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Social media use, attitudes, and knowledge among social work students: Ethical implications for the social work profession



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ABSTRACT

The propagation of social media carries potentially rich ethical implications for communication norms, societal well-being, and individual mental health (i.e., human development and behavior). These concerns fall within the professional purview of social work. The purpose of this pilot survey research study is two-fold: (1) to describe and explore variables of interest, and their ethical implications, within the data pertaining to social work students' use and knowledge of, and attitudes toward, social media; and, (2) to make recommendations for follow-up research studies seeking to more deeply ascertain the intersection of social media, ethical social work practice, and professional development. To achieve this stated purpose, the authors administer a 55-item survey to social work students ($N = 57$) at a public university in the Southeastern United States with the permission of program directors and Human Subjects approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. Overall, findings reveal that social work students seemingly hold conflicting attitudes toward social media that are also at times contrary to their self-reported knowledge and use of social media. The authors discuss social media's ethical implications for the social work profession, taking the position that information about social media should be included in social work curricula.

1. Introduction

This article explores the various intersections of social media and the social work profession, from micro to macro practice, and the potential ethical implications for social work professional development within each of these identified spaces. For the purposes of this article, social media can be understood as “web-based communication tools that enable people to interact with each other by both sharing and consuming information” (Nations, 2018, So, what is social media?). Although the terms social media and social networking are often used interchangeably, social networking represents a subcategory of social media (Nations, 2018). Whereas media refers to the information being shared, networking refers to the audience and the relationships of the so-called user. Owing to their conceptual overlap, the terms social media and social networking are often used interchangeably (Nations, 2018). This article will use the term social media as a proxy for both social media and social networking.

The rapid propagation of social media has shaped our discursive

constructions of society, including modes of interpersonal and professional communication, and norms therein (Edelman, 2018; Morner & Olausson, 2017; Orben & Dunbar, 2017; Wagner, 2015). Owing to this unprecedented growth in digital communication, social work educators are presently taking up the concern for how to best facilitate awareness and training of social work students on the ethical implications of social media (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, & Fullmer, 2013; Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Judd & Johnson, 2012; Kimball & Kim, 2013; Mukherjee & Clark, 2012; Reamer, 2011; Trimberger, 2012; Voshel & Wesala, 2015). To wit, in their peer-review article entitled, *Social Media & Social Work Ethics: Determining Best Practices in an Ambiguous Reality*, Voshel and Wesala (2015) write:

Social media requires that social workers reframe how they think about privacy, confidentiality, professional boundaries It is therefore imperative that members of the social work profession engage in dialogue and necessary research that focuses on this topic in order to inform professional standards going forward. (pp. 67, 68).

In this vein, the Literature Review that follows focuses on the

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intersection of the social work profession, the ethical mandates of the profession, and the present proliferation of social media.

2. Literature Review: Social work and social media

The National Association of Social Workers, founded in 1955, is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world and author of the Code of Ethics. The Preamble of the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2017) explicates the stated mission of the social work profession:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.

Similarly, the [Council on Social Work Education](#), which is the accrediting body of undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) social work programs in the United States, explicates the various levels at which social workers function. According to the Council's list of practice competencies, social workers: engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations. This spectrum of practice is often conceptualized as falling along a micro to macro continuum, which may include: individual, couples, group, and family therapy; case management and resource allocation; policy practice, survey research, and program evaluation; and, advocacy/-community organizing. Social workers can be found across many settings: community; school systems; government agencies and policy institutes; and, penal, medical, and psychiatric institutions. Social media have arguably impacted this continuum of practice, though much focus in the literature has been paid to direct practice with individuals, families, and groups (i.e., the micro level of social work practice).

2.1. Professional ethics per the National Association of Social Workers

Competent and ethical practice in social work are mutually entailed. Therefore, the core competencies promulgated by the [Council on Social Work Education](#) and used as standards in social work education program accreditation, are informed by the ethics of the profession. One such authority, the National Association of Social Workers, publishes the Code of Ethics, which establishes six core values and corollary ethical principles intended to guide practitioners and standardize the profession. In particular, this study will focus on five of the social work core values: (1) Dignity and worth of the person; (2) social justice; (3) importance of human relationships; (4) integrity; and, (5) competence. An overview of each core value follows.

