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Abstract

This study compares how undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members rate social media posts based on appropriateness, employability, and responsibility. Previous research suggests that students have different views on what is acceptable to post on social media. Student status and age were studied to see if they had an effect on what is considered as appropriate social media posts, with the hypothesis that graduate students would view social media posts more negatively than undergraduate students. 409 participants were given a survey including mock Instagram and Twitter posts relating to alcohol, work, and/or school. Participants rated each Instagram image or tweet based on appropriateness, employability, and responsibility. Graduate students reported Instagram photos, and school and work related tweets as more inappropriate, lower employability scores on school related tweets, and lower responsibility scores on work related tweets. When participants were grouped together by age, 18 to 25 year olds viewed social media posts more positively than other age groups. These findings supported the hypothesis, and suggest that college students should consider different perceptions of social media in light of their future employment.

To Post Or Not To Post: Perceptions of Appropriateness on Social Media

The evolution of social media has provided many opportunities for young adults to stay connected and up to date with the world around them. According to Pew Research Center, seven out of 10 Americans use social media to connect with others, find news content, and share information with family or friends. In 2005, only 5% of American adults used at least one form of social media. Today, that number has risen to 69% of Americans who use social media. While there is a steady increase in the amount of social media users, there are many positive and negative effects that continue to occur. One effect of social media use that little research has explored is the appropriateness of posted content and how it can affect the perceptions of others. When social media users decide to share a post with friends or followers, they often overlook the possible negative outcomes. More specifically, inappropriate or controversial content on college students' social networking sites can be viewed as offensive and can negatively affect future employment. French and Read (2013) have examined similar areas such as impression management, user behavior, and motives for using social media from the perspective of the user. In this study, we propose to examine perceptions of common behaviors seen across social media today from viewers' perspectives.

Previous social media researchers have typically used Facebook as the social media outlet of interest. However, social networking sites such as Instagram and Twitter are commonly used among college students, but thus far have lagged behind Facebook in terms of research. Approximately 64% of Americans between the ages of 18 to 29 use Instagram, and about 40% of Americans ages 18 to 29 use Twitter

(Pew Research Center, 2018). There has been a shift in the specific social media outlets college students use based on posting behaviors. While Facebook provides personal connections with the term "friend", Instagram and Twitter use the term "followers" instead. More specifically, the goal of Twitter is to gain as many followers as possible in order to get their message across, which creates a more open environment to post questionable content. Because of this, it is less common for users to have privacy settings on their accounts, although they are available (Miller & Melton, 2014). Instagram is a more visual platform where users can share photos and videos and also connect with strangers who might share the same interests. On the other hand, Facebook is a platform based on connecting with friends and family members where users tend to share more private content. Both Twitter and Instagram have become increasingly popular among the younger generation and therefore may be more susceptible to controversial content. The current study attempts to look further into these other social networking sites and to expand on the previous Facebook-centric literature.

Social media users have a variety of motives that come into play when they decide to engage in social networking sites. Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade (2013) have examined the phenomenon of user behavior from perspectives such as personality and self-esteem; however, there is little research on the exact motivations or attitudes toward using and posting on social media. It is common for individuals to turn to social media to find a sense of belonging. Belongingness is one of the main components of developing a healthy psychological well-being (Kim, Wang, & Oh, 2016). According to Lee et al. (2015), Instagram provides its users with

five primary social and psychological motives. These include social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking. Social interaction is an obvious motive across all social media sites, but archiving and self-expression are relevant areas that could help explain why users potentially post controversial content.

Another concept found in previous research is the motive of social conformity. Krishnan & Hunt (2015) studied various attitudes and motives for using social networking sites and found that positive attitudes of self-disclosure influenced social conformity on social networking sites. This suggests that some individuals feel more open when communicating or posting on social media, or that it is easier for them to disclose personal information over the Internet. Social media users may do this in order to feel cool or important, compare themselves with others, or to conform to society. Although socialization is the primary motive in using social networking sites, these other motives make significant contributions to exploring the thoughts behind posting on social media.

Miller and Melton (2015) identified differences in posting behavior of college students between Facebook and Twitter, finding that participants were more comfortable with others viewing their Facebook account than they were with others viewing their Twitter account. This included audiences consisting of friends, parents, significant other's parents, professors, and potential employers. This relates back to the idea of Twitter encouraging openness to post controversial or inappropriate content. College students seem to be more cautious with their Facebook accounts; in Miller and Melton's sample, about 78% only allowed friends to view their profile, while 68.6% left their Twitter accounts public (2015). Notably,

college students do not treat all of their social media outlets the same, despite the fact outside viewers can still access their public Twitter accounts.

