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Over the Hurdles: Barriers to Social Media Use in Extension Offices

Abstract

The research reported here explored the perceived barriers to social media use by Extension educators. Using a sequential mixed method approach, the research was composed of two parts. The qualitative study used interview data (n=27) from Wisconsin and New York Extension educators. The quantitative study gathered data from surveying Extension offices in New York State (n=42). We argue that key barriers to adoption of social media as an outreach platform include perceptions around time and control. Ultimately, we recommend that Extension educators receive focused, hands-on training to more efficiently and effectively use social media for education and outreach efforts.

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Introduction

Social media represents a vital avenue of communication and outreach, with 67% of online adults using social networking sites and 83% of 18-29 year olds using social media (Duggan & Brennen, 2012). But despite its popularity and low-cost use, social media does not necessarily represent a core element of the Extension educator "tool belt" for outreach to stakeholders. Although previous research has focused on what social media tools Extension educators can use (Cooper, Cox, & Corbin, 2012; Kinsey, 2010), as well as identified why social media is important for Extension to use (Cornelisse, Hyde, Raines, Kelley, Ollendyke, & Remcheck, 2011), little empirical research has examined the reasons behind this lack of prevalent social media use in Extension. Thus the purpose of the research reported here was to explore the question of what barriers stand between educators and social media use for outreach.

The research was composed of two studies, following a sequential mixed method design (Creswell, 2003). The first study was an exploratory, qualitative study that used interviews with county-level Extension directors and educators in Wisconsin and New York states to identify what educators perceive to be barriers as well as unique opportunities of social media for extension and outreach work. The second part of the study focused on a survey of New York State. Overall, the findings suggest that the perceived barriers to using social media include a lack of control over content and the amount of time it takes to maintain, both of which can be addressed through more hands-on training with educators to increase their social media literacy.

Study 1

The first step in understanding social media use for Extension educators was to start by asking them about their social media use. In order to explore this question, researchers interviewed educators in New York and Wisconsin Extension. These states were purposefully selected due to their similarities, with both having a great many rural counties and large dairy industries, two areas seen as benefiting from social media to reach a geographically dispersed audience. The data was gathered through in-depth and semi-structured interviews over the phone, for a total of 27 interviews, with New York (n=17, females=13) having slightly more than Wisconsin (n=10, females=8). In both states, central Extension offices emailed invitations to county Extension offices asking for their participation in the study. The interviews were conducted in June to December 2010, then transcribed and analyzed using a comparative interpretive approach (Lofland, 2006). Interviews were coded for four emerging themes: Risks/Barriers, Opportunities/Reasons to Use, Social/Industry/Administrative Pressure to Use, and Social Media Within Broader Outreach Efforts.

Social Media Within Broader Outreach

Importantly, social media was seen as another tool in the Extension educators' outreach toolbox. About half of educators (15 of 27) suggested that social media is just one component of a broad outreach plan that Extension should have. As opposed to replacing other forms of communication and outreach, social media was seen as complementing other forms of media outreach. In particular, social media was seen as a way of expanding the range of the existing outreach efforts of Extension, particularly to younger constituents who may not use traditional media (e.g., newspapers).

Pressure to Use

One of the tensions around social media among Extension educators was the perception that if they did not begin using social media, they would be outdated. Half of those interviewed (14 out of 27) discussed feeling pressure to use social media because it was the latest way to reach an audience. Because of the perception that their stakeholders were using social media, there was a sense of needing to be where the people are. This pressure to follow the crowd and use social media was seen as an opportunity (e.g., to reach new people through a new tool) as well as a risk (e.g., following a trend without a plan).

Opportunities/Reasons To Use

Some of the opportunities that social media was thought to afford were:

1. Reaching a wide audience;
2. Communicating instantaneously and cheaply with stakeholders; and
3. Allowing for direct interactivity between educators and stakeholders.

Most county-level Extension directors and educators saw social media as allowing them to get a

message out quickly to a large number of people and to be able to see the reactions to those messages through commentary. Although social media was seen as just another tool in outreach efforts, it was recognized for the unique ways that it complements other forms of media outreach by being able to see the audience. Furthermore, because Extension educators are used to spreading information through a community by word of mouth, social media was seen as a way of translating those same techniques online.

