# Digital Faculty

Faculty social media use and
communications

Nicole Johnson and George Veletsianos

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# DIGITAL FACULTY:

# FACULTY SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND COMMUNICATIONS

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Most importantly, we thank our survey respondents.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Faculty Social Media Use and Communications report is part of a series of publications resulting from the 2020 Digital Faculty survey conducted by Bay View Analytics (formerly Babson Survey Research Group). The survey included questions investigating the social media habits of faculty members, particularly patterns of prevalence and personal/professional use.

The findings reflect the responses of 1,131 faculty from across the United States. The sample is representative of the overall range of faculty in the United States. Respondents completed the survey between November 5 and November 11, 2020.

## Key Findings

Most faculty use multiple social media platforms to varying degrees; however, the nature of their use varies by platform. Faculty use some of their social media platforms daily or every few days (e.g. Facebook and Instagram), and use others (particularly research-focused platforms like Academia.edu and ResearchGate) far less frequently. Findings include the following:

● Faculty are most likely to have social media accounts on Facebook (75%) and LinkedIn (65%).

● Faculty use social media professionally and personally; however, such use varies by platform (e.g. LinkedIn is primarily used for professional purposes whereas Facebook is primarily used for personal purposes).

● Frequency of social media use varies by platform (e.g., Facebook is used daily or every few days by 74% of faculty, whereas LinkedIn is used every few weeks, monthly, or rarely by 71% of faculty).

● Faculty social media use is mostly passive. On all platforms the majority of faculty reported posting content seldomly or never.

● Around 25% of faculty have a personal website (such as a blog or portfolio site). This faculty sub-group has several unique characteristics related to how they use social media, including an increased likelihood of Twitter use and being more likely to use Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter for a mix of professional and personal uses.

● Faculty have mixed feelings about social media, holding both positive and negative opinions about both tools and their impacts across personal and professional dimensions.

● In comparison to earlier studies, there has been very little change with regard to faculty use of social media to communicate with students.

# INTRODUCTION

The Digital Faculty research project builds upon previous studies about faculty use of technology, faculty social media use and communications, and faculty perceptions of the future of higher education. This report focuses on Faculty Social Media Use and Communications. In it, we provide a snapshot of the types of social media platforms used by faculty, the frequency and nature of social media platform use, and the technologies used by faculty to communicate with students.

The Faculty Social Media Use and Communications report draws upon a large body of research that has examined how and why faculty use social media. With the exception of a few studies (e.g., Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Tinti-Kane and Seaman, 2013) much of the research has focused on specific social media practices rather than broader trends. There is a need for large-scale research studies that give an up-to-date picture of broad patterns and trends associated with social media use among faculty. This study provides an up-to-date, foundational source of data about broader patterns of faculty social media use and communications to facilitate further research that explores, in more depth, the nuances of these patterns.

Investigating faculty communications, particularly their use of social media is important because faculty have been generally encouraged to have a social media presence (Carrigan, 2019; Lowenthal, Dunlap, & Stinson, 2016; Weller, 2011). However, recent studies indicate that faculty social media use is fraught with tensions. For example, Jordan and Weller (2018) reported that faculty associated more negative outcomes than positive with social media use and that they hold concerns about navigating professional and personal boundaries in online spaces. Both our own research, as well as the research of other research groups, indicates that faculty social media use tends to be complicated, uneven, and shifting over time (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2020; Greenhow et al., 2019; Veletsianos, 2016; Veletsianos et al., 2018; Veletsianos et al., 2019). Our past findings also reveal that faculty social media use is impacted by a variety of personal, professional, and environmental factors (e.g., technological advancements, political climate, concerns about harassment).

In this report, we present findings about most commonly used social media platforms by faculty, personal and professional uses of social media, and patterns of social media use. We report on the proportion of faculty with personal websites or blogs and examine variations between faculty sub-groups. We also share open-ended comments made by faculty members that express their perceptions about social media, and examine faculty communications with students and the role that social media plays in these interactions. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and make recommendations for future research.

