Social Media Safety For Teachers And Schools

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EDUCATION

Maxxia Report
Social Media Safety
for Teachers and Schools

The growth of social media in schools

Social media is an integral part of modern life, with over three billion users expected by 2021. This worldwide reach translates to the classroom for both students and staff, making social media in schools more prevalent than ever. Appropriate use of social media to protect all parties is a considerable concern for education professionals, with unions calling out for more guidance in this area.

And yet, this topic is rarely going to be top of the priorities for resource stretched school leaders … until something goes wrong!

It's clear to see that social media is moving towards being ever present in most walks of life, including schools. And with The National Union of Teachers receiving hundreds of worried calls from teachers about this, how are schools responding?

To find out more about this topic, we've surveyed social media policies from schools across the UK, found some interesting insights about these and noted some practical considerations for improving policies in this area.

Consider these statistics:

- 92% of those aged between 16-24 accessed the internet through their mobile last year

- In the UK, there are now 45 million social media users (approximately 67% of the entire population)

- Ofcom estimates 50% of 11-12-year-olds have access to their own social media accounts

Source: statista.com, avocadosocial.com

Teachers on social media: what OFSTED says

OFSTED's guidance for inspectors makes a point of referencing the personal use of social media for staff. Under the subsection 'Creating a safeguarding culture in the school', OFSTED requires inspectors to verify that "leaders and managers oversee the safe use of electronic and social media by staff..." meaning that schools are held accountable for the sensible social media use by their staff.

The majority of the policies reviewed as part of our survey left the responsibility of creating the policy, and therefore adhering to this regulation, down to the headteacher and governors of the school. With such a crucial policy left to be created by those with little time to dedicate to the task, it's possible that policies are missing what government bodies deem to be important facets and considerations.

Recommendation:

Consider a board of volunteers, made up of teachers and school leaders to look after the social media policy for the school.

OFSTED also requires leaders to "...take action immediately if they are concerned about bullying or risky behaviours" on social media. We found that 25% of the policies reviewed had no mention of bullying, including the prevention or monitoring of bullying behaviours online.

A simple step, such as this, could result in the early detection of problems with staff, students and parents. Worryingly, 30% of policies didn't mention safeguarding at all, something actively sought after by OFSTED inspectors. This would mean an educational institution might be open to review, or deemed to be non-compliant with these rules – even if all staff follow the school's social media policy to the letter.

Social media safety: maintaining your school's integrity

Aside from the regulatory implications, sparse guidelines for personal social media use can lead to accusations of online misconduct. Coupled with the possibility of online abuse from both parents and students, the risks of poor online monitoring are considerable and can result in damage to school and staff reputation. There are increasingly frequent cases where teachers have been dismissed as a direct result of their behaviour on personal social media sites and your school should place importance on building a well-rounded policy.

Policy length

We found the average length of a social media policy is **6.6 pages.** While in general, the longer policies explored a larger array of topics, they often were brief or top-level explanations. Some policies spanned as many as **41 pages**, meaning an abundance of information was present, but under further scrutiny, many opportunities to protect staff were still missed.

