are not immune from such dysfunction. An application of an Africana lens suggests that initial attempts to understand these phenomena from a White hegemonic perspective are inadequate and show that the issues require more detailed scrutiny. Awareness of events through an Africana cultural perspective reveal resilience and opportunities for transformation. Africana theory 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.

Keywords: social media, digital devices, teenagers, school and community, African American, White hegemony

INTRODUCTION

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.

While social media has many positive characteristics and opportunities, it also holds 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. For this study we are defining teens as adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18.

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).

While some studies report that parents are sometimes concerned about the time their children spend using social media, teens report that their parents need not be concerned and that their experiences are positive. Despite that, one study indicated that 9% or more of teens experienced significant negative experiences using social media (Twenge & Martin, 2020).

These negative experiences seemed to be more significant among females than males, and also seemed to be more significant among urban and inner-city users than those in suburban or rural settings. Recent studies support the proposition that girls are often victims of bullying and depression, often exacerbated by social media (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). The purpose of this discussion is to consider the impact of social media use among students in high-poverty, African American. While studies differ somewhat between the ways that males and females use social media (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023), that is not the focus of our discussion.

In this article, we consider 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 found no other studies that specifically examine this phenomenon. Our essay is based on our observations of the ways that teens use social media in negative ways that transverse home, school, and community and create significant disruptions across that spectrum. Many studies investigated teens' use of social media during the pandemic. While we do not discount the effects of isolation caused by the pandemic school closures, we take a broader view of the ways that the elements of school, home, community, and social media intersect and interact. In addition, we are not distinguishing among the uses of specific platforms. Our views included TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and airdrop. We believe the focus of teens on specific platforms to be both ubiquitous and ephemeral. Neither do we distinguish between the use of girls and boys when it comes to negative posts. 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 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 define stakeholders as students, staff, parents, and community members. 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. They ask school leaders to "think about the ebb and flow of life from seeming instability to renewed and transformed models of stability (Shapiro & Gross, 2013, p. 51). We believe that despite the negative effects of the ways that some students abuse social media, such positive transformation is possible through closer study and understanding of the phenomena.

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 (2020) 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. 1.

FIGURE 1
INTERSECTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITH HOME, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY



Source: Robinson, Bowen, and Lane (2023)

We argue that social media is a cultural leveler that influences the learning of youth. We apply several frameworks that help us understand the data. First, we apply Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes observation and modeling and the influence of environments and cognitive factors (Bandura, 1971). The social learning theory postulates that learning occurs through observation. Teens model what they see on social media. They also model the actions and comments of others. For a small group, this becomes a recursive, destructive cycle.

Foundational to the social learning theory are the following: (a) individuals as social beings, (b) knowledge as a matter of competence, (c) knowing as a matter of active engagement, and (d) meaning is what is produced when learning takes place. When students engage in viewing social media, the behaviors they observe influence their desire to replicate what they see.

Zhang, et al. (2021) posit that social capital theories suggest that social media create "temporal" and spatial environments that "contribute to social capital development and individual wellbeing" (p. 2) and help teens develop positive coping mechanisms. In a minority of events, the online environments allow for

the fermentation of negative development as well. Vannucci, et al. (2021) present the co-construction model that emphasizes that online and offline contexts within which adolescents are immersed are strongly interconnected. Adolescents, therefore, bring to the social media context their offline developmental issues related to identity, autonomy, peer relationships, sexuality, and risk-taking and sensation-seeking. According to this model, 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 seek risky and sometimes aggressive behavior that they would be less likely to demonstrate face-to-face (Center for Disease Control, 2023; Jones, et al. 2022; Vanucci, et al., 2021).

Finally, we apply the cultural lens of Africana to view our data. Conyers (2004) argues for the concept of Africana studies as a discipline that captures fundamental interconnections in the global Black experience. Conyers uses the terms “African American studies, Black studies, and Africology interchangeably, referring to the study of African phenomena from an Afrocentric perspective” (1997, p. 119; 2004). He explains that “traditional disciplines have fallen short in their aim and objective to examine African phenomena because of the employ of a Eurocentric economic perspective” (1997, p. 119). Conyers argues that Africology presents

a corrective and alternative to the orientation of traditional disciplines. This discipline intellectually transforms an epistemology of sciences from a geocentric position to a holistic convergence. Consequently, such challenges are labeled as dysfunctionism or demagoguery studies by transgressors who employ a Eurocentric hegemonic perspective (1997, p. 120).

