

Millennials tweet like twits

The Millennial Generation has already been criticized for narcissism, a lack of motivation and ignorance of current events. But recently some millennials have added to the infamy by defaming young females on social media with sexually explicit comments and photographs and rationalizing it as acceptable.

It began in January when Penn State's Kappa Delta Rho fraternity allegedly posted photos of nude or partly nude women, some asleep or passed out, on an invitation-only Facebook page. When the national leadership of the fraternity suspended the chapter "for the most serious misconduct," one of its members could not understand it, insisting that "nobody was killed, nobody was hurt."

Then, earlier this month, several New Jersey college students tweeted lewd remarks about Gabby Schilling after her father, Curt, posted a congratulatory tweet for her acceptance to a Rhode Island college. One of the students dismissed it as "just a joke." But that didn't stop the former Phillies' pitcher from pressing charges.

And last week, a Bloomsburg University

baseball player was removed from the team after posting an offensive tweet about Little League World Series phenomenon, Mo'ne Davis.

Having taught at the undergraduate level for the last 15 years, I know that most college students believe themselves to be "cyber invincible." I also realize that as recently as a few years ago, such incidents of cyberbullying would have been dismissed as little more than a prank.

Victims usually ignored what was written about them or accepted it as part of free speech. Few sued for defamation because they didn't think it was worth the time, energy and resources to pursue the matter in court.

But today there is a growing intolerance for libel, whether in print or social media. If the victim is sufficiently upset by what has been said about them, they are more willing to exercise their legal rights.

Twitter defamation cases, in particular, have become more common and are likely to increase in the future. That makes the Millennial Generation



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vulnerable to litigation because of its widespread use of social media as well as its considerable ignorance of defamation law.

Although there is no single legal definition of "defamation," the term is generally defined as information

that is false and reduces the reputation of an individual or business in the eyes of others, especially if it can be proven to be untrue.

Defamation can be written (libel), or verbal (slander). "Libel" occurs when an untrue statement is written in a book, newspaper, magazine, film, in an email, on a website, blog, chat room or social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter. "Slander" occurs when the defamatory comments are spoken, but it can also refer to photographs and cartoons that appear in print or online.

Unlike the cyber bullies who make sexually explicit or racist statements, many college students run the risk of posting potentially defamatory comments as opinions. But prefacing their remarks by writing "I think" or "I believe" does

not protect them from a libel suit. Sometimes statements of opinion really are viewed as statements of fact, depending on the circumstances.

I remind all of my students that ignorance is not an excuse. If they are blogging or writing on a Facebook page, or submitting comments on someone else's blog or Facebook page, they must be certain that their facts are accurate before posting the statement online. Or, alternatively, if they cannot determine the accuracy of the facts, don't say it at all. Once they click "send," it can't be taken back.

The Internet and social media are certainly beneficial for our society when used responsibly. But those tools also provide an especially fertile breeding ground for potentially libelous statements.

Today's millennials must think before they tweet, bearing in mind that it can be retweeted as well as found by others in online searches. Hopefully the recent cases of cyberbullying will serve as a much needed wake-up call for the Millennial Generation.

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