We also reviewed policies which were barely two pages long, with thin and vague content. These brief documents seem to imply that social media safety was a secondary thought to the school leaders, or merely a 'tick-box' exercise. So what is the optimum policy length? Keeping in mind that a much longer policy becomes more of a chore to write, read and review, it makes sense to keep a balance between ensuring all main points are covered, whilst keeping the document succinct and reader friendly.
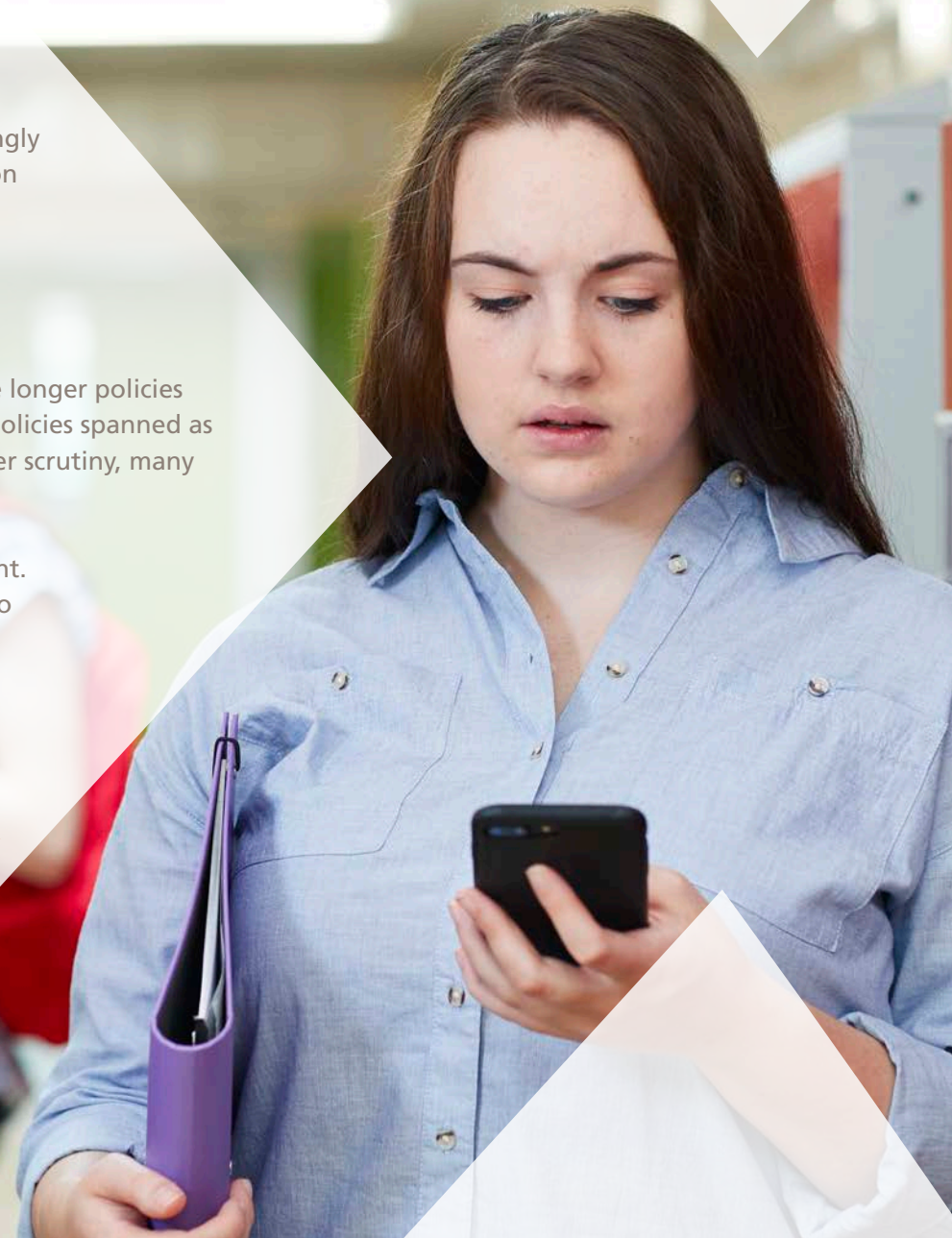
Policy review

We found the average time between policy review is 3.1 years. How much has social media changed in that time? There are new social media platforms joining the market daily, including apps such as Houseparty and TikTok which initiate the sharing of both pre-recorded and live video content. With a review of policies happening only every three years, how are schools keeping up with trends, risks and opportunities?

Recommendation:

Regular reviews should be scheduled - probably annually given the speed of change in this area. As part of this, schools should invest time in becoming aware of new technology emerging into the landscape by actively researching social media use. And conduct regular internet searches, talk to staff and students and keep up to date with technology news. In doing so, you'll help to mitigate risks associated with staff not understanding the current social media landscape and the implications for their own social media use.

