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Does the Social Media Platform Change the Impression of Teaching Assistants?: A Facebook vs. Twitter Study

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Abstract

This study analyzed how impressions are formed online depending on the type of social media and the implications that may come from the over-disclosure of information. Using a Qualtrics survey, 97 participants viewed the profile of a female teaching assistant on Twitter and Facebook. While there was little difference between the two social media, the use of self-disclosure on Twitter seemed slightly more inappropriate for sharing personal information.

Keywords

Impression Online, Social Media, Teaching Assistant

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication has given our society a way of staying in contact with a variety of people in our lives. While people still use the internet to email and send instant messages to communicate with people they know, the popularity of social media as a means has become the primary source of most communication online [1]. Although people use different social media platforms for different reasons, searching for people online has become a simple task due to the technological advancements of these platforms. In addition to finding people online, the process in which people form impressions of others online is a phenomenon that has become exponentially more well-known among social scientists [1]. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter play a key role in how impressions of people are formed. Nowadays, with apps like Tinder or LinkedIn on social media, a lot of impressions are formed in different ways when someone views an online profile. In universities across the country, most graduate students

pursuing Master's and Doctoral degrees are also teaching assistants (TA's) or teaching fellows (TF's). This means that while one is completing this degree, the graduate student is also teaching undergraduate students.

Just like most people, TA's and TF's use social media for their own personal use. TA's and TF's are expected to maintain professionalism in the classroom while balancing their own personal/social lives. As teaching assistants, we can use social media in different ways to help with the classroom, such as learning students' names. However, our students can also use social media to figure out what their professors look like or dig into what the TA or TF's personal lives are like. Even setting their profile to private does not stop students from sending friend requests or sometimes directly messaging the professors and TA.

Given the aforementioned issues, we will specifically focus on teaching assistants because of the amount of interaction and close age range (typically) to undergraduate students. From personal experience, we wanted to explore the ways in which students form impressions about teaching assistants on social media (Facebook and Twitter). The close age range and nature of the classroom blur the boundaries of professionalism, specifically when focusing on social media like Facebook and Twitter. Also, the customization of social media profiles allows the user to monitor and control what is and is not on their own page. The user is then the one who controls what sort of image about themselves is displayed on the internet, which then controls the impressions that one might make about the person. We will focus on how social media profiles can impact teacher credibility, attitudes towards social networking, and appropriateness of teaching assistants' social media use.

2. Literature Review

We will review three main components of literature: social media, self-disclosure, and teaching assistants, in order to better understand how impressions of TA's are formed via Facebook and Twitter. As an academic, people tend to think of you as just an intellect. Although this is not a bad thing, it marginalizes teachers into one category and leaves out the personal/social aspect of the teacher. As more updated technology moves into the classroom, the social media is more present than ever. More specifically, social media is present in our educational system. Both teachers and students are using social media in and out of the classroom which distorts the lines of professionalism and self-disclosure.

2.1. Social Media

First, social media is a key aspect of our society because it is literally at our fingertips. Nowadays, everyone has a smart phone with apps that connect us to others near and far. Researchers [1] discussed teacher credibility, learner empowerment, and online communication attitude as predictors of social media and technology within the classroom. "Recent research has identified both teacher credibility and learner empowerment as factors shaping student responses to classroom policies

on technology use, and thus they serve as our theoretical starting point for understanding factors motivating students' social communication technology use" [1] [2].

Researchers [3] have studied how organizations adopt a social media strategy. Other scholars [4] concentrated on technology and how the designs of social media sites are particular. They have made communication technologies more open in design and have studied the freedom in the social and political concepts [4]. Because technology and the internet are so open and basically anyone can make a website, freedom is discussed as an elastic concept. Results showed that freedom is a powerful factor and that there are different controls that go into the facilitated freedom that comes with internet usage [4]. Surveillance, censorship, and intellectual property are the three main factors that are taken into account. The study on the relationship between freedom and control when it is related to technology design [4]. These two factors are crucial when constructing the design of technologies. Individuals engaged in social media are continuously evaluating the contributions of others. Few studies have addressed exactly when and why developers seek information about unknown others, how impressions of these people are formed, and what information is relied upon to infer an unknown developer's expertise, or other personal characteristics [5].

We can connect previous research [1] [3]-[5] to the customization of Facebook and Twitter profiles. Nowadays, we can post different pictures, privatize different "about me information" and monitor what does and does not go on our "walls". Through this customization, the user can have more control over the types of impressions that someone may form.