Alcohol related content is relatively common across college students' social media accounts. This content can be displayed through status updates, personal photographs, or comments directed to other users. Approximately 83% of college students reported having references to alcohol on their Facebook profiles (Moreno et al., 2012). This content can be perceived as inappropriate to viewers, especially if the content is coming from those who are underage. It is likely that college students post pictures of themselves drinking because of the dominance of alcohol use in college culture (Glassman, 2012). In a 2012 study, Glassman found 29% of college students with an active Facebook account reported having pictures of themselves drinking alcohol, and 56% reported posting pictures of their friends drinking alcohol on their Facebook account. Taking the legal drinking age of 21 into consideration, 62% of college students who posted alcohol related pictures on Facebook were above the legal drinking age, whereas 39% were underage (Glassman, 2012). Although alcohol consumption is considered a normative behavior across college campuses, it is putting students at risk for negative consequences when sharing content that can be accessed by future employers.

College students are encouraged to prepare for their future and to establish a professional persona over the course of their college careers. This idea is most obvious in higher education programs such as medicine, management, teaching, engineering, and other social and health care positions (Fenwick, 2016). However, many undergraduate and graduate students do not apply this idea of

professionalism to their social lives, including their social networking sites. Jain et al. (2014) reported on social media use among medical students and how it can have an effect on how others perceive them, showing that three out of 10 profiles owned by medical students had unprofessional content that was readily available to view. The content consisted of drunkenness, overt sexuality, and inappropriate and offensive language. This study examined the differences in appropriateness ratings from medical students, faculty members, and the general public. The results of this study showed that faculty members and the public rated images as significantly less appropriate than medical students. Faculty members and the public also reported that they would feel less comfortable having those posting students as their future doctors (Jain et al., 2014). These findings are useful for future studies and suggest that different groups of people perceive social media content differently than others.

With the evolving use of social media, it is becoming more common that prospective employers review social media sites of potential job candidates. This is important for college students to consider when deciding what to post or what is visible to those who view their profiles. According to Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade (2013), job applicants use social media for personal communications that are unintended for employers, and leave traces of their social media behaviors through statuses, pictures, comments, and blogs. Badmouthing behavior is considered another form of inappropriate content, and is frequently used on social media to both directly and indirectly criticize and engage in disrespectful remarks towards others. This form of user behavior can reflect poorly on the users' personalities and viewers perceive them as unfriendly and irresponsible (Stoughton et al., 2013).

Impression management is a key factor in posting on social media because users try to control how others perceive them. They desire to appear attractive, likeable, and competent to others (French & Read, 2013). In order for college students to have a better understanding on impression management, being more aware of the negative perceptions of superiors is essential. Unprofessional and inappropriate content reflects poorly on students, which in turn can affect one's ability to be offered employment (Jain et al. 2014). It is safe to say that college students should take this into consideration before they post that picture from a party or vent their emotions through a status update.

The present study attempts to incorporate different outlets to uncover how groups of people in university environments perceive social media posts. To expand on the past studies on Facebook, the social media outlets of interest include Instagram and Twitter. Both are common social networking sites among college students. Alcohol related content and badmouthing behavior are considered inappropriate, yet are still common behaviors across all forms of social media, and this study includes both types of behaviors.

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate how undergraduate and graduate students rate social media posts based on appropriateness, employability, and responsibility. Twitter and Instagram platforms will be studied in order to look further into the perceptions of questionable content on social media. Does student status or age have an effect on what is considered as appropriate in social media posts? Will alcohol related content or badmouthing behaviors across social media be viewed as more inappropriate than the other? This study attempts to explore these

questions, in addition to testing the following hypotheses: based on previous research, it is hypothesized that graduate students, or older participants, will view social media posts more negatively than undergraduate students. More specifically, alcohol related Instagram posts and tweets will be viewed most negatively in regards to appropriateness, and school and work related tweets would have more negative ratings for employability and responsibility among graduate students. Undergraduate students will have more positive views on all areas of social media posts compared to graduate students and faculty members. Graduate students and faculty members will both have more negative views on social media posts, with graduate students being the most negative. It is believed that graduate students, or older participants, will have a better understanding of maintaining a professional role throughout their social media accounts, and will less likely have inappropriate content consisting of alcohol related references or badmouthing behaviors.