Risks/Barriers

Some perceived risks of using social media were described as control, time, money, and access to the Internet and access to training in how to use social media.

Control

One of the most commonly perceived risks of using social media among our interview participants was a concern over how to control their online presence. For example, social media allows not just Extension educators and directors to post but anyone.

For example, one executive director from a county in NY state said: "[I am] a little reluctant because of some of the concerns in terms of how do you monitor it, how do you control it, how do you make sure that the people that are on that represent the organization..."

In part, the idea of control was also linked to a sense of responsibility for the messages that were posted on an office's social media presence-and a concern over whether the office was liable for content posted by other individuals.

Another issue that related to the idea of controlling a social media presence was the issue of privacy. Some educators were concerned about who would be able to see information that was posted or commented on profiles and how that could be used.

Yet this idea over control of social media also had an upside, as some educators felt social media allowed them *more* control over the content of their messages than outreach via traditional media. For example, instead of relying on newspapers to cover stories about Extension activities, educators and directors could post the content themselves.

Time

Another perceived risk among our participants was the issue of time. Almost half of participants were hesitant to add another task to an under-resourced and busy work schedule. A few educators suggested that since the Internet was constantly changing they did not want to commit to learning a service like Facebook or Twitter only to have to change soon after. But for those who already had existing social media presences, almost half of participants felt that it was difficult to remain on top of updating new content. Therefore, time was perceived as a hurdle for both getting started with social media, as well as maintaining it within their busy day-to-day work schedules.

Access

Another unanticipated barrier was access to the Internet. First, there was a concern from rural communities about access to high-speed Internet connections. Second, the infrastructure of the offices had an impact on whether Extension could access social media websites. For example, in Wisconsin, where many offices are considered part of the county government, Extension directors and educators were blocked from using social media at the time of the study. The inability to access social media was thus the primary barrier for these Extension offices to use social media in their outreach and education efforts.

Training

Beyond access, many participants wanted social media training. Without basic training, some educators simply lacked the confidence to begin using various social media platforms to promote their work because they did not know how to begin, where to start, or what constituted a good post that people would read and remember. One respondent said:

I have yet to find a good training where we sat down and somebody said I'm going to show you how to use Facebook. I'm going to show you how to log on, how to upload, etc. I have never seen that kind of training. (an Extension Educator, NY)

Even if they were already using social media, some educators mentioned that they could always improve their use of it and in turn their ability to promote Extension and their programs to the audience that uses social media.

Study 2

To more systematically examine the perceived barriers of using social media, the second part of the research focused on testing issues surrounding access, time, and control. To explore these themes, the study employed the Integrative Model of Behavioral Prediction (IMBP) (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). This model attempts to explain why people do not perform a behavior by examining, for example, attitudes towards the behavior (attitude), availability of resources to perform the behavior (environmental constraint), the sense of being able to accomplish the behavior (self-efficacy), skill at the behavior (skill), and the perception of others engaging in the behavior (perceived norm). Many of the survey questions derived from previous research analyzing barriers to using the Internet (Chia, Li, Detenber, & Lee, 2006), but were adapted to Extension with the help of the New York State Cornell Cooperative Extension Office. In this case, we were interested in unpacking the reasons why Extension educators did or did not use social media, and how they perceived their stakeholders using social media.

To address this question, we conducted a quantitative survey of all county-level New York State Cornell Cooperative Extension Executive Directors, and out of 56 surveys sent, we received 42 responses, giving us a 75% response rate. Based on the IMBP, the survey measured variables, such as: organizational and stakeholder access to the Internet (environmental constraint), training in social media (skill), how effective or knowledgeable they felt about using social media (self-efficacy), perceived difficulty of incorporating social media into the work routine (attitude), perceptions of peer use of social media (perceived norm), costs and benefits of using social media (attitude), and the

urgency of Extension using social media for outreach (attitude).

Issues of Access

One of the key barriers in using any new technology is access to that technology. Based on our previous study, New York educators had the capacity to access social media in their offices. Educators in this survey felt that it was easy to access social media both from home and at work. So to address this question, we asked how educators connected to the Internet. Of those surveyed, 95% of respondents connected over a high-speed connection such as broadband, and 4% connected via dial-up at work. Thus the speed of the connection was not an obstacle for most respondents.