2.1.1. Dignity and worth of the person

According to the National Association of Social Workers, social workers are cognizant of their: "*Dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society* [emphasis added]. They seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interests and the broader society's interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession" ([National Association of Social Workers, 2017](#), core ethical principles). It is precisely this dual responsibility to the individual and to broader society that renders knowledge of social media especially relevant. Social media pervade human existence and for this reason, have implications for the social work profession from the micro to the macro levels of practice.

2.1.2. Social justice

According to the National Association of Social Workers, social justice is achieved when, "Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and

meaningful participation in decision making for all people" ([National Association of Social Workers, 2017](#), core ethical principles). Social justice speaks to social and political equality, and economic equity, which are democratic values. When social media are used as vehicles to effectively disarm democratic processes by undermining civic engagement through the spread of disinformation, voter suppression/influence campaigns, and data breaches, social media arguably undermines the social work professional mandate to advance meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

2.1.3. Importance of human relationships

The National Association of Social Workers' core value, Importance of Human Relationships, rests on the ethical principle, "Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change" ([National Association of Social Workers, 2017](#), core ethical principles). Social media impact human relationships and have resulted in the observation of a number of contemporary phenomena, including Sherry Turkle's phenomenon, *alone together* ([S Turkle, 2012](#)). As the name implies, *alone together* describes the new human behavior of congregating in groups, but interacting individually with electronic devices. Social work professionals should be aware of if and how such changes in behavior have broader implications for normative communication styles and human social development. Certainly, in the helping context, face-to-face communication is important in order to ascertain congruences/incongruences between verbal and nonverbal cues. As well, in the humanistic framework, there is therapeutic effect in being fully present with the person.

2.1.4. Integrity

According to the National Association of Social Workers:

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated ([National Association of Social Workers, 2017](#), core ethical principles).

[Kolmes, Nagel, and Anthony \(2011\)](#) propose an ethical framework for the use of social media by mental health professionals and address confidentiality, multiple relationships, testimonials, informed consent, privacy, and record keeping. They also provide guidelines to navigate the ethics of: personal versus professional behavior on the web for practitioners; friend and follow requests; use of search engines; interacting using email, SMS, @replies, and other on-site messaging systems; consumer review sites; location-based services; and, online treatment modalities ([Kolmes et al., 2011](#)). Ethics and trustworthy practice are essential to the profession and are rightfully incorporated in social work curriculum. Further, ethics-based curriculum should keep pace with current trends and developments in digital communication.

2.1.5. Competence

According to the National Association of Social Workers, "Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession" ([National Association of Social Workers, 2017](#), core ethical principles). Competent practice in social work entails the ability to assess the goodness of scholarly literature and public information including news articles in order to keep informed about best practices, and other political developments, such as changes to extant social policy. Therefore, it is important that social work students and practitioners are able to understand the process by which information is assessed for validity and reliability, so that they themselves can be critical consumers and purveyors of information. Otherwise, the social work profession risks compromising the former core values: Dignity and Worth of the Person, Importance of Human Relationships, Social Justice, and Integrity.

2.2. Social work professional ethics and social media

The impact of social media to the social work profession has been formally recognized by national and international professional organizations, organizations of social work regulatory bodies, and the national accrediting body. For example, in 2017 the National Association of Social Workers partnered with the Association of Social Work Boards, the [Council on Social Work Education](#), and the Clinical Social Work Association to form the Task Force for Technology Standards in Social Work Practice. The Task Force authored a set of technology standards for professional social workers to use as a guide in their practice. Areas addressed include: Provision of information to the public; designing and delivering services; and, social work education and supervision. Standard 2.10 entitled, Social Media Policy, reads:

Social media policies inform clients regarding their social worker's professional use of social networking sites, e-mail, text messaging, electronic search engines, smartphone applications, blogs, business review sites, and other forms of electronic communication. A carefully constructed social media policy that social workers share with clients can enhance protection of private information and maintain clear boundaries. The social media policy should be reviewed with clients during the initial interview in the social worker–client relationship and revisited and updated as needed. (Task Force for Technology Standards, 2017, p. 18).

Additionally, in August 2017, the National Association of Social Workers' Delegate Assembly approved significant revisions to the Code of Ethics that focused on ethical challenges pertaining to both social workers' and clients' increased use of technology ([Reamer, 2017](#)). The changes to the Code "reflect a broader shift in social work practice related to technology that has led to very recent and noteworthy changes in regulatory (licensing board) standards, practice standards, and ethical standards" ([Reamer, 2017](#)). Similarly, as part of their Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles published July 2018, the International Federation of Social Workers also addresses the ethical use of technology and social media:

Social workers must recognize that the use of digital technology and social media may pose threats to the practice of many ethical standards including but not limited to privacy and confidentiality, conflicts of interest, competence, and documentation and must obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to guard against unethical practice when using technology ([International Federation of Social Workers, 2018](#), Ethical Use of Technology and Social Media).