Another aspect of social media that is "newer" in the technology realm is the use of social media/technology in the classroom. Scholars [6]-[8] have focused on the presence and use of technology and social media in the classroom. Although technology is being incorporated into the classroom, social media use is not as prevalent. Researchers [6] focused on the impact that posting and tweeting has on classroom connectedness. Since information is constantly changing, social media brings us together and allows the knowledge to feed back into the connectivity of the classroom. The author [7] explored the use of WhatsApp and how the app can be used to enhance literary skills at the collegiate level while also reducing anxiety. The researcher [7] stated, "Though the extensive use of social media can be seen as an activity that can affect the users' social skills, the learners' tendency to use social media may be utilized to strengthen their reading and writing skills" (p. 48).

Similar to our focus, scholars [9] focused on the perceptions of teachers' disclosures on Facebook and their impact on credibility. Our study expands this research by focusing on more than one social media. Researchers [9] conducted their study on professors who were actually Facebook friends with their students and analyzed disclosure along with credibility impact. We want to focus on this similar aspect because the amount of self-disclosure is important. While most of our teaching assistants are not friends with their students on social media until

after they are their current students, disclosure and credibility are important.

2.2. Self-Disclosure

Traditionally, in the classroom, teachers often spend the majority of the class period talking more in the classroom than the students. While a good portion of classroom time is spent covering course content, teachers also talk about themselves, tell stories, and share their personal beliefs. In the classroom, teachers often tell stories to engage students and spark interest. The act of teachers telling stories, typically from personal experiences, is an act commonly referred to as self-disclosure.

Scholar [10] defined self-disclosure as having an attitude of trust and love. According to this scholar [10], when a person believes another person is trustworthy, self-disclosure will occur. For example, students are more likely to participate in discussions within the classroom towards the end of the semester when a relationship with the teacher is established. However, self-disclosure has been known to be a strategic behavior which teachers use to build relationships with their students, explain the content in further detail, and establish trust in the classroom. The use of self-disclosure contains positive and negative social side effects. As scholar [10] explained, “self-disclosure may alienate one from oneself when disclosures that formerly took place within one context are disseminated to other contexts”. He also argued that informational privacy or controlled disclosures, enables an individual to mediate various social relationships [10].

Teachers can choose to disclose in a controlled environment through social media platforms online. “As we will show, garnering impressions from online information is nothing new, although the kinds of information social networking technologies present and the manner in which impressions form may be” ([11], p. 30). The researcher [11] discussed the challenges of understanding the functions of social media in terms of the ever-changing characteristics of the social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. “The newest forms of online communication complicate matters in ways that are unique with respect to the kinds of information they offer for observers to draw impressions, and they raise different theoretical issues than those formerly applied to interactive uncertainty reduction online” ([11], p. 29).

The communication of the teacher with his or her students is an essential part of both a successful teaching and learning process [12]. The interactions between teacher and students result in forming impressions of one another. Through social media, teachers and students are also able to reciprocate any intimate communication by simply following the account, providing “likes”, or adding comments to posts. The use of social media among teachers and students has made the forming of impressions online much more intimate than in a normal classroom setting.

Many classroom settings are set up through the banking model of education in which teachers deposit information into students using a transactional process [13]. One way in which this may happen is by simply lecturing the material while

the students listen. There are limited opportunities for self-disclosure to happen among the teachers and limited to no opportunities for students to self-disclose. Although self-disclosure happens infrequently in a typical classroom setting of the banking model of education, where interactions may be task-oriented rather than casual, individuals' social encounters still allow for general impressions of the other person's characteristics and dispositions to be formed [14].

One thing to keep in mind with self-disclosure is the importance of the social penetration theory. The social penetration theory states that an individual begins communication with surface level conversations and slowly penetrates the other individual's public persona to communicate with them from a deeper, more intimate level [15]. The social penetration theory is vital in understanding self-disclosure because one's willingness to self-disclose may be due to the relationship they share or do not share with someone else. For example, two best friends are more likely to share intimate details in their life rather than two strangers, due to the social penetration theory.

When self-disclosure is used effectively through social penetration theory, reciprocity is achieved. The value of reciprocity refers to the value in which reciprocity is used to achieve personal benefits [16]. Therefore, the positive reaction of one individual because of another individual's self-disclosure may be referred to as reciprocity. The act of self-disclosure cannot be successful for one individual unless there is some form of reciprocity occurring from the other individual, whether that be in person or through social media. For example, if someone discloses a very intimate Facebook post and receives very few "likes" or comments, we could assume that the use of self-disclosure through social media as the median was unsuccessful in terms of reciprocity from other users.