He continues, “The Afrocentric perspective seeks to provide critical analysis and insight to examine the Africana diasporic experience. From this particular worldview, black studies scholars focus on authentic representations of African diasporic history, ethos, and motifs” (1997, p. 120). Conyers cautions against using things that he calls “cultural deficiency theories that see racial inequality is emanating from cultural values and traits” (2002, p. 251). He sees such theories as seeking to blame the victim, rather than seeking a viable solution.

When we began planning this chapter, we expected that the application of an Africana lens would help us better understand the experiences of the students we observed. We discovered a more complex diaspora for which we did not have enough information to analyze. Through our discussions, we have come to understand the trap of applying a European hegemonic view to understand the experiences of the students we observed.

Research Questions

Specifically, our exploratory study aimed to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How are teens’ social media postings related to significant events in their school?

RQ2. How are teens’ social media postings related to significant events in their homes?

RQ3. How are teens’ social media postings related to significant events in their communities?

RQ4. How do teens’ social media postings reflect incidents found in impoverished African American 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. In his role he hears the appeals of students whose principals have recommended placement to an alternative setting because of the students' disruptive events. Hearings include presentations by school administrators, followed by rebuttals or explanations by parents and/or students. Following the presentations by all parties, he makes recommendations on the schools' requests. Placement may include a movement to another school, a recommendation the school board for expulsion, or a return to the student's home school.

Jim's observations resulted from approximately 100 hearings in which students were presented by their principals for expulsion or placement to an alternative setting, based on their disruptive actions. Hearings typically included the student and at least one parent. Settings typically were the students' homes. Outliers included two from detention centers, one from a homeless shelter, and one from a sidewalk outside a parent's workplace. Meetings were more often held on Zoom, allowing some insight into the homelife of the student. Others were held on the phone via a conference call. As noted earlier, our conclusions are based on our observations and interactions with participants, rather than formal interviews. He estimates that 30% would be considered affluent, based on the setting. Approximately 40% of the hearings were with African Americans, with those events split between impoverished and middle class. Shaquanah's observations evolved from numerous conversations with students over the same period. She has also chosen representative interactions that she believes represent the interaction of students, community, and social media. We purposively chose 20 scenarios that we believe are representative of the negative applications of social media among schools and communities. Shaquanah's observations are based on conversations with African-American students from impoverished families.

This essay began through extended conversations about our observations of the effects of social media on the behavior of middle and high school students. This presentation is the result. We collected our observations during the 2022-2023 school years. During periodic meetings, we discussed incidents regarding students' uses of social media and the detrimental effects on school climates. As we analyzed incidents, we began to see similarities among the characteristics and patterns of incidents. We are sharing narratives based on our personal observations. When we present digital messages, we have altered the text so that they represent the meaning but cannot be traced in order to protect the identities of the writers. Because of the sensitivity of the comments and the pervasive nature of digital communications, we are describing scenarios that we see as consistent based on our experiences and observations across multiple school fronts and spanning two school years, fall of 2021 through spring of 2023.

We did not interview students or their parents regarding the specific focus of this essay. We agree that we make assumptions regarding the backgrounds of our participants. We do know, however, that many come from impoverished neighborhoods, and our observations are that many come from families of single parents. 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

Research Questions

Specifically, our exploratory study aimed to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How are Teens' Social Media Postings Related to Significant Events in Their School?

Phones Are Ubiquitous Tools to Plan, Record, and Share Incidents

As we note above, 90% or more of teens have cell phones. While we do not have specific data for impoverished students, phones seem to be widely pervasive among all demographic groups of teens. We see mobile phones as primary venues for the creation, transmission, and consumption of digital media.

Phones become conduits for discourse. Phones used as cameras and digital communication devices. Specific examples include Snapchat, Texts, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. We understand this is not an exhaustive list, and that preferred digital platforms may change. Phones as conduits for discourse – they cause fights and serve as the primary communicators.