Smartphones represent an increasingly valuable tool to effectively use social media-but the majority of respondents did not have smartphones. Only 9% of respondents had a smartphone for work, and 38% had a smartphone for personal use. Because social media can be easily monitored and updated via smartphone, this could potentially be a barrier for social media use.

Further, access to social media is not just a concern for educators, but also for Extension stakeholders. In particular, the previous study raised concerns about those educators who worked in rural areas using social media. This survey suggested that, while Extension offices worked in a mix of rural, suburban, and urban environments, 80% of outreach activities are in rural communities (Table 1).

Table 1.
Areas Where Extension
Offices Reside

Area Type	Percentage
Rural	80%
Suburban	28.5%
Urban	19%

Yet working in a rural environment does not necessarily indicate how stakeholders connect to the Internet, or whether they use social media. According to the respondents, the minority of stakeholders connect to the Internet via dial-up (14.3%), and the majority connect via broadband (Table 2). Interestingly, over one third of stakeholders were believed to connect via mobile. This indicates that many stakeholders have reliable and fast connections to the Internet, and are thus more likely to have to the opportunity to use social media.

Table 2.
Perceived Mode of Stakeholder
Internet Connection

Type of Connection	Percentage
Dial-up	14.3%

Cable or Satellite	42.9%
Other Broadband	47.6%
Mobile	35.7%

While this is not a poll of the stakeholders themselves, understanding how educators perceive the communities they work in could influence social media use and whether it is seen as an effective mode of outreach. Therefore, while nearly half of stakeholders were seen as using broadband access and many of those also have access through mobile devices as well, it is also important to recognize that there are some who are still connecting through slower connections such as dial-up modems. In many ways, this represents that there is a mixture of access practices among stakeholders, and educators may need to employ multiple types of communication, including both traditional media as well as social media to have the broadest impact.

Peer Use

The IMBP suggests that others' behavior is influential. Therefore, we asked educators about how their peers (e.g., coworkers, other Extension offices, other local organizations) use social media. Understanding how educators perceived social media use by their peers may contribute to whether there is a perceived pressure to use social media. Stakeholders, in contrast, are the people who Extension is trying to reach.

Table 3.
Perception of Peer Internet Use

Peer Type	Very Few	Some	Many
Coworkers	38.1%	33.3%	28.6%
Other CCE Offices	11.9%	54.8%	33.3%
Other Organizations	11.9%	52.4%	35.7%
Stakeholders	2.4%	47.6%	45.2%

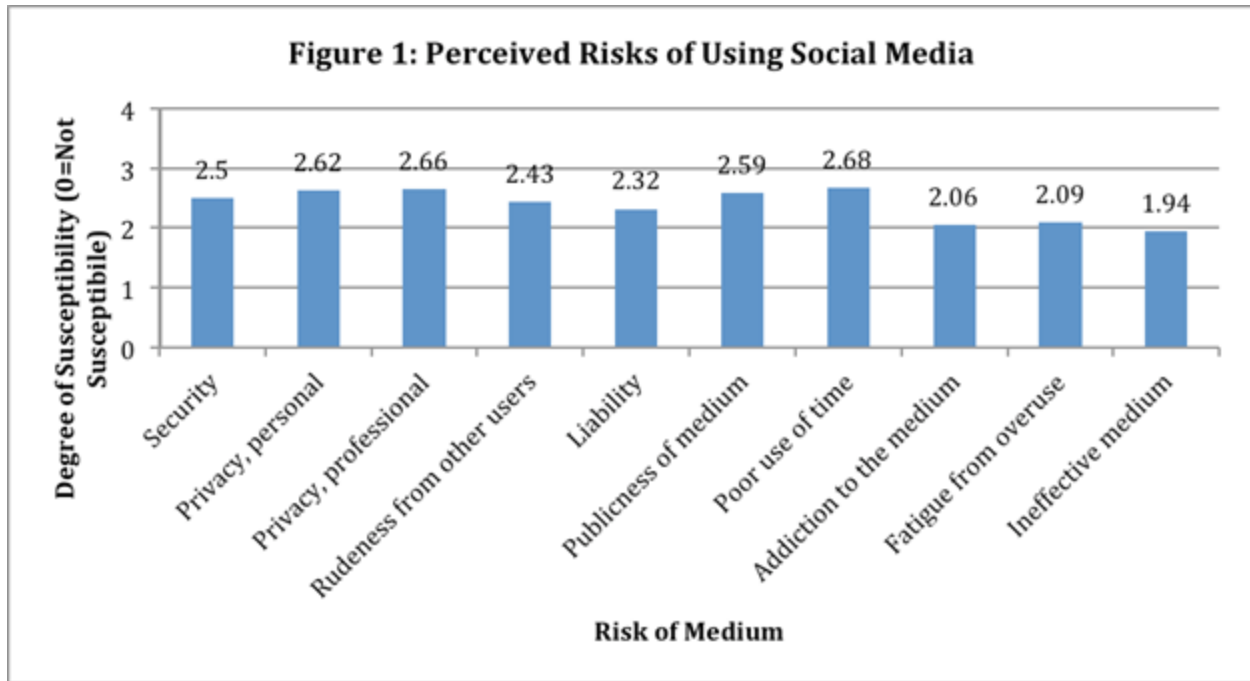
It was clear that educators believed that their stakeholders were more likely to use social media and their coworkers were less likely to use social media. With fewer coworkers using social media, educators are less likely to use social media themselves according to the model.

