

Online Instructor Perceptions of Social Presence and Educational use of Social Media

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Abstract

This study examined active online university instructors' perceptions of social presence in a learning management system (LMS), use of social media tools, and willingness to use social media tools outside of an LMS to increase social presence. Data were collected via an anonymous electronic survey. Results indicated instructors perceived a high level of social presence in an LMS, but there were specific limitations. Subscription to multiple social media tools was common, but use of these tools for social communications with students or other instructors was rare. Instructors expressed a willingness to try social media tools outside an LMS to increase social presence. There is a continued and increasing demand for "virtual" education. While distance-provided curriculum, efficacy of online education delivery platforms and students' characteristics, preferences, and learning styles are all studied, examination of the perceptions of faculty who facilitate learning in a distance format is limited. To achieve success in the cyberspace of education, understanding the behaviors and attitudes of instructors who lead the day-to-day operations of course facilitation are paramount to sustainability.

Keywords: social presence, instructor perceptions, Community of Inquiry, social media, social networking, online education

INTRODUCTION

The continued and increasing demand for "virtual" education, especially at the graduate level, has been the focus of much research (Allen and Seaman, 2011; Arah, 2012; Brazington, 2012; Natriello, 2005). Distance-provided curriculum, efficacy of online education delivery platforms or learning management systems (LMS), and students' characteristics, preferences, and learning styles are all being studied (Baghdadi, 2010; Chen and Bryer, 2012). Financial viability of online programs is also under careful evaluation (Mooney, 2013). Similarly, technical innovations related to education and social media aimed at increasing student satisfaction and success regularly fall under the microscope for review (Blankenship, 2011; Boyd, 2007; Peck, 2012). What are less frequently assessed are the perceptions of faculty who facilitate learning in a distance format. This is not surprising; at the university level, unlike in the K-12 arena, there are no common standards, certifications, requirements, or even experiences that define qualifications for higher education faculty. This absence of an agreed upon set of qualifications is even more common in online environments. As a result of this absence of a core set of credentials for online faculty, accurate assessment of performance is problematic. This dilemma appears consistent with prior and current assessment practices of traditional higher education faculty (Bigatel et al., 2012; Natriello, 2005). For example, historically, university faculty were evaluated based on research, grant acquisition and publication success, rather than teaching capabilities. Currently, traditional higher education faculty are most often assessed through student evaluations, which while important, are unable to paint a whole

picture. A more basic quandary facing researchers attempting to understand the “online instructor” is the absence of a widely accepted definition or description of best practice (Baran, Correia, and Thompson, 2011; Easton, 2003; Johnson, 2011; Parietti and Turi, 2011). A fundamental set of professional teaching standards specifically developed for the online environment addressing the required or even preferred skill sets of online instructors have yet to be defined.

While a well-established framework, the Community of Inquiry (CoI), does exist and has been widely accepted as the gold standard for distance education, it covers categories of what should be included in an online learning experience, but not how to implement those aspects. The basis of this framework is that three presences—cognitive, teaching, and social—must all be present for virtual education to reach its optimal potential (Akyol and Garrison, 2008; Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2010). Cognitive presence represents engagement with subject matter content. Teaching presence refers to engagement with direction and outcomes. Social presence focuses on engagement with and among participants. Combined, the three presences allow for a virtual educational experience that productively sets an engaged climate, regulates learning and supports discourse.