Students are repeatedly in trouble for refusing to put away their phones. One student is talking to a parent on the phone. Another student grabs the phone and makes obscene remarks.

In class, a boy and a girl are arguing and exchanging insults. The girl attempts to take a photo of the boy. The boy grabs her phone and attacks her, smashing her head against the wall, resulting in her receiving a bloody lip and chipped tooth.

We found several examples of the recording of fights within classrooms. The filming does provide the administrative team with evidence of what happens during the investigation process, but the sharing with family and friends creates space for teasing and bullying– especially for the loser. One fight showed a student who threw a desk at another student and began to beat the student down. There was no evidence of any adult stepping in, nor did students step in to stop it. Many stood there, filming the incident as it took place. One student sent the video to the victim’s mother, further spreading the negative impact of the event.

Use of Digital Media to Arrange Sexual Liaisons

We found several examples of students coordinating sexual liaisons during school hours. In several incidents, students arranged to meet in restrooms to engage in sexual activities. In these incidents, restrooms were individual, private cubicles. In other incidents, students arranged to meet in various locations of the school, even including hallways between classes. Ironically, hallway and campus cameras often capture these actions.

Digital Media Channel Restrooms as Venues

Students use digital media to plan, film, post fights and affrays, as well as to arrange liaisons for sex. The attraction is that these sites are shielded from school cameras. Students schedule incidents in the restrooms during class changes or class restroom breaks. These may be more mundane acts of destruction, like vandalizing sinks or stuffing toilets with paper towels. More often these are fights resulting in physical harm to one or more students. Students often orchestrate by texting others to get permission to go to the restroom. Some of the students join in, while others watch. We found numerous counts of these incidents, posted on social media.

RQ2: How Are Teens’ Social Media Postings Related to Significant Events in Their Homes?

Sexting Is Prominent as Both Threat and Amusement

We found sexting common among the vignettes we studied. Foody, et al. (2023) explain sexting as “the sending and/or receiving of sexual images, videos, or texts within the peer network” (p. 10) and note this as increasingly normative behavior among teens. Karasava, et al. (2023) have specifically defined the practice of *cyberflashing* as “the unsolicited sending of nude or sexual images ... typically met with a negative reaction from the receiver” (p. 1).

In one example, a male student photographed another male student’s genitals as he was urinating, then circulated the image to other students. He said it was a joke and saw no harm in his actions. Another student circulated nude photos of several students to parents and other students. Another posted that the genitalia of another student and said she had a genital infection. The post quickly circulated throughout the school. Another student filmed her sexual activity and posted the video with a small group on social media. In retribution for an earlier conflict, a student airdropped the video to an entire grade level who in turn shared it with all their friends. In about 20 minutes, the video circulated around the school, prompting the temporary disablement of the school’s WiFi services.

Insulting, Bullying, and Threatening Online Are Pervasive

On Snapchat, a student said he would bring a Glock gun to school to take care of another student. Another student posted a photo of himself holding a gun and threatening to come to school to shoot other students. In a group chat, a student threatened campus violence against another student. “N*****s found me laxing one time. Now it’s over because n*****s ain’t laxing any more. They don’t want to die over school.” Following an argument on social media the previous night, a female student confronted another student in the school courtyard. She yelled, “There you go” and started fighting the student. The attacker resisted teacher interventions, kicking and screaming and hitting the school resource officer. A student confronted a former friend on social media, writing, “Imma beat your shit.” The exchange culminated in a fight in the restroom the next day.

We also found incidents of students threatening teachers. One student was angry at a teacher for disciplining him. He sent threatening messages to the teacher on a Twitter account he created. The student also called and texted the teacher on her private cell, saying he was outside her house, resulting in the teacher posting an injunction against the student. Another student posted obscenities threatening a teacher on the school’s internal learning system platform.

RQ3: How are Teens’ Social Media Postings Related to Significant Events in Their Communities?

