



## Social media as academic quicksand: A phenomenological study of student experiences in and out of the classroom



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### ABSTRACT

The widespread use of social media and its potential to hinder academic performance has received the attention of researchers and is a growing concern of educators. This phenomenological study explored the perceived impact of social media on the educational experiences of university students in the United States, both in and out of the classroom. Analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed several pervasive themes, all of which can be viewed as barriers to academic success. Participants reported that using social media during academic activities diminishes achievement, increases the amount of time it takes to complete tasks, and reduces how much information students retain from study and lecture sessions. Additionally, participants indicated how a lack of situational and topic interest increases social media's temptation. We argue that educators and students would benefit from a more complete understanding of social media's role as a barrier to academic success. Implications for educators are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

University students are often confronted with technological distractions (e.g., cell phones, social media, laptops) as they attend to academic tasks (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2011). In fact, today's students have grown up in such a technologically-rich environment that they are often referred to as the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998). For these students, technological distractions are often within arm's reach, including as they study and do homework (Junco, 2012) or attend lectures (Kuznekoff, Munz, & Titsworth, 2015; McCoy, 2013).

One potential technological distraction that has received the attention of researchers is social media, which is generally considered to encompass electronically-based platforms (e.g., social networking outlets, texting, video sharing services) that (a) are accessed by multiple users to create online communities, (b) are used to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, and (c) facilitate high-speed interactions between the users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Examples of social media sites include Facebook and Twitter. University students have easy access to social media through their cell phones or laptops. In the United States, nearly 90% of all university-aged adults own a cell phone (Smith, 2011), more than 80% own laptops (Pew Research Center, 2010), and virtually all create social media accounts (McGough & Salomon, 2013). Additionally, more than 90% of university students bring their cell phones to

class (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011) and more than a quarter bring their laptops (Aguilar-Roca, Williams, & O'Dowd, 2012), creating a situation where university students have easy access to social media in and out of the classroom.

For those concerned with student success, it is important to consider what impact constant exposure to social media and other forms of technology has on students' learning, achievement, and motivation. For many, it may seem intuitive to believe the Net Generation consists of tech-savvy students who can leverage technology to their professional and academic advantage. However, according to Switzer and Switzer (2013), this conjecture is largely unfounded. These authors propose that, while skilled at using technology for personal and leisure use, the Net Generation has little to no experience using technology for professional or educational purposes. Rather, research has demonstrated how the presence of technological distractions hinders the Net Generation's learning and achievement outcomes (Duncan, Hoekstra, & Wilcox, 2012; Fries & Dietz, 2007; Junco, 2011).

The purpose of our phenomenological study was to explore how Net Generation university students perceive their experiences with social media as they attend to academic tasks in and out of the classroom. As noted by Creswell (2009, 2013), phenomenological research involves "The exploration of (a) phenomenon with a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (p. 78). In line with this definition, our study was concerned with understanding how social media use (a growing phenomenon for university students) impacts the academic experiences of university students. Although previous research has demonstrated how university students' almost unlimited access to technological distractions diminishes their learning and achievement

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outcomes (e.g., Fox, Rosen, & Crawford, 2009; Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014), few studies have explored university students' perceptions of their social media use. Our study sought to help fill this gap in the literature.

### 1.1. Technological distractions and student success

For the Net Generation, technological devices and activities are part of their daily lives (e.g., texting, emailing, and blogging). In what follows, we provide a brief synopsis of the research literature focusing on the impact that technological distractions have on students as they attend in-class lectures or study and complete homework outside of the classroom.

The majority of university students multitask with digital devices as they attend classroom lectures (McCoy, 2013) or study and work on homework outside of class (Junco, 2012; Mokharti, Delello, & Reichard, 2015). During classroom lectures, McCoy (2013) found that the majority of university students report using digital devices during class periods for non-class purposes. Participants reported using digital devices during class for a range of activities, including social media and web surfing, that result in consequences such as not paying attention (89.8% of participants), missing instruction (80.4%), and losing grade points (26.6%). Other studies have augmented these findings, underscoring how using digital devices for off-task purposes during lectures diminishes the amount of lecture notes students record (Kuznekoff et al., 2015; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013) and their achievement outcomes (Burak, 2012; Hembrooke & Gay, 2003; Kraushaar & Novak, 2010; Sana, Weston, & Cepeda, 2013).