Methods

Participants

A total of 409 participants from a small mid-Atlantic private university completed the study. The sample included 317 undergraduate students (71% of whom were recruited from a General Psychology participant pool), 64 graduate students, and 28 faculty members. The remaining undergraduates, all graduate students and faculty were asked to complete the survey through messages in a campus-wide newsletter, and word of mouth. Approximately 96.3% of the participants reported being a social media user. There were 266 females, 141 males,

2 genderqueer individuals, and 2 individuals who preferred not to report their gender. Ages ranged from 18 to 67 years old, with the mean age being 21.13.

Procedure

Before the survey was open to the participants, the proposed study was submitted and approved through the authors' Institutional Review Board. Upon consenting to participate, respondents provided data via an online survey, hosted by Qualtrics.

Instruments

The survey tool included demographic questions (age, gender, ethnicity, student status, social media user status), and a set of fabricated stimulus materials consisting of Instagram and Twitter posts that participants were asked to evaluate. Each participant viewed a set of five Instagram photos relating to alcohol, and a set of five Twitter posts relating to alcohol, work, or school. All posts were randomly chosen from a larger set of posts created by the first author. After each post, participants were asked to evaluate that post based on its appropriateness, the user's employability, and the user's level of responsibility. Appropriateness was measured using the questions, "How appropriate or inappropriate is this image?" or "How appropriate or inappropriate is this tweet?". Employability was measured using the question, "How likely would you employ this individual?". Lastly, responsibility was measured asking the participants to rate the statement, "This person appears responsible". Responses for all questions were based on a 5-point semantic differential scale with "1" being a more negative response and "5" being a more positive response.

Results

Within each type of post (Instagram: Alcohol, Twitter: Alcohol, Twitter: Work, and Twitter: School), one-way ANOVA tests were performed for each dependent variable (appropriateness, user employability, and user responsibility) to determine which group (undergraduate students, graduate students, or faculty; participants age 18-25, 26-32, 33-40, or 41 and older) viewed each type of post more negatively.

Status-based Analyses

Instagram: alcohol. Graduate students viewed the Instagram posts (all about alcohol consumption) as less appropriate than undergraduate students. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of student status on perceptions of appropriateness. There was a significant effect of status on appropriateness at the $p < .05$ level [$F(2, 405) = 4.96$, $p = 0.007$]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for undergraduate students ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 0.735$) was significantly different than graduate students ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 0.621$), but not faculty members ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.870$). There were no significant findings on the perceptions of employability or responsibility among the Instagram posts.

Table 1

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Student Status on Appropriateness

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between groups	2	5.27	2.64	4.98	.007
Within groups	405	214.81	0.53		

Total	407	220.08

Twitter: alcohol. One-way between-subjects ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the effect of status on perceptions of appropriateness, employability, and responsibility for alcohol related tweets. There were no significant differences between undergraduate students, graduate students, or faculty members in regards to scores on appropriateness, employability, and responsibility of alcohol related tweets.

Twitter: work. Graduate students viewed work related tweets as less appropriate than undergraduate students and faculty members. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of status on perceptions of appropriateness. There was a significant finding at the $p < .05$ level [$F(2, 317) = 5.88$, $p = 0.003$]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for undergraduate students ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.78$) was significantly different than graduate students ($M = 1.30$, $SD = 0.62$), but not faculty members ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.57$).

Table 2

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Student Status on Appropriateness

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between groups	2	6.47	3.24	5.88	.003
Within groups	317	174.53	0.55		
Total	319	180.99			

Graduate students also reported lower user responsibility scores for the work related tweets. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted and there was a significant effect of status on user responsibility at the $p < .05$ level [$F(2, 317)$ = 4.27, p = 0.015]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for undergraduate students (M = 1.80, SD = 0.82) was significantly different than graduate students (M = 1.43, SD = 0.87), but not faculty members (M = 1.68, SD = 0.786). There were no significant results for user employability.

Table 3

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Student Status on Responsibility

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between groups	2	5.78	2.89	4.27	.015
Within groups	317	214.59	0.68		
Total	319	220.36			

Twitter: school. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted and there was a significant effect of status on appropriateness among school related tweets [$F(2, 398)$ = 12.15, $p < 0.001$]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for undergraduate students (M = 2.02, SD = 0.817) was significantly different than graduate students (M = 1.53, SD = 0.636) and marginally different from faculty members (M = 1.66, SD = 0.539).

