

## **Boundaries, Privacy, and Social Media Use in Higher Education: What do Students Think, Want, and Do?**

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### **Abstract**

In this study, we examine university students' beliefs and behaviors related to social media, identity, and boundaries in a higher education context. Findings suggest a complex and at times contradictory relationship between students and social media, in which they enjoy free access to information about and contributed by other people and freely share about themselves in a social or personal context, but are reticent to be active contributors in an academic context. Although students seek information about their instructors online, they do not believe that instructors might reciprocate. In contrast to a common assumption, they do not want to use social media in their coursework and prefer to restrict both their communication with instructors and coursework to private tools and settings.

### **Keywords**

Higher education; social media; identity; boundaries

### **Introduction and Background**

Social media use is rampant in American culture, and higher education is one setting that is no exception. Students and professors alike are using social media in their everyday lives as well as to support learning and instruction, and consequently it is no surprise that the two worlds – school and personal – might overlap or collide at points. Tensions around identity are at the core of this phenomenon. Marshall (2010) in his examination of celebrity persona development via social media notes that there is an inextricable relationship between audience and performance. This performance of a particular persona for a particular audience implies that there can be multiple personas in seemingly clearly defined social arenas – school and personal, for example. The boundaries, however, between these areas while clearly defined are not impenetrable. Individuals may perform one component of their identity online for a particular audience only to find that an unintended audience has come across their information. If intentionally including social media in educational endeavors fosters the potential for the personal to become an active part of the learning environment, then exploring how students use social media can help refine the thinking about how those media can be used most efficaciously.

Despite the increasingly common assumption that social media will positively impact student performance, research in this area does not support this assumption. For example, Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) and Junco (2012) found that Facebook users had lower GPAs and spent less time on content-related course activities.

Additionally, classes are typically considered semi-private spaces, but social media shifts this boundary. Zdravkova, Ivanovic, and Putnik (2012) note in their study of integrating Web 2.0 features into a closed learning environment: “The most sensitive thing was openly publicized personal beliefs different from others” (p. 377). The use of social media in an open learning environment shifts this concern from a classroom to the world at large, albeit the digital one.

### **Research Questions**

In this survey study, we examine the social media habits and beliefs of university students with a focus on privacy and identity management issues. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What types of communications and networking technologies to students use for school versus personal purposes?
2. How savvy are students about maintaining and protecting their online identity?
3. What are students' beliefs about social media use, privacy, and boundaries in a higher education context?

## Method

This study was conducted via an online survey, which asked questions about social media use in higher education, focusing on privacy and boundary issues. Participants were enrolled in education courses at a large research university. They were recruited for participation via a subject pool; students in participating courses were offered points toward their course grade for either participating in research studies of their choice or completing equivalent assignments. A total of 147 participants (24 male and 123 female) completed the survey during the Fall 2012 semester. Survey items were piloted during the Summer 2012 term.

Data analysis focused on of frequency distributions for closed items. Open-ended items were coded by content, with both frequencies and content reported. Highlights and general trends are reported in this short paper.

## Findings

One hundred thirty four (91%) of the participants represent the 18-24 age group. Ninety percent own a smartphone, and about one-third own a tablet. These tools were used by the most participants to engage in social networking, perform Internet searches, email, and engage in academic activities. Nearly all participants use email, text messaging, and Facebook in their personal lives, with usage rates dropping steeply for the latter two in a school context. Pinterest, Skype, and Twitter were used by more than one-half of the students for personal purposes, but with less frequency for school purposes.

When asked to rank preferred modes of contacting professors, face-to-face and email emerged strongly as the top two methods, with telephone third. The least preferred communication tools were Facebook and Twitter, which may reflect a number of factors, such as a lower rate of professor use, a lack of connection between students and professors via these tools, or the default public nature of communication via these tools. However, it is worth noting that while 55 respondents (37%) indicated having professors as Facebook friends, only 20 (14%) listed it as one of their top three means of communicating with a professor.

The respondents most frequently turn to search engines (99; 67%) to find information about their professors; although, a sizeable contingent also checks Facebook (44; 30%). Most indicate that they are looking for course information (138; 94%) or academic credentials (76; 52%), but eighteen percent (24) are looking for personal information.

However, when the question was asked in reverse, the majority of students (92; 63%) did not think that professors would look them up online. One student succinctly stated a prevailing sentiment: "That is creepy." Those who thought professors might look up students believed the act would be academic related or to determine if the student had been partying. And if professors were to look them up, students believed that professors would find either personal information students posted themselves or information that was posted by their friends about them. Regarding the latter point, students indicated a general concern regarding what others post about them online and the potential for embarrassment. Further, although the majority are aware of privacy controls and indicated they have the skills to use them, most students were ambivalent about actually implementing privacy controls.

Students were not enthusiastic about using social media to support coursework; few felt it should be required (16; 10%) or that instructors should be encouraged to integrate social media (42; 29%). Many are more concerned about the quality of their work when it is posted online (76; 52%), and believe that

their instructor should be the only audience for their assignments (99; 67%). In an interesting contradiction, students believe they have learned from seeing assignments that other people have shared online (91; 62%).

Few students felt comfortable sharing personal information with a class via social media (31; 20%) and many would prefer to remove digital footprints at the end of a course (79; 54%). Even the sizable minority of students who indicated a desire to connect with classmates via social media (63; 43%) were unlikely to want to similarly connect to their instructors in this same manner (16; 10%).

## Conclusions

These students recognize both that they have some privacy options and that they do not fully control their own online identity. They communicate an awareness of the concerns one might have about consequences of online behavior in the world at large, yet maintain a sense of naiveté at the crossroads of social media and higher education. They observe others online, but they do not want to be observed themselves, at least not by an unintended audience. The questions that emerge from this study center around the role social media should play in learning environments and the responsibility of learning organizations that use social media for learning to work to ensure the privacy of both teachers and students. – or at least to help teachers and students identify and address this boundary issue before discomfort occurs.

## References

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