Though each of the CoI presences are well understood and theoretically accepted, in practice achieving those engagements remains challenging. Of particular difficulty is social presence because it focuses on interaction and collaboration not directly tied to academic content. As the “human element” of the learning context, social presence is more difficult to provide and measure in online environments. Nonetheless, it plays an integral role for online instructors (Annand, 2011; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997). Social presence is a powerful force that decreases transactional distance, which, according to Moore (1993) and Shin (2002), is the time and/or space between a student and instructor in an online educational relationship. The lower the degree of transactional distance, the greater the bond between student and instructor, resulting in a better teaching and learning environment. Unfortunately, LMS platforms, like the commonly used Blackboard, are not well equipped for non-academic interactions (Kumar et al. 2011; Poellhuber and Anderson, 2011), especially those interactions involving instructors. LMS environments are designed to support evaluation, assessment, and monitoring of all student activities. This high degree of monitoring limits free discussion (Garrison, 2011). Therefore, including social media tools outside of an LMS to increase social presence and decrease transactional distance may be warranted. As Abe and Jordan (2013) note, incorporation of social media may benefit instructors and students through increased real-time engagement and enhancement of the instructor-student connection (p. 20).

Several national surveys (Jaschik and Lederman, 2013; Magna, 2011; Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane, 2011; Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2013) indicate that online instructors subscribe to an array of common social media tools. A 2011 Faculty Focus Special Report on Social Media Usage Trends among Higher Education Faculty (Magna, 2011) indicated that more than half of all instructors have Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts. The 2011 Teaching, Learning, and Sharing Survey (Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane, 2011) that examined how higher education faculty use social media had similar results. A third survey, Social Media for Teaching and Learning (Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2013), conducted in 2013, mirrored both of the previous surveys’ findings. Interestingly, between 2011 and 2013, social media subscription rates among faculty remained steady, even though social media tools became more accessible, affordable, and user-friendly, particularly due to “smart” technology (mobile phones and tablets with Internet connectivity).

However, there is a difference between subscription to social media tools and use of social media tools. Subscription merely indicates enrollment, while use reflects active participation. As such, active participation in social media networking is not easily or clearly defined (Magna, 2011; Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane, 2011; Veletsianos, Kimmons, and French, 2013). While it is not uncommon for social media users to confine their participation to “read only,” more effective use of social media tools, like posting original thoughts and useful information, better aligns with the overall understanding and requirement of two-way communication required for social presence. A recent study (Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2013) indicates that online instructors do self-report use of social media tools for educational or teaching and learning purposes, but at a rate that is less than half of subscription values. Of particular interest, is the infrequency with which social media tools are employed. Furthermore, even though online instructors commonly report subscribing to and using social media in their classes, further investigation reveals that this use is “rare” for all but 19% (Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane, 2011).

This lack of consistent social media use in the learning environment does not diminish online instructor perceptions of social presence within an LMS. Overall, online instructors report being comfortable with the degree of their online social appearance and rate their non-academic presence as positive (Chen and Bryer, 2012; Draskovic, Caic, and Kustrak, 2013). A majority of instructors are satisfied (Jain et al. 2014) with their use of common social media tools for educational purposes, but tend to rely on those that do not require their direct or personal participation (Jaggars, Edgecomb, and Stacey, 2013). Although Facebook, LinkedIn, and blogs are occasionally and inconsistently included in courses, the most regularly-used social media tool is YouTube (McNally-Salas, Espinosa-Gomez, and Lavigne, 2011). However, videos from YouTube, while instructor-selected, are not always instructor-created (McLawhon and Cutright, 2012). This may be a cause of student dissatisfaction with instructors’ utilization of social media tools within courses, as revealed in a recent study (Fidalago and Thorman, 2012) that assessed student perceptions of online instructor social media use. Additionally, this dissatisfaction stems not just from lack of instructor involvement but also from too much faculty involvement (Aubry, 2013; Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds, 2007). A balance, it seems, has yet to be struck.

