Students' Perceptions of Social Media Technology and its Use in Their Academic Journey

Matt Johnson

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Dr. Curtis Friedel
Dr. Tiffany Drape
Dr. Irene Leech

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Introduction

Social media is a term used to describe digital platforms that connect and engage individuals worldwide. Such platforms can take the form of Instagram, X (formerly, Twitter), Canvas, LinkedIn, Discord, etc. Social media helps users "gain knowledge" of important topics "as well as others' activities, thoughts, and stories" (Zhao & Zhou, 2020, p.1032). Since its creation, social media use has grown tremendously. So much so, that it has almost permeated every aspect of our lives. Educational spaces have especially shown evidence of an "increased use of social networking by students to perform academic activities" (Alamri, 2019, p.64). Social media is ever-present in classrooms, educational centers, and professional settings throughout the world. However, it was once stated that despite social media's prevalence, teaching and learning "in colleges and universities" had "largely remained unchanged" (Tierney et al., 2014, p.2). Now, post the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have switched to online learning platforms to gain their education. Thus, this study was conducted to better understand and explore the changes that have come from social media's presence in the classroom.

Recall the emergence of Web 2.0 technology, or social media, in the early 2000's. Despite its prevalence today, its growth has outpaced that of research on its topic, leaving a shallow "understanding of how and why consumers use and accept social media,

particularly within the context of social media use for learning" (Scholtz et al., 2017, p.6). Teachers and students need to quickly adjust and embrace new technologies (Rhoades et al., 2008). Such technologies have many educational uses, especially regarding online instruction: one, students and educators can connect both socially and professionally; two, educators can provide content, updates, and reminders; third, academic participants can evaluate and analyze content; etc. It is now the year 2024, and social media has been active for over 20 years. As a result, the adoption of this new technology within the classroom has occurred in many regions of the world. While social media is prevalent in today's classrooms, this study will focus on those individuals who attend Virginia Tech and who are currently studying within one of their many online master's degree programs.

There is a gap in the research and a need to revisit Rhoades' study, which examined students' perceptions of new technology within the classroom (Rhoades et al., 2008). Years later, this current study, focused on students' perceptions of social media as it relates to their academic journey, seeks to analyze the evolution, if any, of these perspectives.

An online survey was used to collect data on this topic. The information gathered from the data collection process was then used to support three research objectives: one, to identify student preferences for social media in coordination with online, master's level, school-based learning; two, to determine preferences for social media technology used by Virginia Tech online master's students; and three, to determine those students' preferences as they relate to faculty-student relationships through social media. In

conclusion, this study updates relevant literature on the existence of social media in today's classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

Social media is widespread, yet still misunderstood and underutilized in higher learning, academic settings (Scholtz et al., 2017). With its advent and continued use in online education, not only will there need to be a refreshing of research and understanding conducted on how it is used and perceived, but also how educators can better implement the technology within their spaces. This study should be conducted for three reasons:

- one, to update prior research on this topic – providing relevant information that can be used to connect those within academic settings;
- two, to provide an awareness of how educators can better use and implement social media technology into their curriculum; and
- three, to provide information that can help adjust perceptions that are resistant to the adoption of social media technology, which can hinder the technological development of students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is two-fold: one, to understand the students' perceptions of social media technology and its impact on their academic journey; and two, to compare perceptions now versus what they were in 2008, when a similar study

was originally conducted. In that study, it was stated that “researchers must continue to monitor” students and their instructors as they implement new technologies (Rhoades et al., 2008, pg.36). That was a sound recommendation, as students and instructors have differing levels of understanding and perspectives (Al-Maatouk et al., 2020). Rhoades also noted that educators had made “minimal progress in adopting new Web 2.0” technologies into the classroom (Rhoades et al., 2008, pg.36). At the time, “Web 2.0 technology referred to the ‘new generation of internet’ (Weller & Strohmaier, 2014, pg.1). Now, almost two decades later, Web 3.0 is in active use, and there are even discussions of what Web 4.0 will look like.

Physical campuses are no longer the sole places of higher learning. Online degrees are becoming more widely accepted. Online learning platforms are some of the “fastest growing” avenues through which individuals can expand their education (Farrell & Brunton, 2020, p.1). Not only do these programs offer completion flexibility, they also provide access to people throughout the world. Social media technology can help spread research and academic information, improve the connection between experts, and create opportunities for enhanced learning; yet there is a lack of understanding on how students view such and use such technology (Weller & Strohmaier, 2014). Therefore, newer, more updated research needs to be conducted on this topic.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were developed based on the purposes of this study

1. Identify student preferences for social media in coordination with online, master’s level, school-based learning

2. Determine preferences for social media technology used by Virginia Tech online master's students
3. Determine Virginia Tech online master's students' preferences as they relate to student-faculty relationships through social media

Definition of Terms

COVID-19: "(coronavirus disease 2019) is a disease caused" by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (CDC, 2024). This very contagious disease has caused "over one million" deaths in the United States (CDC, 2024)

Educational centers: places, like colleges and universities, where structured learning occurs

E-Delivery: Electronic delivery; takes place when individuals receive correspondence through electronic means like emails and text

New technology: technology that has recently surfaced and lacks extensive research and understanding

Recency Bias: deeming information that is relatively newly acquired to be more important than information of old, and the tendency to remember recent events more than those of old (Cherry, 2024)

Social media: an umbrella term that describes online social sites like Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter (now, X), Snapchat, TikTok, Canvas, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc., that individuals use to connect and share knowledge, ideas, and experiences (Merriam-Webster-2024)

Systematic approach: a method to ascertain and/or understand information using steps where one progressively leads to the next (Merriam-Webster, 2024)

Web 2.0: one of the earliest forms of social media technology, presented in the early 2000's (Weller & Strohmaier)

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study are primarily related to bias, data collection, and time. I, Matt Johnson, am the primary researcher for this study. Due to my age and position, I am closely related to the age of possible participants in this study. Therefore, this proximity in age may serve to create bias. Rather than ignoring or denying it, I bring it to the forefront to strengthen this research (Underwood et al., 2010). Ultimately, the opportunity for recency bias to take effect is acknowledged (Philips-Wren et al., 2019).