Arguments Become Recursive Events Cycling Among Home, Community, and School

In one representative example, a fight that began in school continued into the neighborhood. Walking home, several students began to fight. Some parents arrived and called the police. All the actions were recorded and posted to social media. The fighting rolled over into school again the following day. In a different event, a new student entered the school building for the first time. She was greeted by students she knew from the neighborhood and others she had encountered via social media. She soon began experiencing difficulties with socially adjusting and was quickly involved in a fight. An investigation determined that an abundance of text messages, social media posts, and *likes/shares* contributed to a group affray that disrupted an entire class. In another event tying neighborhood and school, a student learned on social media that his friend’s family had been arrested. This sparked depression for him and embarrassment for his family.

In several examples, students admitted that they spend hours at home browsing social media, arguing with classmates and bringing arguments back to school. One student shared,

“They will not disrespect me like that.”

“Like what?”

“They talking about me.”

Each time she returned to school, the pattern continued.

Parents as Active Participants

We found several incidents of parents engaging with students and posting insults about each other online. In one case, a mother used her daughter’s phone to attack her daughter’s boyfriend on Snapchat, writing, “You are a smart ass, disrespectful, low-class a*****e.” The mother warned him to stay away from her daughter. She later came to the boyfriend’s house and warned his parents that he should stay away from her daughter. The parents captured on their doorbell camera and posted the scene.

In a scenario recorded by several students and parents and posted on social media, students were gathered in front of the school during dismissal. A mother began yelling at other students, using profanity, and making obscene and aggressive verbal gestures. Her daughter pushed another girl and instigated a fight. Her mother then also pushed another girl. Two mothers then began fighting before police arrived.

RQ4: How Do Teens' Social Media Postings Reflect Incidents Found in Impoverished African American Communities?

Although this question began as a key component of our discussion, we have realized that we do not have enough information to respond responsibly to this question. We explain in more detail below.

DISCUSSION

Most of these issues occur because of mobile phones. If the students are not posting to social media platforms, they are being social and sharing information with one another through the power of the phone. Conflicts begin either digitally or physically, in either the community or school. Lines are blurred between physical school and community. Social media has become the new community that transcends physicality.

We believe the conceptual frameworks we describe above help explain these phenomena. Bandura's social learning model (1971) is an appropriate frame. In each case we reviewed, students followed models for negative posts in an ever-recursive cycle until, in these cases, events erupted into violent school events. As we explained earlier, the behaviors teens observe online influence their desire to replicate comments and actions.

Social learning theories presented by Zhang, et al. (2021) describe the isolation and atemporal environment that allows teens to create both positive and, unfortunately, negative communication. We also saw that teens were active designers as explained by the co-construction model (Vannucci, et al., 2021). The intermediate stage of their neurological development also helps explain the willingness of some teens to say and do things that pose a danger to themselves and others.

Students and parents often say they were misunderstood and that they did not intend physical harm. Thus, digital media, through various conduits and platforms, create seamless communities in which students move interchangeably between digital and physical environments. In some cases, parents become active participants. We saw these as dysfunctional scenarios that deserve further study. The above incidents represent African American, Hispanic, and White students and are not exclusive to race or income. We found that students of all demographic categories use social media to create or exacerbate crises among home, community, and school.

We found that students who seemed to be more affluent more often had access to outside counseling and more often lived in two-parent households. Often, we found that those parents were able to provide supplementary education for their children outside of school, when the parents of more impoverished students could not. As we explain above, we agree that we make assumptions regarding the income and family status of some of our participants. We do know, however, that many come from impoverished neighborhoods, and our observations are that they come from families of single parents. These are, admittedly, subjective rather than empirical observations, since our discussion comes from our recounting of previous experiences and observations. Nonetheless, we believe that our presentation shows a range of experiences typical of youth, as well as African American teens, who utilize social media for both negative and positive ends.

An interesting characteristic we noted was that White students would periodically apply Black slang in their messages. Specifically, the words *n***a* and *n****r* were often used to verbally attack other students, regardless of their ethnicity. Smitherman has identified such language as Black vernacular (1995) or idiom (2017). We also found other examples of slang used by students of all ethnicities. We simply mark the phenomenon and believe it worthy of further semantic study. Matias notes, "Digital texts, in and of themselves, are not benign reflectors of society. They have the power to not only transmit messages of whiteness; they can also reify the existing power" (2020, p. 27). We believe the issue is of sufficient concern that it warrants further study, specifically investigating teens' use of social media in African American communities.

