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The Risks of Social Media

Pumphrey Law Scholarship Essay

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Prompt: Write a typed essay 800-1000 words on the following topic: the Dangers of Social Media: How Social Media can impact your reputation, your future, and even lead to criminal charges.

With the rapid development and spread of technology, social media has seemingly engulfed the world. By simply using a phone or computer to create a social media account, everyone has the capability to post their thoughts online for the whole world to see. However, this simplicity has led to recklessness for many users, and in some cases, that recklessness has dire consequences. Alicia Ann Lynch faced the wrath of the Internet firsthand when she dressed as a survivor of the Boston Marathon bombings for Halloween and decided to post the costume on Twitter and Instagram. Soon, survivors of the bombings were calling her out, saying that she “should be ashamed” and “needed a filter”. Others were harsher, as they said she “deserved to be raped” and threatened to “slit her throat” as well as her parents’ (Giacobbe). The consequences did not stop there though. Her manager at work was notified about the post, and she was fired from her job the next month. Lynch has since apologized for her Halloween costume and has claimed that she even discussed the costume with a survivor whom she knew. However, the damage to her reputation had already been done, with the top searches on Google criticizing her choice of costume as well as her character. Alicia’s story is one of many unfortunate examples of social media’s profound reach, and new cases arise each day.

There is no doubt that the number of smartphone and social media users is increasing every day. In the United States, 69% of adults actively use at least one social media platform, and the average number of accounts per person is 7.1 (Newberry). Teens and young adults are the most likely to use social media, with 81% using social media according to Benjamin Herold of *Education Week*. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram are several of the most popular platforms, and the majority of users visit the platforms multiple times a day (Perrin). With hundreds of millions of users on all of these websites, there is no shortage of audience to scrutinize and opine on controversial posts. The most common way for users to damage their future and

reputation is to post inappropriate content. What a user may fail to understand in this case is that many other users do not know him/her, so the post may be one of only a few posts that other users can use to assume his/her personality. Other users will not know if an offensive post is meant as a joke. Furthermore, if an offensive post is shared enough times, the user's personal or professional lives may be impacted. For example, they could be suspended from school or subject to intense criticism from their friends and family. Sometimes, users may overshare on social media. While the information is usually harmless, there have been cases where the user may give out confidential knowledge. This can lead to court cases as well as significant fines if the breach is severe enough. An indirect way that social media may harm someone is if other users spread lies and unfair insults about him/her. Although this might not result from the user's mistake, this is still a way that social media can impact the reputation of an individual. Finally, social media has the capability to ruin lives by damaging users' health. Although it is not usual, social media addiction does exist. According to psychological journal *Cyberpsychology*, social media addiction can negatively affect the user's mental health as well as academic performance.

The clearest way to see the effects of posts on social media is through examples. One high-profile story regarding social media occurred recently in the academic world. Kyle Kashuv, a survivor of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, is a well-known supporter of gun rights whose views vastly differed from many of his peers. Thus, he became a celebrity for the pro-gun movement. His accomplishments in politics as well as his exceptional academics gained him admission into Harvard University. However, in May 2019, a series of Google Docs and text messages from when he was sixteen came back to haunt Kashuv. In these, Kashuv had used racist language and described a fellow African-American student in condescending way. Kashuv ultimately paid the price for his behavior, as Harvard decided to rescind his acceptance and organizations quickly cut ties with him (Beauchamp). In another example, a college student named Dana Snay posted about her parent's court victory against Gulliver Prep in Miami. However, this post violated the confidentiality

agreement in the case, and her family ended up paying \$80,000 to the school (Giacobbe). Social media played a crucial position in a court case now known as *Largent v. Reed*. The plaintiff sued the defendants for physical and mental trauma from a recent accident. However, the defendants believed that the plaintiff had been posting status updates on Facebook that she had been able to go to the gym. Thus, she was forced to hand over her Facebook login information (Meyer). Social media posts have also led to arrests and criminal charges. A 19-year-old Florida man named Depress Johnson posted Instagram photos with guns, cash, and other dangerous substances. Eventually, police found his account and raided his home, where they found around \$250,000 worth of stolen goods (Taylor). Each of these examples illustrates the serious implications and responsibilities that many people take for granted when they use social media.

Social media has expanded and updated to a point where many users cannot possibly keep track of the people who have access to their posts. As a result, one inappropriate post or comment has the potential to cause a flurry of outbursts and other verbal attacks. It is important for users to learn from the mistakes of others in the past. A careful online presence may prevent a lifetime of regret.

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*Canva was used to create the cover page.

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