Finally, although students generally view the use of social media in education positively (Abe & Jordan, 2013), online instructor willingness to use social media tools outside of an LMS to increase social presence is lacking (Johnson, 2011). Reluctance may stem from several reasons, such as security issues, credibility and authenticity limitations, lack of effective measurement, and hesitation to adopt “yet another silver-bullet approach” (YASBA) (Dorn, 2012). Security concerns include questions about privacy rights (Jacobs, 2012). Limitations of social media tools include an open environment and resulting vulnerability, lack of rigor or authenticity of information (McLawhon and Cutright, 2012) and the participatory nature and shared leadership, which are endorsed theoretically, but not practically, by online instructors (Dyment, Downing, and Budd, 2013). In an era of standards-based outcomes and grading rubric assessments, it is no wonder that instructors are reluctant to use social media tools outside an LMS platform given their lack of metrics. Further, the use of social media tools seems to fall into the YASBA mythical category of improving education with a singular solution (Percy, 2014). Due to the novelty of interactive social media use in the educational environment and the evolving and supposedly improving tools and systems, instructor reluctance to adopt, adapt, and become adept at a host of applications is not surprising.

Therefore, the purposes of this study were to examine online university instructors' perceptions of social presence within an LMS, subscription to and use of social media tools, and willingness to use social media tools outside of an LMS to increase social presence.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Full time and adjunct online instructors from a health sciences university were recruited for this study after approval from the university's institutional review board. The university has multiple campuses and is comprised of two osteopathic medical schools, two dental schools, a college of graduate health studies, and a school of health sciences. Eight degree programs are offered exclusively online. The student population is diverse, representing entry-level, post-professional, on-campus, and online students ranging in age from the early 20s to over 65 years.

All instructors (N=172) in exclusively or primarily online programs were invited via e-mail to participate in an anonymous, cross-sectional survey administered via SurveyMonkey.com. The link to the survey instrument was forwarded to instructors by each program director. Follow-up reminders were sent, at each program director's discretion, within one month after the initial e-mail. The survey instrument was closed after six weeks and data were downloaded for analysis.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument included items related to demographic characteristics and 14 items measuring perceptions of social presence in an LMS that were based on previous research (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Responses for each social presence item were coded on a five-point Likert scale: strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, uncertain=3, agree=4, and strongly agree=5. Respondents were also asked about the frequency of their social communication with students and with other instructors (very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never) and their available time for social connections with students and other instructors. Finally, respondents were asked if they would be willing to use a social media tool if one was offered outside the LMS (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree). The entire survey instrument was reviewed for face and content validity by four doctoral-level distance education professors.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were downloaded into IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22.0 for analysis. Frequencies and percentages were calculated on age category, sex, and race/ethnicity. Due to a non-normal distribution, hours worked per week were summarized using the median. Means, standard deviations, medians, minimum, and maximum were calculated on each of the 14 items measuring perceptions of social presence. In addition, the mean response across all 14 social presence items was calculated as an overall, summary measure of perception of social presence. Because perceptions of social presence and adoption of technologies such as social media tools may be contingent on age, differences in these variables by age were analyzed. The overall mean social presence score was normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk p values >.05); therefore, a two-tailed, independent samples t-test was used to compare means between instructors 50 or younger and those 51 or older. Chi-square tests were used to examine age differences in comfort with social media tools, subscription to and use of social media tools, and willingness to use a social media tool outside an LMS. For all tests, the criterion for statistical significance was set to < .05.

FINDINGS

A total of 92 instructors (54%) completed the survey. Most (71%) were 41 years or older, 61% were female, and 82% were white. Instructors worked between 6 and 90 hours per week (median=50 hours).

Overall, instructors reported high levels of social presence in an LMS (Mathieson and Leafman 2014). As shown in Table 1, they were comfortable interacting with course participants in an LMS, participating in discussions, disagreeing with others, and conversing through a text-based medium of the LMS. They believed that their point of view was acknowledged by other participants and that the online discussions in an LMS helped them develop a sense of collaboration. However, instructors also believed that discussions in an LMS tended to be more impersonal than teleconference discussions and that communication through an LMS was not an excellent medium for social interaction.