While we proposed to study the impact of Africana, we did not find a specific difference between the ways that students from predominantly White and minority communities employ social media... While we

do believe our examples reflect the lives and angst of our students, we do not know that they are representative of deeper aspects of the Africana phenomena.

While we find this admission unsettling, we note Conyers' observation that "the Eurocentric hegemonist method of analysis examines social problems beginning with studying the consequences of problem rather than its creation" (2000, p. 31). Indeed, perhaps we were guilty of this view at the start of our discussion. We focused on consequences, which we viewed as events circulating recursively among school, community, and home. We do not seek out causes and admit that we do not have enough data to make an application of an Africana lens to interpret the ways that African American youth apply social media. We believe that to offer generalizations regarding Black families based on our few observations would raise intense and deserved criticism from both Conyers and those who follow his writings. Thus, we make no such claims.

Conyers observes,

The concept of race still presents a dilemma and paradox concerning Africana continental and diasporic people's quest to advance, and more importantly, employ the idea of cultural and political autonomy. Nevertheless, not just focusing on the hierarchy and subordination of gender, in the Africana community, black people throughout the world will and must and should consider to seek or locate a collective consciousness and describing, enumerating, and evaluating the historical and cultural condition of African people, from a lens, prism, and perspective that reaffirms their own experiences (2000, p. 35).

Perhaps the ubiquitous use of social media across all levels of young American society, regardless of ethnicity, financial background, or geography argues against this unifying aspect of Africana. At the same time, the use of social media may be seen as a unifying factor among African American youth. Not all social media are used for negative ends. Certainly, digital media can be used for good. We submit that applying Conyers' Africana lens to the diaspora of African American communities can be used as a uniting tool, rather than one of discord. It is there that we see hope.

Conyers argues,

The genesis of real social inequality, as opposed to mere social differentiation, is rooted in the evolution of the production process. The existence of surplus was a precondition for structured inequality. Economic inequality is basic to an understanding of general social inequality, but a comprehensive view of inequality does not end here, for economic inequality makes possible other forms of inequality (2002, pp. 249-250).

As we noted above, nearly all students have cell phones and Internet access, regardless of their race or economic level. We observed no differences in the uses of social media and cell phones between the black and white students we observed. Thus, a sort of pyric victory may be that that specific economic inequity has been reconciled.

Conyers cautions against using things that he calls cultural deficiency theories that see racial inequality is emanating from cultural values and traits." (2002, p. 251). He sees such theories as seeking to blame the victim. Conyers argues for three strategies for remedying racial and inequality: the civil rights strategy, affirmative action strategy, and the ladder out of poverty strategy. We see the application of an Africana lens to the uses of social media among African American communities as an example of an understanding of this powerful tool as a ladder out of poverty and discord. We stand with Conyers in embracing the "impact and residual effects of institutional and individual racism as a hindrance to the progression of African Americans" (1997, p.118) and believe a deeper study of the uses of social media can further this cause.

Conyers argues, "The purpose of African American studies is a key proponent in examining the problems of the African diaspora. It is also key in attempting to solve problems through theory and practice period this means that an Afrocentric perspective of studying humanity is not hegemonic but an alternative

view” (2004, p. 6). An application of an Africana lens suggests that initial attempts to understand these phenomena from a White hegemonic perspective are inadequate and show that the issues require more detailed scrutiny. We believe the use of African American students and their uses of social media for both positive and negative ends deserves further study. Awareness of events through an Africana cultural perspective reveal resilience and opportunities for transformation.

We join Conyers in underscoring the importance of this area of study regarding the impact of social media on African American youth: “Let us collectively accept the challenge of intellectual rigor and academic integrity, in the pursuit of providing critical studies that seek to describe and evaluate the historical and cultural experiences of African Americans” (1997, p. 122).

Social media are rich with a variety of platforms and venues. As we note, Facebook, Tik Tok, and Instagram are only a few examples of this evolving milieu. As noted, almost all students, regardless of income or ethnicity, have access to mobile phones and digital media. Africana theory 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 uses of social media as examples of resilience and opportunities for transformation for African American and Hispanic youth.

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