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The Effects of Social Media: Is it Hurting College Students?

Megan Landry

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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The Effects of Social Media: Is It Hurting College Students?

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the relationship between how frequently college students' access social media sites in class, and their GPA. Our class sent out an electronic survey and had 264 respondents, including men, women and transgender individuals. The results of the survey demonstrated that students who accessed social media sites during class often had lower grade point averages than students who never visited social media sites in class. The response rate was adequate, but future studies require an even larger sample in order for the results to be applicable to the general university population.

This topic is interesting and research worthy because I find myself distracted by my peers in my class who are on Facebook or Twitter. My research focuses on how frequently students use social media sites in college classes and how it affects their Grade Point Average (GPA). Not only does it distract me in class, but I also wonder, to what extent is it distracting the students who are using it? I hypothesize that there is a negative relationship between the frequency of social media use in class and students' GPA. I believe this is an important issue to study because it could have an effect on American college students in the future. It might not only be distracting to the people who are using social media in class, but also to other people and to the professor who is teaching the class.

My research question is, "Does frequency of using social media in class correlate with lower GPAs in college students?" The independent variable is the use of social media in class, and the dependent variable is grade point average. Even though there is limited research on this topic, I have found previous studies suggesting there is a negative relationship between the use of social media sites and students' GPA. Stollack et al. (2011) surveyed 430 students from small liberal art colleges. Of the 430 students, 97% said they used social media, with the number one site being Facebook. The results of the survey showed that students who spend less time on social media sites have a higher GPA than those who frequently use social media. In a study by Walsh et al. (2013), researchers specifically focused on female students and found a relationship between social media and GPA. They surveyed 483 females who were first year college students. Their results were similar to Stollak et al. (2011), demonstrating that females who spent more time on social media sites reported having a lower GPA than females who spend less time on social media. Reynol Junco (2011) also found similar results. This study focused on students' Facebook use and found that the more time students spend on the site, the lower their GPA. Another study, conducted by Jacobsen and Forste (2011), focused not only on students who use social media sites in class, but out of class social media use as well. This study looked at the effects that social networking sites had on many factors, including GPA as well as how well students perform in the job market. They studied first year students using an online survey (Qualtrics) and had students keep a 3 day log of their activities. Jacobsen and Forste also found a negative correlation

between high use of social media and academic grades. They state, “For every hour of electronic media exposure reported by students on average, GPA was reduced between 0.05 and 0.07 points” (2011). That is a significant drop that can hurt students when it comes to getting a job, applying for graduate school, or getting scholarships.

I asked the participating students questions on an online survey, which was directed by all of the Sociology 601 students. The survey is a convenience sample of UNH students. We benefited from using this kind of sample because it is cost effective, extremely fast, and easy for the students to participate in the survey. The downfall to using this survey is that we cannot control the sample (we might not get the right variation of race, gender, and age) therefore it will not be representative of the population. The survey was administered via the online survey program, Qualtrics. Every student in Sociology 601 submitted email requests to their peers in their social networks or sent individual emails. Our survey was anonymous, and students were not compensated for their time. The first page of the survey had a consent form for the students to read and we did not ask for signatures because we wanted to keep the survey anonymous. Once the students read the consent form, they completed the survey and the data was entered into the Qualtrics program.

This research does pose small risks to the participants. There could be a psychological risk associated with my questions in the survey. I will be asking students for their GPA (in an interval-ratio form) and that could upset some students who are not performing well. I am hoping that the students will not experience any discomfort while answering the questions because they will choose a range that their GPA is in, so we will not know their exact grade point average. While we are not compensating students, they will benefit from participating in the survey at a community level. Their answers will help me determine if there is a negative relationship between social media use and GPA. If there is a relationship, it will possibly help students spend less time on their social media sites and improve their GPA.

Table 1- Sample Characteristics

Gender

Male	41%
Female	57%
Transgender	2%

Academic Class Standing

Freshman	12%
Sophomore	13%
Junior	44%
Senior or More	30%

Table 1 shows the characteristics of our sample, and it is clear that most of the sample was from the junior or senior class. This could be because our class is composed of juniors and seniors, and since we emailed most of our peers, the population may not be as diverse as it could have been if the class had more underclassmen. In addition to class standing, 41% of our respondents were male, 57% female, and 2% identified as transgender.

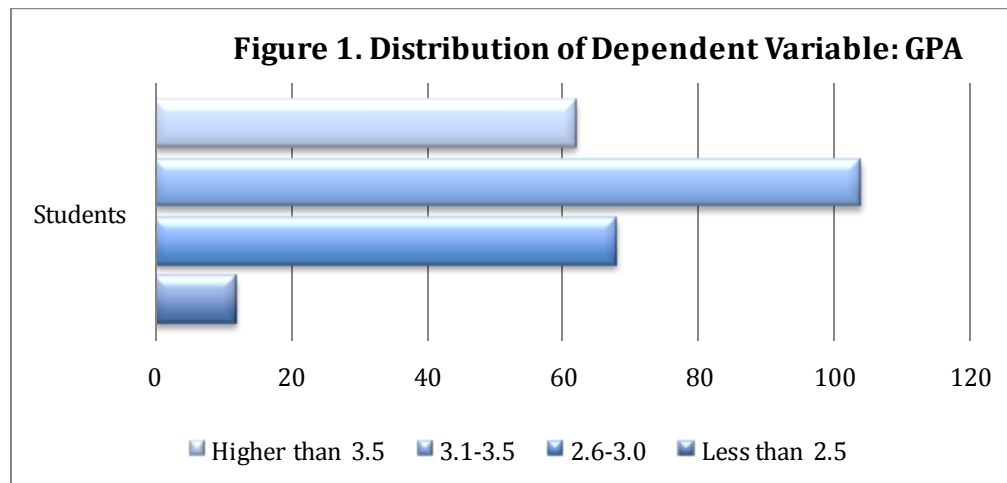


Figure 1 shows that the distribution of the dependent variable, GPA. The most common GPA range among the sample is 3.1-.3.5. All GPA ranges are represented, and there is a positive skew.

