

## Chapter 37

# Acceptability of Social Media Use in Out-of-Class Faculty–Student Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*In this exploratory study, higher education faculty perceptions regarding acceptability of social media use for out-of-class student engagement are identified. Hypotheses are developed and tested using a survey to address the impact of factors such as awareness, faculty/student relationship status, gender, academic discipline, and rank on faculty attitudes toward out-of-class social media use for student engagement. Findings indicate that faculty members are aware of social media, but use varies. Overall, they do not view social media as an important part of out-of-class engagement, but it is viewed as more acceptable for engagement with former students. In addition, faculty from Marketing and Communications disciplines and Associate/Full Professors perceive social media use to be more acceptable for student engagement when compared with their colleagues from other disciplines and lower ranks. Implications and conclusions are discussed for development of university social media usage policies and directions for future research.*

### INTRODUCTION

Social media usage has increased enormously in the last few years. With near constant access to the Internet through computers and smartphones, social media has become an indispensable part of people's lives. According to the Pew Research Center's survey in 2014, 74% of adults online have reported using various social media sites: Facebook is the top destination (71%) followed by Pinterest (28%), Instagram (26%), and Twitter (23%). For young adults (ages 18 to 29) who are online, the usage jumps to 87% for Facebook, 53% for Instagram, 37% for Twitter, and 34% for Pinterest which shows that college age adults

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2584-4.ch037

are heavily involved in social media activities. More interestingly, 50% of users with college education are now on LinkedIn, indicating the evolving nature of social media in university campuses nationwide.

The role of social media in college classrooms, consequently, is changing as well and instructors around the world are scrambling to figure out its place in academia (McArthur and Bostedo-Conway, 2012). Although some higher education faculty members view social media with skepticism, reports show that over 90% of them use social media in their professional and/or private lives (Cain et al., 2013). Usage of social media by students is also widely reported especially in their personal lives (Dahlstrom, 2012). It is clear that the role that social media plays in higher education is great and is likely to continue. One question that is still unanswered is what role social media plays in out-of-class communications between students and faculty.

Social media is a term that encompasses various social networking services and corresponding applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. (Cain et al., 2013). Other growing social media applications include LinkedIn, Google+, Vines, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, etc. With all of these different forms of social media it would seem reasonable to explore what faculty members perceive as acceptable forms of interactions with students in out-of-class activities and more specifically whether they favor some forms of social media applications over others. In this study, we explore faculty members' *perception* of the role social media plays in out-of-class faculty/student communications. Given that social media usage is still an evolving area in academia, the results of this study will help universities when recommending policies on acceptable faculty/student out-of-class social media interactions. This is particularly important considering the professional nature of faculty/student communications and the boundaries that need to be maintained. McEwan (2012) argues that social media communications have the potential to blur the traditional boundaries of faculty/student relationships. Therefore, it is critical for universities to clearly identify what is acceptable, and what is not, when a faculty member engages his/her students outside of the classroom. This issue can be even more important in the case of tenure and promotion for younger faculty since it is a key administrative process that shapes and impacts the institution's future.

Today's new professors have never known academia without social media and the Internet and its inclusion in their endeavors is likely to have major implications as they come up for tenure and promotion. Institutions and senior faculty may not recognize social media use as a component of the teaching process. It is also unclear which social media activities are seen as acceptable, and which are not. This raises serious professional issues particularly for the use of social media outside of the classroom.

This specific study addresses the issue of faculty attitudes toward what is acceptable use of social media in engaging students outside of the classroom. Understanding these issues is important as institutions begin to develop policies for social media use by faculty which in turn could directly impact promotion and tenure decisions for faculty as those policies are interpreted and enforced. It is, therefore, imperative for universities to set policies that allow for the productive usage of social media in classrooms and to also solidify boundaries relating to personal interactions. While previous studies have looked at social media as it is currently used in classrooms as a learning tool, our study seeks to identify how faculty feels about social media in out-of-class interactions. We also look at specific social media applications with the expectation that some professional Web-based platforms such as LinkedIn may be viewed as more acceptable in out-of-class faculty/student communications than the more personal platforms such as social gaming and chatting platforms. Additionally, we seek to find out whether faculty's perceptions of these kinds of interactions are dependent on whether the students are current or former. The next sec-

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