The term self-disclosure has several definitions. However, we will investigate the use of self-disclosure by teaching assistants through a social media medium, specifically Twitter and Facebook. We will also be analyzing the significance of reciprocity of students when teaching assistants choose to disclose themselves on social media.

2.3. Teaching Assistant

We wanted to focus primarily on the role of communication studies teaching assistants because of the rising popularity of communication scholars in the university's Communication Studies Department. In fact, over the past five years, the number of communication studies undergraduate majors has increased by over 70% [17].

We chose to utilize teaching assistants for our research because of the uniqueness of the role of teaching assistants and instructors. Teaching assistant-to-student relationships tend to remain more intimate than professor-to-student relationships. Professors deem the role of the ultimate superior in the classroom for a few reasons. The large age gap between the professor and students grants the professor more power over their students and, in turn, creates less opportunity for

disclosure from both parties. While age is a factor that contributes to the lack of self-disclosure of the professor, it is also important to note that the credibility of professors tends to be higher than the credibility of a teaching assistant. Several university professors have a PhD, while teaching assistants only have their BA or BS. Therefore, when there is a discrepancy between the role of the professor and the amount of disclosure that the professor provides, whether that be through social media or during class, the professor may lose credibility and trust with the students rather than develop.

On the other hand, a teaching assistant is typically closer in age to students which results in a higher likelihood to generate a more intimate relationship with students. For example, many first-semester teaching assistants were undergraduates in the prior semester and sometimes were classmates of students they are now teaching. Therefore, we wanted to explore the effects of teaching assistants disclosing the self on two separate social media platforms to compare and contrast the impressions formed by students.

At the university, teaching assistants in the Communication Studies Department take 3 Master's level graduate courses and assist in teaching 3 undergraduate courses. The responsibilities of a teaching assistant include assisting the main instructor in basic course needs. Some of the needs include grading assignments, checking attendance, helping answer students' questions about the course, offering help to students and instructors when needed, and facilitating recitations for students. The teaching assistants at the university usually remain professional but have more opportunities to interact with students in the large lecture in comparison to the professor because teaching assistants may interact with students during recitations or briefly in class while the professor lectures.

However, first-semester graduate students in the Communication Studies Department typically teach at least two *Introduction to Communication* courses, in which they are solely the instructor. While teaching *Introduction to Communication*, graduate student instructors are required to teach the content of the course, take roll, administer tests, provide feedback on students' work, and essentially become the main person to contact concerning any questions or concerns about the course or course material. The role of instructor as a teaching assistant becomes more demanding not only in terms of the workload, but also because the interactions between the instructor and students become much more intimate and ultimately create more of a gray area of appropriateness in the classroom. For example, due to the closeness in age among *Introduction to Communication* professors, there are many times in which students and teachers may share a similar experience or understand the same type of language used.

3. Method

Our study was brought about through our research on impression formation in our graduate level computer-mediated communication (CMC) class. The impression formation research [11] [14] [18] [19] has provided insight into how impressions

are formed and maintained online. We wanted to focus on two major social medias: Facebook and Twitter, to explore how undergraduate students perceive a teaching assistant on social media. For our study, we posed two questions:

RQ1: How is an impression formed on one social media (Facebook or Twitter) different to an impression formed on a second social media (Facebook, or Twitter)?

RQ2: How are impressions about teaching assistants formed by students based on their social media profiles (Facebook or Twitter)?

3.1. Participants

Our study was conducted at a large southern state university. We used four different sections of *COMM 1010: Introduction to Communication Studies* classes and offered each class section an extra credit opportunity worth up to 10 points. The participants were undergraduate students from ages 18 - 25 of several different races/ethnicities. One section was made up of a learning community where 21 of the participants were media arts majors. Generally speaking, our participants were from all different majors and had a close age range to the graduate teaching assistant population in the Department of Communication Studies.

3.2. Stimuli

We had four images in total, which represented the different social media sites used, along with the amount of disclosure the fake teaching assistant gave. The two social media sites analyzed were Facebook and Twitter, along with full and partial self-disclosure. The two full disclosure Facebook and Twitter sites had the same wording. The two partial disclosure sites, Facebook and Twitter, also used the same wording.

3.3. Procedure

We developed a 5 - 10-minute survey via Qualtrics. The facilitator asked each class section to look at the image on the screen at the front of the room and take the survey according to the image shown. We also asked the students to pretend that the social media image they were viewing was their own teaching assistant. The students took the survey on their phones/laptops and showed the completion page to their instructor in order to receive the extra credit. The survey consisted of five measures with an average of five questions in each section.