Regarding limitations from data collection processes, the sample for this research is being conducted on a self-selected group of individuals by the nature of their enrollment in one of Virginia Tech's online master's programs. This sample may not adequately represent the millions of higher-learning students who utilize social media technology daily (Raut & Patil, 2016). Nor can these results provide certainty as being representative of the entire online graduate community at Virginia Tech. Furthermore, not all colleges and universities within the United States have programs such as, or like, those offered through Virginia Tech.

Finally, time is also recognized as being a limitation of this study. Research is being conducted during the summer semesters. These sessions are shorter and contain fewer students than the fall and spring semesters. Therefore, there is less opportunity to connect with possible participants, and less time for the data collection process.

No research study is perfect, and many come with limitations (Underwood et al., 2010). These limitations have been highlighted to maintain good ethical standing. In conclusion, this study does not go without its hindrances. However, the information provided from this study can still lend to advancing research on this topic.

Basic Assumptions

- Assumption one: students utilize social media to help them with their academic pursuits
- Assumption two: educators limit social media use because they believe it is a learning distraction, can infringe on privacy, and because they are concerned about the accuracy of information that is being shared
- Assumption three: students are honest in their survey choices
- Assumption four: this research will inform educators and students to better utilize social media technology within the classroom and throughout students' academic journeys

Significance of the Problem

In response to the problem statement, updating prior research on this topic, and thus providing information that can be used to aid collaboration within academic settings, is important because it progresses education. In the United States, many have slowed their embrace of technology due to education-based societal norms. However, this slowed embrace needs to cease. For the United

States to continue advancing on a global scale, more technologically advanced graduates are needed (Obama, 2009).

Next, providing further understanding so that educators can better implement social media technology will help alter nationwide curricula. Physical textbooks, pens, and pads represent tools of the past. While they still support student learning, there are more technologically advanced ways to learn. This study will reveal to educators the benefits of utilizing such tools.

Lastly, this study provides information that can help individuals alter their hindering perspectives of social media technology. Much like educators, not all of society is ready to accept social media technology as an efficient way to improve education and other aspects of life. However, whether it be small business owners, government officials, non-formal educators, or those within academia, social media should be considered an asset.

Theoretical Review

This section on theory explains the "Theory of Uses and Gratifications" which describes the media pursuit individuals take to fulfill specific needs (Blumler, 1979). The theory posits that consumers are not passive, but rather that they are active and "goal-directed" in their desire to fulfill gaps both psychologically and physiologically (Rubin, 1994). These gaps, or needs, range from "cognitive, affective," and integrative, all the way to releasing tension for the individual (Rubin, 1994). The Theory of Uses and Gratifications is the perfect theory for the basis of this study's research because it "offers a unique lens through which" media's effects can be examined (Rubin, 1994).

When Rhoades completed her study on 'Students' Feelings of New Technology in the Classroom,' there was little understanding of how students perceived such technology (Rhoades et al., 2008, p.34). Now, in the United States, hundreds of millions of students have access to social media technology at any given point of the day. While it is "prevalent in students' out-of-class college experiences, its adoption into the classroom has been limited (Dumford et al., 2023). Despite the limitations, students still use social media as an alternative and complement to classroom education. While this theory "does not focus on the effectiveness of new media technology as an education tool," it can still be used to understand students' perceptions of the value it brings them (Rhoades et al., 2008, pg.33).

In conclusion, the Theory of Uses and Gratifications can help to explain and interpret students' social media use during class periods, especially during direct classroom instruction. Altogether, there is now an opportunity to resurface Rhoades' 2008 study by updating it and providing evidence that is relevant to today's society -- in particular, its academic settings.

Literature Review

In gathering research to form the basis of this study, research was primarily explored through university libraries. Google Scholar's online database was also used to access accredited, quality research. Quotes and other referencing information were then combined and placed into a form for efficient accessibility. As a result, there has been enough research gathered to help build an informative foundation for ongoing research. Altogether, the materials that were reviewed on this topic were chosen to answer three research objectives: one, to identify student preferences for social media in coordination with online, master's level, school-based learning; two, to determine the preferences for social media technology used by Virginia Tech online graduate students; and three, to determine those students' preferences as they relate to student-faculty relationships through social media.