# FACULTY SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN 2020

Nearly all faculty (92%) report having a social media account on at least one platform. With an ever-increasing number of social media platforms, the majority of faculty (82%) reported having two or more social media accounts. Very few faculty (10%) had only one social media account and 8% of faculty noted that they did not have any social media accounts at all.

While faculty have accounts on many different social media platforms, few dominate. About 75% of faculty reported having a Facebook account and 65% reported having a LinkedIn account. One-half of faculty reported having a YouTube account, which was closely followed by Instagram (45%). Roughly one-third of faculty reported having accounts on Twitter (37%) and Pinterest (31%). A minority of faculty had accounts on academic-specific social media platforms such as ResearchGate (27%) and Academia.edu (19%). Less that 15% of respondents had accounts on other social media platforms such as SnapChat, Reddit, TikTok, and Tumblr.

**Faculty Social Media Accounts**

| Platform | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Facebook | 75% |
| LinkedIn | 65% |
| YouTube | 50% |
| Instagram | 45% |
| Twitter | 37% |
| Pinterest | 31% |
| ResearchGate | 27% |
| Academia.edu | 19% |
| SnapChat | 14% |
| Reddit | 11% |
| TikTok | 9% |
| No social media accounts | 8% |
| Tumblr | 4% |
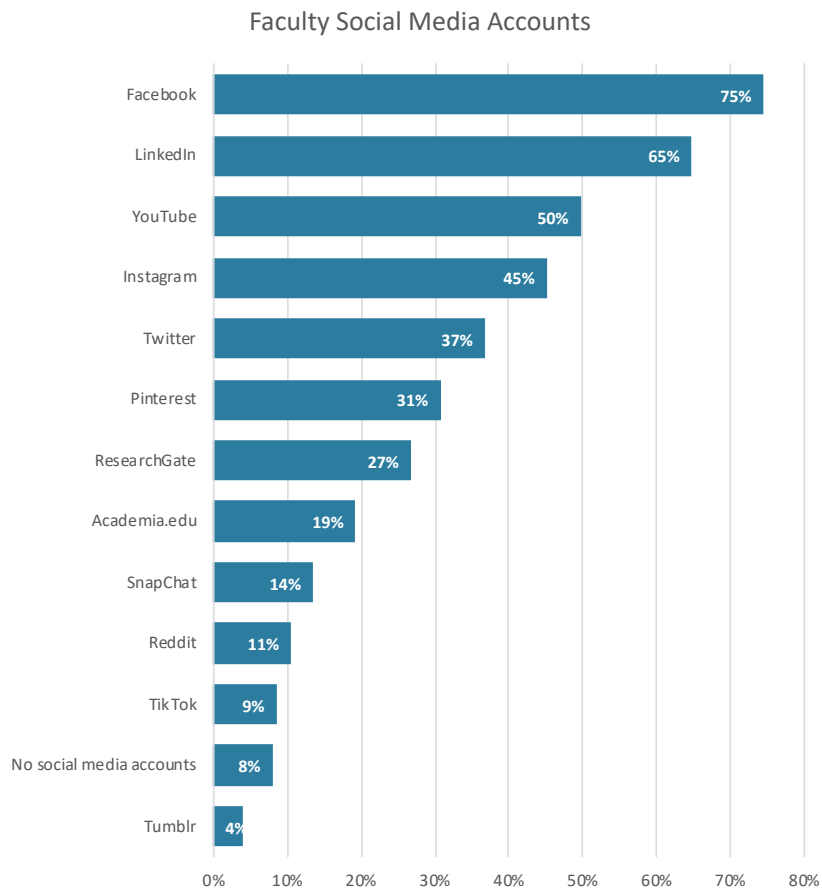
It is important to probe beyond the binary notions of use versus non-use. We note that the notion of 'use' goes beyond merely having an account. Use of social media implies logging into the account and consuming and/or posting content. To investigate whether there are patterns associated with time spent on certain platforms, we asked faculty how frequently they used the social media platforms on which they had accounts.

