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## **SCHOLARS' CHANGING SOCIAL MEDIA USE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Summary**

Understanding academics' experiences with technology over time is critical in making sense of the use of technology in education and teaching. In this research study we explore whether, how, and why scholars' social media use changes over time. We conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve scholars who were asked to download and reflect upon their Facebook or Twitter archive prior to the interview. Using thematic analysis of interview transcripts, we found that the factors impacting scholars' social media use over time include: personal experiences, professional experiences, issues related to online privacy and self-protection online, evolution of technology, a desire to develop and nurture relationships, awareness of the needs of others, and political environment. Results suggest that the factors leading scholars to evaluate, reconsider, and change their social media practices are complex, layered, and multidimensional. An important implication of these findings is that encouraging social media adoption among scholars, without considering how scholars use them for other purposes, may create future problems for them.

### **Introduction**

The use of social media has become a mainstream practice among scholars, both professionally and personally (Donelan, 2016). While social media adoption is generally positioned as being positive (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010; Naveh, Tubin, & Pliskin, 2010), advocacy tends to be based on belief rather than evidence (Kimmons, 2014; Selwyn, 2013). Whether it be incorporating social media into teaching practices, using social media to promote their research and publications, or connecting with friends and family, scholars use social media for a variety of purposes (Veletsianos, 2016). Yet, there is a dearth of evidence within the existing body of research as to how scholars' social media use changes over time and the factors that lead to such changes. Understanding changes in scholars' social media use over time is significant because of the pressure that scholars may feel to engage in social media to advance their career (Lowenthal, Dunlap, & Stitson, 2016; Weller, 2011) combined with a lack of evidence as to whether and how such engagement offers career-related benefits (Jordan & Weller, 2018). Furthermore, there are emerging conversations among scholars about the relationship between personal wellbeing and social media use, with scholars describing taking intentional social media breaks in order to improve productivity (Ferguson, 2017; Zellner,

2012). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore whether, how, and why scholars' social media use changes over time. In this paper we will describe our findings and discuss the implications of our results as they relate to the roles of teachers and learners in higher education.

## **Research questions**

The following research questions were posed: What factors do academics report as leading to changes in their online participation over time?

## **Methods**

A request for participants was sent to members of an international organization of instructional technology faculty mailing list. Twelve members self-selected and consented to be interviewed for this study.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between twenty-five to sixty minutes. Prior to the scheduled interview time, scholars were asked to download either their Twitter and/or Facebook archive and to review their archive independently. During the interviews, we asked scholars to reflect upon what they noticed about how their social media use has changed over time, based on their thinking of the topic, their reflections of their practice, and what they saw in their archive(s). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Two researchers individually analysed the transcripts using a constant comparative analysis strategy to generate individual lists of codes, which were then compared and combined to generate a list of themes. Researchers discussed the codes and themes with a third researcher and engaged in a process of iterative analysis. Analysis continued until saturation was reached. The themes are described next in the results section.

## **Results**

The analysis resulted in the identification of factors for change in social media use which were then grouped into seven themes. These are listed in Table 1. The themes describe factors reported as influencing scholars' social media use over time. Social media use over time in scholars' lives was found to be complex and resists simple analyses: all scholars reported more than one factor in influencing their use of social media over time, some scholars reported simultaneously increasing and decreasing social media activities, and some factors lead some scholars to reduce their use of social media while leading others to increase their use (e.g., parenthood). Overall decreases appeared to be associated with nurturing offline relationships, improving wellbeing, or self-protection, while overall increases appear to have professional purposes; however, changes reported by scholars were typically related to specific aspects of their social media use such as decreasing the amount of personal content posted but increasing the amount of professional content.

Importantly, themes are not monolithic, as there are significant overlaps between them. For example, Ethan (pseudonym) described a change in his social media use when his first child was born; however, he also acknowledged that the birth of his child occurred at the same time

that he acquired his first smartphone and he felt that he could not differentiate whether one of these factors was more influential than the other in driving a change in his social media use. With this complexity in mind, we present themes in no particular order and emphasize that no one theme appears as being more influential than the others.