Students' Perceptions of Social Media Used in the Teaching Process

Social media is prevalent in classrooms not only in the United States (U.S.) but also in classrooms throughout the world; however, while "almost all students use social media," very "few lecturers" do for class-related purposes (Sakkir et al., 2016). There are many barriers and reasons educators are hesitant to adopt social media technology into the classroom (Manca, 2020). From one perspective, it is seen "as a distraction – diverting student's attention from their work" (Selwyn, 2016, p.1010). In others, some simply do not like the new technology, and some are just not accustomed to it. For example, "teachers who have never used" social media may feel "lost" or confused when configuring its applications and even when using it to connect with others (Sakkir et al., 2016). Moreover, discouraging headlines like mentions of investigations or

controversies have led some educators to refrain from using Facebook within the classroom (Manca, 2020). It is also difficult to discern information amongst all the fabrications. Although this is the case for many educators, it is still critical for them to be "active facilitators when the internet is used" (Sakkir et al., 2016). Educators' involvement is critical for various reasons, seemingly the most important being that "students rarely use textbooks" anymore because of new technological developments (Sakkir et al., 2016). Nowadays, there is a "trend of blended learning" where online learning is mixed with in-class instruction (Jamari et al., 2017, p.264). This kind of blended learning has created many benefits for students. One benefit of such technological integration is that it "helps in timesaving and avoiding hassle" because it has so many uses (Jamari et al., 2017, p.265). Another benefit is that social media "stimulates active learning" (Martunis, 2020, p.72). This active learning describes students' ability to "engage with learning material," "participate more in forum discussion," and "work together" with others in their learning spaces (Martunis, 2020, p.72). Furthermore, social media technology presents "time and place of study" flexibility for "both teachers and students" (Martunis, 2020, p.73). As a result of such benefits, the trend to use social media as "an alternative platform for learning" continues to rise (Jamari et al., 2017, p.267).

While social media has great positive potential, the ability for students to "communicate with faculty members" outside of the classroom, presents a couple cautions (Dagli et al., 2021). One, "students are more susceptible towards teachers" who are on social media "because [educators] are perceived as being more akin to a 'real person' (Mahmud et al., 2016); and two, a lack of supervision and "accurate planning" can lead to excessive social media use, which can in turn lead to poor "academic performance" (Alamri, 2019, p.75). It is not just students who believe this, as the data conveys it as well. Data from Mahmud et al. (2016) revealed that

"students who participate actively in social media... were highly engaged" and attained higher grade point averages (GPA). On the contrary, those who used social media too much or without supervision received worse grades than those who did not (Alamri, 2019, p.74). It was also found that when students began to use social media for non-academic purposes, they performed worse on academic tasks (Alamri, 2019, p.64).

Social Media's Impact on Academic Performance

At one point, before the COVID-19 pandemic, there weren't many "associations between" time spent on social media and "academic performance of students." Now, post-COVID-19, associations have been found (Mufassirin et al., 2023). These associations give cause for mixed perspectives on social media's presence in today's classrooms. Some "studies indicate that social-media websites should be incorporated into the classroom," while others suggest that its addition "may have negative effects on the study habits and academic performance" of students (Leyrer-Jackson & Wilson, 2018, p.221). Many of those who hold a cautionary perspective prepare their stance based on geographical measures. It has been stated that online learning poses challenges, especially to those from rural areas, who "may not have such technologies" (Asad et al., 2022, p.341). On the contrary, in some academic settings, some believe that there needs to be a sense of urgency for educators to "intentionally and strategically harness the power of… transformations in technology use" to help catalyze students' success (Davis III et al., 2015, p.409). Overall, research has shown that students have a positive perception of social media as it relates to their academic performance. For one, the "internet can be used to support" many academic processes (Sakkir et al., 2016). In a recent study, Twitter (now known as 'X') was found to encourage participation and further learning when out of the

classroom (Manca, 2020). X was also found to allow "for the exchange of information and retainment of knowledge" (Xie & Luo, 2019). Furthermore, many students believe that social media is a technology that can enhance one's abilities. Research from Sakkir et al. (2016) found that students believe that "social media allows people to create… share…, and exchange information," and that it can be used [to]... facilitate the learning process." Therefore, "educational policymakers and school leaders" should feel more comfortable encouraging social media technology within and outside of the classroom (Fischer et al., 2018, p.25).

Perceptions of Social Media as it Relates to Social Behavior

Social media has many uses for students, educators, and people in general. Among the most common uses of social media is its capacity to connect individuals through its "highly useful, personal communication technology" (Sakkir et al., 2016). Moreover, many individuals use social media sites "for the creation of social capital" and for the opportunity to transform that into "professional capital" (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017). Among students, social media is used to "learn about people's different thinking styles… and to improve open-mindedness" (Al-Sharqi et al., 2015, p.127). However, there are concerns in this regard, specifically about physical and mental health. "Physical inactivity, exposure to negative ideas, bad company", and the fact that "higher levels of social media use" are associated with worse mental health, are all cautions that can arise without the proper facilitation of social media use (Al-Sharqi et al., 2015, p.127; Zhao & Zhou, 2020, p.1019). Furthermore, there is also the caution of misinformation spreading. While social media is becoming more prevalent, the term 'misinformation' has gained severe prominence over the last 20 years. Social media's unregulated nature "provides a space where users can communicate unfiltered information" (Zhao & Zhou, 2020, p.1032). In addition, since

social media has such a “virulent effect,” one post “without veto or fact-checking” can drastically affect the trajectory of a person’s life (Cuello-Garcia et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that “the more participants knew about COVID-19 information, the more likely” they were to convey and disperse that information - which is a prime example of social media’s virulent ability (Green et al., 2024, p.87). Unfortunately, this trend seems like it will not decelerate anytime soon, as “many device users remain constantly connected” to their devices (Rowell, 2019, p.74).