3.4. Measure

For our study, we chose five different scales which measured: teacher credibility, social attractiveness, physical attraction, social attraction, attitudes towards social networking, and appropriateness of teaching assistants' social media use.

The first measure used was teacher credibility. The participants were asked to evaluate the instructor (based on the social media profile shown) in terms of the adjectives on each scale. Credibility scale [20] directly assessed the credibility concept and, therefore, was used in this study. The scale included the following

adjectives: intelligent/unintelligent, untrained/trained, expert/inexpert, uninformed/informed, competent/incompetent, stupid/bright, sinful/virtuous, dishonest/honest, unselfish/selfish, sympathetic/unsympathetic, high character/low character, and untrustworthy/trustworthy. An index score using the 11 retained items was created for teacher credibility ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.31$).

The second measure used was social attraction. The participants were asked to evaluate the social media profile displayed on the board and answer accordingly. We used authors [21] 7-point Likert scale which extended from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items measured were: I think she could be a friend of mine; It would be difficult to meet and talk with her; She just wouldn't fit into my circle of friends; We could never establish a personal friendship with each other; and I would like to have a friendly chat with her. An index score was created for social attraction ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.25$).

The third measure used was physical attraction. The participants were asked to evaluate the social media profile displayed on the board and answer accordingly. We used authors [21] 7-point Likert scale which extended from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items measured were: I think she is quite pretty; She is very sexy looking; I find her very attractive physically; I don't like the way she looks; and She is somewhat ugly. An index score was created for physical attraction ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.10$).

The fourth measure used was attitudes toward social networking. We assessed student's attitudes toward social networking through an adaptation of Generalized Attitude Measure [22] [23]. We used 3 items: good/bad; harmful/beneficial; and wise/foolish. An index score was created for attitudes toward social networking ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.53$).

The fifth and final measure used was appropriateness of TA social media use. Scholars [24] assessed student perception of appropriateness of teachers to use Facebook. However, we adapted the measure to focus on teaching assistants' appropriateness in using Facebook and Twitter. We used a 7-point Likert scale expanding from extremely appropriate to extremely inappropriate. The two items used were: Facebook and Twitter. An index score was created for appropriateness of TA to use Facebook ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.45$). An index score was created for appropriateness of TA to use Twitter ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.53$). The lower the number, the more appropriate that students thought it was for teaching assistants to use social media.

4. Results

Although our sample size was small, we had some close to significant outcomes. Overall, we found that a teaching assistant's social media use and profile impact how students form impressions on Facebook and Twitter. We found that students found it slightly more acceptable for teaching assistants to have Facebook over Twitter. Overall, the students found it more acceptable for teaching assistants to have social media. Future researchers need to expand the data collection and

diversify the teaching assistants' social media profiles. We found that the male participants reacted more positively to the social media profile than females did. Although we did not test sexuality, our study relies on heteronormative assumptions.

We conducted a univariate General Linear Model (GLM) to determine the students' perceptions of teacher credibility. We tested all the factors: teacher credibility, social attractiveness, physical attraction, social attraction, attitudes towards social networking, and appropriateness of teaching assistants' social media use. Our demographics included gender, age, and race. We had a total of 97 participants: 55.7% male, 63.3% female, and 1% other/non-identifying. Our age range of participants ranged from 18 - 25 years old. An index score was created for age ($M = 19.29$, $SD = 1.57$). Our participants racially identified as 7.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 50.5% white, 14.4% Black/African-American, 21.6% Hispanic/Latin@, and 6.2% Other. Our dependent factors were teacher credibility, social attraction, and physical attraction, and our fixed factors included social media platforms, information, gender, and race.

In our post-hoc Tukey analysis, we found significance with teacher credibility ($p = 0.05$). We found slight significance between the two Twitter profiles: full and partial self-disclosure. The differences between Facebook and Twitter were not significant except for the slight effect on physical attraction.

5. Discussion

The research we concluded can be used as a stepping stone to analyze more about how impressions are formed online and the implications that may come from the over-disclosure of information. The topic of impression formation made us think about how impressions are formed differently depending on the social media. Our findings can help expand the existing literature on social media usage among educators. The data neither supported nor rejected the hypothesis because the goal of the present research was to examine how information provided by and about teaching assistants on two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, impacts judgement and impression formation of the students visiting the sites. We found that the way students form impressions of teaching assistants does not differ entirely depending on social media. However, we discovered that students showed more inappropriate views of self-disclosure among teaching assistants on Twitter. The results generally support the hypothesis, however with qualifications.