Faculty use of social media tends to be concentrated on a few platforms. Consistent with previous findings reported by Tinti-Kane and Seaman (2013), Facebook was the most frequently used platform among faculty. The vast majority of faculty (84%) reported using Facebook at least once per week, with 56% reporting daily use.

The majority of faculty also use several other platforms on a daily, or almost-daily basis:

- 75% of those with a YouTube account reported using it at least once per week, with 30% reporting daily use

- 74% of those with a Instagram account reported using it at least once per week, with 42% reporting daily use

- 64% of those with a Twitter account reported using it at least once per week, with 37% reporting daily use

- 61% of those with a Reddit account reported using it at least once per week, with 36% reporting daily use

- 53% of those with a SnapChat account reported using it at least once per week, with 23% reporting daily use

- 53% of those with a TikTok account reported using it at least once per week, with 22% reporting daily use

Although about two-thirds of faculty members reported having an account on LinkedIn, the platform was one of the ones that was least frequently used. Only 34% of faculty who have an account on LinkedIn used it once per week or more, and nearly half of faculty (49%) used LinkedIn once per month or rarely.

The least used social media platforms were academic-specific sites (Academia.edu and ResearchGate) with one-quarter of respondents using each of these platforms once per week or more.

### Frequency of Use

| Platform | Daily | Every few days | Weekly | Every few weeks | Monthly | Rarely |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Facebook | 56% | 18% | 10% | 5% | 3% | 8% |
| Instagram | 42% | 20% | 12% | 9% | 5% | 9% |
| Twitter | 37% | 13% | 14% | 9% | 6% | 17% |
| Reddit | 36% | 16% | 9% | 14% | 7% | 16% |
| YouTube | 30% | 26% | 19% | 12% | 6% | 6% |
| SnapChat | 23% | 17% | 13% | 9% | 5% | 25% |
| TikTok | 22% | 18% | 15% | 13% | 7% | 20% |
| Tumblr | 14% | 11% | 14% | 20% | 11% | 18% |
| LinkedIn | 7% | 10% | 17% | 17% | 11% | 32% |
| Pinterest | 7% | 14% | 16% | 22% | 14% | 24% |
| Academia.edu | 5% | 6% | 14% | 16% | 14% | 35% |
| ResearchGate | 2% | 7% | 16% | 22% | 18% | 31% |

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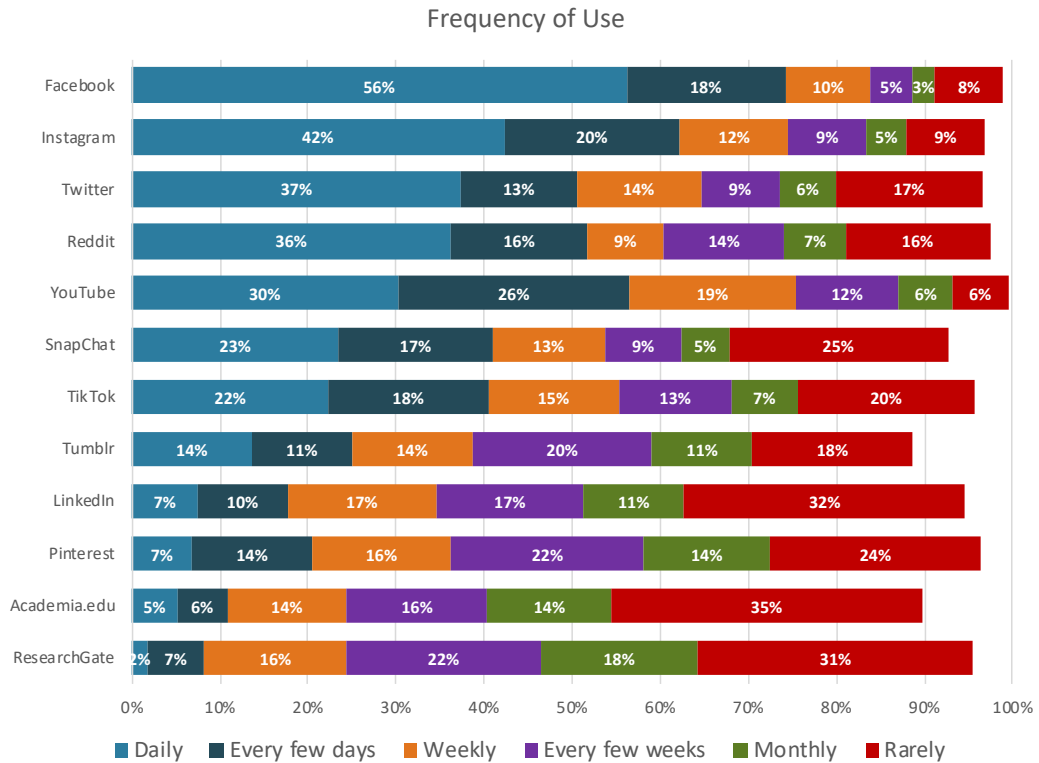
# PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The survey findings reveal a distinction between professional and personal use on certain platforms, suggesting that (a) social media platforms are used for a mix of purposes, and (b) different platforms are used for different purposes. Some platforms are used by faculty almost entirely for professional purposes (e.g., ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and LinkedIn), some are used almost entirely for personal purposes (e.g., SnapChat, TikTok, Tumblr, Reddit, Instagram, Pinterest), and others encompass a greater mix of personal and professional uses (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube).