Students’ Overall Perceptions of Social Media Within the Learning Process

Based on the reviewed literature, many students favor social media use, even in the classroom. In general, students show a “positive attitude toward and a willingness to use” social media applications (Sakkir et al., 2016). Moreover, there is a “positive preference slant toward using social media for learning” purposes within and out of the classroom (Al-Sharqi & Hashim, n.d., 2019). Some students view professional learning on Twitter more positively as well (Fischer et al., 2018). It was also found that the more students used and engaged with social media platforms, the more positively they viewed such things (Jamari et al., 2017, p.268). Furthermore, research shows that students are not just using social media in one class, rather they are using it in their “studies for one or more courses” (Al-Sharqi & Hashim, n.d., 2019). This is likely a result of “unprecedented access” to a plethora of information (Wang et al., 2023, p.1436). In Sakkir et al’s 2016, mixed-method study, results showed that the “majority of students” believe that social media “is useful for learning,” that they can be inspired by it, and that they can use social media to “improve their skills.

Students’ Perceptions of Online Learning

Today's classrooms represent more than just those at places of higher learning. Today's classrooms are home offices. They are farm buildings. They are bedrooms and places of rest. Some classrooms are even digital. This shift was exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic where "overall time spent on social networking" sites experienced a "dramatic" increase (Mufassirin et al., 2023). Now, "face-to-face" instruction in "classrooms and lecture halls" has widely been replaced by "online teaching" (Mufassirin et al., 2023). Virginia Tech offers 14 online master's degree programs where students are educated through web-based learning platforms.

Online learning, like any other aspect of life, has its attributes and disadvantages. A quantitative university study on Pakistani mathematics students in Khairpur, Pakistan, found that online learning helped students "express themselves freely while also focusing on deep study" to learn more (Asad et al., 2022, p.355). That study also found that changing their students' environments helped increase "interest and motivation" in learning (Asad et al., 2022, p.353). In other regards, online learning inspires students to "take responsibility for their own learning" (Martunis, 2020, p.73). What's more is that online learning, specifically through social media sites, "provides access to study materials and web-based resources" while also offering a "source of entertainment" (Mufassirin et al., 2023).

Contrary to its attributes, are the number of drawbacks that online learning presents. Placing a student in a sometimes unstructured environment can inhibit learning. It was found that "the most challenging" part of online learning was "balancing" one's academia with other "highly valued and time-consuming" aspects of one's life (Farrell & Brunton, 2020, p.15). Furthermore, there have been documented instances in which "digital technologies" were found to "distract and divert" students from their work (Selwyn, 2016, p.1011).

Altogether, there are mixed perceptions of online learning. Some studies have found that online discussion forums “function as an affective support system” (Fischer et al., 2018, p.2), while others share that students have “felt nervous, exposed, and… disinclined” to use such technology (Farrell & Brunton, 2020, p.15). In conclusion, "successful online student engagement" and the use of online learning are "influenced" by many things, and so is the overall perspective of online learning (Farrell & Brunton, 2020, p.17).

Barriers to Social Media Usage in the Classroom

Social media, no matter how pervasive, must be adopted and implemented by educators for it to have a full effect within the classroom. However, several barriers are inhibiting this full adoption and implementation. For one, the internet “has not always been social,” and many are not used to it being used in such a way (Poore, 2015, p.5). Many educators were alive and well when both the internet and social media were implemented into society, so there was once a time when the two were not synonymous. Furthermore, “large classes, lack of training, and lack of facilities” are problems for many educators and institutions (Sakkir et al., 2016). Discord among academic professionals is also an issue, as there is “disagreement on the use of social media for enhancing academic” events and activities (Jamari et al., 2017, p.269). In addition, there is disagreement on social media’s implementation because some educators believe that “[social media] is meant for socializing” (Jamari et al., 2017, p.269). Finally, there are stronger issues like “cultural resistance, pedagogical issues, and/or institutional constraints” (Dumford et al., 2023).

Literary Conclusions

No one social media platform can be used as the sole guide that both accurately and comprehensively conveys how the academic community feels and thinks (Manca, 2020). Still, research conducted on each platform provides a basis for developing a consensus of society's social media zeitgeist. Based on research found through this literature review, there is a consensus that social media has benefits that students can employ to not only help them in the classroom but also in everyday life. Students can enhance their learnings by using social media as a research tool. Students can develop their academic interests by conversing over academic material with others while on social media. Students can even develop and nurture relationships by using social media as a mode of connection and communication. Although this is the primary consensus, there are barriers to the experience of these positive attributes, as some educators are not yet ready to adopt the new technology and some students are opposed to its usage. However, there is opportunity for change in this regard, as "participation in… social networking sites has become" a daily activity for many educators and students since the revelation that social media provides "new learning opportunities that can transcend traditional boundaries" (Macià & García, 2016, p.292; Trust et al., 2017). This study is needed to connect and update the findings of prior studies so that they are on par with the novelties of today's society.