Overall mean perception of social presence in an LMS was lower for instructors 51 and older (3.56) than for instructors 50 and younger (3.85), $t(90)=2.56$, $p=.012$. Similarly, only 63% of instructors 51 and older reported comfort with using social media, compared to 70% of instructors 50 and younger. However, this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 1: Perceptions of Social Presence

Question	Mean (SD)	Median [minimum, maximum]
In Blackboard, I feel comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust.	4.0 (.76)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
Messages on Blackboard are impersonal.	2.5 (1.0)	2.0 [1.0, 5.0]
I feel comfortable interacting with other course participants in Blackboard.	4.4 (.78)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
I feel comfortable conversing through Blackboard's text-based medium.	4.00 (.95)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
I feel comfortable participating in Blackboard discussions.	4.4 (.72)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
I am able to form distinct individual impressions of other participants using Blackboard.	3.9 (.08)	4.0 [2.0, 5.0]
Communication through Blackboard is an excellent medium for social interaction.	3.20 (1.01)	3.0 [1.0, 5.0]
The introductions in Blackboard enable me to form a sense of online community.	3.70 (.93)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
I create a feeling of an online community within Blackboard.	3.94 (.84)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]

I moderate the discussions in Blackboard.	4.18 (.84)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
Discussions using the medium of Blackboard tend to be more impersonal than face-to-face discussions.	3.41 (1.11)	4.0 [1.0, 5.0]
Blackboard discussions tend to be more impersonal than teleconference discussions.	3.07 (1.10)	3.0 [1.0, 5.0]
I feel that my point of view is acknowledged by other participants in Blackboard.	4.22 (.65)	4.0 [2.0, 5.0]
Online discussions in Blackboard help me to develop a sense of collaboration.	3.93 (.77)	4.0 [2.0, 5.0]

Note. Responses were coded Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Uncertain=3, Agree=4, Strongly Agree=5. SD = standard deviation.

Ninety-two percent of instructors subscribed to at least one of the social media tools listed on the survey, with the most frequent being Facebook (73%), LinkedIn (59%), and Skype (59%) (Figure 1). Despite this, social media tools were not commonly used to communicate with students or other instructors. There were no differences by instructor age in subscription to or use of social media tools.

Over half of instructors (66%) reported having social communication with students often or very often, but the most common modes of communication were e-mail (90%), an LMS (86%), and telephone (59%). Only 34% reported having social communication with other instructors often or very often.