Costs and Benefits

We asked respondents about the perceived risks and benefits of using social media for Extension work. First, on a four-point Likert scale, we asked how susceptible they were to the risk if they were to use social media (Figure 1). While most of the risks were seen as somewhat susceptible to susceptible (2 or 3), the top four risks were:

1. **Poor use of time**, the perceived time investment around using social media;
2. **Professional privacy**, how widely available information pertaining to your professional life is;
3. **Personal privacy**, how widely accessible personal information is through social media; and
4. **Publicness of medium**, or the concern of what happens once information is posted to social media.

Figure 1.
Perceived Risks of Using Social Media

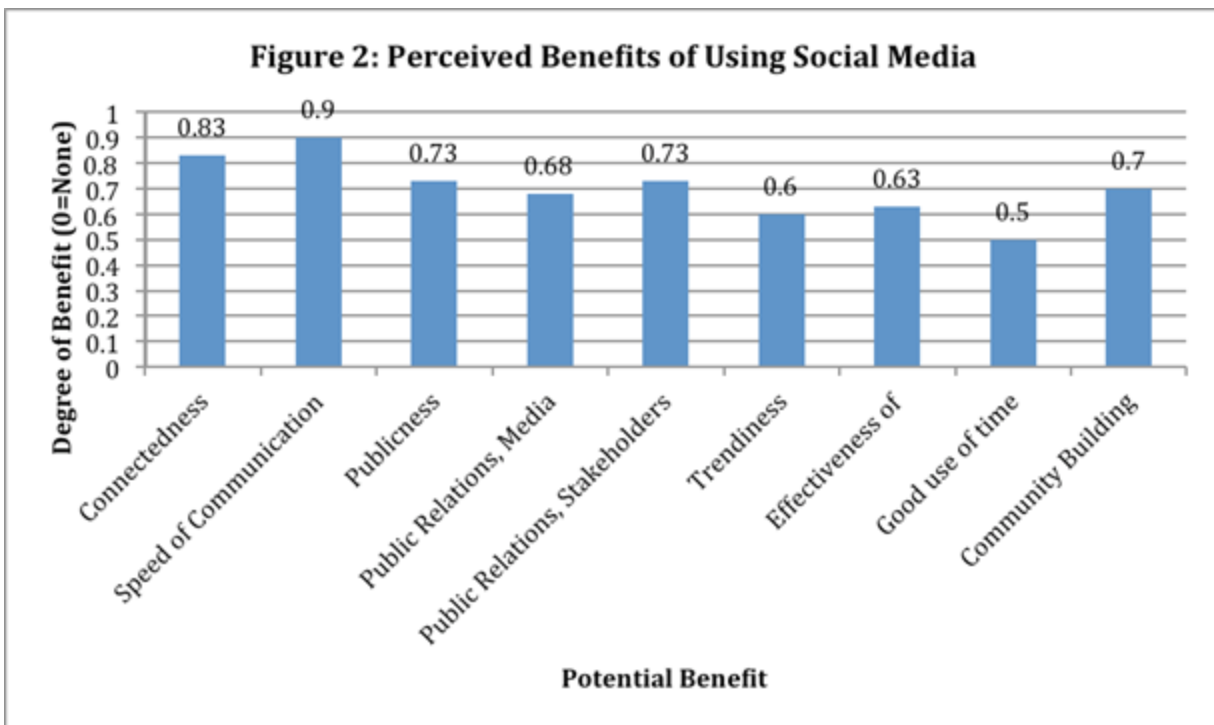


For benefits, we asked whether respondents did or did not see the particular benefit of using social media using a dichotomous, yes-or-no scale (Figure 2). Most variables were perceived as benefits, with the exception of being a "good use of time" only being seen as a benefit half the time.

Top four perceived benefits of using social media:

1. **Speed of communication**, how quickly social media can be used and received when sending out messages;
2. **Connectedness**, being able to directly interact with stakeholders;
3. **Publicness**, how widely open and accessible the medium is; and
4. **Ability to be used for public relations**, particularly with promoting media coverage and reaching out to stakeholders.

Figure 2.
Perceived Benefits of Using Social Media



The most prevalent downside to using social media was that it was considered time intensive-75% of respondents said it would be difficult or very difficult to find the time to use social media. Most of the other concerns are also seen as benefits to using social media. For example, issues around privacy are weighed against the perceived publicness of the medium. The capacity to interact with stakeholders directly as well as immediately is weighed against the concerns around controlling messages.

Respondents were mixed about the importance and effectiveness of social media for Extension efforts. For example, 69% of respondents responded that it was somewhat critical or critical for CCE to use social media. Yet when asked about the consequences of *not* using social media, 67.5% did not believe there would be an impact on stakeholder relations with Extension for not using social media. This, with the costs and benefits analysis, suggests that there are perceived tensions that cannot easily be resolved but must be actively weighed and considered by directors in order to effectively and efficiently use social media in service to Extension's priorities, such as education and outreach.

Discussion

