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Perception of Social Media as Seen by Educational Leadership Online Graduate Students

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Todd Benjamin Emma

May 2023

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Keywords: social media, online graduate students, communication, retention, online community

ABSTRACT

Perception of Social Media as Seen by Educational Leadership Online Graduate Students

by

Todd Emma

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand student perceptions of social media as they relate to the programs of study for online graduate students participating in an educational leadership department (hereafter referred to as EDLR) in Tennessee. As institutions of higher education are being affected by declining enrollments, increasing tuition, rising numbers of nontraditional students, global events, and continuing budget cuts, understanding student perception of the educational experience is a fundamental element for understanding ways to address the uncertain future of higher education. Through a series of in-depth interviews, data were collected and analyzed to provide a framework of understanding for that question. This study explores social media usage by online graduate students enrolled in the EDLR program at a Tennessee university. Some of the key findings that the data illustrate are that the perception of paucity by EDLR in its social media affects student perceptions of inclusion and community. Participants may not be actively engaging in social media; they are often aware of it and many explain that they use social media outlets to keep abreast of class activities and each other. Participants also felt that online learning resources are more like prescribed assignments and lack the needed freedoms for open communication and social media did not invade their personal space.

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DEDICATION

To my Mom, for standing by me from G.E.D. to Ed.D. and all the times you picked me up in between. Thank you for believing in me.

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Special thanks to all the ELPA faculty. Dr. Flora for gently pushing me forward and encouraging me when it would have been so easy to give up a million times over. Dr. Good for making math understandable and so many other great faculty along the years that believed in me when I did not.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATION.....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
LIST OF TABLES.....	12
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	13
Statement of the Problem.....	14
Purpose Statement.....	15
Research Questions.....	15
Significance of the Study.....	16
Definitions of Terms.....	16
Delimitations and Limitations.....	17
Overview of the Study.....	18
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	19
Theoretical Framework.....	19
The Female Advantage.....	21
Current Social Media.....	25
Social Media Applications.....	27
Social Media and Communication.....	28
Online Course Engagement.....	29
Social Media as a Pedagogical Tool, and/or Part of the Educational Experience.....	30
Social Media as Community Building.....	31
Social Media use for Adjustment to College.....	32

Online Discussions.....	33
Pedagogical Lurking	34
Facebook.....	36
Facebook as a Pedagogical Tool.....	36
Facebook as a Retention and Engagement Tool.....	38
Facebook as a Learning Management System.....	39
Twitter.....	41
Twitter as a Pedagogical Tool.....	42
GroupMe	45
GroupMe as a Community and Pedagogy Tool.....	45
WhatsApp	46
WhatsApp as a Pedagogical Tool	47
Zoom.....	48
Zoom as an Educational Tool	48
Legal Issues Social Media and Student Concerns	49
Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972.....	51
Keefe v. Adams.....	52
Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.	52
Social Media Policy on Campus	53
Social Media Inclusiveness in Education	54
Chapter Summary	56
Chapter 3. Research Method.....	58
Qualitative Design	58

Research Questions	58
Researcher’s Role	59
Ethical Considerations	60
Sampling Strategy	61
Sample.....	62
Setting	62
Data Collection	63
Data Management	63
Trustworthiness.....	64
Credibility	64
Transferability.....	64
Dependability.....	65
Confirmability.....	65
Chapter Summary	65
Chapter 4. Data Analysis	65
Profiles of the Participants	66
Profiles Not Included	70
Social Media used by Participants	71
Facebook.....	73
GroupMe.....	74
Zoom.....	75
Presentation of Data.....	76
Research Question 1 (RQ1):	77

Paucity of Social Media in EDLR	77
EDLR Does Not Promote Community Through its Social Media Use.	79
Participants Were Unsure if the Program has Social Media.....	80
Participants Expressed an Interest in More Social Media in the Program.....	84
Perception of Inclusion through Social Media.....	87
Social Media Creates New Exclusion.....	89
Social Media Does not Allow for Exclusion.	91
Paucity of Social Media Did Not Support Inclusion	92
Research Question 2 (RQ2)	94
Participant was Active with Social Media but Did Not Participate.....	94
Educational Lurking.....	96
Kept Abreast of Assignments.	96
Perception of Social Media as a Retention Tool.....	98
Social Media is Clarifying and Reassuring/a Place to go for Answers.	101
Social Media Created Community.....	103
Social media offered emotional and other support.	105
Research Question 3 (RQ3)	107
Social Media Involvement	107
Informal Structure of Social Media Helps to Create Community.	110
Social Media Creates Convenient Peer Connections.....	113
Perception of Use of Social Media	114
D2L did not Create a Community.....	117
Paucity of Faculty Interaction in Online Discussions.....	120

Perception and Thoughts on What Social Media Creates in the Classes and Programs	122
Social Media Creates Informal Communications.	124
Social Media Reaches People who Might Otherwise not be Included.	126
Emergent Category	127
Perceptions of Personal Privacy in Social Media	127
It was a Personal Choice to Contribute to Social Media.	130
No, Social Media did not Infringe on Their Privacy.	132
Summary of Findings.....	132
Chapter 5. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations	133
Research Question 1 (RQ1)	134
Perception that EDLR Does not Promote Community Through Its Social Media Use	134
Perception of Inclusion through Social Media.....	135
Perception that Paucity of Social Media did not Support Inclusion	136
Summary of RQ1	137
Summary of RQ2	137
Participant Was Active with Social Media But did not Participate	138
Perception of Social Media as a Retention Tool.....	139
Research Question 3 (RQ3)	140
Social Media Involvement	141
Perception of Use of Social Media	142
Perception and Thoughts on What Social Media Creates in the Class.....	143

Summary of RQ3	143
Emergent Category	143
Conclusion	145
Recommendations For Practice	145
Recommendations For Further Study	147
References	148
Appendices	165
Appendix A: Social Media & Email Advertisement of Research.....	165
Appendix B: Interview Protocol.....	166
VITA	168

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Types of Social Media Platforms Which Participants Identified 72

Table 2. Paucity of Social Media in EDLR 78

Table 3. Perceptions of Inclusion Viewed Through the Lens of the EDLR Program
Social Media 88

Table 4. Participant Was Active with Social Media but Did Not Participate..... 95

Table 5. Perception of Social Media as a Retention Tool 100

Table 6. Social Media Involvement..... 109

Table 7. Perception of Use of Social Media 116

Table 8. Perception and Thoughts on hat Social Media Creates in the Class..... 123

Table 9. Perception of Personal Privacy in Social Media..... 128

Chapter 1. Introduction

Important and ongoing changes are being experienced within American higher education; in order to address these changes, faculty will be required to integrate elements of social media into online education to maintain its relevance (Vandeya, 2020). There are two elements central to these changes: social media is reshaping communication across the spectrum and demand for online education in public higher education continues at all levels (Lederman, 2019). These two separate but related changes affect student perceptions and expectations of higher education. Chickering and Gamson (1999) and Ahlfeldt et al. (2005) have described strategies and methodologies that define and measure engagement, communication, and effective teaching strategies in traditional higher education programs. Others are studying massive open online courses – MOOCs (Almutairi & White, 2018) to establish and incorporate methodologies to measure these factors in online education. Currently, there is not a universally recognized methodology for online education measurement of engagement, communication, and teaching effectiveness.

As online education continues to become an integral part of the mission at institutions of higher education, new opportunities and challenges are being encountered. One opportunity to consider is how students communicate with each other and the faculty. As students become more saturated with technology, their expectations for how information is conveyed from programs, faculty, and peers is evolving. Educators who participate in online education have a tradition of implementing discussion forums through educational learning systems to create a community designed to discuss ideas and create meaningful engagement (Vandeya, 2020). While educators have been relying on discussion boards, students have been using real-time social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and Discord to communicate with one

another. Faculty who meet with their students on social media have been seen as innovative and sensitive to student needs (Neier & Zayer, 2015).

Faculty and administrators encounter numerous difficulties as they integrate social media into the curriculum. These challenges include the merging of student learning and social domains, potential bullying, student privacy concerns, and a range of free speech issues. If a comprehensive social media policy is not established, students may feel disfranchised and the costs (enrollment, financial) of not implementing such a policy can be significant (Waycott et al. 2017).

Young and Bruce (2011) see the use of purely text-based content in online learning as poor tool to foster a sense of community among students. The absence of a community can have serious consequences leading to student disengagement and "ghosting" out of the online academic environment (Pennington, 2020). This can result in the loss of online students who feel disconnected and unsupported in their studies. As a result, it is important for online educators to find ways to create and foster a sense of community among their students whether through the use of social media resources, interactive forums, or other techniques. Exploring the social media landscape as it relates to higher education is an important step forward in the continuing growth of online education as well as a continued effort to engage students fully in an online environment.

Statement of the Problem

Institutions of higher education are being affected by declining enrollments, increasing tuition, rising numbers of nontraditional students, global events, and continuing budget cuts. There are also rapid changes in how education is being delivered. The increase of options and the accelerated evolution of online education has created an educational landscape

resembling a minefield of obstacles for learners, faculty, and administrators. Central to this milieu is the core question of how educational leaders in higher education increase enrollment while increasing student retention with minimal fiscal changes. Understanding student perception of the educational experience is a fundamental element for understanding ways to address the uncertain future of higher education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand student perceptions of social media as they relate to the programs of study for online graduate students participating in an educational leadership department in Tennessee. An emergent focus in this study is bi-directional social media which is social media that implements a friendship system. Bi-directional social media allows for two-way communication between individuals; Facebook is an example of bi-directional social media. The study also investigates other social media types including one-directional media such as Twitter which is fan-based social media where one individual can share with many others but generally the fans do not correspond directly with the feed's owner (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Research Questions

The central question of this research is: What are the perceptions of the EDLR department's online graduate students about social media use within their program. I explored the perceptions of online graduate students and recent graduates in the EDLR department regarding the use of social media in their program by exploring the following specific research questions:

1. What is your perception of social media use in the EDLR department as an online graduate student?

2. How does the use of social media in your program influence your utilization of social media with others?
3. How does the utilization of social media in your program influence your perception of social media in your educational experience?

Significance of the Study

This study is intended to inform faculty and program leaders about the perceptions that online graduate students have in regard to the use of social media as part of their educational experience. The data may help to inform future decisions about social media as a resource for engagement and retention. There is relatively little existing data on the perceptions of online graduate students about social media and engagement through social media in higher education. Examining how students are using and applying social media as it relates to their program of study may open new opportunities for engagement between the students, faculty, and programs. While the study is focused on online graduate students, there may be applications from the findings for online undergraduate students.

Definitions of Terms

The terms used in this research can be seen as self-explanatory. However, defining them is helpful to create a common language. The differences between bi-directional and single direction social media are important to defining what is covered in this research and what is not. For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

1. *Bi-directional social media* is defined as social media where individuals identify and friend one another and requires a “bi-directional confirmation for Friendship” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 213).

2. *One-directional social media* is media that have “one-directional ties” with users that can be labeled as fans or followers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 213).
3. *Social Media* is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).
4. *Desire2Learn (D2L)* is learning management system; although not typically described as a social media application it is included in this study due to participant perceptions and use during their time in the program.

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of this phenomenological study was that participants were chosen from current online graduate students and recent graduates of the EDLR program dating back no more than 3 years. This ensured that the participants are or were online graduate students since social media has been an established part of society and the EDLR program. A second delimitation of this study was that participants were over the age of 21 and not born before 1964. Using this age group establishes a multi-generational pool while avoiding significant outliers for a graduate program student. There are examples of graduate students, both younger and older, than the age range chosen by the researcher; however, they are outside the typical ages for the program and could artificially skew the data.

A limitation of the data is that data is specific to a particular subset of graduate students. The data are narrow in scope and may not be applicable to other graduate programs or to graduate students outside these parameters. Another limitation of the research was that a single university in Tennessee was the only institution from which participants for this

research study were selected. Therefore, the results, while applicable to this institution, may not be applicable to other institutions.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand student perceptions of social media. Chapter 1 includes the establishment of the purpose of this research study. The statement of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, as well as the limitations and delimitations of the study are identified in this chapter. Chapter 2 is a review of the available literature surrounding social media including a brief history of social media, its applications in education, growth and change surrounding it, a theoretical framework, legal issues & student concerns, and its uses as a pedagogical tool. Chapter 3 establishes the research methodology and design of the study. The data analysis of interviews with participants is reported in Chapter 4, and a summary of the findings, recommendations for practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusions are included in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The web of communication as described by feminist theory serves as a framework for social media as a pedagogical tool and emphasizes the ideas of lateral communications and inclusion developed in the third and fourth waves of feminism. Feminist theory can be linked to the non-traditional communication pathways made possible by social media. A possible beginning of the feminist movement can be attributed to Christine de Pizan whose writings explored women's rights and education is often cited as an early feminist (Akkerman & Stuurman, 1998). Feminist theory has since evolved and adapted to address the changing concerns of women over time. The feminist movement has had three distinct eras and we may currently be in the fourth era. The first wave was in the early 19th century with goals such as gaining equal individual rights, contract rights, and property rights as men. The first era of feminism closed in 1919 with the passage of the 19th Amendment when women in America gained the right to vote (Henry, 2004). Between 1919 and 1960, due in large part to World War II, a significant number of women secured employment in industries that were previously dominated by men. Women also made advances in politics, economic rights, civil rights, and humanitarian activities. The second era of feminism can be seen as the time period between 1960 and 1980. Although some viewed this as a post-feminist time, others fought for equality and ending discrimination. The third era of feminism arose focused around what was seen as some of the failures of the second era and the backlash to equality for women. The third era also brought in the debate as to whether the differences between the sexes are important and those who sought a more gender-neutral society (Zack, 2005). The third era brought in communities that had previously been left out including communities of color (Henry, 2004).

Currently some believe the #MeToo everyday sexism constitutes a fourth wave of feminism (Rampton, 2008). The current or fourth era is also distinct by its diversity as including those of all races as well as those who identify as transgender or non-gender (Rampton, 2008). Social media and the Internet have given a collective voice to those who identify with the feminist movement. While each aspect and wave of feminist theory is important, the framework for this research focuses on the ideas initiated in the third and fourth waves as defined by current literature.

In the 1990s as the third wave of feminism was beginning, there was a turning away from feminism by women; polls at the time stated the majority of women did not identify as feminist (Henry, 2004). However, it is during this time period that feminist authors' questions about the legitimacy of the patriarchy begin to emerge. Feminists begin to question the idea of sexuality, the lack of women in leadership positions, and the traditional female role in society (Henry, 2004; Zack, 2005).

It is from this questioning that nontraditional ideas of communication are brought into focus. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) describe feminist communication as an interwoven web of unique practices in individual experiences with others' lived experiences being woven in and out of the fabric moving infinitely forward. Social media can be described similarly as a web of disorganized practices that intertwine to create an online community. There is no consensus as to precisely how feminist theory is defined (Patton et al., 2016); however, it is generally agreed that feminist theory explores the power relationships between genders and that it reflects social and geopolitical times (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). Feminist theorists often explore the lived experience thus allowing different perspectives to emerge in their research. In its applied form individuals do not need to be a particular gender to ascribe to feminism

(Manning, 2018). Manning explores the idea that “the command and control leadership approach can be debilitating to men as well as women” (p. 91). Feminist theory allows for a non-top-down approach to communication. In the third wave of feminism a more inclusive view of feminism arose that sought to break gender barriers to create a more equitable society (Patton et al., 2016). Helgesen (1995), writing about the third wave of feminism, discusses the *web of inclusion* and posits that feminist organizations use a concentric circular shape of communication rather than a top down structure. The circular model gives more individuals a voice and allows for a more inclusive environment. Applying the communication ideas of feminist theory and non-traditional lines of disseminating information creates a framework to view the web of social media communication as a possible educational resource.

The Female Advantage

Helgesen (1995) suggests feminist leadership theory should be changed and argues that women should embrace their strengths as leaders rather than ape men’s leadership styles. She describes the idea that women leaders previously had been told that they should watch football to learn team sports and understand men's thinking (Helgesen, 1995). She describes women's leadership style to concentric circles of communication and ties many of the ideas of communication to the work of Carol Gilligan who discusses girls’ development. Helgesen notes that Gilligan references the idea of the web of connection and sees the connections and communication style of girls compared to boys helping to form some of the ideas related to the concentric circles of communication and how these circles allow for women to bring their whole selves to their work.

Some of the eight key differences between men’s leadership style and women's leadership style are: (a) women work at a steady pace with many small breaks, (b) women do

not see unscheduled tasks as interruptions, (c) women made time for activities not directly related to their work, (d) women preferred live action encounters but made time for mail, (e) women maintained a complex network of relationships outside their organization, (f) women focused on the ecology of leadership, (g) women saw their own identities as multifaceted, and (h) women scheduled time for sharing information Helgesen (1995). While not all eight of these topics directly correspond to a framework for social media communications many do. Some of the key elements related to social media and similarities with feminist leadership theory share similarities with research on social media as part of pedagogy.

The first of Helgesen's (1995) principles that can be studied in relation to social media is that women made time for activities not directly related to their work; male leaders separate personal and professional lives and "men seemed to exist solely as managers when they were on the job" (p. 33). The idea of a separation of work and personal life is not often possible for women leaders as "they have no wives to shield them from family problems" (p. 32). This is one reason that women leaders have learned to embrace work and life in a more holistic construct. Throughout Helgesen's research women speak about bringing all of themselves to the work and "the integration of home and work was reflected in the diary studies by the women's mental involvement with their families during the workday" (p. 33). One of the participants in Helgesen's study explains that "what exhausts a person is not hard work but the strain of feeling compartmented, cut off, boxed in" (p. 32). Aravinda Kumar and Priyadarshini (2018) report that "employees tend to use social media in both personal and professional life which has a positive effect on work-life balance" (p. 4); this idea corresponds with Helgesen's descriptions of women leaders including their personal lives in their work day. Cavazos et al. (2021) noted that the students who mixed educational discourse with socialization achieved

higher grades than those that focused on purely academic topics in a social media forum related to the course work being studied.

Helgesen (1995) found that women maintained a complex network of relationships outside their organization, Helgesen sees little difference between women leaders and men leaders in this area. However, when reviewed with female leaders' view on correspondence through mail, “none appeared to view her mail as a burden” (p. 24); these complex relationships can be seen as integrated into women’s leadership style. Marshal et al. (2021) see social media use by general practitioners and medical students as mirroring this type of complex relationship networking by creating a space for student to be able to keep in “touch with family throughout the world and with a network of friends from a previous course” (p. 3). The participants I interviewed for this project indicated that staying in contact with peers and keeping up to date outlines social media’s usefulness as a social network building tool for medical students and practitioners.

Continuing the idea of communication, Helgesen (1995) states that female leaders schedule time in their day for sharing information. An example of this is in Helgesen’s interview with Dorothy Brunson, a successful business woman who owned radio and television stations, and sees herself as a transmitter of information – picking up information from many places and sharing the information with individuals who need it. Helgesen posits that in a patriarchal top down system, men hoard information as power; in contrast, women leaders see themselves as transmitters of information. The idea of sharing information can be seen as being derived from how female leaders are concerned with their relationships. The idea of being at the center of a relationship rather than the top creates a more natural multi-directional flow of information. The idea of sharing information is core to social media, and

social media is being implemented in the workplace as a way to share work-related information, as well. Zoonen et al. (2016) examined ways employees use social media for work-related communications. Their participant data indicated that “employees contributed to organizational and personal goals by directly sharing work related tweets within their networks” and “employees use their personally owned Twitter accounts, in more than one third of their tweets, to tweet about their profession” (p. 336). They found that employees use Twitter to share information with their coworkers and associates while minimizing negative statements to maintain professionalism. The use of social media as a tool for sharing information relates to Helgesen’s concepts. She discusses the idea of being the center of the conversation and transmitting the information in a lateral direction rather than a top down structure thus relating social media again to feminist leadership communication styles. Women in leadership roles described that they see interruptions as interactions rather than interfering with their work. Helgesen reports that unscheduled “encounters were not regarded as usurpations that impeded the flow of scheduled events, but rather as part of the flow itself” (p. 21). She also reports that women leaders did not see their executive aides’ roles as providing a barrier to interruptions; they were seen as conduits of communication. Social media can be seen as valuable in the workplace if it is viewed as a conduit rather than an interference or a waste of time. In fact, more than a third of social media tweets sent were work-related and almost half were sent outside normal office hours – not as an interruption but an extension of work Zoonen et al. (2016). Zoonen et al. also found that, rather than taking away from work time, employees who engaged in social media activities extended their work well into their personal lives and extended beyond the traditional work/life boundaries (2016).