For Facebook, which is the most common and frequently used platform among faculty, about two-thirds of faculty (34%) use Facebook strictly for personal use while the remaining third use Facebook for a mix of personal and professional purposes. Hardly any faculty use Facebook strictly for professional purposes.

## Professional or Personal Use

| Platform | Professional | Mix | Personal |
|---|---|---|---|
| ResearchGate | 88% | 8% | 4% |
| Academia.edu | 78% | 13% | 9% |
| LinkedIn | 67% | 20% | 13% |
| Other | 27% | 47% | 27% |
| YouTube | 18% | 60% | 22% |
| Twitter | 13% | 41% | 46% |
| Tumblr | 7% | 11% | 82% |
| Reddit | 3% | 17% | 79% |
| Instagram | 3% | 20% | 77% |
| TikTok | 3% | 7% | 89% |
| Pinterest | 2% | 22% | 76% |
| Facebook | 2% | 34% | 64% |
| SnapChat | %5% | | 94% |

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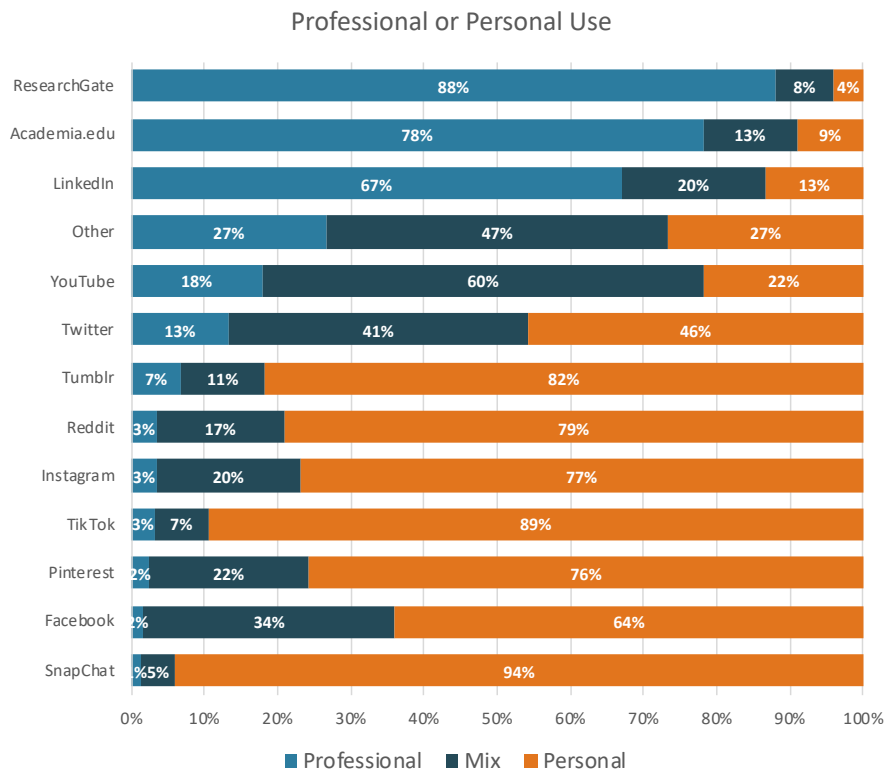
Based on scholarship that examines the use of social media in teaching and learning (e.g., Gruzd et al., 2018; Kumar & Nanda, 2020; Manca, 2020), we were interested in exploring the degree to which faculty actually use social media to communicate with students. We found that faculty were not likely to use social media for interacting with students and were more likely to use videoconferencing and a variety of low-tech options (such as text messages, phones, or listservs) to communicate with students.