Methodology

Research Design (survey)

Following Rhoades et al. direction in their 2008 study, this current study is using a quantitative survey approach. I believe this method of research is the best for this study because it is concise and effective in its delivery. I began research by analyzing Rhoades et al. survey questions that were used to gather information. Many of the items (iPod, Blackboard, Frindster, etc.) discussed in their survey are no longer pertinent to social media technologies that are used today. Therefore, I formulated a different set of questions and analytical measures (see appendices) to ascertain information. From there, such analytical measures were imported into QuestionPro's survey format (QuestionPro, n.d.). Upon completion, I contacted several department heads of Virginia Tech's online master's degree programs. Some of those program leaders then e-delivered (via email or text) to potential participants a short online survey that, on average, took less than five minutes to complete. Data was then saved and analyzed through QuestionPro. From there, their responses have provided a depth of information and understanding. In conclusion of the research, a discussion has been finalized based on interpretations derived from connecting aspects of the data. Within this discussion are future recommendations for instructors, researchers, and students, as well as providing a general understanding of students' perceptions of social media technology concerning their studies.

Subjects

The maximum number of human participants for this study is limited by the number of online graduate students currently enrolled at Virginia Tech. The survey was sent to five online master's degree programs: one, the online Master of Agriculture and Life Sciences program,

which contained 160 students at the time the survey was sent; two, the Master in Agriculture and Applied Economics program contained 16 students; three, the online Master in Public Administration program contained 15 students; fourth, the online Master in Business Administration program (MBA) contained about 70 students; and lastly, the online Master of Natural Resources program contained 150 students. It was expected that there would be at least 100 participants involved; however, there were 110 individuals who viewed the survey, 32 of whom participated. Participants consisted of students aged 21-40 studying within those various online graduate programs. Screening of survey participants took place in the form of "direct screening," whereby qualifying questions were presented to participants before data collection was "administered" (DeSimone et al., 2018, p.172) In other aspects, to maintain inclusivity, participants were not barred based on geographical location, ethnic background, or identity preferences. Ultimately, those within Virginia Tech's online master's degree paths learn through a completely online format; therefore, many aspects were considered.

Procedure

An online survey was created based on the questions asked in the Rhoades et al. (2008) study, examining student perceptions and use of social media in the classroom. QuestionPro was used as the survey instrument. The survey was then made available on July, 17th, 2024, and remained open for two weeks. Reminders were sent out on July 23rd and 30th, with the conclusion of the survey being on August 2nd.

Data Analysis

In conclusion of the methodology portion of this study, the data were analyzed by examining the frequency of responses, means, and standard deviations through QuestionPro's

software (QuestionPro, n.d.). The data was then presented and structured into table format; data was also compared to that of Rhoades' 2008 study.

Results

110 students viewed the survey. Of the 110 viewers, 29% (n=32) started the survey, yet only 22.7% (n=25) completed the survey. Now, while the number of participants was enough to gather credible information, it is understood that having more participants would increase the validity and serve as a more representative sample. Nevertheless, on average, survey participants completed the survey in three minutes. Altogether, there was a 78.1% completion rate. It is important to note the number of viewers compared to those who started the survey. Many factors could have contributed to the discrepancy, for example: the copy on the face of the survey could have been a barrier to entry, and the screening questions could have done their job. Moving forward, this is something worth considering when continuing this research.

Table 1: Survey Completion Information

Viewed	**Started**	**Completed**	**Completion Rate**	**Drop Outs (After Starting)**	**Average Time to Complete Survey**
110	32	25	78.12%	7	3 minutes

Demographically, there were 28 respondents (see table 1). 12 of which indicated that they were between the ages of 20 and 29, and nine indicated that they were between the ages of 30 and 39. Six participants indicated that they were over 50 years of age, and one individual indicated they were between 40 and 49 years of age. Participants were also asked to indicate their gender using an inclusive set of response options. They were also given the option not to

share that information. Of the 28 total participants, 23 were female and five were male. 26 responses were indicating how long each had been enrolled in the MS online program. Of these participants, the average enrollment was 1.74 years, with a range of one semester to four years. There were 23 responses indicating students' GPA in their MS program. Of these participants, the average GPA was 3.8 with a range of 3.0 to 4.0. Regarding fields of study, five MS programs could be identified as having been aware of the survey: Agriculture and Applied Economics, Agriculture and Life Sciences (OMALS), Natural Resources, the Online MBA program, and the Public and International Affairs program. Of those five programs, 85.71% (n=24) of the 28 responding participants study within the OMALS program, while 7.14% (n=2) are within the Agriculture and Applied Economics program as well as the Public and International Affairs program (see Table 2).

Table 2: Participant Enrollment by Degree Program

Answer	**Count**	**Percent**
Ag and Applied Economics	2	7.14%
Ag and Life Sciences (OMALS)	24	85.71%
Natural Resources	0	0.00%
Online MBA	2	7.14%
Public and International Affairs	0	0.00%
Other	0	0.00%
Total	28	100%

This study's first research objective was to identify student preferences for social media in coordination with online, master's level, and school-based learning. Participants were asked to indicate their personal use of a set of social media platforms that ranged from longer-form content platforms like YouTube and Pinterest, all the way to short-form platforms like Snapchat (see Table 3). Surprisingly, most students indicated that they do not use social media that often each week. Participants indicated that YouTube is their most utilized platform with the mean score being 2.80. It is important to note that each item required one of the following responses: "1," indicating that the individual "[does] not use" the social media platform; "2," indicating that the individual uses the platform for "1 to 2 hours per week;" "3," which indicates that the individual uses the platform "2 to 4 hours per week;" "4," indicating that the individual uses the platform "4 to 5 hours per week;" and "5," that the individual uses the platform "more than 5 hours per week." These results are in stark contrast to those of Emily Rhoades' study (2008) where she found that most participants utilized the internet and social media. It is also important to note that Rhoades' study was conducted on undergraduate students, while this study examines those preferences of graduate students, who are primarily older than most undergraduate students and may not find it professional to use social media in connection to their studies.