Each of the ideas by Helgesen (1995) is based on data acquired over a series of in-depth phenomenological studies following a series of successful women through their daily routine. Helgesen continues her discussion to describe the theoretical framework and recounts a conversation with Frances Hesselbein, chief executive of Girl Scouts. Helgesen reported on how Hesselbein manages her organization through concentric circles reaching out from the center much like a web. Top-down *command-and-control* leadership emphasizes a strict protocol for sharing information that discourages random communication. In contrast to this notion, the *web of inclusion* creates opportunities for discreet or peer-to-peer communication that is loosely structured and provides direct points along a tangent, creating a different type of information flow (Helgesen, 1995). This notion can transfer to an examination of social media use in academic settings, “Peer-support discourse provided some of the more compelling examples of communication related to the cultivation of community” (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 405).

The ideas of communication and management style in the web of inclusion overlap with social media in higher education. With the faculty member or administrator being at the center of a web of communication that allows for a freer flow of information, the framework laid out in feminist theory creates a roadmap for describing inclusive practices in higher education through applying social media applications around the framework of feminist leadership theory.

Current Social Media

Currently “68% and 45% of United States citizens own smartphones and tablets respectively” and the devices are being used by millennials as communication tools and more (Perry, 2017, p. 87). In exploring how social media affects the EDLR population being studied, an important step is defining what may be and what may not be classified as social media for

this research. Public perception of what social media is has changed over time from email and bulletin board forums to Snapchat, GroupMe, Instagram, Zoom, Discord and many other social networking applications. Historically, social media has been defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This is a broad understanding of social media; in more focused terms, social media applications can vary greatly from one-direction fan-based photo, video, or tweet sharing, to more traditional bi-directional information-sharing applications that include information or posts (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media applications often have a bi-directional friendship system, but others have a one-directional system with fans or followers (2007). Twitter and Instagram, with their follower-based sharing system, are examples of a one-directional system, while Facebook with its friends-based sharing system is a bi-directional system. Along with traditional social media applications, Zoom and educational learning management systems (LMS) are arguably being included in a social media. The web site BACKLINKO reports that “in April 2020, Zoom announced the milestone of 300 million daily meeting participants” and the “Zoom mobile app has been downloaded 485 million times in 2020” (Dean, 2022). While Zoom does not have traditional friends or followers, its use as a social media tool is difficult to deny. Although there is a paucity of information on the number individuals or educational institutions using learning management systems “estimates of colleges and universities running an LMS are almost always near 99 percent” (Brown et al., 2015). The research for this study was primarily focused on participant perception of bi-directional social media; however, also included is other research that examines one-directional social media and non-traditional social media that includes Zoom, GroupMe, and learning management systems.

Social Media Applications

Faculty and administration within higher education are implementing a wide array of social media tools that include “learning management systems, blogging tools, discussion forums, bookmarking sites, wikis, social networking sites (SNSs), devices, cloud computing services, augmented reality, virtual reality, and robot technology” (Aldahdouh et al., 2020). The top social media applications in the public arena vary significantly year to year; however, at the top of any list from 2015 forward is likely to be Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok and Snapchat (Kellogg, 2020; Statista Research Department, 2021). There is growing primary research on how these applications affect higher education and how they are being used in higher education. Gigliotti (2016) examined how different types of interaction including informal communications, course-related discourse, peer-support conversations, and program-related communications were applied in an online chatroom. Richardson (2017) sought detailed information about the perceived effects of social media on student engagement in higher education. Richardson found that social media interactions can be used to enhance courses and possibly have a beneficial result on academic performance as well as increased student engagement. Gigliotti (2016) stated, “learning and community lie at the core of the graduate online MPA experience” (p. 410). Another researcher with recent primary research is Vandeya (2020) whose qualitative research explored the experiences of faculty as they implemented social media technology for teaching in a resource-constrained environment. Vandeya found that learning resource management systems were inadequate for a complete learning experience and that social media added to the overall learning environment. These researchers examined a variety of social media applications including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, and others (Hamadi et al., 2020; Richardson, 2017;

Vandeya, 2020). Although the highest active users' statistics may change significantly, there are several social media applications that present themselves as primary tools in the general population and higher education.

Social Media and Communication

The widespread use of social media conveys the idea that social media is a primary communication tool across a multi-generational audience. Bowman (2018) finds that “social media is a tool to effectively communicate with stakeholders” (p. 141). Also, “as the usage of social media continues to rise, the usage of social media in higher education is also continually growing and evolving” (Chugh & Ruhi, 2017). Social media first entered our lives in 1997 in what is a recognizable social network site – SixDegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

SixDegrees had a modest 3,500,000 users in 1997 (Read, 2015). In comparison, Facebook has “2.8 billion monthly active users” as of 2021 (Tankovska, 2021). That is over a 7000% increase in social media users in roughly the last 20 years with almost 40% of the planet's population using a single social media application. In a relatively short span of time, social media has saturated the planet's population. The incredibly rapid adoption of social media technologies, both bi-directional and one-directional, has resulted in a fundamental disruption in traditional communication and has created entire new avenues of learning and sharing information (Chugh & Ruhi, 2017). Individuals using social media as a communication tool in the educational leadership sphere are supportive of using social media as a communication tool; however, they identify challenges associated with social media, as well (Lewis, 2017).

Reviewing research on how to use social media to communicate can lead to much higher rates of engagement. Perry (2017) found that schools that applied best corporate practices for Facebook communications had an engagement rate that was 12 times higher than

universities that did not, and for Twitter that number increased to over 53 times. Perry (2017) found that:

Maintaining consistent posting strategies based on the literature for both Facebook and Twitter regarding character counts, posts per day, consistency in posting strategy, not being overly promotional and the use of images/videos all yielded a positive impact on student engagement rates for these channels. (p. 89)

Understanding the stakeholder's preferences for communication, having appropriate knowledge of the technology being used by stakeholders, and having access to the technology is vital to being able to communicate effectively (Bowman, 2018).

Online Course Engagement

Student engagement is a key area when discussing communication. In their research, Junco et al. (2010) found that “using Twitter in educationally relevant ways can increase student engagement and improve grades.” A recent study by Humber (2021) states that “the types of communication tools that faculty use within their delivery modes have a great impact on student's ability to engage in coursework” (p. 14). However, there is a deficiency “in the literature on the use of social media at the overall university level for purposes of engaging with students” (Perry, 2017, p. 21). Perry also notes there is a growing field of studies and research on classroom best practices and possibilities applying social media to courses. Peer interaction is a necessary part of an online course, and some of the most commonly used tools are discussion boards, blogs and wikis to facilitate collaboration. In addition, other tools such as chatrooms, instant messaging, and web conferencing also allow for communication and may ease some of the student frustration and anxiety associated with the long wait times to questions on bulletin boards or discussion posts (Humber, 2021). In research using blended

teaching combining Blackboard, a learning management system, in conjunction with Facebook increase the level of student participation as measured by student activity (Kent, 2013). While individual students define engagement uniquely, Humber (2021) “suggests that student engagement should be defined by the student's perception as it relates to their individual feelings of how engagement relates to them directly” (p. 21). Participants in Humber’s study cited doing the course work, conversation in the class, and discussion with other students as elements of engagement.

Social Media as a Pedagogical Tool, and/or Part of the Educational Experience

“Social media applications have a pedagogical value since proper integration may allow students to feel more engaged in the learning process” (Cesarano, 2018). Since early in the 21st century, online learning as a pedagogical tool has been expanding (Martin et al., 2020). Recently social media has begun to be reviewed as an supplement to traditional teaching activities as well as in online teaching (Bista, 2015). Implementing “social media spaces provided awareness of self-directed, voluntary, and informal learning opportunities” (Romero-Hall et al., 2018, p. 89). Cesarano suggests with the proper implementation and use, social media creates the opportunity to shift from a faculty-centric learning environment to a learner-centered approach to education. Social media has also been examined as a way to improve retention and engagement (Daugherty et al., 2015). Cesarano concluded that “language educators believe that social media use helped to create learning environments characterized by greater student involvement and engagement” (p. 100). Romero-Hall et al. learned that graduate students found social media to be a valuable tool. However, Bista’s research shows that social media can have negative effects on learning in that it can be time consuming or at times addictive. Cesarano also found that the participants in their study had concerns about

“social media safety, privacy, security, and intellectual copyrights” (p. 98). Each of these researchers bring useful information to the discussion when examining perceptions of social media in education.

Social Media as Community Building

Social media can be used in higher education to build community and improve retention. Friess and Lam (2018) found that using Twitter in an introductory course created a sense of belonging that may improve retention. According to Ardeni et al. (2021), implementing online social activities, including the application of Zoom as well as other social media, helped with building community especially during the migration to online during the COVID-19 lockdown. Ardeni et al. used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous social events to “fight stagnation and the feeling of solitude” (p. 95) and reported that they saw improved lateral student to student communication. Although creating a community for an online course can take longer than with face-to-face courses, instructors can influence participants' understanding of why and how to build an online community (Brown, 2019). This community building is tied to the idea that social media goes “beyond traditional teacher-to-student vertical communication. In particular, we experienced enhanced student-to-student horizontal exchanges and connections as well as unexpected, organic relations that involved students and instructors alike” (Ardeni et al., 2021, p. 95).

This peer to peer information sharing is seen again by DeAndrea et al. (2012) who reported “we saw many instances over the summer of students pointing one another toward helpful information” p. 19). The community building demonstrated by the student-to-student information sharing is also reported to have allowed “students to connect with others and thus perhaps influenced their perception of the university as a place where they could find the

resources they need” (p. 19). However, not all research agrees with the lateral student exchange in information. Naghdipour and Eldridge (2016) found that during review of a course on improving English as a foreign language “the level of student-to-student interaction in this study remained very low.” (p. 596). Naghdipour and Eldridge noted that although lateral communication was low, the study found “students nevertheless established and maintained a sense of community” (p. 596).

Social Media use for Adjustment to College

DeAndrea et al. (2012) noted that social media has been used to improve student adjustment to college for over a decade. Yang (2022) examined the use of Facebook and Instagram usage in first-generation and continuing education students as a tool for social adjustment. Yang states that “social networking sites (SNSs) may facilitate social adjustment by providing a convenient platform to build new connections and maintain existing relationships” (p. 80). Yang explains that social networking sites (SNS) can have implications for the user’s social adjustment and well-being (2022). Interestingly, one-directional or broadcasting activity resulted in poorer social adjustment in first-generation students, and bi-directional social media such as Facebook created a positive association and more interactions with on-campus peers. Gray et al. (2013) found that students used “Facebook namely to connect with classmates at the college and to collaborate on academic projects help students feel more connected to the college, which may subsequently increase the likelihood that they will persist beyond their first year” (p. 205). Implementing bi-directional social media is documented over the last decade to improve student engagement that may be related to improved student retention.

Online Discussions

Social media can take many forms and can include learning management systems (LMS) and the discussion forums they provide. Discussion forums are the base of many online courses; Cho and Tobias (2016) examined how online discussions affect the learning experience of online students. The study examined the same course over three consecutive semesters with different levels of faculty-input in the online discussions. One semester there were no discussions, one semester there was no faculty interaction in the online discussions, and one semester had discussion with faculty input. Cho and Tobias found that “a basic online course discussion did not influence students’ learning experiences to any extent as long as the instructor was present online in email, grading, and feedback and an online course is well designed” (p. 136). They also note that “social presence was significantly different among discussion conditions. More specifically, open communication and group cohesion were statistically higher in both discussion groups (Conditions 2 and 3) than in those with no discussion (Condition 1)” (p. 133).

Effective discussion and social talk in classrooms and online discussion threads has historically been seen as in conflict with one another. Online discussion forums need to be more than simply available to be effective as a learning and community building tool (Chen & Wang, 2009). Chen and Wang discuss the need for unstructured “social talk” as a necessary element to online discussion forums – going against the grain of highly prescribed discussion forums. Both of these studies point to a positive effect that discussion forums can have if they are used as points of interaction with faculty input (Cho & Tobias, 2016) and space for social talk (Chen & Wang, 2009). While online discussion forums may or may not add to the student learning experience, they can have a noticeable effect on the value added to a course through adding

social value if they are supported by the faculty and given the space for social talk (Cho & Tobias, 2016; Chen & Wang, 2009).

Pedagogical Lurking

Ebner et al. (2005) asked the question, “does a higher level of online interactivity lead to a better learning result” (p. 72). Not all community building or classroom engagement is obvious and visible to faculty as “learning can happen in many ways and that lurking is one way of learning and interpreting our online and offline, virtual and face-to-face, worlds” (Bozkurt et al., 2020, p. 1). The idea of online educational lurking has developed as researchers understand how social media is being used by students. Arnold and Paulus (2010) found that “pedagogical lurking may be occurring even though we can't see it” (p. 195). Educational lurking or pedagogical lurking is the idea that students or participants are actively watching or following online discussions about courses but are not participating in a visible way. While Arnold & Paulus do not report that pedagogical lurking had any negative effect on their course, other research states that lurkers in educational forums can have a negative effect on the participants perception of community (Rovai, 2000). Other researchers have questioned the negative assumptions about lurkers. Beaudoin (2002) found that “three-fourths of the respondents in this preliminary study indicated they prefer to read rather than write may suggest a learning style preference [may contribute to pedagogical lurking] and students want to ‘get it right’ before they commit themselves to online dialogue because the written format seems so ‘public’” (para. 4). Dennen (2008) concluded these results “may just be part of regular online class participation” (p. 1631) and that students who do participate in pedagogical lurking, such as reading messages and returning to review a topic, are more likely to report that they found coursework meaningful in comparison to students who did not report pedagogical lurking. The work by Ruthotto et al.

(2020) examines whether race, gender, or age play a role in the type of online activity participants choose. The study involved 1,914 students enrolled at Georgia Institute of Technology's Online Master of Science in Computer Science (OMSCS) degree program over the 2016-2017 academic year. The OMSCS program had several qualities that provided excellent research opportunities. It was fully online and there was a required learning management system, PIAZZA, that was used for all communication between students, teachers, and teaching assistants. The requirement of a single learning management system allowed for Ruthotto et al. to examine participation data across multiple courses. The research revealed:

Online class size matters for understanding participation patterns in the virtual classroom. As the Lurking Index shows, large classes experience a relatively greater drop in active participation than passive participation, meaning that students posts less on average, but view roughly the same amount of content. (p. 10)

Ruthotto et al.'s (2020) data describe varying relative levels of active participation across demographic groups; they report finding that after class size was controlled for underrepresented minorities, they spent no more or less time lurking than whites, unlike Asian students who spent less time in active participation and older adults engaged more than younger students (2020). Faculty that force interaction through mandatory minimum numbers of online discussion forum posts from each student during an assigned time period to avoid the parasitic effects of pedagogical lurkers "denigrates the less visible processes of teaching and learning that occur "off camera" (Beaudoin, 2002, para. 3). Although there may be participants in an online discussion forum that are less visibly active in the form of written participation, this alone does not indicate learning is being compromised or that there is a negative effect on their progress. Implementing a

successful educational online discussion forum allows room for both active participants and pedagogical lurking as a way of engaging with course materials (Edmer et al., 2005).

Facebook

Facebook originated in 2004 and became the largest social media network in 2021 with nearly 3 billion registered users (Hall, 2022). Started by Mark Zuckerberg et al., Facebook was originally created as a student directory of personal and other information, *facemesh* (Facebook: Complete Guide, 2022). Facebook is now under the corporate umbrella of Meta whose other holdings include social media applications and virtual reality related hardware Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus. Facebook, as of August 2022, had a penetration rate of roughly 82% of North America (Dixon, 2022). Due to the overwhelming number of active users, some have begun using Facebook not only for general social networking but also as a tool in the classroom (Miller et al., 2019).

Facebook as a Pedagogical Tool

Some faculty members reject the application of Facebook as a pedagogical learning or teaching tool for a plethora of reasons including the perception that Facebook is not an academic tool. They also have concerns for their personal privacy and their desire to protect the personal privacy of their student body (Whitehurst, 2015). Hew (2011) reports that “Facebook thus far has very little educational use. Very few education-related activities on Facebook were found in past research studies” (p. 668). There also may be barriers to the use of any social media, including Facebook. Whitehurst (2015) found restrictions included the added time for students to integrate another social media into their daily lives and that there is no way to integrate Facebook into the learning management system the students were already using as part of their educational experience. Although there are individuals who are

concerned about its use, Facebook as a pedagogical tool has been successfully integrated into course work for roughly a decade. Cain and Policastri (2011) used Facebook as an informal learning tool for their research focusing on student use of a Facebook page where optional activities were presented: “the course directors designed an informal learning strategy using a course Facebook group page” (p. 2). While the student perception of the experience was generally good Cain and Policastri noted that:

any type of requirement for using and posting to Facebook would have negatively altered their perception of and the way they approached the activity. The informality of the learning environment appeared to be one of the primary elements of its success. (2011, p. 7)

Madge et al. (2009) found that 53% of the student participants they studied replied positively about using Facebook for a formal teaching and learning tool. Other studies including Urbano (2022) describe the benefits of accessibility to a wide array of students and state that Facebook as a learning management tool is a safe place to learn and teach. English as a foreign language learners report using Facebook 6 to 10 hours a day which manifested a highly favorable attitude towards its use as a pedagogical tool in writing performance in their course work. Also, students in an English as a foreign language course reported favorably to using Facebook as a writing tool due to the language tools Facebook has built into its software (Tarihoran et al., 2022). Applying Facebook as a pedagogical tool in an entry level Spanish course, class participants indicated an increased perception in their confidence for reading and writing skills after using Facebook as a learning tool. They reported that social media is overall an effective tool for learning – particularly cultural awareness and Spanish language usage (Miller et al., 2019). In addition to the pure academic merits, Miller et al. found

“students are naturally indicating a sense of community formed specifically by the platform in which they co-habited” (p. 555). However, students may use social media and not interact. Students who used social media to watch quietly and learn from others' questions can be referred to as educational stalking (Bista, 2015). Cain and PolICASTRI (2011) showed that allowing for “optional participation with no interaction requirements was a key instructional design element that enabled the informal learning environment” (p. 6). The act of watching but not participating in social media can be a positive experience for some students.

Facebook as a Retention and Engagement Tool

Researchers including Whitehurst (2015) may dispute Facebook as a pedagogical tool; however, other studies have shown Facebook to be an effective retention and engagement tool that has been proven to be a valuable means of attracting and retaining freshmen. With over 85% of North Americans as registered Facebook users, it follows that a large number of incoming freshmen are already members of Facebook, and many of those users join their university's Facebook pages before their first day of attendance (Madge et al., 2009). Daugherty et al. (2015) demonstrate that Facebook's “Class of” pages create a possible benefit to incoming students and institutions if used in ways that assist students (2015). Due to the popularity of Facebook, universities can engage prospective students from any location and that “students perceive creating a sense of community with their new institution as the primary benefit of the “Class of” page” (p. 169). Daugherty et al. found student engagement demonstrated repeatedly by incoming freshmen who made statements such as “on the first day when I walked in [to class] it was this whole room of faces I knew from the Facebook” (p. 166), and “the ‘Class of’ page provided participants the ability to make connections with others and develop a sense of belonging to the larger university community” (p. 168). Daugherty et al. reported that, “This culminated in

providing students a sense of belonging at their new institution” (p. 169). This research agrees with others including DeAndrea et al. (2012) who note that social media can help facilitate the transition from high school to college. Studies by Daugherty et al. and Burkart (2013) show no significant difference between the intensity of Facebook use – high, average, or low – and student engagement. Burkart examined several items related to student engagement and concluded that the amount of time a student spent using Facebook did not negatively or positively affect engagement. Madge et al. (2009) note that students integrating into university life used Facebook to assist with settling into college. They state that “early in their life as university students, they used Facebook to join university groups, plan social events and communicate with new online friends at university” (p. 146). Other research has shown that:

Engagement in co-curricular activities maximizes persistence and educational attainment and that interaction with peers is a powerful force in student persistence and degree completion. Therefore, it is entirely possible that student use of Facebook is related to co-curricular involvement in some ways that maximize student academic success. (Junco, 2012, p. 169)

Their research shows that Facebook could play an important role in integrating into student life through engagement in new university social circles. Early work by Morris et al. (2009) showed a correlation between students who had Facebook friends, Facebook groups, and postings had a higher persistence rate than students who did not.