**Interact with Students**

| Platform | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Videoconferencing | 63% |
| Text messages | 42% |
| Phone | 39% |
| Listservs | 15% |
| YouTube | 12% |
| Facebook | 11% |
| Other | 10% |
| LinkedIn | 7% |
| WhatsApp | 7% |
| Other | 5% |
| Twitter | 4% |
| Instagram | 4% |
| No social media accounts | 3% |
| ResearchGate | 2% |
| SnapChat | 1% |
| Pinterest | 1% |
| Academia.edu | 1% |
| TikTok | 0% |
| Reddit | 0% |
| Tumblr | 0% |
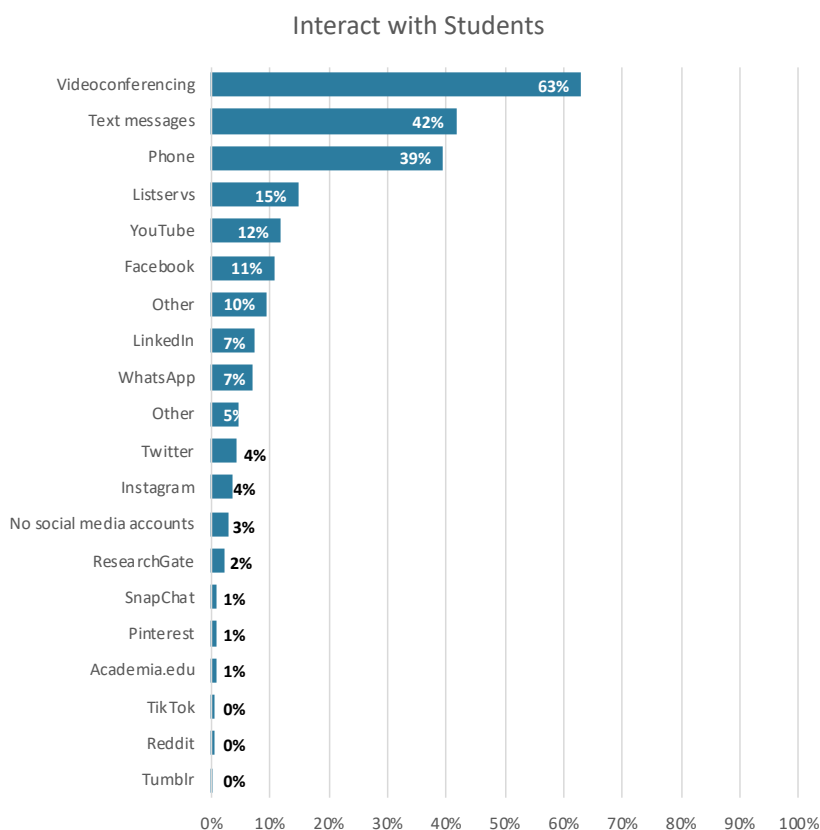
These findings seem persistent over time. In 2013, Tinti-Kane and Seaman found that 59% of the faculty surveyed did not use social media in their teaching practices. Our findings, seven years later, are similar: 61% of faculty reported that they did not use social media to communicate with students.