Dating apps

Not one of the policies reviewed mentioned the personal use of dating apps. Many social media platforms of this nature use geo-targeting to connect users together – a particular concern for secondary school teachers, where many students are likely to use these apps. It's possible that a teacher could inadvertently connect with an older student while on school grounds, thus acting inappropriately and breaching their school's social media policy. Until recently, Tinder allowed under 18s to join the platform, with **7%** of users between **13 and 17 years old** (more than the proportion of 35-44 year olds).

Recommendation:

Even if not stated in your school's social media policy, it's advised that staff turn off location settings and geo-targeting for these apps while in or around school property.

Named platforms

During our research, we also found that policies only named a select few social media platforms. This didn't seem to correlate with the top platforms or the average user age. Almost without exception, policies named Facebook as a primary social media platform (where the average user age is 23-37). While this shows awareness of parents' and teachers' online presence, it doesn't demonstrate that the schools know where pupils are using social media.
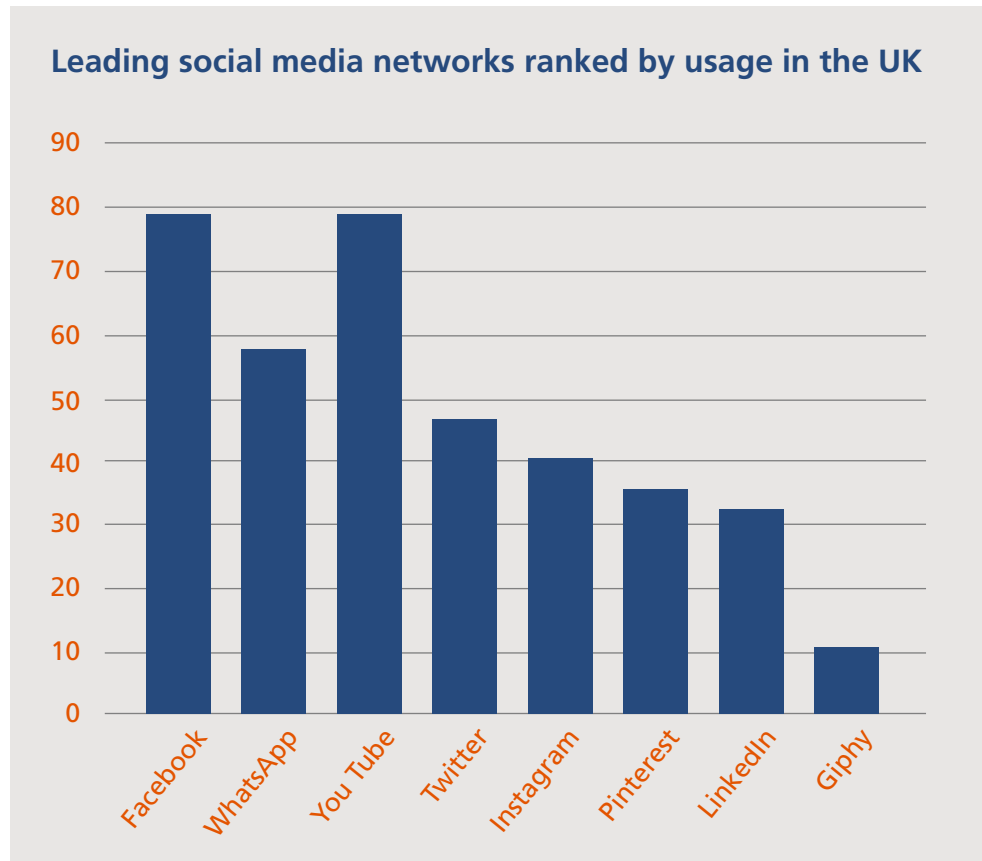
This can be boiled down to knowledge of the technology available as well as general awareness into user behaviour. During our research, we found that more policies mentioned business networking platform LinkedIn, than the popular image sharing app Snapchat. The assumption is that those apps which don't conform to traditional social media platforms in style or use (like SnapChat or TikTok) will be overlooked or disregarded, or that there is a general lack of awareness of the platforms available.