Facebook as a Learning Management System

Investigating social media as a pedagogical tool for teaching and learning can suggest many distinct ideas about how to implement Facebook into education. Facebook has been suggested as a replacement to a proprietary learning management system. A university may not

subscribe to a proprietary online learning management system and find a need if forced to online instruction as occurred during COVID-19 lockdowns (Ulla & Perales, 2021). Meishar-Tal et al. (2012) explored the differences between an educational learning management system and a private Facebook group as a way to manage a course through incorporating technology to improve outcomes. They found that learning management system must fulfill three core goals: (a) to provide students with materials, (b) allow for interactive learning, and (c) manage course materials including achievements and grades. Meishar-Tal et al. also noted that Facebook has many of these elements; they studied 50 students in a course that took place over a 13-week period and reported that:

Student reflection on their learning with a Facebook group indicates that learning in this environment is perceived as very intensive and collaborative in nature. The students emphasized the importance of the environment in evoking mutual support and social consolidation, factors that support collaborative learning processes. (p. 44)

The Facebook group encouraged the participants to interact through the use of the ‘like’ function. Ulla and Perales (2021) noted the forced migration into the online environment that was caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic instigated the use of Facebook as a learning management system. They report:

Although the university had an LMS in place, the sudden spread of the coronavirus caught the university and all its teachers unprepared to utilize the existing LMS. As a result, teachers utilized various online platforms to continue the teaching and learning process. (p. 2)

The Ulla and Perales study explored the perceptions of 33 Thai students enrolled in an English course at their university. Students reported that they had a positive perception of Facebook as a learning management system, and they felt that Facebook helped them to be more creative, independent, and able to explore learning in the course. While all the students had a positive perception of learning using Facebook as the learning management system, several problems arose during the course including difficulties understanding the online materials and increased amounts of homework. Several key features were found to be helpful during the students online learning. Due to the difficulties of organizing group activities in an online environment, the chat function provided a place where the students could meet and discuss content with their peers. LaRue (2012) reported similar findings. Facebook made the replacement of a learning management system possible by implementing Facebook groups; members are not required to be online friends, the members allow for a private invitation-only place, and members do not share information on the user's wall. In addition, the administrator can open, close, or leave the group. In the absence of an adequate learning management system or to improve integration of technology, Facebook offers an effective teaching and learning tool that can be implemented to promote interaction, creativity, and an exchange of academic information while offering unique opportunities beyond that of the typical learning management system.

Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking service that allows users to tweet short messages of 280 characters. Started in 2004 and incrementally changing until its debut in 2006, Twitter currently has 396.5 million users (Dean, 2022). A quick Google Scholar search of "Twitter pedagogical tool" will result in 170,000 results with topics and ideas. However, it can be interpreted that scholars are using Twitter as a pedagogical tool and studying its effectiveness.

Twitter as a Pedagogical Tool

“Twitter can be a useful tool to reinforce or create new learning paradigms” (Desselle, 2017). Examining the work of several researchers on integrating Twitter into educational curriculum shows several different ways that Twitter can be integrated into classes. Some tweets are used as a way to exchange information related to the topic, collaboration on projects, or assessing learning outcomes. Desselle integrated Twitter as a way to supplement course materials and open new learning channels for students enrolled in a survey course of the pharmacy health systems course (PRMC 603) at Touro University California College. Desselle implemented a constructivism framework of knowing their surroundings and having the student participants acquire new knowledge by building on knowledge they had already acquired. The researcher did this through the use of course projects where students were assigned to “write reflective mini-papers on selected tweets” (p. 185). Desselle applied Twitter in a scaffolding process that relied on previous learning to promote performance improvements and creating peer-to-peer communications. The mini papers were part of the course grade thus holding participants accountable to demonstrate learning and engagement. The outcome of the study was that “students believed that the Twitter assignment was useful in their learning, and they reported high levels of engagement in a course that previously had not been evaluated very highly” (Desselle, 2017, p. 193). However, the researcher points out that while Twitter and other social media may be beneficial, it does require careful preplanning for a successful implementation.

Bista (2015) studied Twitter as a pedagogical tool also and stated that Twitter is becoming a leading space for education integration with social media. Bista’s research differed significantly from the work done with Facebook (Daugherty et al., 2015) in that the students were assigned required projects and the students were graded on the assignments. With the

Facebook study the students had used Facebook as an ungraded piece of their educational experience. The Twitter page was reviewed by Bista “at least twice a day for 15 weeks to ensure active participation of students, and quality of contents posted on the page” (p. 88). The course emphasized that “participants had to participate in the activities in order to earn the points that counted towards their final course grade” (p. 98). Cain and PolICASTRI (2011) identified formal or graded materials as non-conducive to social media in the classroom as it could create potential problems for students. However, in Bista’s research the students “saw Twitter as a valuable tool to use in the classroom, and recommended it to use in the future classes” (p. 98). Bista’s research highlights students' non-unilateral perceptions on social media use in the classroom. In slight contrast to Bista’s research, Luo and Xie (2019) found that students felt that Twitter was more favorably used as a support tool and reported that, although the use of Twitter in the classroom may be distracting, students noted that it fosters greater participation in discussions (Luo, & Xie, 2019). The study compared similar usages of Twitter in two separate courses. One of the uses was an in-course backchannel for students to use during the course. Students were generally supportive and believed the use of Twitter as a backchannel created a unique learning experience. It allowed for clarification and real time answers to questions. Both classes found the backchannel to be distracting and devoid of quality, and the researchers attributed this to cognitive overload (Luo & Xie, 2019). While Twitter was able to improve some elements of pedagogy, it was not as coherent in others.

Erhel et al. (2022) studied Twitter’s use as a motivational tool and posited that “there is little data available about the effectiveness of using social media to promote course content, in terms of impact on actual student learning or attitudes regarding the course” (p. 1). Their study examined 1,731 students participating in a first-year cognitive psychology course over a multi-

year period. Erhel et al., integrated a Twitter account that had been specifically created for the course and plainly declared its education motivation of supplementing the instructional content of the class.

The purpose of the Twitter account was to strengthen concepts taught during the course with scientific press articles selected by the teachers. We posted three or four tweets a week, all referring to a press article with the corresponding topic clearly marked (e.g. #phobia). (p. 4)

Erhel et al. explain that integrating the social media “significantly increased motivation (with both an increase of intrinsic motivation and a decrease of amotivation) and interest in the course over the semester, above and beyond preexisting differences between students” (p. 8). The results of this study concur with other research by Bista (2015) and Desselle (2017) that social media, in particular Twitter, is a way to improve motivation and interest in academics. With this in mind, understanding student perceptions of Twitter as a learning tool is relevant.

Osgerby and Rush (2015) explore the question of student perceptions of Twitter when used as a learning support tool. Their study was spurred by Osgerby and Rush’s (2013) research that unexpectedly found students using social media outside of the school learning management system as a preferred way to communicate with each other. The study took place over the academic year 2012-2013 and included 37 participants in a management and accounting module. The researchers “immersed accounting students in using Twitter across a range of learning support functions” (p. 346). They found that the participants were generally positive in their perception of Twitter as a learning support tool; however, online discussions using Twitter could be challenging to start and carry through. Twitter has shown it can be a useful pedagogical tool.

By integrating carefully well-planned social media experiences, students can be and are receptive to social media in their coursework as a pedagogical instrument for learning (Bista, 2015).

GroupMe

GroupMe, now a Microsoft product with over 12 million users, is a phone-based chat system created in 2010 by Hecht and Martocci (Davis, 2022). GroupMe is a free app that works with the user's contacts and other social networking site contacts. "You can use GroupMe to send direct, one-on-one messages to your contacts, but the app is really designed around multiperson chats" (Mitroff, 2014).

GroupMe as a Community and Pedagogy Tool

GroupMe and WhatsApp are mobile instant messaging applications (MIM) and are incorporated in this research with other social messaging sites. Although there are limited studies on MIM applications, MIM's are relevant to this study. GroupMe and other MIMs do not require the use of a profile making them appealing to individuals who prefer anonymity and ease of use. GroupMe "could be accessed more easily than the course LMS that had a lengthy login process" (Gronseth & Hebert, 2019, p. 20). GroupMe can be integrated into a course much like a discussion on the LMS. MIM "afforded student's opportunities to respond to discussion prompts through text-based, asynchronous messages" (2019, p. 19). Glasco, in a review of GroupMe, found "GroupMe creates community with classes that do not meet face-to-face" (2021, p. 259). Hanif & Sajid (2020) found that "WhatsApp helps students to gain knowledge and motivates them to interact with their fellows and instructors to resolve their queries." Cavazos et al. (2021) looked at using GroupMe as part of a large (60 plus student) introduction to psychology course. The researchers examined the GroupMe texts between their undergraduate teacher assistants and the student participants in the course and specifically looked at the level of interaction between

participant students and undergraduate teaching assistants. The research group found that high levels of engagement were often associated with high levels of non-academic content, while low levels of engagement were more centered on educational materials. “When assessed again 10 weeks later, the interactions in low-engagement groups still centered on course-related content, while interactions in the high-engagement groups continued to be predominantly humorous” (Cavazos et al., 2021, p. 274). The study concluded that:

Too little discussion might indicate a lack of group cohesion and perhaps poor leadership on the part of the UTA, but too much conversation might indicate a lack of focus on the subject material. The medium interaction teams employed a mix of both on- and off-topic conversations, and this balanced approach was the best predictor of overall course success. (Cavazos et al., 2021, p. 274)

With the limited primary research on MIMs, the findings available loosely resemble those of other social media sites demonstrating student engagement, community building, and lateral exchange of information between peers.

The use of WhatsApp within the classroom not only enhances the knowledge of the language but also remains a major source of improving the confidence of students as they get immediate feedback from their instructors while sharing knowledge with their classmates. (Hanif & Sajid, 2020, p. 40)

WhatsApp

WhatsApp was developed in 2009 by Acton and Koum (Summers, 2020). The phone-based application is designed to send and receive a variety of media including text, images, videos, documents, positioning, and voice calls (About WhatsApp, n.d.). Currently, the application has between 1.5 and 2 billion users in 180 countries worldwide and is the most

popular messaging application in the world. Although the North American share of the instant messaging user's community is smaller than other social networking options, it is growing (Summers, 2020).

WhatsApp as a Pedagogical Tool

Rodawold and Vogler (2022) studied the use of WhatsApp by pharmacy students during their clinical rotations. The study consisted of two cohort participants and was conducted over multiple academic years. The participants were sent primarily case-based questions, open ended questions, and calculations. The researchers intended the study to assist the “students to practice applying their knowledge, continue to be challenged, and connect with their peers in discussion” (p. 1027). Upon completion of the study students reported that “they felt more confident in their pharmacy knowledge and felt more prepared for the boards” (p. 1031).

Abiodun et al. (2020) investigated how nursing students in Western Cape in South Africa were using instant messaging applications – in particular WhatsApp. The researchers state that “the aim of the WhatsApp community of practice was to support graduate nurses in their community service placement transition year through the delivery of a transition support program using WhatsApp” (p. 2). Their primary reason for the use of WhatsApp is that it is inexpensive, easy to use for communication, and has high use among young people in the medical community. The compulsory application of the WhatsApp program was set up over two groups and delivered three sessions per week. Each week a new topic was covered and followed by moderator-lead discussions. Participants had a positive view of using WhatsApp in education and said it allowed them to cooperate easily with their peers. The participants reported that their community increased after the introduction of the WhatsApp application and that they had improved peer-to-peer learning. The WhatsApp community created social capital that improved

the connectedness of the participants. The WhatsApp instant messaging application has demonstrated an ease of use and integration into academic settings globally. While more popular in other regions around the world for a variety of reasons, its use is growing in North America.

Zoom

Zoom is a teleconferencing application created to allow users to interact virtually when in-person meetings are problematic. It allows for live chats, recording, and video conferencing (Tillman, 2022). Zoom was founded by Eric Yuan and the app launched in 2012; by the end of 2013 Zoom had 1 million users (Tech with Techs Team, 2022). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom's use quickly increased and in April 2020 Zoom reported 300 million daily meeting participants (Dean, 2022). Zoom is arguably social media; it allows for socialization but does not fall in to one-directional or bi-directional relationship categories. Zoom, at times, is included into post-pandemic discussions around social media; however, video conferencing is often described as a separate type of communication software.

Zoom as an Educational Tool

During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 colleges and universities around the world were forced to go online. "The coronavirus has had a profound impact on teaching and student learning. As a result of this crisis, instructors had to quickly adapt and shift to remote teaching" (Barry et al., 2021, p. 1583). While some places of higher education had online learning management systems in place, others were forced to pivot quickly to an online format. Sobaih et al. (2020) studied nine public colleges that grant tourism and hotel bachelor degrees in Egypt where an online learning management system was not in place prior to the pandemic. The researchers explored the systems implemented by faculty members used in the nine colleges to fill the void. They report that a mix of Facebook, WhatsApp, Google, and Zoom were all

employed and that “students perceived social media as a more appropriate tool for communication than other free online communication tools, e.g., ZOOM and Google Classroom due to its ease of use, usefulness and interactivity” (p. 16). The authors report that the participants were familiar with Facebook and WhatsApp prior to the pandemic and were not comfortable with Zoom which may have had an effect on their perception of their preferred learning tools. Hanson and Danyluk (2022) presented the idea that Zoom as a pedagogical tool opened new teaching opportunities that “resulted in many of us considering how we can respectfully integrate Indigenous perspectives in online classrooms” (p. 3). Their examination of respectfully integrating indigenous teaching strategies into online classes explores the use of talking circles. They showed that by incorporating Zoom, the research participants had “redesigned the course for an online environment and in doing so, had adapted the circle as pedagogy” (p. 6). While there is a scarcity of empirical data on Zoom as a pedagogical tool, many anecdotal studies describe the benefits of Zoom. Lewin (2022) described engagement while using Zoom in a lesson, and “after that, the ice was broken and most of the students were cooperative in the online Zoom sessions. Attendance was high (usually over 70% of the students), with many students participating in class discussion” (p. 10). The application of teleconferencing in online classes is more widely accepted and is creating new opportunities in teaching and communication with students.

Legal Issues Social Media and Student Concerns

Looking at social media as part of the educational experience requires a minimal understanding of the legal implications and concerns associated with it and should be included in the discussion. Only about half of all Carnegie classified doctoral granting universities have social media policies in place (Pomerantz et al., 2015) and “70% of students did not know if

their university had a social media policy” (O’Connor et al., 2016, p. 624). School policy, student privacy, and the idea of boundaries quickly come into the discussion when students use their personal social media accounts to participate in official educational experiences or unofficial experiences that can be viewed by others in the educational community. In formal academic settings students can be asked to log into a program's social media which can lead to a crossing of hemispheres between the student’s personal life and the student’s academic life. Uncertainty surrounds social media law and higher educations’ interpretation of it. Issues that are related to students' rights to express themselves online are commonly sources of disagreement and legal dispute (Quigley, 2017). This ambiguity of the law, policy, and the idea of personal privacy come into play when students or faculty do not fully understand the laws and policies governing speech on the Internet. There are several aspects to social media law that govern speech. In regard to higher education these are Title IX and “three sources of law: federal law (particularly the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution), state laws, and contract law” (Quigley, 2017). Federal law is rooted in the First Amendment which states that the United States government will make no law “abridging the freedom of speech” (U.S. Const. amend. I). This includes all public schools under its umbrella but does not include private institutions as they are not government agencies. This important distinction narrows the view of free speech on campus. The First Amendment does not protect several types of speech including speech that creates a clear danger, true threats, and fighting words further narrowing its definition (Quigley, 2017). An example of this is *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942) where the court ruled these types of speech “lacked the social value of disseminating ideas to the public that lay behind the rights granted by the First Amendment.” In contrast, hate speech as a form of expression that is generally agreed upon to mean abusive language

through which the speaker's primarily intent is to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against people the speaker targets is protected under the First Amendment (Vile, 2017). However, under Title IX, sexual harassment is unlawful and "applies to institutions that receive federal financial assistance" Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (2018). This can be interpreted to mean that within public institutions of higher education "speech that would be protected by the First Amendment could be punishable under Title IX" (Quigley, 2017, p. 6). Contract law further narrows the realm of speech that an individual may use in online media. In *Keefe v. Adams* the court stated that "viewpoint-neutral professional codes of ethics are a legitimate part of a professional school's curriculum that do not, at least on their face, run afoul of the First Amendment" (*Keefe v. Adams*, 2016). Although not a decision in higher education, the Supreme Court's most recent finding in *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* (2021) curtails the school district's ability to regulate student speech off school grounds. This is in opposition to earlier court rulings that stated schools could take disciplinary actions against students for off campus speech. Social media law is ambiguous, and different layers of laws can be contradictory; this can have an influence on an individual's perception of social media in higher education.

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972

Title IX creates a series of workplace protections that protect a person's right to privilege, advantage, or opportunity based on the prohibition of sex discrimination by any group or entity receiving Federal financial assistance. "No person be subjected to discrimination on the basis of sex under any education program that receives federal assistance" (Title IX, 2018). Any language or speech that creates a hostile work or educational space is not protected speech under Title IX. Parisi et al. (2022) noted that school-conducted

Title IX investigations in recent years have included a review of both private and public social media communications and posts whether or not social media activity can be used as evidence in a hearing depends on the school's sexual harassment and student conduct policy or its jurisdiction to discipline students and faculty members for their off-campus behavior.

Keefe v. Adams

Craig Keefe, a nursing student Central Lakes College in Minnesota, was expelled from his program for lack of professionalism. Keefe had made inappropriate comments on Facebook about his classmates and inappropriate jokes about a medical condition. Keefe made insulting statements, sexual jokes, and other offensive comments through a series of social media posts. The school bypassed the disciplinary hearing by applying an academic misconduct standard and dismissed Keefe for breaking the code of conduct.

Keefe had argued that his First Amendment rights had been violated (Hudson, 2017). In *Keefe v. Adams* (2016), it was established that professional codes of ethics are legitimate and may be enforced as a way to remove students from an academic program. A student can be academically expelled for breaking a school's professional code of conduct. This is noteworthy due to the fact that this was an academic expulsion and not a disciplinary expulsion and was, therefore, exempt from standard student disciplinary proceedings.

Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.

In *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* (2021) the Supreme Court ruled the school district had over-reached its authority. A cheerleader, B. L. was suspended from cheerleading activities for 1 year after posting a vulgar social media post from off campus. "Levy, of Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, was not in school when she made her post, but she was suspended from cheerleading activities for a year anyway" (Sherman, 2021, para 3). This

decision followed a *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969) decision that ruled behavior that was not substantially disruptive to academic operations is beyond the jurisdiction of the school's enforcement. However, the Supreme Court did supersede part of a lower court's ruling by stating that schools maintain some ability to regulate a student's free speech when off campus. In this case, the courts favored free speech and students' rights over the will of the school. It should be emphasized that the speech was off campus, unlike in *Tinker v. Des Moines*. This ruling continues to leave the door open to interpretation of where a school's jurisdiction ends.