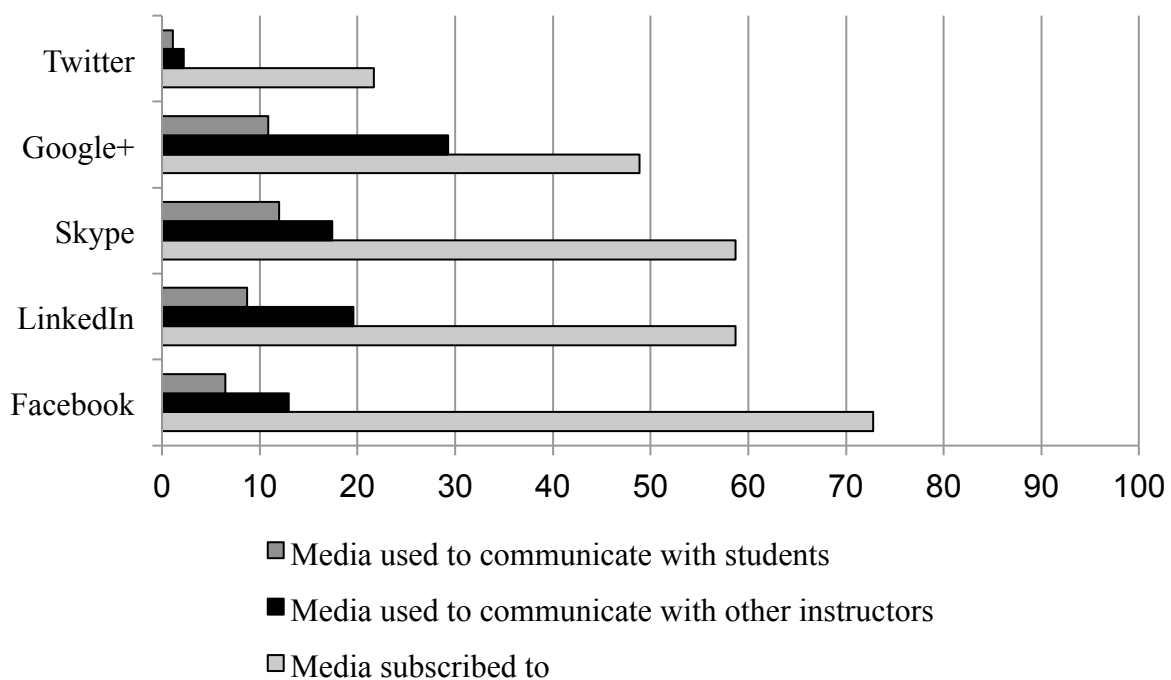


Figure 1. Social media use of online university instructors.

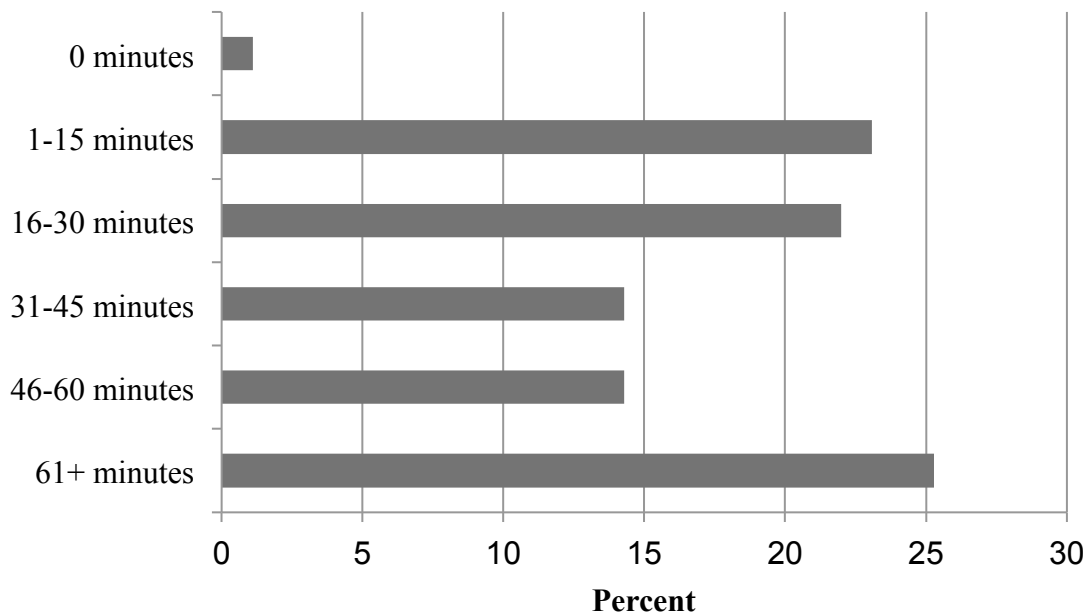


Figure 2. Minutes available daily for social connection with students and other instructors.

Only one instructor reported having no time available daily for social connection with students and other instructors. Seventy-six percent reported having 16 or more minutes per day to devote to such connections (Figure 2). One-third of instructors reported they were very comfortable using social media, and when asked whether they would use a social media tool outside an LMS if one was provided, 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed, 34% agreed or strongly agreed, and 38% were uncertain (Figure 3). There were no age differences in willingness to use a social media tool outside an LMS.