Overview of users:

Platform	No. of active worldwide users*	Average age of users (years)*	Lower age limit for use	% of policies that include this named platform
Facebook	2.32 billion	23-37	13	83%
Twitter	330 million	16-22	13	75%
YouTube	1.9 billion	18-24	13 with parental permission	50%
Instagram	1 billion	18-34	13	29%
LinkedIn	303 million	25-44	16	25%
Snapchat	287 million	18-24	13	19%
WhatsApp	1.6 billion	18-24	16	8%

*Source: avocadosocial.com & statista.com

Top platforms:

Leading social media networks ranked by usage in the UK

Bar chart values (approximate, y-axis 0–90):
- Facebook: ~79
- WhatsApp: ~58
- You Tube: ~79
- Twitter: ~47
- Instagram: ~41
- Pinterest: ~36
- LinkedIn: ~33
- Giphy: ~11

Source: statista.com

Notable new platforms include:

TikTok
A platform for creating and sharing short videos.

Vero
Similar to Instagram, Vero allows for the sharing of movies, photos, books, music, links and other media.

Musical.ly
An app designed to facilitate the creation and sharing of short videos.

Steemit
Using cryptocurrency, Steemit rewards users for sharing posts and creating content that other users 'like'.

Byte
Another video sharing app, this platform stitches videos together to loop infinitely. The videos can then be shared with other users.

NASUWT the Teachers' Union, gives five general guidelines on social media use for teachers, stating that privacy settings should be "adequate" and naming only Facebook and Twitter. Generic guidelines are frequently not enough to reduce the risks to teachers and education providers. While 52% of policies had no mention of required privacy settings for staff, many didn't declare how they felt about teachers connecting with students or colleagues on the platforms, with 44% of policies neglecting to discuss this issue at all.

Privacy settings are an easy way to protect schools online and prevent possible issues with colleagues or students. Teachers' online comments can easily be interpreted as the views of the school and in the most extreme circumstances can bring the whole school into disrepute.

Social media safety: what role do parents play?

How much should parents be held responsible for their own actions or the actions of their children on social media? It's easy for comments posted online to damage the professional reputation of staff and the school. While this is an important consideration for any school's social media policy, only 31% of policies had any mentions of the expected behaviour of parents online. This can leave parents blameless for potentially defamatory comments posted online.

Recommendation:

Set parameters for what should and shouldn't be posted online, outlining points for both teachers and parents to consider. Equally weighting importance on the behaviour of parents and teachers online should help you to work together.

Issues with the use of social media can arise from even well-intentioned staff, parents or students. If a school's social media policy falls short of protecting its staff, the reputation and future of the school could be at risk. By creating an all-encompassing policy detailing the best way to achieve social media safety, you'll be helping to protect the school's reputation and staff from claims of online misconduct. While the actions of individuals online cannot be controlled, the provision of clear guidelines helps to make sure that staff understand the expectations for behaving professionally.

When creating social media guidelines for school employees:

- Keep in mind the protection of staff and the reputation of the school when setting out parameters for online behaviour.
- Take responsibility for the social media policy in your school – no matter your position. If you feel that the policy isn't enough to protect staff, speak up.
- Mention within your policy any rules or guidelines for parental use of social media. Alternatively, have separate guidelines to outline your schools' expectations for parents online.
- Keep in mind the age of your students. A secondary school social media policy should additionally provide guidance on social media safety through using privacy settings on dating apps.
- When it comes to creating, maintaining and reviewing the social media policy of your school, regular research is key. Monitor trends in social media and review and update the policy at least every 12 months. Once a date for review of the policy has been set, stick to this and make necessary amends.

Sources:

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- https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/754198/Inspecting_safeguarding_guidance_061118.pdf
- Maxxia social media policy research – 36 school policies from 18 primary schools, 15 secondary schools, 2 school trusts and 1 council. Dated from November 2010 to January 2019 - reviewed in March 2019.

About Maxxia

At Maxxia, we arrange leasing solutions for a wide range of equipment and school improvements, from minibuses to temporary classrooms, or computers to catering equipment. Whatever funding requirements your educational establishment has, Maxxia gives you the most cost-effective, compliant and transparent leasing methods available.

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