Social Media Policy on Campus

Considering the ambiguity surrounding social media use in higher education, "universities need to communicate their social media policies to students early and often to avoid the potential disciplinary issues associated with personal social media use by college students" (O'Connor et al., 2016, p. 626). The majority of colleges and universities do not have clear social media policies in place (Pomerantz et al., 2015). Students are resistant to unclear social media policy or social media policy that is not explained well, and believe that the First Amendment grants them protections. O'Connor et al. (2016) found that:

Most students disagree with the university's ability to monitor their personal social media accounts, as well as that of other students. Students also generally disagree with a university's ability to take disciplinary action against students for their personal social media posts. (p. 624)

However, the statistics found by O'Connor et al. (2016), drop significantly when students are asked about specific instances.

These court decisions and policies influence what speech is acceptable for public online speech. When social media is included in a classroom environment that includes access to the student's private social media account, faculty and students need to be aware that their speech is regulated by precedent including cases that include *Adams v. Keefe*, Title IX, state laws, and university academic policy as well as university disciplinary policy. Students at public schools are subject to different protections than those at private colleges. While the courts have created an array of precedents that at times seem in opposition to one another, universities' lack of clear policies on social media can have negative repercussions for students, departments, programs, and faculty. Additionally, student or faculty "lack of awareness and/or understanding of their university's social media policy can lead to instances where university students are punished for their personal social media posts" (O'Connor et al., 2016).

Social Media Inclusiveness in Education

Ragnedda et al. (2022) explored how multiple levels of socioeconomic and sociodemographic status influences digital inclusion. Ragnedda et al. posit that socially disadvantaged individuals with access to the Internet generally are unable to take advantage of the opportunities that it offers. In missing the opportunities provided by the Internet, these individuals are unable to gain full value from social inclusion. "Despite their access to the Internet, those at risk of social exclusion (especially less educated, older, and low-income users) are more likely to have a digital experience that does not fully exploit the possibilities that the Internet can offer" (p. 8). The primary axes of these disparity's – such as gender, race, and level of education – play a role in the way these groups apply their online activities to gain or not gain value from their online experience (Ragnedda et al., 2022).

Junco (2013) looked at inequalities and inclusiveness in education through the lens of social media and findings regarding the inequalities of social media mirror those found by Ragnedda et al. (2022). Junco (2013) posits that “unfortunately, research on digital inequalities in education suggests that the benefits obtained by using educational technology may vary according to gender, race, or socioeconomic status” (p. 2329). These inequalities become pronounced in the use of social media tools and their correlation to student value. Junco found “there were clear differences by gender, race/ethnicity, and parental educational level” (p. 2333). Social media can have a negative or positive correlation with grade point average depending on the student’s activities while online. Individuals with a lower socioeconomic background are less likely to use social media for activities that have shown a positive correlation with grade point average such as communication and connection than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Junco, 2013). This is relevant to the idea of inclusion as previous research by Junco (2012) found that

Facebook activities predicted more of the variance in student engagement than time spent on the site; creating or RSVPing to events, commenting, and viewing photos were positively predictive of engagement while playing games, posting photos, using Facebook chat, and checking up on friends were negatively predictive.

The participant data indicated that “inequalities are no longer represented in differences in time spent on the Internet or social sites, but on how those sites are used and what they afford the users” (Junco, 2013, p. 2334). As mentioned by Ragnedda et al. (2022), “despite their access to the Internet, those at risk of social exclusion (especially less educated, older and low-income users) are more likely to have a digital experience that does not fully exploit the possibilities that

the Internet can offer” (p. 9). Ragnedda et al. and Junco both posit that as social media continues to grow its holdings in society and education, it is more likely that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds will be at an educational disadvantage.

Chapter Summary

This literature review covered a wide range of research and theory related to social media in education. The literature demonstrated that there is a well-documented history of social media growth since its inception and that social media growth shows no signs of stopping. While it started off as a small part of the online world it has grown to become a behemoth. As such, higher education has begun to incorporate the more prominent social media outlets at several levels. The literature review also explored the idea that feminist theory – in particular feminist theory on leadership as described by Helgesen (1995) – showed that social media applies the framework of concentric circles of communication is part of an inclusive pedagogical incorporation of social media in the online education environment that is capable of decentralizing information. Applying the idea of the web of communication on large-scale social media overlaps several hemispheres in the students' life – in particular their private thoughts and their public speech. This can lead to harsh consequences as when a student misunderstands where their private speech ends and their public speech begins as noted in *Keefe v. Adams* (2016). Social media often requires users to create personal accounts for themselves. When educational systems implement social media, they can bring a student's personal thoughts to an educational setting. This situation can play a role in students' perception of social media in higher education. Educators and institutions of higher education have pushed forward, and social media has been incorporated into pedagogical and retention uses that include formal and informal learning tools as well as creating communities. Social

media has many applications, and “careful and creative use of such social media can strengthen the educational interest and academic success of students” (Bista, 2015).

Chapter 3. Research Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand online graduate student perceptions of social media, specifically online students participating in the EDLR program at the Tennessee school. Prior studies of online students found that social media “provided participants the ability to make connections with others and develop a sense of belonging to the larger university community” (Daugherty et al., 2015, p. 168). Included in this chapter is an overview of the qualitative method applied in the research, a review of the research questions presented, the role I played as the researcher, ethical concerns taken into consideration, the sampling strategy applied to create the sample, an overview of sample, the setting for the interviews, data collection, the interview protocol, data management, and a review the measures of rigor applied to ensure quality data.

Qualitative Design

I used a phenomenological qualitative approach for this study. The feminist theoretical framework was appropriate to understand the lived experience of the sample population as it emphasized the phenomenon explored. Gathering the life experiences of individuals created an opportunity for a deep understanding from participant perspectives. A phenomenological exploration of a “group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” is a defining feature of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013, p. 78).

Research Questions

The central question of the research was: What are the perceptions of EDLR online graduate students about social media use within their program. I explored the perceptions of online graduate students and recent graduates from the EDLR department regarding the use of social media in their program by exploring the following specific research questions:

1. What is your perception of social media use in the EDLR department as an online graduate student?
2. How does the use of social media in your program influence your utilization of social media with others?
3. How does the use of social media in your program influence your perception of social media in your educational experience?

Researcher's Role

As a currently enrolled student in an online doctoral program and a faculty member actively teaching in a different department at the Tennessee university, I actively use social media to improve communication with my students and to stay connected with my peers in the EDLR program. While I see benefits to using social media in higher education, I have also been aware of the privacy concerns that can be felt as students share personal social media accounts in order to access course materials or program information. I have also witnessed the disruptions that can occur on social media. While my bias favors using social media in higher education, I also believe that there are many pitfalls that need to be addressed in order for it to be successful. Social media is not a magic bullet for higher education communication needs.

“In some forms of phenomenology, the researcher brackets himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). As both a current faculty member in a different department at the Tennessee institution and graduate student in the EDLR program, I am currently immersed in the changes affecting higher education. As a non-digital native with over 20 years in the classroom as a faculty member, my view of the online environment has progressively developed with the technology. To understand the participants' experience I worked to bracket my personal constructs to

maintain an objective perspective regarding the role of social media in the EDLR program. Reflexivity on my part was also an important part of my role. The conscious act of “reflexivity in which the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 216) was an important part of the interview and review process as well as acknowledging that I was an online student in the EDLR program and that I brought my own biases and perceptions of the use of social media in the program. This knowledge guided some of my choices in sampling, questions, and review of the data.

Before beginning the data collection process, I worked with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at East Tennessee State University to ensure all the research was done in an ethical and responsible way. I obtained written consent from the participants and provided them with information about the premise of the study and the information being gathered. These efforts were to ensure that participants were fully informed regarding this study and understood how the research was to be used. All information gathered was stripped of identifiers to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Finally, the data were reviewed by other investigators ensuring that the triangulation process was accurate.

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the data collection process, I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at East Tennessee State University “A qualitative researcher conveys to participants that they are participating in a study, explains the purpose of the study, and does not engage in deception about the nature of the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 174). The study began after I received IRB approval and the practice of informed consent was implemented at the beginning of every interview. I made every effort to protect the participants’ identities and maintain confidentiality while acquiring and housing data that included individual’s identity. I

removed identifying information from participant comments, and the data itself were stored on password-protected servers. Finally, limiting the sample to EDLR past and present students ensured there was no conflict of interest between my role as a faculty member of and the research being done in in relationship to the EDLR program.

Sampling Strategy

In a phenomenological study the most important aspect in choosing the sample population is that the population has all experienced the phenomena (Creswell, 2013, p. 174). I used a combination of sampling methods to create a purposeful sample and employed typical case sampling to choose the first participants in the sample. In typical case sampling “candidates are generally chosen based on their likelihood of behaving like everyone else” (Ilker et al., 2016, p. 3).

After I completed interviews with the first group of participants I applied snowball sampling per Ilker et al. (2016) and each participant shared their experiences of the Ed.D. program. The selected individuals from that group had firsthand knowledge of the topic that ensured “all of the participants have experience in the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 2013, p. 155).

I then employed snowball sampling to enlarge the participant pool by “agreeable participants [who] are then asked to recommend other contacts who fit the research criteria and who potentially might also be willing participants” (Parker et al., 2019, p. 1). By applying snowball sampling to the original sample, I was able to expand the participant pool from within the EDLR program and include individuals that otherwise may have been excluded.

Using this purposeful combination of methods that included typical case and snowball sampling I gained access to participants for the study. By directing the sampling to an

information rich group and expanding the participant pool based on the initial group members' recommendations the sample was deep and narrow.

Sample

The sample consisted of students and recent graduates of the online EDLR program. This narrow sample was chosen in part because of their deep knowledge of the online environment and active use of social media. The EDLR program went fully online in 2011 (D. Good, personal communication, September 4, 2021) giving the program a well-established history and depth. The depth of the program paired with its success as measured by its graduates going on to prominent positions (Good, 2021) and, at the time of this study being ranked 14th in online doctoral programs in Educational Leadership in the U.S (DeRose, 2021), created a participant pool who all had deep knowledge of the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2013).

The sample consisted of adult professionals with high levels of education. The individuals in the study were predominantly working in higher education at the time of this study and included males and females. They were currently enrolled students or recent graduates of the online EDLR program and ranged in age from approximately 27 to 57.

The sample size consisted of 12 participants and expanded up to data saturation. Beginning with the 12 participants, I did initial coding, and based on that coding I continued to use snowball sampling until I reached a satisfactory data saturation level.

Setting

All interviews were conducted through Zoom video conferences. This strategy allowed the researcher to observe participants' spoken words and body language. The participants' activities were documented through the use of Zoom in their entirety and created a detailed

record of interviews allowing me to revisit areas or ideas that needed clarification. I created Zoom meetings and used a home office to facilitate my end of the Zoom video conference; the participants' locations varied from home office to school settings.

Data Collection

Acting as the interviewer, I was able to gather data directly from the source as is often important in qualitative research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The interviews took place over a 3-month period and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Applying an interview protocol with a prescribed script introducing the study and using open-ended questions, I was able to maintain an information-rich conversation focused on the content of this study. The online format of the interviews created a digital record that allowed for a high level of accuracy in the transcript and analysis of data while maintaining a clear and transparent audit trail.

Data Management

All original interview data were kept on password-protected servers or Panopto Zoom servers at a Tennessee university which are recognized to meet IRB protocols. All participant identifying features including names and other identifiable measures were coded with pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were filed separately from the original recordings and stayed on servers at a Tennessee university. Secondly the interviews were backed up to a local password-protected drive. All notes and coding documents were kept on Tennessee university computers in order to maintain a secure data trail.

Trustworthiness

The researcher applied four strategies of rigor to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and findings. These included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Credibility

Credibility was established through the application of triangulation and phenomenological reflection (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The interviewer distilled the interviews to make explicit the lived experience of the participants through self-reflection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I also applied triangulation through document analysis, interviewing, member checks, and peer review of research to achieve an “explicit structure of the meaning of the lived experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 195).

Data were gathered through phenomenological interviews, and triangulation was applied for analysis with data comparison across different cases and cross checked through a process of transcribing and coding of interview data. When questions arose about any of the participants' statements a strategy of member checks was applied and participants were contacted through email for clarification.

Transferability

Transferability was applied through the use of thick descriptions and purposive sampling. A strategy of purposive sampling through a snowball technique of referrals from information-rich participants ensured quality data on the subject collected. The record of participant recommendations was kept as a part of the audit trail. A complete description of the context in which the interviews occurred and the technologies used to record the

interviews along with detailed information about the individual that included age, preferred pronoun, education, and occupation.

Dependability

Dependability was established through the peer review process, code-recode strategies, and the creation of an audit trail. The data was reviewed to strengthen the validity of analysis and of the recognized themes. The review of data between researcher and the committee chair highlighted areas of interest or areas interpreted differently. Through this process, in conjunction with the recorded interviews and member checks confirming the data, the audit trail was created and emergent themes were identified, coded, and recoded.

Confirmability

“Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination, but clearly derived from the data” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121) Through keeping a reflection journal, detailed records of the interviews, and interview protocols an audit trail was created that shows transparency in the collection of data and the data themselves.

Chapter Summary

I applied phenomenological interviews to understand better the lived experience of the participants’ perceptions of social media while they attend or attended graduate school. Implementing snowballing and purposeful sampling I worked to achieve a more intimate knowledge than could be gleaned otherwise. The participants, while predominately female and racially skewed to a white majority, are representative of the region and school. Examining the uses of social media in this way, I hope to help faculty and administration in their understanding of EDLR student perceptions of social media.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis

The central question of this research was: *What are the perceptions of EDLR online graduate students about social media use within their program?* I explored the perceptions of graduate students in an online program and recent graduates in the department of EDLR at a Tennessee school regarding the use of social media.

Profiles of the Participants

There were 18 participants in the study. Each was involved in a deep interview and each was able to articulate their experiences and perceptions which established data saturation for the study. The following is a description of each participant, their background using social media, and their perceived ideas of the social media they used during their time in their doctoral program.

Mark is a 37-year-old woman who works as the advising manager at a regional university. She earned her bachelor's degree in 2007 with a major in English and minor in secondary education. She received her Master's in 2015 in student development, counseling, and administration. After moving to Tennessee, she enrolled in the EDS program, Education Specialist Program at a state university and graduated in 2019. She is now enrolled in the EDLR program at the Tennessee university. Mark started using social media “around 2003-2004.” She started using “Facebook when it was just for college students.” Mark perceived that they used Facebook, Twitter, and email as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Kara is a 36-year-old woman who works at a regional university as clinical faculty. She studied psychology, worked in developmental psychology, and completed a Ph.D. in developmental psychology. Kara is currently enrolled in the EDLR program. She has been using

social media for 15 years; “I remember my friends signing me up for Facebook when I was a freshman in college, which would have been 2007.” Kara remembered that they used email and texts as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Sophi is a 49-year-old woman who is employed as a teacher department head in a county in Tennessee. She earned her Ed.D. in school leadership in December 2021. She has been using social media, including messaging apps, since 2008. Sophi has been using social media for 14 years. Sophie perceived that they used Zoom, email, and other services as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Sam is a 41-year-old woman who teaches ESL. She has a bachelor's in biology, a Master of Arts in Teaching, and is currently working on a doctorate in the EDLR program. She has been using social media since 2007. Sam noted that they used Facebook as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Tony, a 39-year-old woman, is employed as an Assistant Supervisor of special education for a school district. She has a bachelor's in elementary education, a master's in clinical psychology, and a master's in special education; she is currently enrolled in the EDLR program. She states, “I have a very strange relationship with [social media], which you'll find out over the course of this interview. So, on and off, maybe eight, nine years – not a really long time.” Tony said that they used Zoom, D2L, and texting as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Fred, a 37-year-old woman, is employed as a director of a satellite campus for a regional university. She has a diverse educational background which includes a bachelor's degree in sport and leisure management and a master's in religion and leadership. Fred explains, “I'm currently in the dissertation process of my Ed.D.” She has been using social media for

approximately 16 years. Fred noted that she used Facebook, GroupMe, D2L, and email as part of the overall social media experience during her time in the EDLR program.

Tim is a 55-year-old woman. She is currently in the Ed.D. program and works as a professor at a community college. She has been using social media “since 2006-ish.” Tim stated that she has used Facebook, Twitter, and Zoom as part of the overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Scott, a 40-year-old woman, is a faculty member at a clinical college with an educational background that includes a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. Her master's is in allied health and she is currently enrolled in the EDLR program. She has been using social media “however long Facebook has existed. I did MySpace before that,” roughly 16 years. Scott perceived that she used GroupMe and D2L as part of the overall social media experience during the EDLR program.

Zoey is a 39-year-old woman and is employed at a regional university as a leader in admissions. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in college student affairs; she received her Ed.D.. She says that she “started using social media after I graduated from grad school. So, I would say I remember it being when I was supposed to have a 10-year high school reunion. So sometime around 2010” (about 12 years). Zoey perceived that she used Facebook and D2L as part of the overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Milo is a 39-year-old man. He is an assistant vice president for enrollment services at a regional community college. Milo has a bachelor's degree in public administration and an MBA; he is currently enrolled in the Ed.D. program. Milo's social media use began,

in my undergrad experience we were AOL Instant Messenger and I don't know if that would count. But even in high school we were AOL Instant Messenger. So, I

was probably on AIM living my life on AIM as far back as maybe like 1997. So, 25 years.

Milo stated that he used GroupMe, D2L, Zoom, and YouTube as part of the overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Noah is a 52-year-old woman. She is currently employed as a director of operations at a state level higher education administrative institution. Noah's educational background includes a master's in curriculum and an Ed.S. in curriculum instruction with a concentration in secondary mathematics. She is currently a student in the EDLR program and has been using social media for about 10 years. Noah perceived that she used Facebook and D2L as part of the overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Han is a 34-year-old woman who holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's of education and is currently enrolled in the EDLR program. Currently overseeing advisement at a regional university, Han has been using social media for about 12 years. Han stated that they used Facebook as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Harry is a 56-year-old woman. Harry has a master's degree in business administration and is a doctoral candidate in the educational leadership program. She is currently employed as a business manager for a vice provost. Harry has been using social media for 13 years and stated that they used Facebook as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Kali, a 52-year-old woman, has a master's in public health and is an educator at a regional community college. She has been using social media for 14 years. Kail indicated that they used text and email as part of the overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Obi, a 40-year-old man, has a bachelor's in history/secondary education and a masters in higher education with a student affairs concentration and certification in conflict resolution. Obi finished the EDLR program in 2021. He has been using social media that includes “MySpace” and goes back to 2006,” for over 16 years. Obi perceived that they used Facebook Messenger email as part of their overall social media experience during their time in the EDLR program.

Brit is a 35-year-old male, his educational background includes an undergraduate degree in liberal arts. He earned his master's degree in intelligence studies in 2014 and is currently enrolled in the EDLR program. He has been using social media for 16 years. Brit reported that they used GroupMe as part of their overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Yen is a 39-year-old woman. Her educational background includes a Bachelor’s in Spanish with a minor in human development and a master's in education in college student personnel administration. She is a current EDLR student and is currently employed as a director of a center for women at a regional university. Yen perceived that she used Facebook as part of the overall social media experience in the EDLR program.

Profiles Not Included

After reviewing the 18 interviews several times, I made the decision to cut two of the interviews from the data. The participant, Kail, had attended the Ed.D. program while it was hybrid and finished after the program was fully online. This fell outside of the fully online experience which was a critical factor for the research. Also, Luke a 26-year-old woman, was removed from the study for similar reasons as she was part of a hybrid program not the fully online Ed.D.