Table 3: Participants' Personal Use of Social Media

Social Media Platform	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**
YouTube	25	2.80	1.29
Instagram	25	2.72	1.34

Facebook	23	2.65	1.58
Podcasts	25	2.36	1.41
LinkedIn	26	1.65	1.02
Blogs	26	1.50	0.91
WhatsApp	26	1.50	0.71
TikTok	26	1.42	1.14
X (formerly known as Twitter)	26	1.38	1.02
Snapchat	26	1.38	0.85
Reddit	26	1.38	1.10
Pinterest	26	1.23	0.51
Slack	25	1.12	0.33
Discord	26	1.08	0.27
Average		**1.73**	

The second research objective for this study was to determine preferences for social media technology used by Virginia Tech's online master's students. Following the trend of a lack of weekly social media usage, these online master's students at Virginia Tech prefer that their instructors do not use social media concerning online coursework. Participants were specifically asked to "indicate [their] disagreement, or agreement, in wanting [their] instructors to use more for online coursework." Response items presented: a "1," which indicated students strongly disagree; a "2," which indicated that students simply disagree; a "3" which indicated

that participants' stances were neutral; a "4," which indicated that students agree; and a "5," which indicated that participants strongly agree. As such, participants' average desire for instructors to use more social media for online coursework was 1.73 (see Table 4), which indicates that most students disagree. Additionally, participants were asked if there are other social media platforms that they would like to use in their online graduate coursework; those options were not listed in the survey, still, only one participant responded with "N/A," indicating a no answer.

Table 4. Participant Desire for Instructors to Use More Social Media for Online Coursework.

Social Media Platform	Count	Mean	SD
Podcasts	23	3.04	1.36
YouTube	23	3.00	1.21
Blogs	25	2.28	1.24
LinkedIn	25	2.24	1.39
Instagram	24	1.67	1.05
TikTok	24	1.46	0.98
Facebook	25	1.40	0.96
Slack	25	1.40	0.76
Pinterest	25	1.36	0.70
WhatsApp	25	1.32	0.80
X (formerly known as Twitter)	25	1.32	0.80
Reddit	25	1.28	0.61

Discord	25	1.28	0.61
Snapchat	24	1.17	0.48
Average		**1.73**	

Lastly, the third research objective for this study was to determine online Virginia Tech master's students' preferences as they relate to student-faculty relationships through social media. Study participants were asked to "indicate [their] disagreement or agreement in the following statements with respect to interacting with [their] instructors in social media" (see Table 5). Response items presented: a "1," which indicated students strongly disagree; a "2," which indicated that students simply disagree; a "3" which indicated that participants' stances were neutral; a "4," which indicated that students agree; and a "5," which indicated that participants strongly agree. The survey results were clear. Online master's students have seemingly dissociated most social media technologies from their academic studies. Participants indicated that they prefer not to have social media and networking technology integrated with their studies. One student shared that they exclusively use LinkedIn to connect with classmates and educators. Additionally, one respondent stated that they are unsure of how social media even fits into academia. Overall, the consensus from participants is that they do not desire to connect with instructors via social media and that more social media technology should not be used within academia (See Table 5).

Table 5: Desire to Interact with Instructors Using Social Media

Question	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**
Instructors should not be connected or following me on social media.	24	3.04	1.27

Instructors connected or following me on social media is an intrusion into my privacy.	24	2.79	1.41
Classes that use social media are more likely to focus on real-world tasks and examples.	24	2.67	1.24
My instructors being on social media shows they are in touch with students.	25	2.52	1.30
I am connected or follow my instructors on social media.	25	2.48	1.30
The instructor's use of social media has increased my interest in the subject matter.	24	2.46	1.14
I have found it useful to interact with my instructor on social media.	25	2.40	1.19
I think there should be more social media and networking technology used in my courses.	25	2.36	1.15
I spend more time engaged in course activities that require me to use social media.	23	2.22	1.20
Average		**2.55**	

Conclusion

Social media technology is utilized by many throughout the world. It solves problems and has many uses. As such, there has been an overall increase in the use of social media technology by students within their academic studies (Alamri, 2019). Furthermore, it was also found that there has been an overall positive trend for social media use within and relating to academia (Al-Sharqi & Hashim, n.d.,2019). While this has been the case, the findings from this study indicate that many of the online graduate students at Virginia Tech feel that academia and social media should not mix.

Both Rhoades' and I used the 'Theory of Uses and Gratifications,' which describes how and why individuals use social media to fulfill their needs (Blumler, 1979). While the theory was present within Rhoades' study, the theory did not factor into this study's results. Through their

survey responses, students indicated that they are not motivated to use social media during their graduate studies, hence the lack of need for the Theory of Uses and Gratifications in explaining the results. Moreover, respondents indicated that LinkedIn is the only platform they use to connect with other classmates and teachers and that these graduate students do not want their more personal social media accounts to be involved within academia. From personal experience being a member of Gen-Z, this is a widely held belief. Many individuals do not want educators having access to their accounts for many reasons. Some feel that it may affect the perception their professors have of them. Some believe that the open access could somehow affect their grades. Some simply desire a break from their studies and believe that a social media connection with their educators would infringe upon that.