Social media should not be seen as a silver bullet for Extension outreach efforts, but it can be a valuable tool when coupled with other modes of outreach. County-level directors and educators clearly believe that members of their communities are using social media, but they are uncertain about how to move forward to best use social media to reach their stakeholders. In part, this could be as a result of questions of access to the right resources (e.g., full access to social media sites at work, or smartphones) as well as perceptions about social media. It is particularly interesting that, based on the second study, there seems to be a disconnect between seeing social media as being critical for Extension to use but also believing that there would be consequences for not using it. Social media is arguably an important method of outreach for demographics that have high use (Duggan & Brenner, 2012).

In many ways, the research reported here points to a need for social media training among Extension educators to focus on addressing some of the core belief barriers and capitalize on the positive elements of social media. For example, training should demonstrate how social media is not a passing fad but a long-term instrument for communicating with a broad audience. Furthermore, it can capitalize on elements that Extension educators already have strong social ties within the community and a desire to engage the public. To demonstrate its utility, educators should be trained on how to measure the impact of social media tools, such as through Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, or other report software. It is particularly important that social media be seen as an effective and efficient means of outreach and a tool to be used with others towards building social capital with their stakeholders.

It is important to recognize that key barriers included concerns around control, privacy, and time investment. Thus, training should address the privacy settings and illustrate how to negotiate negative encounters on social media. Perhaps most critically, training should discuss social media with relation to time management. Social media should be seen to complement other forms of outreach and not a reinvention of the wheel.

For example, training can focus on developing a schedule to post content online in order to alleviate some of the day-to-day planning or focus on how dividing up the labor of social media management into specific focused roles (such as a person who should engage stakeholders and another person who generates the posts). Training should illustrate that content can also build off of existing content refashioned for the online environment, or even show off the behind the scenes work by posting about current staff activities. Social media does not need brand new content, but can reflect and document existing work.

Demonstrating more intimately how other Extension offices are currently using social media as an effective strategy to their education, outreach, and fundraising efforts might also go a long way to diffusing the barriers for those who have not yet employed social media. By leading by example and pooling knowledge bases, social media might be seen as in service to the priorities of Extension and not another hurdle to surmount.

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