Of the faculty that used social media to communicate with students, they tended to use either one social media platform (26%) to communicate with students and very few (13%) used two or more platforms. YouTube (12%) and Facebook (11%) were the most commonly used social media platforms for communications with students.

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We also invited survey respondents to leave the open-ended comments with respect to their use of social media. Several faculty members provided their reasons for avoiding social media communications with students:

*"I am reluctant to use it [social media] with students: I try to maintain clear boundaries between friends and students, and social media tends to dissolve those."*

*"I think social media causes more harm (and distraction) than good. I focus on helping students get familiar with databases and other resources that will have more impact on their future employment."*

*"Useful in some instances but it can be a distraction for the students. Materials in too many location impedes the learning because not all students are comfortable with using many of the 'social media'"*

*"I do not use my personal social media accounts to interact with current students, but I do control our program's official Facebook and Instagram accounts to communicate with current, past and prospective students."*

*"I've deleted many students because I don't want them to know so much about my personal life.*

Of the faculty that used social media to communicate with students, 26% communicated with students on a single social media platform and 13% communicated with students on two or more platforms.

## Patterns of Use

Faculty use of social media is mostly passive. Regardless of platform, faculty tended to consume content posted by others, rather than posting content. When faculty did post content to social media (or engaged in a mix of posting and reading content), roughly one-half to one-third posted on the following platforms: Facebook (46%), SnapChat (41%), Instagram (40%), Twitter (33%), or YouTube (31%).

### Pattern of Use



| Platform | Often post | Mix of posting and reading | Seldom post - mostly read | Never post - read only | Don't use |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Facebook | 10% | 36% | 42% | 9% | 2% |
| Twitter | 9% | 24% | 36% | 26% | 4% |
| Tumblr | 9% | 18% | 16% | 50% | 7% |
| Instagram | 8% | 32% | 38% | 18% | 4% |
| SnapChat | 8% | 33% | 25% | 23% | 11% |
| YouTube | 7% | 24% | 31% | 38% | 1% |
| TikTok | 3% | 5% | 15% | 72% | 4% |
| ResearchGate | 3% | 16% | 29% | 44% | 8% |
| Academia.edu | 2% | 8% | 39% | 43% | 8% |
| LinkedIn | 2% | 12% | 39% | 37% | 10% |
| Pinterest | 1% | 16% | 24% | 55% | 3% |
| Reddit | % | 19% | 24% | 54% | 2% |

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## Faculty and Personal Websites

Ownership and control of one's web presence has been an important issue among scholars over the years. Many have expressed various concerns about corporate social media, with some scholars advocating for personal cyberinfrastructure (e.g., Campbell, 2009) and taking control over their own domains and online activity (e.g., Watters, 2015). Some institutions have responded positively to these calls and taken steps to support faculty in creating their own online spaces rather than relying on corporate social media platforms (e.g., https://middcreate.net/). With this in mind, we were interested to know more about the prevalence of personal websites and blogs among faculty, and the degree to which faculty rely on social media platforms vis-a-vis platforms that they own and/or control. We discovered that roughly one-quarter (24%) of survey respondents reported having a personal website or blog, revealing that the majority of faculty rely on digital platforms that they have little control over.

### Have a Personal Website
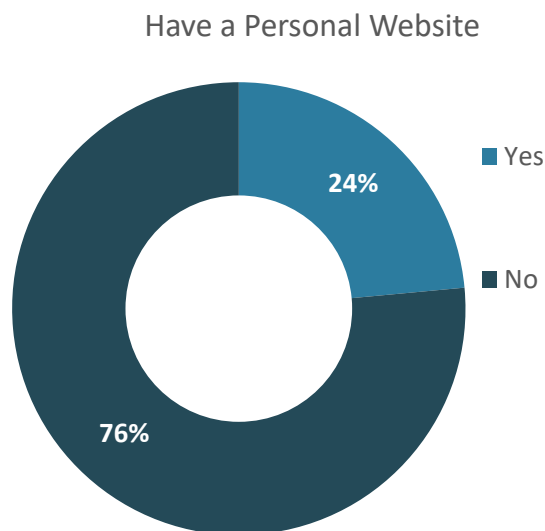
We also wondered whether this sub-group of respondents used social media differently from the rest of faculty who did not have a personal website or blog. We conducted further analyses to uncover differences. While the differences between faculty who have a website or blog and those without were not extensive, there were several notable distinctions between the two groups:

- Half of faculty (50%) with a personal website/blog used Twitter compared to only one-third of faculty (33%) without a website/blog.

- Faculty with a personal website or blog were more likely to use Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter for a mix of personal and professional uses, rather than strictly for personal use.

- Faculty with a personal website or blog were also more likely to use Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube in a more participatory way (e.g. posting some content versus only consuming content) when compared to faculty without a website or blog.

- Faculty with a personal website or blog were 10-15% more likely to have an account on LinkedIn by 11%, ResearchGate (12%), YouTube (12%), Academia.edu (13%), and Instagram (14%).

# FACULTY PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The survey included an open-ended question asking faculty to define social media in their own words. Many respondents opted to offer their opinion of social media instead of providing a definition. These opinions gave insight as to what faculty find beneficial and challenging about social media use.

## Positive Opinions of Social Media

Faculty whose open-ended responses included positive perceptions of social media mentioned the accessibility of social media and the affordances that they offer for exchanging ideas and communicating with friends, family, and colleagues.

*"A marketplace of ideas."*

*"Ability to interact with others easily across distances, great or small."*

*"I used to avoid it, now I find it creative, nourishing & helpful. I am glad I have so much I can offer & receive through it."*

*"A way to communicate with a lot of people what is going on in my life and a way to find out how a lot of people in my life are doing."*

*"The use of LinkedIn and ResearchGate for professional purposes is different, can lead to increase in productivity, motivation, expand horizons, get new perspectives, etc."*

*"Provides a platform for individuals to communicate socially and/or professionally."*

*"It is accessible to everyone and popular for people to use it."*

*"Social media is the technology that allows us to communicate with a broad spectrum of people. It allows us to do more than use the spoken or written word - we can show, demonstrate, observe, etc."*

*"To me, social media is electronic, facilitating communication to a larger group/audience than otherwise possible that allows for responses in a visual format that is accessible anywhere there is wifi."*

*"A place to find information, connect with people in my network, celebrate accomplishments."*

*"A more convenient way to connect with students, friends and family."*

*"In well-moderated groups, a useful exchange of ideas and tool for professional and personal development."*

## Negative Opinions of Social Media

Faculty whose open-ended responses included negative perceptions of social media mentioned feeling as though time spent on social media was time wasted and that social media perpetuated misformation and political discord.

*"A corporation that has managed to effectively prey on the need for individuals to maintain social networks in an increasingly alienated world."*

*"With the abuse of social media platforms by the current president, I am resistant to using it at all. Disinformation is a serious problem with social media."*

*"Any digital space in which sharing gossip is socially acceptable."*

*"Place to go to socialize and find gossip or information that is not fact checked."*

*"A waste of time."*

*"A necessary evil.  It has some good qualities, but mostly very negative."*

*"Distracting, overwhelming and OBSESSIVE misuse, which - I hope to see that - will be added to the "Substance Abuse " chapters in textbooks or the DSM later addition. It becomes an Obsessive/Compulsive time consuming thing for users. I had students who admitted to using "social media" as much 6-8 hrs a day.  It is aggressive, mind-befogging nonsense. I saw a boy/girlfriends duo sitting on the corridor floor TEXTING each other! I despise and hate it."*

*"An insidious technology for wasting vast amounts of time and numbing the intellect of its users."*

*"A huge time-sucker, and hard to follow all the differences; clearly important to and used by students, but not an "extra" I have time to spend learning at the moment."*

*"Anxiety-inducing waste of time."*

*"Unfortunately too political for my taste, I wish there was a teaching social media without all the hate speech."*

*"A once promising technology whose dark side has been a catastrophe for the USA."*

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# SUMMARY

These findings re-iterate the complex nature of social media use for faculty life, highlighting that adoption and use for professional purposes cannot be viewed in isolation of how these technologies are embedded in faculty members' broader life.