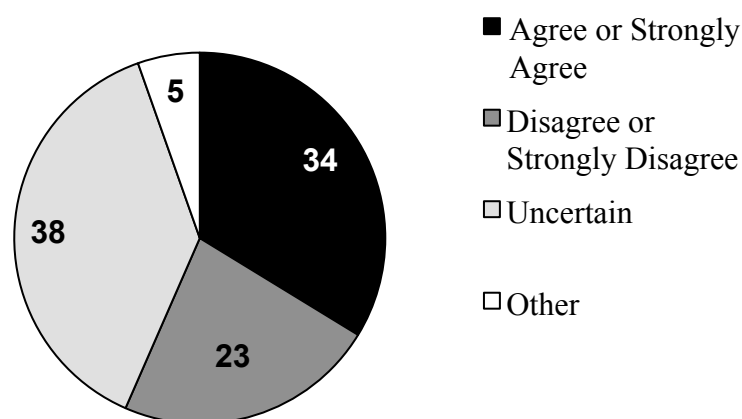


Figure 3. Willingness to use a social media tool outside a Learning Management System.

DISCUSSION

Social presence in an online environment is counterintuitive (Pacansky-Brock, 2013). Unlike a face-to-face classroom where sociality is required, online academic environments delivered via a virtual learning platform or an LMS do not promote engagement of students and faculty in non-academic interactions (Borup, West, and Graham, 2012). Given the importance of social presence and its link to student satisfaction, efforts must be made to boost social presence

within online courses. A complicating factor is that online students and instructors may have different perceptions of social presence within an LMS. Prior research (Leafman, Mathieson & Ewing, 2012; Mathieson & Leafman, 2014) has shown that compared to instructors, students perceive a lower level of social presence in a course housed within an LMS. In particular, students perceive the LMS as more impersonal than instructors and are less comfortable participating in LMS activities than instructors.

Results of the current study, which examined online instructor perceptions of social presence within an LMS, support prior findings (Brazington, 2012; Chen and Bryer, 2012; Dorn, 2012; Sung and Mayer, 2012). Instructors perceived a high level of social presence in an LMS. They indicated that they had time available daily for social connections with students and other instructors. While one-third were willing to use a social media tool outside an LMS, nearly 40% were uncertain, pointing to potential concerns about the type of tool to use and exactly how to appropriately incorporate its content into an online course environment.

Overall, online instructors were satisfied with the level of social interaction that occurred in their courses. However, these instructors also indicated that discussions in an LMS tended to be more impersonal than teleconference discussions and that communication through an LMS was not an excellent medium for social interaction. Therefore, despite instructors' perceptions that an LMS fosters a satisfactory level of social presence, potentially significant LMS limitations exist. This finding is important because students in an online environment highly value social relationships and perceive them to be tied to success (Brunet, 2011). If an LMS is unable to deliver a venue for adequate non-academic interactions between instructors and students, then tools outside an LMS, including social media tools, should be considered for inclusion in online curricula.

Professional use of social media tools outside of an LMS by online instructors may or may not be an insurmountable obstacle. In the current study, over 90% of instructors subscribed to at least one social media tool, with Facebook being the most common, and one-third were very comfortable using social media. They also reported having time for social media. However, very few instructors used social media tools to communicate with other members of their learning community. This result is consistent with prior research suggesting that online instructors do subscribe to a variety of social media platforms (Jaschik and Lederman, 2013; Magna, 2011; Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2013), but suitably incorporating those platforms into course curricula remains a challenge (Revere and Kovach, 2011; Rodrigues, Sabino, and Zhou, 2010). Third-party multimedia, like YouTube videos and/or Rich Site Summary (RSS) blog feeds, for example, are certainly valuable learning tools, but offer little opportunity to increase social presence and social connections among instructors and between an instructor and students.