Social Media used by Participants

Table 1 shows how each participant perceives their exposure to social media while they were involved in the EDLR program. Here the participants describe the social media software they used while in the program highlighting some of the diversity of social media used. The following data represents participant experience with social media and is grouped by participant identified media type. Several participants identified multiple social media sources used and appear multiple times:

Table 1*Types of Social Media Platforms Which Participants Identified*

Participants	Theme	Theme	Theme
	Facebook 2d	GroupMe 2d / Text	Zoom 2d
Mark	x		
Kara		x	
Sophi			x
Sam	x		
Tony		x	x
Fred	x	x	
Tim	x		
Scott		x	
Zoey	x		
Milo		x	x
Noah	x		
Luke			
Han	x		
Harry	x		
Kail			
Obi			
Brit		x	
Yen	x		

Facebook

Nine of the participants cite the use of Facebook as one of the social media platforms used during their time in the EDLR program.

Mark stated, “I am in two (Facebook) groups at the same time, I'm also in that [state university] employees at [my university] group that are students at [this university].”

Sam said, “I'm Facebook friends with a couple of people in my cohort and we do mostly text chains when we're interacting, and email and phone calls, you know, old school.”

Kara stated, “we have a group me message throughout our whole cohort and then that's, that's really it.”

Fred reported, “We did our cohort put together a GroupMe that we used to text back and forth, we actually still use it and then we have a Facebook group, but when we formed the GroupMe we stopped using that. So GroupMe pretty much became the only thing that we use after that first couple of weeks of class.”

Tim said, “I'm on Facebook . . . but not necessarily about the program itself. So yes, I do use Facebook quite frequently to keep up and keep track of everybody.”

Zoey stated, “Yes, peer to peer through our EDLR Facebook group, and I would say that was frequently used.”

Noah reported:

We have our Facebook groups, if you want to consider that I'm actually a member of two. Because I entered with cohort 192. But because of my EDS hours, coming in, I didn't have to do as many courses. So, I'm also in the cohort with you guys the 182. So, I see both of those Facebook things.

Han indicated:

I wouldn't have probably done several things, unless I saw some mentioned from the [Facebook] group. So, like, you know, like the dissertation boot camps. I think, you know, some of the upcoming deadlines, or like, I think students are talking about, like, their internship experiences and stuff like that.

Harry said, "But I mean, I really only use Facebook."

Yen stated:

You know, really early on, we as a cohort created our own (Facebook) page, it was not something that was, I think, really even talked about by the department. But I think we all took the opportunity to get to know each other and be able to message each other really quickly. Put questions out there about our assignments. So, I think really quickly, we kind of all created this little Facebook Home.

Facebook is one of the central platforms that participants cited as part of their social media experience. Participants talked about having previous experience with Facebook, and it being a natural fit with their communication style.

GroupMe

Six participants cite the use of GroupMe as one of the social media platforms used during their time in the EDLR program.

Kara reported, "We have a GroupMe message throughout our whole cohort and then that's, really it."

Tony said, I'm not super comfortable in a group chat . . . I try to keep that as simplistic as possible. If I do talk to someone, I'm more of a text and say, 'Hey, can I give you a call?' and then I call the person and say what I have to say."

Fred reported, “We did our cohort put together a GroupMe that we used to text back and forth, we actually still use it and then we have a Facebook group, but when we formed the GroupMe we stopped using that. So GroupMe pretty much became the only thing that we used after that first couple of weeks of class.”

Scott said, “I don't really feel like other than the GroupMe we have done anything. So, if there's a Facebook or an Instagram or anything like that, I don't even know about it.”

Milo stated, “We have and maintain a group chat, group text. We've got one person on Android, I don't know what your platform is. But those of us who messaged people were like, you're turning it green for us by being the Android person.”

Brit reported, “GroupMe, I've never used GroupMe prior to being in this program. When we all started in May of 20 . . . I don't remember exactly how it got started, but somebody kind of sent an email to everybody saying, we're going to this GroupMe if you want to join – join; and again, about half the cohort has joined or has stayed kind of joined and utilized it.”

The GroupMe application was not a social media platform widely used by the participants prior to their time in EDLR. However, due to its ease of use and easy entry, participants noted that after it was implemented by their peers they integrated it into their social media sphere.

Zoom

Fewer participants cited the use of Zoom as one of the social media platforms used during their time in the EDLR program.

Sophi reported, “We would text to set up a Zoom. But I don't know about your program. But in my program, we had to do a lot of group projects and people would be all over the East

Coast. So, we obviously weren't going to be able to meet in person, and it was during a pandemic. So, we couldn't meet in person. So – Zoom.”

Tony said, “I've used Zoom for my own dissertation although I would have much rather met in person. But anyway, I have seen and used it with other students, maybe to collaborate for some research projects in which I was assigned to a team.”

Milo stated, “I think the crazy hey, I'm on my back porch now stuff from [faculty], everybody jump in Zoom, if you want to. That was actually, you know, that was great. That was really probably the first time I downloaded Zoom, honestly, because it was so far pre-pandemic and that was good, because it was informal and collaborative.”

Zoom is not what participants cited as an obvious social media platform, but after they were in the program they pointed to its social nature. Zoom had limited use, but was mentioned as an important part of the social media experience.

All participants stated they were familiar with social media prior to their entering into the EDLR program and mentioned Facebook, in particular. While in the EDLR program each participant described some social media use related to the program either formally or informally and with different levels of exposure. While programs like GroupMe became common for participants, other social media platforms such as Zoom were used more on a situational basis.

Presentation of Data

The data is broken down by research question and sorted into corresponding categories. Themes and codes that show repeated references across participants responses are graphed and supported by detailed participant comments.

The research questions that the data are centered on are as follows:

1. What is your perception of social media use in the EDLR department as an online graduate student?
2. How does the use of social media in your program influence your utilization of social media with others?
3. How does the utilization of social media in your program influence your perception of social media in your educational experience?

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is your perception of social media use in the department of EDLR as an online graduate student?

Paucity of Social Media in EDLR

The first emergent category that became clear was the perception of the paucity of social media use in the EDLR program. The three themes in the data that were most often repeated in relation to this research question were:

- The program does not use social media to promote community.
- Students were unaware or unsure if the program had a social media element.
- Students want more social media use.

Each participant listed in the table as having spoken to the paucity of the program's social media use and is represented by direct quotes on the major themes that arose. Table 2 is a visual representation of the category paucity of social media in the EDLR program.

Table 2*Paucity of Social Media in EDLR*

Participants	Theme	Theme	Theme
	EDLR does not promote community through its social media use	Participants were unsure if program has social media	Participants expressed an interest in more social media in the program
Mark	x	x	x
Kara	x	x	x
Sophi		x	
Sam			x
Tony			
Fred			
Tim	x		
Scott		x	
Zoey			
Milo	x		
Noah	x	x	
Luke			
Han		x	x
Harry		x	
Kail			
Obi		x	
Brit		x	x
Yen			x

EDLR Does Not Promote Community Through its Social Media Use. The theme, *EDLR does not promote community through its social media use*, was presented by several of the participants in the study.

Mark's perception of the program's effort to promote community with social media is not "really pay[ing] attention to what the department, [or the college] puts out."

Kara's perception that the program does not use social media to promote community is seen in their description of starting a fully online program:

I've never done online, I'd never taken an online class before and so going from never doing an online class to exclusively online – it is hard to build that community with other students. We're not getting any feedback and grades are being put [up] and it's, I think we all kind of feel in our silos, like, are we missing something.

Tim conveyed that social media was an important tool in the EDLR program to promote community.

You know, we're so informed by all this COVID stuff, since we all had the if we weren't online you had to, I'm always I've, again, I'll date myself, but my high school, my senior year was the first year we had a computer science class. That would be 1984. So there was no internet, no, you know, nothing, no home computers at that point. But I think it's a useful tool for our program and for personal use, as well. I think it's nice to be able to keep track and I know in the EDLR program, we've got students all the way from Memphis to you know, there was one lady in the program that's in Oregon.

Milo felt that the program's use of video assignments helped to promote community:

We would have assignments where we had to talk about an idea to our webcam and then post it and I still wouldn't say that's informal collaboration, which I was really yearning for. But it was different, you got a different result, you got to see a face, you got to hear a voice and so it was a richer layer than just a post on a discussion board.

Noah, when asked if they would have felt like a part of a community if the cohort had not had its peer group replied “No. I can say no to that.”

Social media was not used with intent at the department or program level. Although several students thought it was an important part of their social experience and others stated that there were aspects of it in the program, participants did not express that they felt a coherent plan to build community or communication with social media.

Participants Were Unsure if the Program has Social Media. The theme, *participants were unsure if the program has social media*, was presented by several of the participants in the study.

Mark was unsure if the program has social media. “I feel like they have a Facebook page. I know [the college] has an Instagram, there may be Twitter. I don't know.” Kara’s perception of paucity of the EDLR program’s social media as:

I haven't really known too much social media use specifically for the EDLR department. Again, this is something I've been thinking about a lot because we were just talking about this in our class. But I've started noticing a lot of the ways that [this university] as a whole uses social media and really the only social media use is Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. So I don't do Tick Tock or Twitter and all those other things, which I think some bigger organizations might use more but

I really have been paying attention to how [this university] uses social media and I think it's really interesting, because I learned a lot of stuff about other departments that I would have never otherwise known, you know, and I just learned that a good friend of mine, not a good friend of friend of mine, is like the lead climate scientists for all of Tennessee, and he works at [the Tennessee university] and I would have never known that if not for their social media. But as far as EDLR, specifically, I can't think of any specific social media applications that I've seen just from the department.

Sophie's spoke to her perception of paucity of social media use in the EDLR program.

I don't know that we really use social media, per se. We did use a lot of electronic media. But I kind of classify social media as things that are purely for social interaction. We did, you know, we looked at TED talks, we used Zoom, but I don't know if that is classified as social media.

Scott felt unsure if the EDLR program had social media saying, "I don't really feel like other than the GroupMe we haven't done anything. So if there's like a Facebook or an Instagram or anything like that, I don't even know about it."

Noah did not know of any official EDLR program social media:

No, I don't think so. I mean, obviously, we have our Facebook groups, if you want to consider that I'm actually a member, too . . . and sometimes you feel like, of course, being remote, you feel like you're drowning, and nobody else is, but then you realize everybody else is drowning, too and so, you know, everybody's in the same boat kind of thing. Oh, that's been a good thing to have. But that's the only social media you know, other than email, obviously.

Han noted the paucity of social media use in the EDLR program and noted that students would like to see more:

I don't really know if they have outreach through social media. Now, our cohort I think, as a group where we talk to one another kind of update on assignments. So I think kind of peer or student led, social media has been a really nice outlet for me. Students want more social media use . . . and [EDLR] probably need to consider doing a little bit more around social media and considering something I said a little bit earlier, where, you know, I think most of our cohort members are folks from [this school's] community, or different community colleges, or like [state university] that doesn't necessarily have an educational leadership program yet. But if they want to continue to grow their numbers, or, you know, have interested students here, year over year, I definitely think social media needs to be the direction they go, just because our cohort was pretty social to begin with and then obviously, there was some attrition along the way and so they, so it'd be a good opportunity for them to promote, you know EDLR in general, and then retain some students to just kind of spot why they are showcasing some of the neat, maybe like dissertations that folks are doing currently.

Harry perceived a paucity of official social media and expressed a desire for more social media interaction:

So I don't know that the department itself necessarily has an online social media presence that they encourage for the students or the different cohorts. But our cohort started a private Facebook group within the early days of our first term, and it has been a godsend.

Harry felt that there was a lack of interest by the faculty overall “I guess for me, accepting that level of attrition as just is what it is, surprised me and, and I really wonder if that informs what I perceived as lack of interest in what we were doing.” They go on to express the lack of community promotion could be why they perceive that EDLR has a low retention rate “they don’t find community.”

Obi perceives a limited social media presence from the EDLR program that emphasizes email.

That was the only real form of social media per se that I received I know that they do have a new person who can’t remember her name. She’s over programming for EDLR but I think she just got a new role . . . I can’t her name I’ve ever met her.

But I remember getting the emails. But I know since she’s been within EDLR, she has hosted some virtual and in person events for EDLR students, which is kind of new and refreshing, which wasn’t there when I first started the program. So I’m glad that person is there in that role to be able to provide that resource for students.

Brit’s understanding of social media in the EDLR program is “It’s not utilized a lot, it seems. From my perspective, it’s not a tool that’s been pushed a lot in the marketing sense, or, or really any, any sense.” Brit was unsure about the program’s social media presence saying, “I’m pretty sure they do. I might be confusing it with the overall college.”

Overwhelmingly participants were unsure of the program’s social media platforms or if the program used social media. Participants thought there may have been some type of social media but struggled to give concrete examples of the program using social media in a meaningful way. As participants were unaware if the program had a social media content, one

can assume they are also unaware if the program has a social media policy that was applicable to their online actions. This can be problematic for both students and the program.

Participants Expressed an Interest in More Social Media in the Program. The theme, *participants expressed an interest in more social media in the program*, permeated many responses from participants. Mark is very clear that they want more use of social media by the department.

Absolutely. Yeah, peer engagement is very important to me. Now, if we had a separate group where faculty was involved, that would have been nice at times . . . I appreciate any, you know, anytime I do reach out to faculty, I make sure that I'm professional and I'm very careful about crafting emails. But I feel like we, it would be nice to have kind of that informal and formal setting, to engage with faculty so that we could have actual true conversations, especially if they do want to work with us professionally in the future and a Social Media Group is a great platform for that.

Kara explained they want more social media use in the program.

I wish, I wish that we got a little bit more from the program as a whole and so I think maybe if there was like a Facebook group, or something for our cohort where they could go and post updates and things like that, because we have D2L as a resource . . . as I'm sure you know, for our cohort. But I forget to check it because there's never anything posted there.

Sam's perception of social media is fairly narrow. "If you're referring to Instagram and all of those, I don't interact with it at all." However other participants have classified social media to include Zoom meetings. Sam expressed a desire to integrate more elements of social

media through Zoom. “I kind of wish – I don’t know if this is connected. But, uh, I’d rather have more Zoom meetings than discussion boards. I’m getting really tired of discussion boards.”

Han also perceived that there was a lack of faculty communication with students.

I really didn’t hear from the faculty members too terribly much outside of just the courses and the curriculum and what was required for their course content that semester . . . I think that there could have been an opportunity for a larger community at each of the institutions so I mean, [state university] are colleagues there who had resources with students from previous cohorts that really helped them along and gave them advice and, and things like that.

Brit perceives that:

Facebook and Twitter and Instagram [are] underutilized or not utilized at all. I think there’s missing pieces there. Where it could be better utilized for students and while I worked in admissions for a number of years and, you know, social media has this piece where you’re either trying to recruit new students, or you’re trying to, you know, keep in contact with current students and alumni.

Yen describes their experience with social media as part of their cohort, really early on, we as a cohort created our own page, it was not something that was, I think, really even talked about by the department. But I think we all took the opportunity to get to know each other and be able to message each other really quickly. Put questions out there about our assignments. So I think really quickly, we kind of all created this little Facebook home, that we were able to really, you know, do some conversations that we might not have had to or had been able to otherwise, because we’re all online.

Brit continues that no one suggested that the cohort start a social media presence. They [EDLR] did not suggest I don't recall our department, telling us to do this . . . I don't know if it was prior to our first class or during our first class I have to look back at when that page was started. But I know another student and I was the moderator on it. Both of us worked at a regional university at the time, and so I think we just kind of took it upon ourselves to, let's get a hold of everybody and see if they're interested.

Brit describes wanting more social media use, "although like our very first class was a technology class you think they would have suggested, Hey, maybe you all should get together on a GroupMe or get together on Facebook."

Participants regularly stated a desire for more or improved lines of communication through social media. They explain that they feel it could be a way to improve retention, create community, and share events.

The data revealed that many of the participating students are unaware or unsure of the current social media efforts by their program. Often these same students felt that the program's social media is not working to promote community, and many of the participants wanted more social media in their educational experience. These three themes speak to the paucity of social media in EDLR. While each participant varies in their specific thoughts on the program's use, the general idea presented is that the program is lacking an important element for them. Participants were unaware of program social media, and, one can reasonably assume, this includes a lack of awareness of a social media policy that defines acceptable social media use.

Perception of Inclusion through Social Media

This section explores the emergent category of participant perception of inclusion through social media in the program. From different points in the participant conversations, the perception of inclusion through social media in the program had three emergent themes:

- social media creates new exclusion
- social media does not allow exclusion
- paucity of social media did not support inclusion

Table 3*Perceptions of Inclusion Viewed Through the Lens of the EDLR Program Social Media*

Participants	Theme	Theme	Theme
	Social media creates new exclusion	Social media does not allow for exclusion	Paucity of social media did not support inclusion
Mark			x
Kara	x		
Sophi		x	
Sam	x		
Tony			
Fred	x	x	
Tim	x	x	
Scott			
Zoey	x		x
Milo	x	x	
Noah			
Luke			
Han			x
Harry			
Kail			
Obi			
Brit			

Social Media Creates New Exclusion. The theme, *social media creates new exclusion*, was presented by several of the participants.

Kara explained social media creates exclusion:

On the other hand, [social media] could leave people out, because certainly not everybody has or uses Facebook and so you know, especially since we're a more kind of non-traditional student program, I think it would potentially leave out, even if it left out two or three people, you know, that's a big chunk that would be missing . . . So it could potentially help but it could also maybe make it more inaccessible for some people . . . Yeah, I think for other people who might not have that social media [it] may exclude them if it was a place, because they posted really good information on that social media site, and then whoever didn't have it just didn't get that information.

Kara also noted that feelings against social media can also create exclusion.

Some people have very strong feelings against Facebook or whatever. So if it didn't require people to go and do something like making a whole profile, if they could find a way to kind of present information, I think it could promote inclusion and again, just giving people that sense of community, that there would have to be a way to do it, like I said, without kind of going against what people want.

Sam stated that they didn't use social media. "Don't use it," but continued later to say "Well, no, it's not inclusive." Fred described social media creating new exclusions,

We actually had two groups going on with our whole class and then six or seven of us got just really close and really got close on personal levels as well, not just

academic levels. So, we formed a second group that was more just the close-knit students that really stayed in touch and formed that personal connection . . .

It started out inclusive because we had our whole class in there and then as we progressed, and like I said, those more personal relationships started to form between six or seven of us, we formed that second group that became more, each level seemed like it was more open, we were all more comfortable being open the social small the group got. So when it was the bigger group, me with all of the class members, there was still hesitation to share certain things. Whereas when we got to the second group that was tighter and social small and more intimate, we were a lot more vocal about things that we were talking about in class or things that were going on in our dissertation, or we still communicate when, you know, good and bad things happening for the people in our cohort. So, it created inclusion as a whole. But then as we got further in, it gave us a chance to form a social small, more close-knit group.

Tim explained that social media creates new exclusions, “[social media] makes it really easy for anybody no matter where you are, as long as you have Internet access” – showing that not having access to social media outside of class can be a new type of exclusion. Zoey perceived that social media creates new exclusions.

Okay, are you asking informally or formally. I believe, with the informal use of social media that some cohorts have done on their own, it really has supported everyone feeling a part of that cohort, because it’s very easy. If we did not have that, it would feel very easy to just be excluded at all times. Like, I don’t know what’s happening, maybe people are texting on their own or having informal

communication with each other and I would feel excluded if I wasn't in this social media group. So I think it's done a great job of supporting inclusivity.

Milo perceives that social media creates new exclusions. "If you're somebody that doesn't succeed in writing, you know, then your kind of screwed out, you really are out of luck in this program."

While participants' views on social media inclusiveness varied, often participants mixed the idea of inclusiveness between program specific social media and social media in general. The common theme was that social media could create exclusivity, either by excluding people that did not use the Internet or to program specific ideas of being left out of conversations.

Social Media Does not Allow for Exclusion. The theme, *social media does not allow for exclusion*, was presented by several participants. The perception of exclusion related to stereotypes is nullified by the lack of physical presence in social media according to the participants. They explain that only knowing a person's name is not enough to form preconceived ideas about them. The perception that social media does not promote inclusion rather it does not allow for exclusion by the participants demonstrates a unique look at how the participants view the programs social media.