Our research may also be used for future research in terms of analyzing the similarities and differences between the self-disclosure of teaching assistants and the self-disclosure of students. As stated, since teaching assistants are very close in age, there is more of a likelihood that the social media that teaching assistants use will be the same social media students use. This creates more opportunities for teaching assistants and students to interact online and share information about each other, which would normally not happen in a typical classroom setting.

Our research can also help future researchers analyze the positive and negative

utilities of self-disclosure based on sites like ratemyprofessor.com. Ratemyprofessor.com is a public website where individuals are able to share their impressions of teachers through ratings and comments for other students to see. Many students look at these ratings and comments in order to form an initial impression of a professor before meeting them or signing up for a course the professor teaches. By using our research, future researchers will be able to begin further investigation as to how these impressions are formed and under what circumstances.

Another way in which our research may help future researchers investigating self-disclosure is through dating apps such as Tinder or Bumble. With the rising popularity of social media dating sites, impressions are being formed among individuals in a unique way, which may help future researchers understand how impressions are formed based on the self-disclosure of individuals. By analyzing the ways in which students view teaching assistants, whether it be based on physical attractiveness or ethical credibility, researchers may use our study to begin discovering patterns in which individuals form impressions of each other through the use of social media.

As previously stated, the two primary questions were (RQ1): How is an impression formed on one social media (Facebook or Twitter) different than an impression formed on a second social media (Facebook or Twitter)? And (RQ2) How are impressions about teaching assistants formed based on their social media profile (Facebook or Twitter)?

Regarding the first question, the overall results indicate that the impressions of teaching assistants by students regarding information provided through one social media platform were not significant in comparison to the impressions of teaching assistants by students regarding information provided through the other social media platform. One of the limitations we found was the size of the participants. Due to time constraints, we only used 97 participants. Therefore, we saw a slight difference in some areas of the research. If we would have had more participants, we hypothesize that the data results may have been more evident.

Another limitation of our research was the number of tests we ran. Although we did choose two types of self-disclosure (enriched and partial) on both Facebook and Twitter, we chose only one stimulus for participants to analyze. Since we chose only one stimulus, a young female, we limited our research to one gender. In addition to choosing a young female, there are limitations of aesthetics within itself, such as race, hair color, and weight, that may impact the overall impression formed by students.

6. Conclusions

Initially, the purpose of this study was to analyze how impressions are formed online and the implications that may come from the over-disclosure of information. The topic of impression formation made us think about how impressions are formed differently depending on the social media. We conducted a Qualtrics

survey in which 97 participants, both male and female, viewed the profile of a female teaching assistant on Twitter and Facebook.

We wanted to begin research to understand the differences in forming impressions of teaching assistants by students depending on which social media the teaching assistants chose to disclose. We found that while there was little difference between the two social media platforms, the use of self-disclosure on Twitter seemed slightly more inappropriate when sharing personal information. We also wanted to begin research to understand the ways in which students form their impressions of teaching assistants by the quantity of disclosure the teaching assistants provide. While our findings did not remain very significant, we can assume that if we conducted the same study with more participants, we would be able to find more significance in our findings.

The goal of our research was to provide more information on existing studies on social media usage among teachers. The research we concluded can be used as a stepping stone to analyze more about how impressions are formed online and the implications that may come from the over-disclosure of information. The data neither supported nor rejected the hypothesis because the goal of the present research was to examine how information provided by and about teaching assistants on two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, impacts the judgement and impression formation of the students visiting the sites.

Future research may explore how physical attractiveness and gender may impact the formation of the impression of teaching assistants by students. As the relationship between teaching assistants and students becomes more intimate, the question of appropriateness becomes less clear. The degree to which impressions formulate or dissipate may depend on the physical or emotional attractiveness of the teaching assistant rather than the credibility they have or their skill level. In addition, expanding the research to include more platforms and balancing the perspectives on social media's impact could strengthen the study's applicability.

Conflicts of Interest

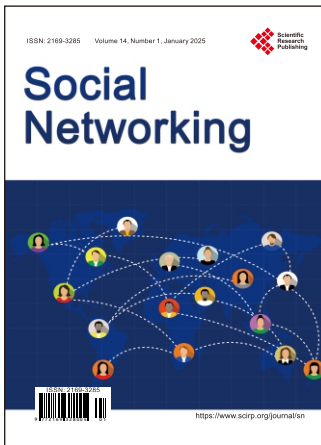
The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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