Ambivalence about and reluctance to use social media tools to engage with students may stem from several hesitations, including lack of training, lack of opportunity, or, more seriously, legal and ethical concerns (Blankenship, 2011; Bugeja 2006; Demski, 2012). Lack of training may arise from a willing or unwilling transition of traditional faculty to an online environment. Mastering the technology of any LMS takes time, perseverance, and adaptability. The "virtual classroom" is not a seamless transition. Complex requirements need to be addressed such as determining the best methods for asynchronous course delivery. Less obvious, but still confounding, are issues of office hours, instructor availability, and assignment turnaround time. Further, students are everywhere and in all time zones, so schedules, cultures and accepted social behaviors are more diverse. For example, how students regard, address and

approach instructors with course questions, comments and concerns varies widely around the globe, as do expectations of services offered. Also, the pace of an LMS technology and the technological “glitches” that arise are different from problems that arise in a traditional classroom. Platforms regularly change and an online instructor’s ability to transfer prior working knowledge of an LMS may be of limited assistance. In addition, there is the always frustrating reality of Internet and server reliability. Access to an online course is completely reliant on a cadre of internal and external network connectivity. One break and a course can be offline from seconds to hours, unexpectedly playing havoc with already tight schedules. For technologically untrained instructors, requiring the use of social media tools in addition to and outside an LMS may be asking too much.

Lack of opportunity of online instructors as indicated by the results of this study, (Figure 3) may also influence the willingness of online instructors to incorporate social media tools outside an LMS into their courses (Jennings, 2012; Roblyer et al., 2010). Traditionally, instructors teach in a physical classroom on a subject matter in which they are experts or at least adequately trained. In an online environment, an instructor is asked to be a teacher as well as a director, producer, editor, videographer, and technical support adviser, often simultaneously. The demand to present coursework dynamically while at the same time being all things to all students can be overwhelming. Therefore, the less outside multimedia offered, the less online instructor dedication to time consuming and technologically challenging content supplements. Mastering the art of uploading third party videos, blogs, and RSS feeds, for example, as opposed to anxiously creating original multimedia content, is as far as most instructors are willing or confident enough to go.

In addition, adding social media tools outside an LMS raises potentially serious legal and ethical issues. This may explain why, although the majority of online instructors in this study subscribed to some type of social media tool, most were uncertain about or unwilling to use such a tool outside the LMS to engage with students. Questions of exactly what and how much an instructor should or can personally share in an online environment do not have clear answers (Jain et al., 2012; Wang, 2014). There is no definitive line in the sand indicating what is acceptable and what is taboo. What is allowable and what is not are regularly being tested in the courts (Aragon et al., 2014). Typical examples include violations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations. How concerned must an instructor be with assuring that all posts (without prior written approval) are deidentified and deemed truly anonymous? The inadvertent abuse or even simple perception of misuse of social media tools has led academic institutions to large financial settlements as well as the ruin of instructor reputations and, in some cases, suspensions or permanent dismissals (George, Rovniak, and Kraschnewski, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Fostering social presence in an online environment may call for the use of social media tools not found within an LMS (Demski, 2012; Jaschik and Lederman, 2013; Jacobs, 2012). In addition, research has shown that students are enthusiastic about the incorporation of social media into the educational experience (Abe & Jordan, 2013). Unfortunately, a clear vision for how and when to use social media as a course enhancement is not currently available. Without such a directive, online university instructors are left without guidelines for how to proceed successfully and without putting themselves or their jobs at risk. This lack of bearing, coupled with the challenging nature of social media’s eternal cycle of moving parts, likely contributed to the study’s results indicating a lack of instructor interest for incorporating these tools into

courses. Additionally, study results indicated that selection of a social media tool and determination of when to use it, without sufficient guidance, technical support or administrative assurances, are confounding tasks for most online instructors. Further, social media tools tend to change their user policies regularly. For example, popular, user friendly and well accepted social media sites more and more often are, without warning, beginning to charge user fees. As a result, what appears to be a wise selection at the beginning of a term may change rapidly. Given the time and effort required to incorporate a social media tool into a course, the instability of this potentially rich resource, to many, outweighs the benefits. Therefore, prior to committing the time and effort required to include a social media tool in a course outside an LMS, instructors will need confirmation of its expected course value, personal profile and post safety, and continued sustainability.

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