Sophi perceived that social media does not allow for exclusion saying, "I'd say instead of promoting inclusion, it doesn't allow for exclusion. I mean, pretty much [social media is] open to whoever is truly interested. If you think [about it] it's really nice; there's really no way to be biased."

Fred explained social media does not allow for exclusion saying,

It kind of removed [exclusion] I mean, unless you put a picture up with your profile, it removes the pressure I think of the characteristics that might differ

people whether it be gender, or race, or nationality. I mean, any part of the things that make us check a box. I guess, is how I would put it, those things kind of go away. Because really, you know, somebody's name, and whatever information, they give you all the introductions, but beyond that, you can't necessarily glean information that could cause somebody not feel included and I also think, you know, having discussion boards and stuff on D2L, well, those are required a lot of times, so people are forced to interact, whereas they might not interact socially on any other kind of platform.

Tim perceived social media as inclusive. "So I think [social media] makes it much easier for people to be included." Milo explains that social media does not allow for exclusion:

You can't really activate those biases. Because you got nothing to go on. Yeah, you don't have any idea if this person is old or young or male or female or black or white, or you just don't know. So maybe potentially more inclusive. Because everybody kind of stands on their written statement. I do think the flip side of that coin is that possibly in the online D2L type environment, everybody has the same opportunity to be heard, based on what they write.

Paucity of Social Media Did Not Support Inclusion

The work done by Cho and Tobias (2016) showed that LMS discussions did not add to the value of a course but the faculty did need to be involved to maintain cohesion and communication, emphasizing the need for faculty involvement in the online space as cited by the participants in this study. The theme, paucity of social media did not support inclusion, was presented by several participants in the study. The perception that the EDLR program did not use

social media to support inclusion was a common theme. The paucity of involvement and intentional social media use created a non-inclusive perception of the EDLR program.

Mark found the EDLR program's lack of social media unsupportive in creating an inclusive environment,

I think the lack of social media doesn't support inclusion. If faculty were more involved or if there was a place that we all we had a safe place to respectfully discuss issues, topics, whatever I think it would make for a more inclusive environment for the program. If we had a cohort group with faculty involved in that group or a similar platform that would provide a more inclusive environment.

Zoey explains that lack of social media did not support inclusion,

I believe that if the program had a formal social media presence it would increase that level of inclusivity. It would very much make people feel included and allow them to feel comfortable to ask questions that maybe they wouldn't if they didn't have a formal way for that to happen and we're just lucky that there has been some informal social media presence out there.

Han perceives lack of social media did not support inclusion,

I think [social media] was kind of student-led and student-driven with that one group that I keep on mentioning, I mean, I think we were obviously very inclusive in that group and we wanted to see everyone in our cohort succeed and even . . . some of the students that . . . stopped or dropped out, or anything like that; we tried to keep in touch with them, as well. I wouldn't necessarily say [social media] was like an EDLR driven initiative, but I would say a student led initiative that felt very inclusive.

The data demonstrates that many of the participating students are mixed in their thoughts about social media's ability to create inclusive environments. While social media can break down traditional biases it also creates new exclusions including rights to privacy, access to the Internet and the ability to express oneself clearly in written formats. The perception that the lack of intentional communication by the faculty and program through social media led to a feeling of non-inclusivity that prevailed throughout the participants' comments.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How does the use of social media in your program influence your utilization of social media with others?

Participant was Active with Social Media but Did Not Participate

At different points in the conversations a category of participants emerged who were active with social media but did not participate. The participants pointed to ways they were active through viewing posts but not contributing content to social media. They indicated that they used social media to keep up with dates and information and checked in with the group's social media, but did not actively participate through posting on social media.

- Educational lurking
- Kept abreast of assignments

Table 4*Participant Was Active with Social Media but Did Not Participate*

Participants	Theme	Theme
	Educational lurking	Kept abreast of assignments
Mark	x	
Kara		
Sophi		
Sam		
Tony	x	x
Fred		
Tim		
Scott		x
Zoey		x
Milo	x	
Noah		x
Luke		
Han		x
Harry		
Kail		
Obi		
Brit		
Yen		x

Each participant identified in the table as having spoken to the utilization of social media is represented by direct quotes on the major themes they addressed.

Educational Lurking. The theme of *educational lurking* was presented by several participants in the study.

Mark explains that they did not participate often but stayed aware of people through social media:

I'm gonna be I'll look and then you know, sometimes if it (EDLR Social Media) does pop up on one of my feeds, then I'll pay attention but I don't actively seek it out. Unless there's something going on that I want to look at.

Tony indicated that they did not participate often but stayed aware of people through social media. "She typically initiates everything [for our cohorts' social media] and then as other folks have time, they respond over the course of a day or a couple of days with, Hey, this is where I am. This is my struggle right now."

Milo stated that they did not participate often but stayed aware of people through social media. "So Twitter to me, is interesting and I almost never tweet but I read it all the time."

Some participants cite lurking at the social media platform their colleagues used and felt this gave them the perception of being part of a community.

Kept Abreast of Assignments. The theme, *kept abreast of assignments*, was presented by several of the participants in the study. Participants used social media as a way of gaining information in a non-top-down model. This indirect style of communication can be thought of as a web of communication.

Tony states that they used social media to keep up with assignments.

Yeah, certainly. So if someone says, Hey, did you take a look at d21, Dr. So and So posted this or that, then I'm definitely watching and reading the messages and making sure that it's not something that I need to respond to in terms of needing to complete an assignment or a step in this process? Sure and I do find it very helpful for that reason, because, you know, the folks that are really using the messages are sharing information, and they're sharing ideas, so that really is helpful.

Scott explains that they used social media to keep up with assignments. "Having the GroupMe has helped some of us stay on track with certain projects – and especially for one of our classes this semester." Zoey used social media to keep up with assignments:

So people might point out something in the group chat, or the social media group that you may not have been aware of, or you may have been missing . . . I did feel like that [social media] was still super helpful and influential in the way that it ensures you were staying up to date.

Noah explained they used social media to keep up with assignments.

There were some times when there were things posted that I had missed. Somewhere, you know, and it's like, hey, heads up and really, I don't even have a good example. But I do know that there were things . . . And somebody in the group said, Hey, heads up, we need to do this or whatever and so it reminded me that I needed to do something that I had forgotten.

Han used social media to keep up with assignments.

It (social media) kept me on track for especially some of those things outside of classes that were requirements for the program. Like the internship or like when we get a little bit closer to dissertation, this boot camp opportunities.

Yen states that they used social media to keep up with assignments,

I got much more out of our cohort page than I did out of the other attending [this university] page. But yeah, out of our page, I got a lot out of that and I think we did a lot of sharing, we did a lot of, hey, I'm gonna complete the assignment on this time, or, Oh, man, I'm late can anybody go in and, you know, do my do my discussion post real quick, or there's a lot of that . . . As an introvert, I am very much okay with not having that traditional classroom atmosphere. Um, and so it was really nice to feel like we could, you know, put a message out there not expect an immediate response. We weren't cluttering up people's emails, people could respond if they wanted [they] didn't have to and everybody would be really good if they had a response of answering it and so I think that was really helpful instead of having to be in class and ask the professor.

The data demonstrates the idea that although the participants may not be engaging in social media actively they are often aware of it and many explain that they use social media outlets to keep abreast of class activities and each other but do not actively participate. This web of communication style of disseminating information helps to create the perception of being part of a group.

Perception of Social Media as a Retention Tool

The data in Table 5 represents the emergent category 'perception of social media as a retention tool as it relates to RQ2, how does the use of social media in your program influence

your utilization of social media with others. There are three primary emergent themes in this category.

- social media is a clarifying and reassuring/a place to go for answers.
- social media created community.
- social media offered support emotional/ etc.

The following table represents emergent themes related to the idea of social media as a retention tool. The three most often cited themes are presented in the table below.

Table 5*Perception of Social Media as a Retention Tool*

Participants	Theme	Theme	Theme
	Social media is clarifying and reassuring/a place to go for answers	Social media created community	Social media offered support emotional/ etc.
Mark	X	x	x
Kara	X		x
Sophi			
Sam			
Tony		x	
Fred		x	x
Tim			
Scott	X		
Zoey	X	x	x
Milo		x	
Noah	X	x	
Luke			
Han	X		
Harry	X	x	x
Kail			
Obi			
Brit			x
Yen	X	x	x

The following data expands on table 5. Each participant identified in the table as having spoken to social media as a retention tool is represented by direct quotes on the major themes they spoke to.

Social Media is Clarifying and Reassuring/a Place To Go For Answers. The theme, *social media is clarifying and reassuring/a place to go for answers*, was presented by several of the participants in the study. Here direct quotes are presented to highlight that perception.

Mark states that they see social media as a place to clarify and reassure or a place to go for answers as part of retention,

I want to make sure that if, because I can be a little hot headed at time, so I want to make sure that I'm not the only one. Before I really go off kind of things like that. So I engage personally, and privately not really as much publicly.

Kara felt that social media was a way to ask questions that helped as a retention tool, "ask questions or just kind of, especially since it's an online program." Scott believed that social media had a clarifying and reassuring or a place to go for answers.

Some of the people have completely forgotten about the student projects for EDLR class and so thankfully someone had posted and said, hey, don't forget that's due and so I think at least two or three people came back and we're like, what, what projects.

Zoey explains how they used social media clarifying and reassuring or a place to go for answers.

Hmm. Yeah, I feel like [social media] influenced [retention] in the sense that it allowed me to, for lack of a better term, stay in good standing, it allowed me to make sure I was doing my assignments appropriately, turning things in on time and sometimes understanding the content in the way that it might have been

intended if there was confusion over what was intended. So, I think it was very influential in just ensuring that I went through the appropriate steps to gain this degree. So, I don't know that that would have been as easy without social medias process.

Noah explains that clarifying and reassuring or a place to go for answers.

I don't know if I'm an introverted extrovert, or an ambivert, or whatever. But I'm okay sitting over here doing what I got to do. That's just, that's just me. I don't have to socialize. But it has been nice having the peer group to bounce ideas off of you.

Han discuss their social media use as clarifying and reassuring or a place to go for answers.

I wouldn't have probably done several things, unless I saw some mentioned from the group. So like, you know, like the dissertation boot camps. I think, you know, some of the upcoming deadlines, or like, I think students are talking about, like, their internship experiences and stuff like that, and it would maybe start some like ideas or, or have me thinking like, oh, gosh, I need to be on that.

Harry used social media for clarifying and reassuring or a place to go for answers, "I would reach out to the group and tried to clarify if I was on the right track, or completely clueless." Yen describes their use of social media for clarifying and reassuring or a place to go for answers.

I got much more out of our cohort page than I did out of the attending [this university] page. But yeah, . . . I got a lot out of that and I think we did a lot of sharing, we did a lot of, hey, I'm gonna complete the assignment on this time, or, Oh, man, I'm late can anybody go in and, you know, do my do my discussion post real quick, or there's a lot of that.

Participants often state that in their perception they turned to the unofficial social media feed for information about projects, dates, and other relevant education. The web of communication can be seen replacing the need for top down information. Participant perception of social media is that it is an important retention tool.

Social Media Created Community. The theme, *social media created community*, was presented by several of the participants in the study. Mark cites that social media created community.

It establishes a peer group within an online program. So my master's degree at Indiana was actually an online program and I didn't have any peer groups, I did connect with a few of my classmates individually. But there was no such thing as a peer group and I feel like we have that within ours and kind of going back to what I said earlier about, I can be a hothead. So if I throw out a thought in our group, and I know that I'm not the only one thinking whatever thought, I feel comfortable going to faculty with my concerns, because I know I'm just not overreacting. So it creates a peer group, when normally there isn't one.

Tony cites that social media created community, "I think having the sense of community that's established through those group chats is definitely a retention." Fred described social media as creating community, "When we finished classes. We lost several people throughout the course of the coursework. So [social media] allowed us to stay in touch with those folks."

Fred went on to say that social media created community; "it made us all feel even closer together."

Zoey social media created community as "it allowed me to better move through this program because of the communication I was able to have on social media." Milo perceived

social media created community while they were doing the course work but dissipated after dissertation work started.

You know, we were just kind of marching toward the finish line holding each other toward that shared goal that we had and then we got dissertation time, and everybody's at a different place with different chairs. So our ability to be there for each other kind of evaporated. So we're still friends, and we still talk in person and we still text. But the shared accountability element of it is gone.

Harry perceived that social media created community, “[social media] was actual interaction, beyond just online posts, getting to know each other, also taking advantage of different people's experiences and perspectives.” Yen and goes on to describe their thoughts about how social media created community.

It was a great way for us to, you know, really integrate ourselves with everybody across the state, because, you know, we've got those of us here in Middle Tennessee, there were the people from Walter State, they're the people from East Tennessee, they're the people from Chattanooga, so it was really great to be able to talk to people, that we wouldn't normally talk to you because we weren't on ground.

Participants describe their perceptions that social media played an important role in creating a circle of peer groups. These online relationships are described as “close” and are an important part of helping program retention.

Social media offered emotional and other support. The theme, *social media offered emotional and other support*, was presented by several of the participants in the study. Here direct quotes are presented to highlight that perception. Mark stated, “I think with our group, we check on one another. So the (our cohort), we do actively check on everyone to see how everyone's doing and I think that helps with retention as well. Because not only do I want to finish for myself, but I also know that you all are going to you know.”

Mark believes that social media provided emotional and other support to aid with continuing the program: “Yeah, like, whoa, whoa, that's when I was like, okay, come on self and then I slacked off a little bit more. But you know, we held each other accountable just by sharing the progress of everyone else.”

Kara stated the emotional support was part of their perception of social media as a retention tool, “we've kind of connected a little bit but just as a way to connect with other people. It's been nice to have that.”

Fred also recognized the emotional support social media provided.

For me there was a lot of encouragement to keep going, people would share is they were feeling overwhelmed or felt like quitting or felt like taking some time off or whatever it may have been the case, we were able to really hold each other accountable and hold each other up.

Zoey found that emotional and other support through social media improved retention, So this is all just my perception. My perception is that the informal social media group, I believe, assisted in ensuring that some students stayed in the program because they felt like they had support. They could ask questions, they could have people have their back, if they were maybe struggling through something or

needed to go to a faculty member, that there was more support than just them having to do that on their own.

Zoey echoed the value of emotional support.

There were definitely some times that . . . I was like, I can't do this. But I think just having the support of people in the program and if we had not become a group because of that social media presence. Oh, yeah, absolutely. I also think [social media] allowed a place for people to feel comfortable to reach out to a faculty member, because we might all say, This doesn't seem right, and so support of each other support of making sure if things don't seem right, that we're on the same page about that, and support to get administrators to kind of help us move down the road, because we supported each other through that process. So yeah, absolutely.

Noah also perceived that social media created community saying “obviously, there's some people I've gotten closer to than others, you know, I'll do a direct message to some people, but others I just see in the Facebook group.”

Harry explained that emotional and other support were important to the program's retention. “We encountered things that probably made all of us consider quitting a gazillion times, the community and the support and the encouragement was that extra leg up to persist.”

Brit talked about the emotional support provided by social media and the effects of participation on retention.

I would say [social media] is utilized in the informal sense to enhance retention from peer to peer and, yeah, I can think of two or three examples of that. We probably be more intentional with that, we've had a couple of people join our

cohort who did drop out a couple of years ago, I don't know that we ever added them to the group. So we could do a better job of that, you know, when people do join in, adding them to that, that could enhance retention as well.

Yen spoke about the emotional and other support they felt during their time in the program. As an example, Yen mentioned another student who was

. . . gonna probably end up doing her dissertation for this summer, she ended up sending me a lot of her assignments to look them over and stuff, especially when her husband was ill and so, you know, it was a great way for us to, you know, really integrate ourselves with everybody.

Participants described their perceptions that program-related social media helped them stay focused and supported in their studies. They also noted that they felt motivated and included via their social media connections. Participants considered that social media, although not offered through the EDLR program, offered emotional support.

The students' perception of social media as a retention tool varies slightly from person to person but the participants often mention community, support, and clarification as important elements that social media integrated into their program's retention. However, it must be noted that often it is the participants' non-departmental social media that they used rather than any formal social media created by the department.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How does the utilization of social media in your program influence your perception of social media in your educational experience?

Social Media Involvement

The category of social media involvement emerged from different points in conversations with the participants. Two primary themes related to RQ3.

- Informal as part of community
- Convenient peer connections

Table 6*Social Media Involvement*

Participants	Theme	Theme
	Informal structure of social media helps to create community	Social media creates convenient peer connections
Mark	X	
Kara	X	x
Sophi		
Sam		
Tony		
Fred		x
Tim		x
Scott		
Zoey	X	
Milo	X	
Noah		x
Luke		
Han		x
Harry		
Kail		
Obi		
Brit	X	
Yen	X	x

The following data expands on table 6. Each participant identified in the table as having spoken to social media as it relates to their social media involvement through direct quotes on the major themes they spoke to.

Informal Structure of Social Media Helps to Create Community. The theme, *informal structure of social media helps to create community*, was presented by several participants. Participants shared their perceptions that social media's informal nature creates organic peer connections and informal community. These informal communities are described as natural collaboration and are an important part of the participants' educational experience.

Mark perceives the cohort's informal peer-to-peer Facebook group as part of their community. They did not actively seek any official department or college social media but reads materials from feeds or alerts.

I'll look and when you know, sometimes if it does pop up on one of my feeds, then I'll pay attention but I don't actively seek it out. Unless there's something going on that I want to look at. Now with our engagement as a group. I Do actively seek that out and I have notifications for that, because I do want to know how everyone's doing, you know, bounce ideas off one another.

Kara saw that their informal peer-to-peer GroupMe as creating community.

You know, we're not getting any feedback and grades are being put and it's, I think we all kind of feel in our silos, like, are we missing something or what's going on? But then once we kind of put it out in the GroupMe, and then all of a sudden, everybody's like, Yes, me too. Oh, my gosh, I feel the same. It's kind of like, okay, you know, it helps you feel a little bit more confident . . . less like, you're kind of operating in a silo and saying, Okay, no, they're the other people

are feeling and noticing and feeling the same things that I am and then we can also throw out their ideas or questions about, Hey, how did you interpret this instruction for this assignment? You know, whereas otherwise, I wouldn't necessarily know how to put that out there to the whole class.

Zoey saw that the informal peer-to-peer social media communication created community, I would not say it was meaningful. Most of the time, I would say it was just a way to check in on course information on maybe assignments we did or didn't understand and to just kind of check on everyone's progress, I wouldn't say we were having deep meaningful conversations. However, I will add that I did feel like that was still super helpful and influential in the way that it ensures you were staying up to date. So people might point out something in the group chat, or the social media group that you may not have been aware of, or you may have been missing and so it was influential in the sense that it helped you stay up to date and help to make sure that you weren't missing important information for class that you might have missed if you didn't have that social media platform. So, I was very thankful for that and still in terms of just being able to make sure I'm staying in line with what everyone else is doing.

Milo found that informal communication through impromptu Zoom meetings created a sense of community.

I think that, to me, I really prefer to learn in the classroom and it's not so much that listening to the lecture live is useful versus watching age old YouTube videos. But the ability to ask a question, the moment.” They were able to replicate some of that spontaneity in Zoom meetings.

Brit explains their perception that informal social media plays a part in creating community.

I have had some faculty as well utilize zoom in an informal like a drop-in kind of thing. I've not taken advantage of that just because of the timing of when those occur. In the informal sense of say GroupMe. I've never used GroupMe prior to being in this program. When we all started in May of 20. I don't remember exactly how it got started, but somebody kind of sent an email to everybody saying this is a GroupMe if you want to join, join, and again, about half the cohort has joined or has stayed kind of joined and utilized it. But I would say, without this program, I don't know that I would be using GroupMe in another sense and I will say this maybe off topic, but I have another friend of mine, who is in a doctoral program and his cohort also has this – it not through EDLR, but they have a GroupMe as well and utilize it in the similar sense.