Professional-focused platforms (e.g., ResearchGate, Academia, and LinkedIn) tend to be used less often than mixed-use sites (such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, which faculty use for both professional and personal purposes). The nature of faculty social media use tends to be passive (e.g. scrolling through social media versus actively posting). Importantly, the majority of faculty do not use social media to communicate with students, which indicates that their professional use of social media is not closely linked to their teaching practices.

What remains unknown are the factors that influence the different ways that faculty use social media. While some differences in how different platforms are used are self-explanatory (e.g. LinkedIn is designed to be a professional platform so it is expected that faculty would use LinkedIn primarily for professional purposes), other differences are less clear. Further research is needed to explore the motivating factors for social media use on different platforms. There is also a need to better understand the factors influencing faculty preferences with regard to the active or passive nature of their social media use, the frequency of their social media use, and their frequently activated platforms.

There is also indication that different sub-groups of faculty may have unique patterns of social media use. Our findings related to social media use among faculty with personal websites or blogs, show that this sub-group of faculty used social media differently than faculty without a personal website or blog. Future studies that examine why certain faculty members participate online in different ways may be worthwhile. To what extent are narratives around controlling one's own web presence prevalent amongst faculty? To what degree are faculty interested in controlling their web presence, and to what degree do they understand the implications of doing so or not doing so?

Ultimately, the findings we report show that while faculty social media use varies from individual to individual certain patterns (e.g. Facebook being the most frequently used platform and an avoidance of social media for communications with students) have held steady over time.

# METHODOLOGY

The data for this report comes from survey results using a sample of faculty, designed to be representative of the overall range of all teaching faculty in U.S. higher education. A multi-stage selection process was used for creating the stratified samples.

The process began by obtaining data from a commercial source, Market Data Retrieval, which has over one and a half million faculty records and claims that its records represent 93% of all teaching faculty. All faculty who taught at least one course were selected for this first stage. Individuals were then randomly selected from the master list in proportion to the number contained in each Carnegie Classification, to produce a second-stage selection of teaching faculty. This list was then checked against opt-out lists, as well as for non-functioning email addresses.

Responses were collected from a total of 1,131 higher education faculty. Participants represented all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Participant institutional affiliation was matched to the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to retrieve institutional characteristic data allowing for analyses to be conducted by type of institution. The largest group of respondents (52%) were from four-year public institutions, while 29% were from four-year private institutions, and 19% from two-year institutions. The IPEDS data show that 39% of the respondents were from an institution with a "research" Carnegie classification.

The responding faculty are primarily from all size institutions. The largest group (31%) are from institutions with less than 5,000 total enrollments, with 27% at institutions having 20,000 or more students.

## Procedures

All data were checked for completeness, missing values, or erroneous codes. All responses entered as "other" were reviewed to determine if they should also be coded as one of the fixed responses. Respondents could skip any question, though very few respondents did; all surveys where less than three-quarters of the eligible questions were not completed were deleted from the analysis.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Nicole Johnson is the Research Director of the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association. Her research focuses on tracking the evolution of digital learning and the use of digital technologies over time. She has a special interest in how and why people activate learning opportunities (formal, non-formal, and informal) in digital environments to develop professional competencies and how these experiences impact capacity development.

Dr. George Veletsianos is Professor in the School of Education and Technology at Royal Roads University, in Victoria, B.C., Canada. He holds the Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning and Technology and the Commonwealth of Learning Chair in Flexible Education. His research examines people's experiences and practices surrounding online and flexible learning, networked participation, and the future of higher education. George has authored or co-authored more than 80 peer-reviewed papers and book chapters, and his latest book is Learning Online: The student experience (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020). You can read more about George at his website.

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