Table 4

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Student Status on Appropriateness

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*

Between groups	2	14.66	7.33	12.15	.0001
Within groups	398	239.99	0.60		
Total	400	254.65			

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted and there was a significant effect of status on employability among school related tweets [$F(2, 398)$ = 6.48, p = 0.002]. Post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for undergraduate students (M = 1.96, SD = 0.80) was significantly different than graduate students (M = 1.66, SD = 0.68), and marginally different than faculty members (M = 1.63, SD = 0.63). There were no significant findings on level of responsibility for school related tweets.

Table 5

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Student Status on Employability

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between groups	2	7.72	3.86	6.48	.002
Within groups	398	237.02	0.59		
Total	400	244.74			

Age

Instagram: alcohol. Participants of this study were broken into different age groups. The majority of the participants were in the 18 to 25 years of age group (N = 360). The 26 to 32 age group consisted of 23 participants, the 33 to 40 age group consisted of 13 participants, and the 41 and older age group consisted of 10 participants. The first two age groups can be considered as college-aged individuals;

where as the other two age groups are typically individuals no longer in college. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted, showing a significant effect of age group on responsibility scores of Instagram posts [$F(3, 402) = 2.68$, $p = 0.047$], but Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons did not reveal any pairwise significant differences among groups. One-way between-subjects ANOVA tests were conducted for appropriateness and employability, however there were no significant results.

Table 6

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Age on Responsibility

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between groups	3	4.19	1.396	2.68	.047
Within groups	402	209.61	0.52		
Total	405	213.80			

Twitter: alcohol. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted, showing a significant effect of age group on responsibility scores of alcohol related tweets [$F(3, 372) = 2.73$, $p = 0.044$], but Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons did not reveal any pairwise significant differences among groups, other than a marginally significant difference ($p = .064$) between participants ages 18 to 25 ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.87$) and participants ages 26 to 32 ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 0.81$). This finding suggests that younger participants (18-25 years old) reported higher scores on responsibility for alcohol related tweets compared to older age groups, although not conclusively. One-way between-subjects ANOVA tests were conducted for appropriateness and employability as well, but no significant findings were found.

Table 7

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Age on Responsibility

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between groups	3	6.13	2.04	2.73	.044
Within groups	372	278.65	0.75		
Total	375	284.77			

Twitter: school. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted, showing a significant effect of age group on appropriateness scores of school-related tweets [$F(3, 395) = 3.19$, $p = 0.023$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for participants ages 18 to 25 ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.81$) was significantly different than those ages 26 to 32 ($M = 1.48$, $SD = 0.53$), but not compared to ages 33 to 40 ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.49$) and those 41 and older ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.77$). These findings indicate that younger participants (18 to 25) viewed the school-related tweets more positively in regards to appropriateness compared to the next-oldest age group.

Table 8

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Age on Appropriateness

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between groups	3	6.01	2.00	3.20	.023
Within groups	395	247.45	0.63		
Total	398	253.46			

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted, showing a significant effect of age group on employability scores of school-related tweets [$F(3, 395) = 4.96$, $p = 0.002$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for participants ages 18 to 25 ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.79$) was significantly different than those ages 26 to 32 ($M = 1.36$, $SD = 0.50$), but not compared to 33 to 40 ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.63$) and those 41 and older ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.69$). These findings indicate that younger participants (18-25 year olds) reported higher employability scores for school-related tweets compared to the next-oldest age group.

Table 9

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Age on Employability

Source	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Between groups	3	8.84	2.95	4.96	.002
Within groups	395	234.73	0.59		
Total	398	243.57			

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted, showing a significant effect of age group on responsibility scores of school related tweets [$F(3, 395) = 4.07$, $p = 0.007$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the mean score for participants ages 18 to 25 ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.81$) was significantly different than those ages 26 to 32 ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.57$), but not compared to 33 to 40 ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.22$) and those 41 and older ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.53$). These findings indicate that participants ages 18 to 25 reported more positive scores in regards to responsibility of school-related tweets than the next-oldest age group.