Yen perceived social media as an informal community that created convenient peer connections.

So I think there was a guy who attended [state university] or worked at [state university] that was in the cohort or two ahead of us and I think he said that they had done something similar and I don't know if they had done a Facebook group or if they had done a group me or something, you know, back in 2017 was when we started. But I don't remember exactly when but [a peer] and I were on Facebook together as you know, colleagues as friends type of a thing. So I think we just decided we're already using that platform most people our age should be on that platform. So I think we just decided that might be the easiest. Interestingly enough from that, I don't know if they've started one in the cohort behind us. But we started a Facebook group of all the [state university] people who are attending

[this university]. Because there's, you know, several of us in our cohort, there's several of us in the cohort behind us and then [another student], who was in cohort 192, but joined us then after she had her EDS, she started an all [state university] people attending doctor, it's everywhere, Facebook group.

Social Media Creates Convenient Peer Connections. The theme, *social media creates convenient peer connections*, was presented by several of the participants in the study. Fred explained that:

I think social media encourages communication, it gives you a lot more avenues, other than just email or texting folks to reach someone. So now instead of just having a phone number to call you now I have a couple of phone numbers that you have access to you have maybe more than one email address that you have access to plus, you can direct message on Facebook, or Twitter or Instagram, or you can send messages d2l. Well, so I think it just helps you have more avenues with which to, that you can communicate with now than in the past.

Tim perceives that social media was convenient peer connections because they had “friends spread far and wide. So yes, I do use Facebook, quite frequently to keep up and keep track of everybody.” Noah perceives that social media creates convenient peer to peer connections.

Well, if we didn't have the Facebook group, then I probably wouldn't. I mean, I wouldn't be communicating with you guys. Most likely, unless it was an email and I probably wouldn't even do that. Unless it was something I had to do. Like somebody put out there the other day, the link to Joe's dissertation, because I didn't get an email.

Han perceives that social media created convenient peer connections.

Our cohort I think, as a group where we talk to one another kind of update on assignment. So I think kind of peer or student led, social media has been a really nice outlet for me and just so I have "kept" informed on some upcoming things, or deadlines or whatnot and I think that has been a nice way to get to know students outside of just like the discussion board posts or anything like that on the online digital platform.

Participants describe their perceptions that social media creates convenient peer connections. Participants found that the ease of social media communication increased the ease of communication between peers. Social media broke down traditional barriers to communication, showing a web of communication capable of bringing new lines of communication into the participants experience.

When participants describe their involvement in social media they often cite the convenience of it in their communications and their use of it in informal settings to build a community of peers. They described the social media community interaction as a substitute for the interactions that would have happened in a traditional course through the informal interactions in class. The perception of the ease of communication between participants opened a channel for staying current with classmates and course materials. These perceptions helped to create an informal community for some of the participants.

Perception of Use of Social Media

From different points in the conversations tied to RQ3, the emergent category of *students' perception of use of social media during their time in EDLR program* had two primary emergent themes.

- D21 did not create a community.
- Paucity of faculty interaction in online discussions.

Table 7*Perception of Use of Social Media*

Participants	Theme	Theme
	D2l did not create a community	Paucity of faculty interaction in online discussions
Mark		
Kara	X	x
Sophi	X	
Sam	X	
Tony	X	
Fred	X	
Tim		
Scott		x
Zoey		
Milo	X	x
Noah		x
Luke		
Han	X	
Harry		
Kail		
Obi		
Brit		x
Yen		

The following data expands on table 7. Each participant identified in the table as having spoken to social media as it relates to their perception of their utilization of social media through direct quotes on the major themes they spoke to.

D2L did not Create a Community. The theme, *D2L did not create a community*, was voiced by several participants. Kara perceives D2L did not create a community:

I find D2L very hard to navigate, and it's just kind of clunky and so I think using a platform that everybody's familiar with, could enhance the community . . . we have a D2L, as I'm sure you know, for our cohort. But I forget to check it because there's never anything posted in there.

Sophie perceives D2L did not create a community,

I would say when I was using discussion boards, it was definitely more formal, more research based. Usually, you know, text messages and emails were mostly inquiry, whereas a discussion board would be more of a presentation or a formal response.

Sam perceives D2L did not create a community. "We do use Zoom. Yeah, our meetings are our Zoom and we have that discussion board in D2L. But that's more formal."

Tony said about D2L:

When I first began the program, one of my very close friends from maybe this is part of the reason I didn't use it, but one of my very close friends from [state university] was in the doctoral program with me and so he and I would talk, but like we would phone call, Hey, what do you think about this assignment? And so, he left the program, decided it wasn't what he wanted to do and moved on to something else and when he did, I was really at a loss because I didn't have that

sense of community and so I did email a couple of folks just for clarification, a time or two about assignments and then we have to text one another back and forth. I'm not super comfortable in a group chat.

Fred said about D2L:

I use social media in my professional realm quite a bit. I will share things on the [Tennessee university] page that I see that I might find to be something that is a broad application. So they might post something that they might be gearing just towards a REIT, they might post a resource that is more helpful. They think it's helpful for the EDLR students. But in reality, it really could be helpful for any student, whether it be, you know, talking about time management, or talking about different aspects of being a student. Sometimes those can reach further than just what they're anticipating. So sometimes I will share those from the [Tennessee university] severe role page so that our students and our stakeholders see them as well. Beyond that, I don't know that it really motivates or encourages me to use it. I don't use D2L on a regular basis for my job or for I don't host any classes through the tool. So I only use D2L as a student. I will say that I've had some instructors in my program that have used D2L to post encouraging videos or information on how to accomplish different portions of research or faculty used to be good about putting stuff in detail about statistics that might help us understand certain aspects of statistics better. So I do think d2l is a better use than other forms of social media . . . it was more private for us to have student to student conversations, peer conversations without feeling like we were being overseen or watched by our faculty members.

Milo, perceives D2l did not create a community

I go by Milo, nobody calls me Million, I don't like to be called Million and even though I would sign every post and D2L as Milo, it would, you know, the platform itself would say Million McMillion said and then everybody would agree with Million and it just it depersonalized that it was already not very personal . . . the fact that the platform did not honor our preferred name. You know what, I think this made it even more. Disengaging.

Han perceives D2l did not create a community,

The discussion posts, you know, I know it is best to facilitate that, that social outlet and or discussion format, but you know, it felt very prescriptive. So it was like, you know, here's said chapter right, your reflection on it and make sure to respond to your peers. So it was, you know, wasn't really like we weren't getting that social connection, or the ability to network with one another and I do think there probably needs to be a little bit more for that social outlet than is online for free . . . I think social media is something that we definitely need to utilize more to reach a broader scope of students for and that like on demand, feeling and or even some, like, you know, self-reflection or promotions of students in the program that are successful things along those lines. I think there's a whole ton of avenues that EDLR program can potentially do with social media outlets, but it's kind of an untapped resource.

Obi perceives D2l did not create a community,

I didn't, I will say didn't as an there was no one-on-one communication, like I didn't reach out to one student say, hey, like introduce myself, I think through the

conversations or through the discourse, the discussion forum, we kind of got to, you know, learn one another not in the, my cohort itself, those folks that were on campus, when I started my program, I was working at [this university]. So, I knew a couple of the names and knew that a couple people were working on any [Tennessee university] campus at the time. So, I think a couple of us did connect. Actually, those three people or four people in particular that I knew that we connected with started the program together and we also work on campus together as well. So, but um, but yeah.

Participants felt that D2L did not create a community and that it was prescriptive and impersonal. Participants repeatedly stated that D2L discussions did not create a space for discussion, and they perceived the discussions as formal or prescribed and lacked the freedom necessary for a real conversation. This idea of a prescribed formulaic discussion forum diminishing the quality of the discussion aligns with the research by Chen & Wang (2009) that found social talk to be an important element in discussion forums. This also aligns with previous research by Cain and PolICASTRI (2011) on graded assignments taking from the community building that informal social media can create.

Paucity of Faculty Interaction in Online Discussions. The theme, *paucity of faculty interaction in online discussions*, was presented by several of participants in the study. Kara goes on to say, they perceive the faculty interaction lacking from the platform:

I feel like there's a lack of communication. To us, like, as far as, for example, we have our internship that we're supposed to be doing this summer, we've heard zero about that and so I think if they had a platform where they could go and just post

updates to an entire cohort in an easily accessible manner, I think that would be really helpful.

Scott spoke to the paucity of faculty interaction:

Well, I think that social media can definitely open up communication for people that otherwise wouldn't communicate, as well. The downfall of that, and I'm just, this is not EDLR related, but just thinking about my students and how they use social media to like, bring patients into the clinic, and things like that and I think social media is awesome. It's great. It lets you keep up with people. But I also think that social media has pushed us to be more of a text, or a messenger or an email type of society, versus just picking up the phone and calling someone I'll be the first to tell you that I would rather text even though I'm like a super big time extrovert. But I can feel like that because of social media. Because it's so much easier just to type in what you're going to say. It's easier if I don't know the word I'm looking for, but more or less, pick a fight or whatever, or go back and forth with someone because you're typing words, you're not actually having to say them. So, I feel like this, if you're not careful, social media can definitely lead to confrontation, and take away the personable aspects of a relationship.

Noah said regarding the paucity of faculty interaction:

I always liked when I did have a faculty member that came in, chimed in on some of the things and then when we had the ones where the faculty never chimed in, it didn't get a good feeling of are they even reading this? And then it's like, okay, so am I saying stuff? That's totally off the wall? Do they agree with me? Do they disagree with me? Are they sitting over there hating on me because I wrote

something that offended them, you know, because you don't have that. You can't read those facial emotions and their body language and so you just kind of go on and off whatever's in there and when they don't chime in, it did give a different feeling to the course.

Brit perceived the paucity of faculty interaction, “I don't have faculty members posting on discussion boards. So, I have no idea. I have no idea what their opinions are of the discussion boards, whether they're good, bad, indifferent, or nothing.”

Participants indicated the paucity of faculty online interaction including formal and informal interactions had a detrimental effect on creating useful community building. Here participants feel the paucity of faculty social media interaction leaves them feeling uncertain. Ardeni et al. (2021) show that engaging social media is a shared effort by faculty and students.

Perception and Thoughts on What Social Media Creates in the Classes and Programs

From different points in the conversations and interview question, the students' *perceptions and thoughts on what social media creates in classes and programs* during their time in EDLR as it relates to RQ3, two primary emergent themes frequently occurred.

- Social media creates informal communications.
- Social media reaches people that might otherwise not be included.

Table 8*Perception and Thoughts on What Social Media Creates in the Class*

Participants	Theme	Theme
	Social media creates informal communications	Social media reaches people that might otherwise not be included
Mark	x	
Kara	x	
Sophi		x
Sam		
Tony		
Fred	x	x
Tim		
Scott		x
Zoey		
Milo		
Noah		
Luke		
Han		
Harry		
Kail		
Obi		
Brit	x	
Yen	x	x

The following data expands on table 8. Each participant identified in the table spoke about social media creating an informal space for communication and related to that the participants describe being able to reach one another through direct quotes on the major themes they spoke to.

Social Media Creates Informal Communications. The theme, *social media creates informal communications*, was described by participants in the study. Mark perceives that social media creates informal communication:

But I have to craft emails to faculty in the EDLR program, whereas I think, if we had an informal platform, a group with students and faculty both engaged, it wouldn't be so formal and that would help in building relationships, and it would definitely increase communication . . . I'm actually friends with faculty on Facebook and I banter with him back and forth through comments. So, I wouldn't do that in an email and I definitely wouldn't do that in a cohort meeting with him.

But I will, in a comment thread on social media.

Kara perceives that social media creates informal communication. "It's pretty much strictly short messages, but it's a really nice place to be able to go and sometimes people kind of complain about things."

Fred perceives that social media creates informal communication. "It was more private for us to have student-to-student conversations – peer conversations – without feeling like we were being overseen or watched by our faculty members."

Brit perceives that social media creates informal communication:

I think social media allows us to be in more of a community than we would otherwise. In an online program, right? We've got so in our cohort, we've got

students from all over the state and some that are outside the state and so in a traditional online program, without social media, we would not be able to communicate, other than through email or some more traditional sense, we would not be able to communicate either formally through say D2L or zoom or wherever we're in or then the informal group me.

Yen perceives that social media creates informal communication

I got much more out of the 1XX our cohort page than I did out of the [regional university] attending [this university] page. But yeah, out of the 1XX page, I got a lot out of that and I think we did a lot of sharing, we did a lot of, hey, I'm gonna complete the assignment on this time, or, Oh, man, I'm late can anybody go in and, you know, do my do my discussion post real quick, or there's a lot of that.

The participant's perception that social media creates informal communications is repeated by the participants in several ways. Participants describe the peer-to-peer communication as informal or relaxed and a way to reach out to one another. Participants' overall perception is that social media creates a web of communication that would otherwise not be available to them.

Social Media Reaches People who Might Otherwise not be Included. The theme, *social media reaches people who might otherwise not be included*, was described by participants in the study. Sophie perceives that social media reaches people who would not traditionally receive information. “I think it opens up avenues to reach people in groups that you wouldn't find in your direct community.”

Fred perceives that social media reaches people that would not traditionally receive information. “Well, so I think it just helps you have more avenues with which to, that you can communicate with now than in the past.”

Scott perceives that social media reaches people that might otherwise not be included. “I think that social media can definitely open up communication for people that otherwise wouldn't communicate, as well.”

Yen perceives that social media reaches people that don't read traditional emails and who might not otherwise be included.

I really enjoyed that aspect, too, of social media being able to reach people you may not have been able to reach. It was a great way for us to, you know, really integrate ourselves with everybody across the state, because, you know, we've got those of us here in University A, there were the people from University V, they're the people from University C, they're the people from University D, so it was really great to be able to talk to people, that we wouldn't normally talk to you because we weren't on ground.

The participants' perceptions that social media reaches people that might otherwise not be included is not directly stated; often this category is indirectly mentioned throughout the

different themes and has more relevance that is directly apparent. Participants explain that these new pathways help to promote the perception of community among the participants.

The data collected here aligns with previous research by Cain and Policastri (2011) who found that formal assignments do not create an open-encouraging community. Participants state that the online learning resource, D2L, felt prescribed. Combining the negative perceptions of D2L with the perceived lack of faculty online presence left the participants feeling unsure about their directions at times.

Emergent Category

Perceptions of Personal Privacy in Social Media

The category of participants' *perceptions of personal privacy in social media* does not directly correspond to the research question; however, the emergent data does not agree with the published findings about student perception of privacy and social media found during the literature review. Bringing this emergent data into the conversation could be significant for future research.

The data in Table 9 depicts participants perceptions of personal privacy in relation to social media. The data is gathered from different points in the conversations and from the specific question “In your perception did the use of social media infringe on your personal freedoms or privacy.” Three primary emergent themes surfaced.

- Students expected it, and were used to it.
- It was a personal choice to contribute or not.
- No, social media did not infringe on their privacy.

Table 9 represents emergent themes related to the perception of personal freedoms or privacy by the participants. The three most often cited themes are presented in the table below.

Table 9*Perception of Personal Privacy in Social Media*

Participants	Theme	Theme	Theme
	Students expected it, and were used to it	It was a personal choice to contribute or not	No, social media did not infringe on their privacy
Mark		x	
Kara	x		x
Sophi		x	
Sam			
Tony			
Fred			
Tim			
Scott	x	x	
Zoey			
Milo			x
Noah	x		
Luke			
Han	x		x
Harry			
Kail			
Obi			
Brit	x		x
Yen			

The following data expands on table 9. Each participant identified in the table as having spoken about social media as an invasion of privacy or that they did not believe it was.

Students Expected a Lack of Privacy and Were Used To It. The theme, *students expected a lack of privacy and were used to it*, was described by participants in the study. Kara perceived that they expected a lack of privacy in social media:

Yeah, I don't think I don't think it has again, especially since I'm, I use Facebook, I use Instagram. I'm fully aware that the man of the internet out there knows everything about me. They know what I want, they know what I like they know what I need and don't need. So no, I don't think that anything related to schools, use of social media has infringed any more than everything else we do on a day to day basis.

Scott perceived that they expected a lack of privacy in social media:

I just feel like that's part of being an education. If you're going to be in education, you are going at some point probably to stand up in front of a group of people and a video to me is no different.

Noah perceived that they expected less privacy in social media,

I don't know if the Facebook group is something that's kind of standard. I know, you know, I'm in two different [Facebook cohort groups] now, because of overlapping cohorts. But teachers encouraging something like that, I think is important, because students need in students' majors gravitate toward that anyway . . . I liked Dr. Skywalker. In her classes. She did, it was voluntary. But you know, she did the thing where we got together at whatever that place was that Greek

restaurant, which is not social media. But since COVID, she's done sort of that same thing via Zoom.

Han perceived that they expected less privacy in social media,

I don't really think I would consider that an infringement on my privacy, because it's just kind of built into my daily routine and even to that point, you know, kind of even just using like LinkedIn, or, you know, something along those lines, I would have, you know, probably looked up other peers or tried to get to know them, as you know, if that kind of built in networking or sense of belonging.

Brit perceived that they expected less privacy in social media,

No. I mean, I am of a generation that, you know, I got Facebook, my sophomore year in undergrad. It's a part of my culture. I mean, It's just a part of life. I don't see it as “Yeah, I know it. Trust me.” I have a master's degree in intelligence.

The participants' perceptions that less privacy in social media was expected as part of their online experience was not universal; however, it was significant. Participants state that for a number of reasons from age to COVID that it is an expected part of their online educational experience.

It was a Personal Choice to Contribute to Social Media. The theme, *it was a personal choice to contribute to social media*, is described by participants in the study. Mark perceived that social media was not an invasion because they had the choice to contribute or not, “No, because it's my choice.” Sophi perceived that social media was not an invasion because they had the choice to contribute or not:

Yeah, I would say so [social media did infringe] on personal privacy. I mean, I suppose that theoretically, you can get in touch with me whenever you want. But I

have to open the email, you have to be willing to open the text. So if I don't want to I won't.

Scott perceived that social media was not an invasion because they had the choice to contribute or not.

So I think that we, to an extent have the ability to write how we choose to write and there's I don't think there's a right or wrong answer for most of the discussion boards and things like that, that we do that other people see a lot of it is about opinion. So, you know, like in an ethics class what one person thinks is ethical someone else may not and so you have the ability, I guess to write however you choose, you know.

The participant's perception that social media did not infringe on their privacy was largely due to their perception that it was their choice on what, how, and when to contribute and is supported through research by Cain and Policastri (2011). Forcing students to participate in social media may change their opinion by removing their ability to choose how they contribute.

No, Social Media did not Infringe on Their Privacy. The theme, *social media did not infringe on their privacy*, is described by participants in the study. Kara did not perceive social media as an invasion of their personal space. “I don't think that anything related to schools, use of social media has infringed any more than everything else we do on a day-to-day basis.”

Milo did not perceive social media as an invasion of their personal space, “No, not at all.” Han echoed that sentiment – that social media was not an invasion of their personal space, “No, I don't think so.” Brit did not perceive social media as an invasion of their personal space, “I know what it has access to. It doesn't bother me.”

Participants repeatedly stated that they did not feel as though social media was invasive. While some participants expected social media to be part of their online experience others felt they had control of what they chose to use.

Summary of Findings

The participants' responses to the three research questions created 17 emergent themes directly related to these questions and three emergent themes that had relevance to the topic but were not directly related to the research questions. RQ1 has two related categories: perception of social media in EDLR (paucity of social media in EDLR) and perception of inclusion through social media in the class and/or program. RQ2 presented two emergent categories: participant was active with social media but did not participate, and perception of social media as a retention tool. RQ3 identified three categories: social media involvement, perception of use of social media, and perception and thoughts on what social media creates in the class. The final category is not directly related to a specific research question, but created one category: perception of personal privacy in social media.