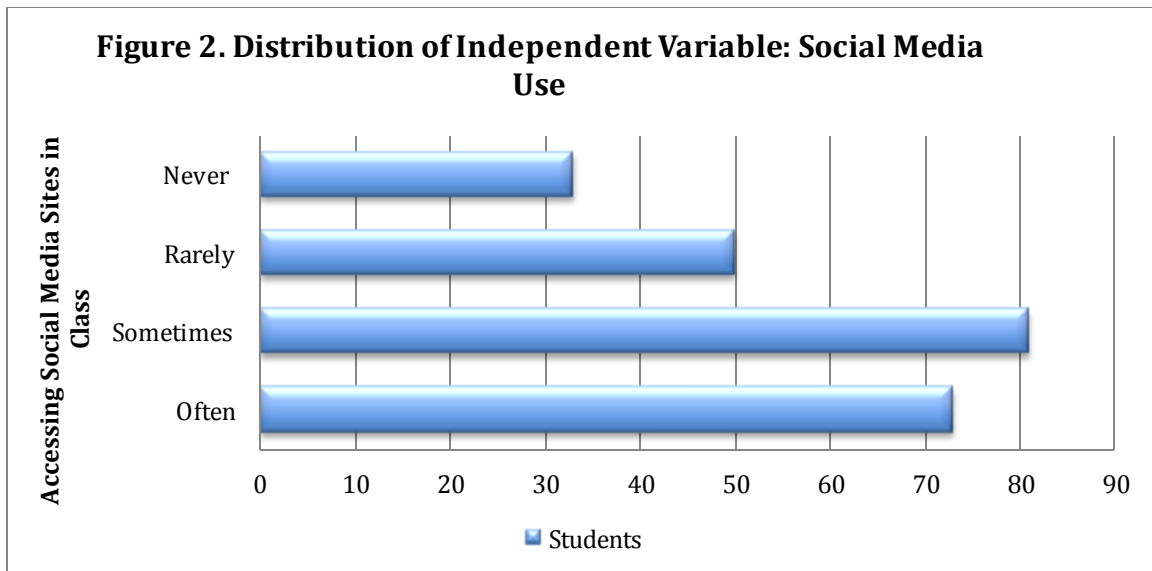


Figure 2. shows the distribution of the independent variable. The most common response for how often students accessed social media in class was “sometimes.” The distribution of all the response categories shows that students varied in how often they used social media in class.

How often do you access social media sites in class?						
	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total	
What is your current grade point average (G.P.A.)?	Less than 2.5	6 8.22%	2 2.47%	3 6.00%	1 3.03%	12 5.06%
	2.6-3.0	28 38.36%	18 22.22%	13 26.00%	6 18.16%	65 27.43%
	3.1-3.5	31 42.47%	40 49.38%	318 36.00%	13 39.39%	102 43.04%
	Higher than 3.5	8 10.96%	21 25.93%	16 32.00%	13 39.39%	58 24.47%
	Total	73 100%	21 100%	16 100%	13 100%	237 100.00%
	Chi Square	19.03				
Degrees of Freedom	9					
p-value	.02					

Looking at Figure 3, I can reject the null hypothesis, which states that there is no relationship between students' GPA and how often they use social media during class. There is a 98% chance that my results would hold in the population. The P-value is .02 so there is only a 2% chance that the findings would not be true to the whole population. With those people who have a GPA higher than 3.5, 39.99% of them never use social media in class, and 10.96% of them access social media in class.

I found that there is in fact a negative relationship between students' who frequently spend time on social media sites in class and how it affects their GPA. If you look at students who have a GPA between 2.6 and 3.0, 38.36% access social media often, while only 18.18% of them never check social media. Students' who never visited social media sites in class have higher GPAs than those students' who visit social media sites frequently.

Previous research on this topic has limitations. It is difficult to evaluate previous research because social media sites are fairly new and there are not many studies on the topic yet. Another important limitation is the response rate studies are receiving. Similar to my research, many of the studies use online surveys to get information from college students. While surveys are easy and cost efficient, the response rate tends to be rather low, which can lead to results that are not being representative of the population.

The present research has limitations, as well. Even though 237 students answered questions about their GPA and how often they are on social media sites in class, this is not a large enough sample to generalize the findings. Another limitation is that our sample was not controlled (it was a convenience sample, therefore it was mainly limited to students on UNH campus as well to those who have social media sites), again making the findings not generalizable to the general public. The results might have been affected because we used the online Qualtrics program. Many students found the survey through Facebook, which may affect the results.

After doing this research and analyzing the results, I think that it is important that this information gets out to students. Students should know that if they are spending time on social media sites, they could be hurting their GPA, which can negatively affect their future. I also think that universities should analyze studies like this to develop policies that will make it so students can't access social media sites in class.

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