Outside of the classroom, researchers have found that the majority of university students attempt to either (a) simultaneously use technological devices and social media for non-academic purposes as they study or work on homework or (b) actively switch back and forth between their digital devices and academic tasks (e.g., Head & Eisenberg, 2011; Mokharti et al., 2015). Such off-task behaviors have been associated with decreases in students' grades (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013; Junco, 2011, 2012) and the productivity of their homework and study sessions (Levine, Waite, & Bowman, 2007; Bowman, Levine, Waite, & Gendron, 2010).

Collectively, the literature supports Switzer and Switzer's (2013) contention that Net Generation students do not possess a predisposition to leverage technology to their academic benefit. Instead, the presence of social media and other technological distractions appears to disrupt student learning.

## 2. Research questions

Previous studies have demonstrated how university students' almost unlimited access to social media and technological devices diminishes their learning and achievement outcomes. However, few have explored university students' perceptions of how social media impacts their academic experience. To address this gap in the literature, the central research question driving this phenomenological study was: How do university students describe their experiences with social media as they complete academic tasks inside and outside of the classroom? Sub-questions included:

SQ1: How do university students define social media?

SQ2: How do university students feel that social media interferes with their academic motivation?

SQ3: How do university students perceive their social media use to impact their academic success?

## 3. Methodology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology effective for exploring how individuals experience a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Finlay, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Moran, 2000;

Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). For this study, university students' experiences using social media while they attend to academic tasks represented the central, shared phenomenon of interest. As such, the goal of this study was to describe the essence of participants' shared experiences using social media during academic tasks.

### 3.1. Sample and site selection

After obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, we obtained instructor permission to recruit participants from undergraduate classrooms on campus. Purposeful, criterion-based sampling was used to obtain participants who had experience using social media while attending to academic tasks in and out of the classroom setting. Participants were given a \$15 gift card to a university bookstore for their participation in this study.

Ten undergraduate students (M = 19.7 years old) at a large, public, Midwestern university in the United States participated in this study during the Spring 2014 semester. The majority of participants reported being White, non-Hispanic (n = 7) and a majority also reported having a cumulative GPA above 3.0 on a 4.0 scale (n = 7). Participants were mixed with respect to year in school (5 freshmen, 3 sophomores, 1 junior, and 1 senior) and were evenly split with regard to gender (5 male; 5 female). Collectively, participants represented a diversity of eight different majors.

### 3.2. Data collection

A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 12 open-ended questions was developed by the researchers (see Appendix A). The primary investigator conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants in the secondary researcher's office on the university campus. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the primary investigator. To protect the participants' identities, each was assigned a pseudonym. Participants were subsequently referred to by their pseudonym and their actual names were never attached to interview data.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Moustakas (1994) phenomenological approach to data analysis was used to identify emerging themes in the responses. Initially, the primary investigator explored the transcriptions using Creswell's (2012) preliminary exploratory analysis procedure. During this process, critical memos were written within the transcripts to provide a general sense of the data. Following this analysis, the procedure of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) was applied to the interview data. Through this procedure, "significant statements" related to university students' experiences with social media were identified. This process resulted in the identification of 185 significant statements within the interview response data. These were provided to the secondary investigator for peer review, feedback, and continued analysis.

After identifying significant statements, the researchers engaged in the open coding process (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2009, 2013). Through this approach, codes were assigned to the significant statements, resulting in 48 open codes for the interview data. Focused coding procedures were then used to explore for redundancy and overlap, thereby reducing the number of codes from 48 to 21. These 21 codes were organized into "clusters of meaning" based on similarities in their content and were cross-checked by the secondary investigator. For example, responses coded as "no perceived impact on homework quality" and "social media use impacts study quality" were merged together to form the "Social media use has differential impacts on homework and study quality" theme. Codes were combined into clusters of meaning until the point of saturation was achieved and no new themes emerged (Creswell, 2012). This process ultimately resulted in the emergence of seven themes related to university students' experiences using social media. These themes were provided to the secondary researcher

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