Chapter 5. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand student perceptions of social media as they relate to their program of study for online graduate students participating in the EDLR program at a Tennessee school. Cain and PolICASTRI (2011), Daugherty et al. (2015), and Brista (2015) have explored social media's influence in other populations. I chose students and recent graduates of the EDLR program as my sample due to a combination of factors including: (a) the program is fully online, (b) the program is well established, and (c) the program is successful as measured by members of the program's faculty.

The participants' backgrounds are diverse; however, their shared experiences of using social media prior to entering into the EDLR program is a unifying element as is their participation in the EDLR program. Social media can be broadly defined (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and is demonstrated by the participants' experiences with social media prior to entering into EDLR and during their time in EDLR. Their involvement ranged from fully engaged to minimal exposure. In their time in the EDLR program all the participants reported using social media to communicate with their peers and faculty to some degree. While the participants' background and experiences with social media varied greatly, several common categories and themes emerged throughout the interview process.

The participants shared their lived experience with social media during their time in the EDLR programs. The perceptions of the participants have given insight into the EDLR program's student social media experience.

RQ1: What is your perception of social media use in the EDLR department as an online graduate student?

Two categories emerged that were related to RQ1. The first category indicated student perception of paucity of the program's use of social media. The second emergent category is student perception of inclusion as related to the program's social media.

The three emergent themes in the category of student perception of paucity of the program's use of social media are Theme 1: EDLR does not promote community through its social media use; Theme 2: participants were unsure if the program has social media; and Theme 3: participants expressed an interest in more social media in the program.

Perception that EDLR Does not Promote Community Through Its Social Media Use

Examining the theme, EDLR does not promote community through its social media use, student perception of that paucity was disenfranchisement. Kara explained, "we're not getting any feedback and grades are being put [up] and it's, I think we all kind of feel in our silos, like, are we missing something." Faculty and administration have many opportunities for social media engagement with students through a wide array of social media (Aldahdouh et al., 2020); however, if faculty do not take advantage of these avenues the limited use of social media will affect students' perceptions of belonging.

Participants were unsure if the program had social media feeds. While there is a developing background of research on the effects of social media – both for and against its use as a pedagogical tool – there is very little research on how the lack of social media use affects online student perceptions. I found that participants did not know if their program had any social media. Han shared:

[She] thinks social media needs to be the direction they go, just because our cohort was pretty small to begin with. And then obviously, there was some attrition along the way. And so they, so it'd be a good opportunity for them (EDLR) to promote, you know EDLR in general, and then retain some students.

The lack of social media communication was manifested in the perception that faculty were unconcerned with student success. Harry stated, "Accepting that level of attrition as just is what it is, surprised me. And, and I really wonder if that informs what I perceived as lack of interest in what we were doing." The program's lack of engagement with their students and laying out clear paths of how the program was participating in social media led to a perception by the students of faculty disregard of their success in the program.

The third theme in this category is that participants expressed an interest in more social media in the program. Kara states that:

I wish that we got a little bit more from the program as a whole. And so I think maybe if there was like a Facebook group, or something for our cohort where they could go and post updates and things like that.

Brit continues that thought saying, "Facebook and Twitter and Instagram are underutilized or not utilized at all. I think there's missing pieces there." Daugherty et al. (2015) found that social media is an important tool in student retention.

Perception of Inclusion through Social Media

The second emergent category related to RQ1 is the perception of inclusion through social media. These themes emerged:

Theme 1 – social media creates new exclusion;

Theme 2 – social media does not allow for exclusion; and

Theme 3 – paucity of social media did not support inclusion.

Social media can create restrictive social circles. Fred noted that as certain members of their cohort continued in the program other students filtered in and out of their cohort for a number of reasons. This created a close-knit group of those that had started in the original cohort, leaving the others to discover their own webs of communication. Kara states that the formation of cliques can leave people out the group and they will not get an equal educational experience as the students who are in the inner ring of the social media web. This new type of exclusionary practice can ostracize students in programs that do not have a well-defined social media presence.

The second theme that *social media does not allow for exclusion* appears to contradict the first theme; however, on deeper exploration of the data, participants appear to be describing a different type of exclusion with the perception that social media does not allow for exclusion. This perception is related to not being able to use visual traditional stereotypes to define individuals. Fred noted, “It kind of removed [exclusion] I mean, unless you put a picture up with your profile.” This is a different type of exclusion than in the theme that social media creates new exclusions. This type of exclusion that is perceived to be less likely is that of visual prejudices.

Perception that Paucity of Social Media did not Support Inclusion

The last theme in this category is that paucity of social media did not support inclusion. Repeating the idea of minimal faculty interaction through social media, Mark clearly lays out their perception of this theme. “If faculty were more involved, or if there was a place that we all we had a safe place to respectfully discuss issues, topics, whatever I think it would make for a

more inclusive environment for the program.” The lack of a well-designed social media plan creates the perception that faculty are disengaged from the program.

Summary of RQ1

The data revealed that many of the participating students are unaware or unsure of the current social media efforts by their program. Often these same students felt that the program’s social media is not working to promote community and that many of the participants wanted more social media in their educational experience.

The data demonstrates that many of the participating students are mixed in their thoughts about social media's ability to create inclusive environments. While social media can break down traditional biases it also creates new exclusions including concerns about privacy, access to the Internet, and the ability to express oneself clearly in written formats. Finally, the data reiterated that the program's lack of a well-defined social media presence created the perception of a lack of effort to create inclusion by the program.

RQ1 asked, “What is your perception of social media use in the EDLR department as an online graduate student?” Overall, the perception of paucity by EDLR in its social media affects student perceptions of inclusion and community. A well-defined social media presence is lacking, and this lack of a well-defined presence is influencing student perception of the program in a negative manner.

Summary of RQ2

In response to RQ2 there are two emergent categories: participants were active with social media but did not participate, and the perception of social media as a retention tool.

Two themes came from the category *participants were active with social media but did not participate*. The first theme in this category is educational lurking, and the second is to keep

abreast of assignments. The data found here refutes previous research by Rovai (2000). Three themes emerged from the second category, social media as a retention tool:

Theme 1 – social media is clarifying and reassuring/a place to go for answer;

Theme 2 – social media created community; and

Theme 3 – social media can serve as a retention tool as social media offered emotional and other support.

Participant Was Active with Social Media But did not Participate

The category, participant was active with social media but did not participate, corresponds with previous research. Bista (2015) found that students often used social media and did not actively participate; they chose to watch quietly and learn from others' interactions. This type of behavior can be referred to as *educational stalking*.

The theme of educational lurking associated with the category of *participant was active with social media but did not participate* is mentioned by participants in different ways. Some participants referred to this by stating that they stayed aware of what others were doing while others said they are likely to read something posted but not post. Participants' state that they are using social media as supplement to communication as part of the EDLR program. This theme follows the idea of the web of communication being an important part of social media which allows participants to get information from several different avenues rather than a singular source. This idea of multiple sources of information playing an important role in the dissemination of information aligns with the feminist leadership style of concentric circles of communication allowing for a fuller experience (Helgesen, 1995).

The second theme in this category is that participants used social media to stay abreast of assignments. Participants used social media to stay abreast of assignments and other activities

related to the program and continued to note the paucity of communication by the program. Some found that the social media helped to keep them on track and be aware of required activities outside of class. This use of social media shows concentric circles of communication as an important element in participants' educational experience during their time in EDLR.

Perception of Social Media as a Retention Tool

Three themes emerged from the second category, perception of social media as a retention tool, has three primary themes related to RQ2, how does the use of social media in your program influence your utilization of social media with others. The themes are:

Theme 1: social media is a clarifying and reassuring/a place to go for answers;

Theme 2: social media created community; and

Theme 3: social media offered emotional and other support.

The theme, social media is a clarifying and reassuring/a place to go for answers, is cited as important by participants and participants used social media to fill gaps in clarity, Zoey explains that “it allowed me to make sure I was doing my assignments appropriately.” Social media functions as a concentric web of communication in the absence of top down feedback.

The second theme that participants cited in this category is, social media created community. Mark’s perception that social media “establishes a peer group within an online program” encapsulates the participants' perception of this idea. Participants cite that social media influences them by creating community and is evident from the data. Yen explained that social media “was a great way for us to, you know, really integrate ourselves with everybody.” This idea of integrating school and life follows the web of communication as described in feminist theory by Helgesen (1995). Social media creates community by allowing participants to

experience a fuller educational experience than the formal educational classes alone as described by the data.

The third theme in this category, social media offered emotional and other support continues the idea that integrating school and life creates a fuller life experience as described in feminist theory by Helgesen (1995). Participants perceived that social media created a community where they could go to for support in direct relation to the EDLR program as well as life issues that were affecting their educational experience. Yen mentioned such a situation when sharing they went through a personal struggle and fell back onto the community for support. This integration of a student's full self plays a role in their perception of their ability to be successful.

The data demonstrates the idea that, while the participants may not be engaging in social media actively, they are often aware of it. Many explained that they use social media outlets to keep abreast of class activities and each other but do not actively participate. The students' perceptions of social media as a retention tool vary from person to person but the participants often cite community, support, and clarification as important elements. Participants viewed the department's lack of integrating social media into the program as creating a need for an external support network for information sharing and retention. The void in the program is filled by student led social media initiatives that can be exclusive and run counter to program goals.

Summary of RQ3

Three categories emerged related to RQ3. The first category was social media involvement, the second category was perception of use of social media, and the third was student perception and thoughts on what social media creates for the class.

From the category social media involvement two themes emerged. First was social media as an informal part of community and the second theme was convenient peer connections.

Supporting both these concerns, participants felt D2L did not create a community and faculty interaction was minimal in online discussions. In the third category two themes emerged. The first theme is that social media creates informal communications, and the second theme is that social media reaches people that might otherwise not be included.

Social Media Involvement

In the emergent category of social media involvement, the first theme that the informal structure of social media helps to create community is cited by participants as the missing element of community as a driving factor in their involvement in social media. This aligns with research by Ardeni et al. (2021) that found lateral communication and community building through social media as part of their course pedagogy. Kara posed the question, “Are we missing something or what's going on? But then once we kind of put it out in the GroupMe, and then all of a sudden, everybody's like, Yes, me too. Oh, my gosh, I feel the same.” Other participants discussed their fear of missing out as a reason they participated in social media. This void in communication created the need for peer-driven social media that created collaboration, peer connections, and sense of community. While peer driven efforts to create a social media community are important, they can be problematic. Peer-driven communities can create new forms of exclusion leading to students feeling left out. Also, with peer-driven communities there is a possibility for miscommunication that can create circumstances where disciplinary or legal actions may result.

In the second theme in this category, social media creates convenient peer connections, participants discussed the idea of asking simple questions or checking in with one another as difficult without some type of social media app to support communication. Participants

appreciated the ease of access to information and their peers that broke down barriers and opened lines of peer-to-peer communication that would otherwise not have been possible.

Perception of Use of Social Media

Two themes emerged in the category, use of social media during their time in the EDLR program. The first theme, D2L did not create a community, participants discussed the formal nature of the learning system and how it worked against creating feelings of community. These perceptions correspond with research by Vandeya (2020). The perception that discussion posts became formulaic dissuaded participants from open discussions and into formalized posts. Participants felt the social media outside of D2L was less formal and more open to communication. D2L was perceived as formal or prescribed and did not promote discussion or community. EDLR's heavy dependence on D2L limits the perception of community building opportunities open to the participants.

The second theme in this category, paucity of faculty interaction in online discussions, was specific to this category but mentioned throughout the interviews. Participants felt the scarcity of faculty interaction played a role in many of the aspects related to their perception of EDLR. Brit stated, "I don't have faculty members posting on discussion boards. So, I have no idea. I have no idea what their opinions are of the discussion boards." This perception created uncertainty among the participants. This uncertainty and the perception of minimal communication created the need for peer creation and management of social media which can be problematic for individuals and for the program. A possible result of the paucity of social media engagement from the faculty is the perception that faculty is unconcerned with student retention.

Perception and Thoughts on What Social Media Creates in the Class

Two themes emerged from the participant interviews in the category of perception and thoughts on what social media creates in the class. The first theme is the perception that social media creates informal communications. Participants cite the perception that they communicate freely with their peers without faculty oversight and that they are able to communicate with ease across long distances. Social media without the formality of being attached to a class or program can be seen as advantageous.

The second theme in this category is social media reaches people that might otherwise not be included. Social media is perceived as a line of communication that is more direct and gives the participants the ability to directly connect with one another.

Summary of RQ3

The data corresponds with previous research in that informal social media creates communities that more formal educational communications do not (Cain & Policastri, 2011). The participants cite that online learning resources feel like prescribed assignments and lack the needed freedoms for open communication. The perception that participants can speak directly with one another through social media is an important element and creates an interesting complication on balancing the perception of disengagement from the faculty and the desired faculty participation.

Emergent Category

The participant perception of personal privacy in social media does not directly correspond to the research question; however, the emergent data does not agree with the published findings about student perceptions of privacy and social media found during the

literature review. Also, participants' perceptions of privacy and the lack of social media policy at the program level are potentially problematic for students and faculty in social media formats.

The emergent category of perception of personal privacy in social media has three themes:

Theme 1: students expected and were used to it;

Theme 2: it was a personal choice to contribute or not; and

Theme 3: social media did not infringe on their privacy.

The emergent category of perception of personal privacy in social media found in this study do not correspond with previous studies by O'Connor et al. (2016) and others that showed that students felt that social media as part of an educational program was an invasion of personal space. The theme that students expected and were used to social media in both their formal educational experience and their informal communications to build networks and communities is prominent in this study. This theme stands out due to the paucity of official social media as part of the EDLR program. The disconnect between student expectations and faculty interactions as perceived by the participants is wide.

The second theme, that social media was a personal choice and students could choose to contribute or not, is relevant in that it supports previous research that stated students were open to social media if it was not a formal assignment. However, the feelings of social media not infringing on the participants' personal privacy along with the participant belief that social media is expected, brings this theme of personal choice into question.

The third and final theme for this category is social media does not infringe on their privacy. Participants stated specifically that social media does not infringe on their privacy.

Participants repeatedly stated that they did not feel as though social media invaded their personal space. While some participants expected social media to be part of their online educational experience, others felt they had control of what they used. O'Connor et al., (2016) found that "78% were opposed to the idea of universities monitoring students' personal social media accounts" (p. 619). Participants in this study, in contrast, wanted more faculty interaction in the social media space and, also in contrast to Cain and Policastri (2011), participants also wanted more social media interaction in the official social media channels.

Conclusion

Paucity of faculty social media engagement created a negative perception of EDLR with some participants. Many students cited a desire for more inclusion from faculty as well as more social media contact outside of D2L to create a free flow of discussion. In the void created by the lack of social media interaction, participants created their own social media avenues ranging from Facebook groups to GroupMe threads. This can be a positive experience for students; however, participants saw that there is an opportunity for exclusion and loss retention due to the perception that faculty is ambivalent about attrition. Also, a lack of formal social media opens opportunities for miscommunication that can cause disciplinary and legal issues due to falling into a gray area in academic and legal precedents. This can be demonstrated by Bista's (2015) research that highlights students' non-unilateral perceptions on social media use in the classroom. By integrating well-planned social media experiences, students can be and are receptive to social media in their coursework as a pedagogical instrument for learning.

Recommendations For Practice

The need for clearly defined standards of conduct and expectations for students and faculty should be implemented to improve the perception of inclusion and retention and as a

protection from potential legal issues. Participants often used non-official social media sites and groups to communicate and create community. Research by O'Connor et al. (2016) demonstrates that students are often unaware of social media use policies by their universities and programs. Case law demonstrates that even non-program social media communications can have negative implications for students *Keefe v. Adams* (2016). Without a clearly defined policy, social media use by students and faculty can have a negative effect on the student's education and future O'Connor et al. (2016).

Faculty should participate in the program's social media to prevent the perception of paucity. Previous research by Ardeni et al. (2021) has shown success in building online communities and creating engagement by having a wide variety of individuals from the department participate in social media (faculty to graduate assistants) can create a successful social media presence.

The social media space should be outside of the educational learning system software that is used for online classroom activities. Studies have shown the success of incorporating social media in different ways demonstrated that applying social media outside of normal systems was successful (Cain & Policastri, 2011; Daugherty et al., 2015). Bista (2015) demonstrated in their twitter pedagogy research that even required assignments could be welcomed. While participants described D2L's discussions as a part of their social media experience, they often felt the formalized structure of the requirements interfered with the social nature of the conversation.

Implementing a social media space that applies the web of communication, concentric circles of information sharing, and clearly defined standards of conduct could have a wide-ranging effect on future students' perception of EDLR and their educational experience.

Recommendations For Further Study

Post-COVID, new research to expand on the changing thoughts of students related to online education is needed to understand how best to serve a new generation of learner's social media needs. The data collected in this study on student perceptions of online personal privacy does not concur with data found previously. Current students have used social media in ways previous students did not. With social media giants shaping the landscape and social media infiltrating more of students' public and personal lives, the perceptions of just a few years ago seem out of alignment with the data collected here. Further research in this area may help to understand why.

- Replication in other universities to understand if there are generalized outcomes that can be used to understand a wider audience of learners.
- Expansion of this study to include undergraduate programs to understand the similarities and differences that occur between social media communication among graduate level students and undergraduate level students.
- A comparison/contrast between several programs that usefully implement and do not implement social media at the department level.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Social Media & Email Advertisement of Research

I am conducting a research study that involves the Perception of Social Media as seen by Educational Leadership Online Graduate Students. I am looking for people who are current students or recent graduates of the (EDLR). This study involves a single online interview which should take about 30 to 45 minutes. Please message or email (emma@etsu.edu) me if you or someone you know may be interested in participating or learning more about the study. Thank you Todd Emma, emma@etsu.edu

Hello,

Thank you for helping with this research project. There are two weeks of times from 3/14 to 3/24 available, please select a time in the doodle poll that works best for you. If no time listed works, feel free to email me and I will work with your schedule.

<https://doodle.com/meeting/participate/id/QeZg3qga>

I have attached the informed consent form; it does not require you to respond. If you have any questions, please feel free to let me know what they are, and I will do my best to find the answers.

Thank you
Todd Emma

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Perception of Social Media as seen by Educational Leadership Online Graduate Students. Version 4.2.

Time of interview:

Date:

Recorded With: Zoom

Place/Setting:

Interviewer: Todd Emma

Interviewee:

Bio of Interviewee:

Current occupation:

Education:

Preferred Pronoun:

Age:

Years of use of social media:

Position of the participants: The purpose of this phenomenological study is to better understand student perceptions of social media as they relate to their program of study for online graduate students participating in the department of EDLR.

Questions

1. What is your perception of social media use in the department of Educational EDLR as an online graduate student?
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2. How does the use of social media in your program influence your utilization of social media with others?
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3. How does the utilization of social media in your program influence your perception of social media in your educational experience?
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4. In your perception, how does social media facilitate communication?
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5. How does the use of social media in the program promote inclusion?

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6. Could you explain your understanding of how social media played a role in student retention in the program?

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7. In your perception did the use of social media infringe on your personal freedoms or privacy?

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8. Based on your perception, explain any changes you might suggest for the use of social media to improve the EDLR program?

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9. Can you recommend someone else for the survey

VITA

TODD EMMA

- Education: Ed.D. Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2023
M.F.A. Masters of Fine Arts, Memphis College of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, 2000
- Professional Experience: Professor, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN, 2007-present
Instructor, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, MO, 2006-2007
- Publications: *Emma, T. (2021). "Preliminary investigation of changes in higher education administration brought on by COVID-19" Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference (SITE)
*Emma, T. & Marlow, G. (2018). "Freshmen Classes design for digital media production." Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference (SITE)
- Honors and Awards: 2016-2018 NSF DUE-1525103, \$299,424. Virtual Biology Lab 2.0: Improving and implementing an inquiry-based educational resource. TC Jones (PI), A. Hiatt & T. Emma (Co-PIs).