This study was primarily conducted for two reasons: one, to understand students' perceptions of social media and how it has impacted their academics; and two, to compare perceptions of social media now versus what they were in 2008, when Emily Rhoades conducted research on this topic in a similar study. Rhoades' conducted her research on undergraduate students. This study, however, is based on graduate students – particularly those at the master's education level. In her study, she found that most students use social media technology but that they have not fully adopted it (Rhoades et al., 2008). This 2024 study also found that participants are not very active users of social media with most spending less than 3-4 hours per week using such technologies. Rhoades also noted that most students indicated that they would use podcasts if their instructor provided them (Rhoades et al., 2008). This 2024 study had less compelling, yet similar findings as many students indicated they were neutral in their perspective on whether podcasts should be utilized in academics. In a mirroring-like fashion, both studies showed evidence that students, whether at the graduate or undergraduate level, are not connected with

their instructors on social media platforms. In addition, both studies indicated that: one, students do not desire for their instructors to implement more social media technology into the classroom; and two, instructors should not use social media to connect with their students.

While educators and students should embrace new technologies, this research suggests that some social media should not be fully integrated into academics. While it has many capabilities and opportunities to connect and educate individuals, social media requires intense oversight if it is to be utilized within academia. Moreover, continued research on this topic is recommended to compare these findings to other student populations.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Researchers

In reflection of this study, there were a handful of things that I would have done differently knowing what I know now. As such, I would like to pass on recommendations to other researchers who plan to conduct similar work. These recommendations are as follows:

- Gather data with more qualitative means
    - Although this is a quantitative study, more data could be gathered from presenting survey respondents with more open-ended, free-response questions. Doing so would help to ascertain more detailed information.
- Present survey questions in different styles and formats
    - Most of the survey questions were presented on a sliding scale. While those measures did suffice, data collection could have been improved.
- Consider when it would be best to send out surveys
- Consider alternative theories or qualitative approaches

- The survey was sent to department heads in the early morning hours. This may have been the perfect time, or it may not have been. Nevertheless, it would benefit one to understand when individuals are more likely to devote time and effort to completing a survey.

Recommendations for Students

Per the data and personal experience, there is one recommendation I would like to provide for students concerning their social media use:

- Use LinkedIn and consider it an asset
  - Some survey respondents indicated that they do not desire a connection with their professors, while others indicated that they connect with educators only on LinkedIn. Regardless of one's feelings toward the network, LinkedIn provides exclusive opportunities to learn and connect with industry professionals, academic educators, and non-professional educators. Many professors, because of their tenure, professional development, etc. have built networks beyond thousands of people. It would be of great benefit to students to seek a connection with their educators so they may gain exposure to such networks – especially because there are educators who express their desire for students to do so. Such networks can further one's career, enhance learning, and further one's professional development. Ultimately, remember that professors are in a position to help, so rather than avoiding contact with one's professors, students should seek a connection with them.

Recommendations for Educators

Social media technology's place within academia remains questionable. One participant indicated that they "exclusively" use LinkedIn to connect with classmates and teachers, while another stated that they "don't really use social media for school" and that they are unsure as to how social media can be used in such regard. Still, most students indicated that they are unsure about whether instructors should relate to them on social media sites. Therefore, based on the research and findings, these are my recommendations for how educators can better place social media within academia:

- Educators should delineate what technology they deem as being social media versus an educational platform that can be used to further academic-based learning.
- Educators should express to students what networking technology is or is not allowed within their educational space.
- If connecting with students on social media sites, educators should maintain professionalism and limit all interaction to LinkedIn's platform.
- YouTube and Podcasts can be used for educational instruction.
- Primarily casual social networking sites like Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter (X) should not be used to connect with students.
- Rather than abstaining from classroom social media use, educators should pull resources from an array of social media sites and use them to enhance classroom instruction
- With the advent of new technology, truly consider how your students can learn and apply instruction.

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APPENDICES

Survey

Screening Questions:

1. Please indicate which online Master's program to which you are enrolled.

Survey Questions:

2. Please indicate your age in the pull-down menu below.
3. Please indicate your gender in the pull-down menu below.
4. Please indicate how many years you have been enrolled in your online program in the space below.
5. Please share your current GPA in the space below.
6. Please indicate your personal use of the following social media platforms.
    a. Facebook
    b. X (formerly known as Twitter)
    c. YouTube
    d. Instagram
    e. TikTok
    f. Snapchat
    g. Blogs
    h. Pinterest
    i. Reddit
    j. LinkedIn
    k. Discord
    l. Slack
    m. WhatsApp
    n. Podcasts
7. For each of the following social media platforms, please indicate your disagreement, or agreement, in wanting your instructors to use more for online coursework.
    a. Facebook
    b. X (formerly known as Twitter)
    c. YouTube
    d. Instagram
    e. TikTok
    f. Snapchat
    g. Blogs
    h. Pinterest
    i. Reddit
    j. LinkedIn
    k. Discord
    l. Slack
    m. WhatsApp
    n. Podcasts

8. If there are other social media platforms you would like to use in your online graduate coursework, but were not listed previously, please share the names of these social media platforms in the space below.
9. Please indicate your disagreement or agreement in the following statements with respect to interacting with your instructors in social media.
    a. Classes that use social media are more likely to focus on real-world tasks and examples.
    b. The instructor's use of social media has increased my interest in the subject matter.
    c. I spend more time engaged in course activities that require me to use social media.
    d. My instructors being on social media shows they are in touch with students.
    e. Instructors should not be connected or following me on social media.
    f. Instructors connected or following me on social media is an intrusion into my privacy.
    g. I think there should be more social media and networking technology used in my courses.
    h. I am connected or follow my instructors on social media.
    i. I have found it useful to interact with my instructor on social media.
10. Please list any additional comments you would like to share regarding the use of social media in online graduate coursework.
11. This ends the survey. Please be sure you have answered all questions. You can go back to review your answered questions, if you wish, by clicking on the "back" button.