Table 1: Themes influencing changes in scholars' social media use over time (all names are pseudonyms)

Theme	Description	Examples
Personal experiences	Life experiences that are not related to one's career (singular and ongoing experiences such as family emergency, marriage, maturity, moving to a new location, parenthood, personal health issues, and relationship break-ups).	Stella's experience with a physical health issue led her to decrease her social media use because she "did not feel like sharing anything with anyone".
Professional experiences	Experiences and activities related to one's career (singular and ongoing experiences such as conferences, graduation, job loss or transition, professional obligations and expectations, teaching and learning, and stage of career).	Aaron's appointment as Dean at his institution led him to increase his Twitter activity during the time that he held that position, saying, "I would tweet out a lot of things going on in our faculty" as he felt that "it was something I wanted to do... to raise the profile of the faculty." His use of Twitter subsided following his administrative appointment.
Issues related to online privacy and self-protection online	Experiences and/or concerns about others' ability to access content/data and how to protect oneself from harm (e.g. online harassment, identity theft) resulting from this access. Examples include changing one's privacy settings to restrict the audience, not posting on certain topics that might result in misunderstandings or misrepresentation, and adjusting settings to limit the type of content that shows up in one's social media feeds.	Jason's experience dealing with online harassment led him to decrease his Twitter activity and to choose not to make Twitter participation a required component of the courses he teaches.
Evolution of technology	Changes in technology over time (devices and platforms), including the advent of new technologies.	Peter's acquisition of his first smartphone led to a change in the type of content he posted with a shift from primarily text-based posts to an increase in image-based posts.
A desire to develop and nurture relationships	Adoption of certain social media practices to nurture relationships (keeping family updated, posting in such a way that facilitated meaningful discussion, strengthening relationships with colleagues, communicating according to others' preferences). Conversely, respondents also reported decreasing certain social media practices	Erin came to realize that she wanted deeper relationships with her online connections, saying "building a rapport and building some time beyond our work has been also really important to me". Charles described taking "Facebook fasts" to engage in offline quality time with his family as a result of ongoing

	to nurture offline relationships.	conversations with his wife to set better boundaries around his social media use.
Awareness of the needs of others	Reflection of how one's social media platform and habits can be used to help or support others (e.g. modelling good online practices, sharing content to support others, advocating for other online, and refraining from participating in discussions to create space for marginalized voices to be heard).	Charles' family members' experiences with racism and homophobia led him to post more frequently about these topics as a way to show his support to those family members.
Political environment	The impact of political events (at all levels) and the subsequent changes in political climate, online and offline.	Peter noted how exposure or engagement with controversial issues/debates would negatively impact his mental well-being for several days.

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## Implications

Our results support the findings of others (Jordan & Weller, 2018; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013) that scholars experience tension, having both positive and negative associations when it comes to social media use. Interviewees discussed the professional benefits of using social media to extend their academic reach, to build relationships with other scholars, for teaching and learning, and to stay relevant. Better understanding the positive and negative outcomes of social media use experienced by scholars on a day-to-day basis is critical to developing institutional policies and instructional design that protects scholars' wellbeing while still encouraging the affordances that may improve scholarship and instructional practices.

One implication of this research relates to instructional uses of social media. While faculty are encouraged to adopt social media to enhance instructional practices, this research reveals the intimately personal relationship that scholars have with these tools. Their practices are impacted not just by personal factors, but also by their political leanings and beliefs, as well as by changes that happen around them. Thus, when scholars are encouraged to adopt social media, it behoves academic leaders and instructional designers to recognize that faculty are asked to make decisions divorced from their daily reality of using social media for a variety of purposes that change over time.

A second important implication of this research is the recognition that social media use is impacted by sociocultural factors that change over time. While the majority of literature in the field takes a stochastic approach, examining social media use in faculty lives at particular points in time, this research suggests that scholars engagement with social media is an ongoing event that is impacted by past, current, and future events. For instance, scholars may make decisions to change their current social media practices based on past posts (e.g., while being students), current events (e.g., a new political reality), or anticipated future events (e.g., wanting their children to make decisions about their social media footprint).

With these implications in mind, institutions have a responsibility to understand the personal, day-to-day effects of social media initiatives for faculty as they relate to sociocultural factors relevant to scholars. For example, does requiring Twitter discussion for an online course put students or faculty at risk of harassment by others who may view the discussion? Does the expectation to engage with academic topics on platforms where their personal and professional identities merge create discomfort for scholars who have varied preferences with regard to what they choose to share and where? These and other questions related to scholars' safety and wellbeing must be considered in order to support scholars' participation in public platforms for online learning purposes.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding scholars' experiences with social media over time is critical for developing institutional policies and directives with regard to teaching and learning online. Social media practices have become mainstream in higher education; however, scholars use of social media is complex and extends beyond their professional lives. If we encourage scholars to adopt social media, then we must consider look at scholars' social media use both including and beyond their teaching role. Furthermore, we must understand factors that influence change in scholars' social media use over time to ensure that any policies or directives do not potentially create future problems for scholars, on both a personal and professional level.

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