Table 10

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Age on Responsibility

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between groups	3	7.99	2.66	4.07	.007
Within groups	395	258.98	0.66		
Total	398	266.97			

Twitter: work. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted, showing a significant effect of age group on responsibility scores of work related tweets [$F(3, 314) = 3.16$, $p = 0.025$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni test indicated that the only pairwise significant difference was between participants ages 26 to 32 (*M* = 1.31, *SD* = 0.57) and those ages 33 to 40 (*M* = 2.17, *SD* = 1.03). This finding indicates that participants ages 33 to 40 were more lenient in judging the responsibility level of users posting work-related tweets than those in the 26 to 32 group. One-way between-subjects ANOVA tests were also conducted for appropriateness and employability, however there were no significant findings.

Table 11

One-Way Between-Subjects ANOVA of Age on Responsibility

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between groups	3	6.44	2.15	3.16	.025
Within groups	314	213.31	0.68		
Total	317	219.74			

Discussion

There were no significant findings on appropriateness, employability, or responsibility scores for the alcohol related tweets. Graduate students reported the lowest scores, across all groups of social media posts, which supports the hypotheses and suggests that graduate students have a more negative perception on certain content on social media. Undergraduate students reported the highest scores across most groups of social media posts with the exception of Instagram posts, where faculty members reported higher scores for appropriateness.

Graduate students reported more negative scores than undergraduate students for the alcohol-related Instagram posts. Although engaging in drinking activity is common among college students, posting alcohol related content could be considered risky for this age group because of the potential consequences, such as underage drinking. There may also be an increase in maturity levels as students progress and have different perspectives on the consequences of posting alcohol related content. It is possible for questionable social media content to interfere with job opportunities because it is now very common for employers to view potential candidates' social media sites.

Lower appropriateness and responsibility scores were reported from graduate students than undergraduate students, which suggests that graduate students may be more in tune with social media etiquette regarding one's career. This study advises that turning to social media and venting your anger is not the best option after experiencing a bad day at work. This finding supports previous research indicating this type of behavior reflects poorly on the user's personality, and viewers may find them unfriendly and irresponsible (Stoughton et al., 2013).

Graduate students also reported lower appropriateness and employability scores on the school related tweets than undergraduate students, showing less leniency for badmouthing a school, professor, or a class. Similar to the work related tweets, using social media as a platform to vent your emotions is not recommended because it is possible for employers to view you as less employable. Badmouthing behaviors across social media may not be appealing to potential employers. Graduate students may have a better understanding of the consequences of posting controversial content because they are more likely than undergraduate students to be in a position of applying to more professional jobs.

Younger participants (participants ages 18 to 25) reported the most positive scores compared to the other age groups for responsibility of alcohol related tweets, appropriateness of school related tweets, and employability of school related tweets, unsurprisingly. There was a marginally significant difference for the responsibility scores of alcohol related tweets between the 18 to 25 age group compared to the 26 to 32 age group, but there were no significant differences among the other age groups. There were also significant differences for the appropriateness and employability scores of school related tweets between the 18 to 25 group and the 26 to 32 group, but not for any other age group. These findings could be related to the undergraduate students' perceptions because the age group corresponds with those who are in college. In this study, participants ages 18 to 25 perceive individuals who post alcohol related content as more responsible than any other age group. They also do not view badmouthing behaviors towards school as

inappropriate compared to other age groups. Lastly, younger participants reported higher scores on employability of school related tweets than any other age group.

Contrary to expectations, participants ages 33 to 40 reported more positive scores than the 26 to 32 age group for responsibility of work related tweets. It suggests that older participants can have more positive perceptions of social media posts even if they consist of questionable content. It is likely that this age group's perspective of social media becomes less critical because they have established a career. It is possible that they no longer worry about the consequences about posting controversial content in fear that it will influence their future opportunities.

The results are congruent with previous research suggesting that individuals have different perspectives on what is considered appropriate across social media platforms. The upper level students had more negative perspectives on controversial content on social media, which suggests that they may be more conscientious than younger students in regards to what they decide to post. Faculty members also reported more negative scores than graduate students and undergraduate students, which suggest that older participants become more critical of social media posts. It is important for college students to consider the different perceptions of social media posts and how it could affect future employment. In today's world, social media is our online reputation and can influence the public's perceptions as well as future opportunities.

This study expanded on previous research in social media perceptions by exploring Twitter and Instagram posts. These platforms are more common among college students, whereas previous research focused primarily on Facebook. The

study's sample consisted of many participants spanning a wide variety of ages, however, there was a low amount of graduate students and faculty members. Future research could include a larger sample of these populations as well as other perceptions that go beyond appropriateness, employability and responsibility of social media posts.

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