Tables

Table 6: Survey Completion Information

Viewed	**Started**	**Completed**	**Completion Rate**	**Drop Outs (After Starting)**	**Average Time to Complete Survey**
110	32	25	78.12%	7	3 minutes

Table 7: Participant Enrollment by Degree Program

Answer	**Count**	**Percent**
Ag and Applied Economics	2	7.14%
Ag and Life Sciences	24	85.71%

(OMALS)		
Natural Resources	0	0.00%
Online MBA	2	7.14%
Public and International Affairs	0	0.00%
Other	0	0.00%
Total	28	100%

Table 8: Participants' Personal Use of Social Media

Social Media Platform	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**
YouTube	25	2.80	1.29
Instagram	25	2.72	1.34
Facebook	23	2.65	1.58
Podcasts	25	2.36	1.41
LinkedIn	26	1.65	1.02
Blogs	26	1.50	0.91
WhatsApp	26	1.50	0.71
TikTok	26	1.42	1.14
X (formerly known as Twitter)	26	1.38	1.02
Snapchat	26	1.38	0.85

Reddit	26	1.38	1.10
Pinterest	26	1.23	0.51
Slack	25	1.12	0.33
Discord	26	1.08	0.27
Average		**1.73**	

Table 9. Participant Desire for Instructors to Use More Social Media for Online Coursework.

Social Media Platform	**Count**	**Mean**	**SD**
Podcasts	23	3.04	1.36
YouTube	23	3.00	1.21
Blogs	25	2.28	1.24
LinkedIn	25	2.24	1.39
Instagram	24	1.67	1.05
TikTok	24	1.46	0.98
Facebook	25	1.40	0.96
Slack	25	1.40	0.76
Pinterest	25	1.36	0.70
WhatsApp	25	1.32	0.80
X (formerly known as Twitter)	25	1.32	0.80
Reddit	25	1.28	0.61
Discord	25	1.28	0.61

Snapchat	24	1.17	0.48
Average		**1.73**	

Table 10: Desire to Interacting with Instructors Using Social Media

Question	**n**	**Mean**	**SD**
Instructors should not be connected or following me on social media.	24	3.04	1.27
Instructors connected or following me on social media is an intrusion into my privacy.	24	2.79	1.41
Classes that use social media are more likely to focus on real-world tasks and examples.	24	2.67	1.24
My instructors being on social media shows they are in touch with students.	25	2.52	1.30
I am connected or follow my instructors on social media.	25	2.48	1.30
The instructor's use of social media has increased my interest in the subject matter.	24	2.46	1.14
I have found it useful to interact with my instructor on social media.	25	2.40	1.19
I think there should be more social media and networking technology used in my courses.	25	2.36	1.15
I spend more time engaged in course activities that require me to use social media.	23	2.22	1.20
Average		**2.55**	

Table 6: My Interpretations and Descriptions of Common Social Media Platforms

Social Media Platform	**Description & Use**
Discord	Discord is a community platform that is primarily home to those within the video game world. It is a very informal place where individuals go to connect, form group-chats, and have fun. Discord is the informal comparison to Slack.
Facebook	A social media platform that connects individuals primarily within the millennial and GEN-X demographics; however, many of GEN-Z use the platform to connect and for its buy and sell marketplace.
Instagram	A community platform for the many. When most think of social media, Instagram is often top of mind. Once a primarily photo-based platform, Instagram has shifted into becoming a strong video competitor. GEN-Z mostly uses this platform, but people of all ages use it to connect, share ideas and experiences, and gain social capital.
LinkedIn	Professional networking platform that can be used to connect, share ideas and experiences,

	and further one's career. I think it is undervalued by many in the younger demographics, but it is still used by millions of people. Its learning opportunities are often used by business educators.
Pinterest	Used by many to gain social capital, share recipes and outfit ideas, as well as inspirational content. Many people in the younger demographic use Pinterest to learn about trends, too.
Reddit	Known for its unfiltered nature, Reddit is an online forum where individuals, and sometimes businesses, go to discuss an array of topics. Positively, there are many informative and supportive communities on the platform.
Slack	Slack is a formal version of Discord. It is used by many businesses and project groups to discuss anything team related. Think of it as a an online headquarters with many offices for teams to collaborate.
Snapchat	This social media network is primarily used by GEN-Z and younger. It was once viewed as a way to stay updated with friends, but it has

	morphed into an all-encompassing platform that delivers news, entertainment, and connection opportunities.
TikTok	TikTok is a very interesting platform as it seemingly offers something for everyone. Individuals can buy and sell goods; share news and entertainment; talk one on one; etc. There are not many things TikTok cannot do; however, many individuals have privacy concerns regarding the platform.
WhatsApp	WhatsApp is a messaging platform that allows individuals to connect from nearly anywhere in the world.
X (formerly known as Twitter)	X is very similar to Instagram, but less censored.