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How to Keep Your College Admission Offer: Start With Digital Literacy
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Harvard has rescinded acceptance offers to at least 10 incoming freshmen who posted offensive jokes about school shootings, the Holocaust, bestiality and the death of children and minorities — among other obscene topics — to a private Facebook group.

The jokes were posted in the form of memes, those photographs or images overlaid with captions that you see everywhere on the internet. That young people post offensive memes on Facebook is not news. What's unique about this situation is that Harvard found out about incoming students who were doing so and retracted their admission, sending a strong message that this kind of behavior is unacceptable.

One of the jokes referred to the hypothetical hanging of a "Mexican kid" in the school bathroom as "piñata time." Another, an image of a Pokémon lying in bed with an erection, was captioned: "When you're tryna sleep but your neighbor is beating his kids." Most of the memes could not be printed or explained in this newspaper.

This situation is a stark reminder of our collective failing to teach the first generation of digital natives — those who were born and raised on high-speed internet — that there are real-life consequences for virtual actions.

Since Facebook became widely available, incoming freshman classes have connected with one another in Facebook groups before arriving on campus. Each graduating class usually has its own group. But splinter groups also form, and meme groups with names like "Yale Memes for Special Snowflake Teens" or "MIT Memes for Intellectual Beings and Spicy Memelords" are especially popular right now. The group that got the would-be Harvard students in trouble was a private meme group that only students who posted provocative memes could join.

You almost have to feel bad for these kids. They don't realize: "Privacy" ain't privacy anymore. It just means your mom might not know about something you did immediately after you did it.

A few years ago I started teaching workshops to high school and college students about the importance of maintaining a clean digital reputation. I wanted to ensure that they learned that the things you type, post and share behind a computer screen can still impact your life.

I am of the bridge generation that remembers life before social media permeated everything, but cannot imagine life without it now. I was a sophomore at the University of Illinois in 2004, the year "TheFacebook" launched and was made available to college students who went to Ivy League and Big 10 schools. I signed up for the new social network, and never looked back (except shadily) at BlackPlanet or Myspace.

When I graduated from college in 2006, I went into marketing and ended up introducing the organizations I worked for to social media. It turned out these platforms we kids were all loitering on could be used for business! It was perfect for my next move. I got a job as a marketing coordinator at a nonprofit that taught other nonprofits how to tell their stories through social media and on the web. My position expanded: I started coaching and teaching social media strategy.

A year into my job, I found out from my boss how he'd decided to hire me for the role. He was down to two candidates who were equally qualified but I had the cleaner online reputation, meaning that nothing weird came up when he Googled my name.

Today's young'uns — would we call them Generation Z? — have more than just a few years of a digital trail. They were born into the technology age, and all they know is fast internet. This means, of course, that they will never know the trials and tribulations of leaving your computer on overnight so you could download a single song from Kazaa. They probably don't even know what Kazaa is. But they are in the most danger in terms of their digital reputations: They can be made or broken from the permanent digital record of actions they don't even fully understand.

In my workshops for young adults, the most important thing I emphasize is that anything posted online, no matter how private they think it is, is permanent.

Then I tell them how they can avoid pitfalls and big mistakes, while still staying true to themselves. I am in a great position to do that, as I make my living as a cultural critic who doesn't shy away from speaking up and out. You do not have to be an incredibly sanitized or boring version of yourself online, I tell them. You can still show the most colorful, funny side of who you are, without embarrassing your family's good name. But if you wouldn't want something you posted to end up on a jumbotron in Times Square, DO NOT POST IT.

With that advice, provocative memes, and that act of keyboard courage it takes to post them, become a little less attractive.

Digital literacy couldn't have helped kids who thought referring to a Mexican child as piñata was funny — that's a much deeper issue that falls on the shoulders of their families and communities. Jokes like the ones that were shared in the private group of would-be Harvard students went well beyond provocative and well into the territory of hate speech. But for your average teen, a quick class in the rules of online conduct could mean the difference between a youthful indiscretion kept private and a life derailed by immaturity that became public.

Digital media literacy is just as important as financial literacy now: Who we appear to be online can significantly impact earning power. This isn't just a lesson for young adults. Adults are certainly making these same mistakes. But if we can teach high school and college students these lessons now, we can better prevent them from stumbling. And prevention is always better than treatment.