Finally, since 2013, the American Academy of Social Work & Welfare's Grand Challenges Leadership Group has authored the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work in an effort to address "society's greatest needs" ([American Academy of Social Work & Welfare, 2019](#), History). Currently, the three identified domains that encompass the 12 Grand Challenges include: (1) Individual and Family Wellbeing; (2) Stronger Social Fabric; and, (3) Just Society. The first domain, Individual and Family Wellbeing, includes the following challenges: Ensure healthy development for all youth; close the health gap; stop family violence; and, advance long and productive lives. The second domain, Stronger Social Fabric, includes the following challenges: Eradicate social isolation; end homelessness; create social responses to a changing environment; and, harness technology for social good. The final domain, Just Society, includes the following challenges: Promote smart decarceration; build financial capability for all; reduce extreme economic inequality; and, achieve equal opportunity and justice ([American Academy of Social Work & Welfare, 2019](#)).

2.3. Social work, social media, and the 12 Grand Challenges

Social media have impacted our discursive constructions of society, and modes of interpersonal communication and communication norms therein ([Edelman, 2018](#); [Morner & Olausson, 2017](#); [Orben & Dunbar, 2017](#); [Wagner, 2015](#)). In this way, so too will social media impact the

way in which social workers engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate clients and constituencies, including macro level practice. To provide a framework for identifying the various social work – social media intersections, the authors next invoke the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work by the American Academy of Social Work & Welfare.

2.3.1. Individual and family wellbeing & social media

With regard to the domain, Individual and Family Wellbeing, research supports the viability of social media as an avenue for cyber-aggression/cyberbullying, which impacts the wellbeing of youth and young adults, and is linked with depression and suicide ([Berryman, Ferguson, & Negy, 2018](#)). Social workers are situated across the continuum of care, and work with children and families to meet their needs in the home, in the community, and in the educational, carceral, and medical settings. Additionally, social media is a conduit for sexual harassment, coercion, assault, rape, and sex trafficking ([Armstrong & Mahone, 2017](#); [Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro, 2017](#); [Jasso-Medrano & Lopez-Rosales, 2018](#); [MacPherson, Brown, Herold, & Narayan, 2018](#)). Social work professionals may facilitate group sessions with, clinically engage one-on-one with, or provide resources for, survivors of sexual trauma. Finally, social media are being used to ideologically radicalize youth in the United States (e.g., White Nationalism) ([Tufekci, 2018](#); [Weill, 2018](#)), and some social workers may become involved with public education campaigns or related policy practice. Cyber-aggression/cyberbullying; depression; suicide; sexual assault and trafficking; and, ideological radicalization preclude individual and family wellbeing, and the challenges to Ensure Healthy Development for All Youth and Advance Long and Productive Lives. At the macro level, the health of children and families portends the health of the upcoming generations and the generations yet to be, which tie to social work's professional mandate to advance social justice and to practice competently.

2.3.2. Stronger Social Fabric & social media

With regard to the domain, Stronger Social Fabric, social media have been used to exacerbate lines of social and political division in the United States and across the globe, allowing social media corporations to accrue further profit while shirking legal liability and paying little back in the form of federal taxes ([Noujaim & Karim, 2019](#); [PBS Frontline, 2018](#)). Social polarization, division, and isolation arguably undermine the relationships between and among people that are ingredient to the core social work value, Importance of Human Relationships.

Within the domain, Stronger Social Fabric, is the challenge, Harness Technology for Social Good, which stipulates that:

Innovative applications of new digital technology present opportunities for social and human services to reach more people with greater impact on our most vexing social problems. These new technologies can be deployed to more strategically target social spending, speed up the development of effective programs, and bring a wider array of help to more individuals and communities. ([American Academy of Social Work & Welfare, 2019](#), The 12 Challenges).

At the micro level of practice, social work – social media intersections include: (1) Internet Addiction may come to be included as a clinical diagnosis; (2) social media apps are currently being used to facilitate mental health treatment and counseling services; and, (3) digital communication has tremendous bearing on key ethical issues related to the core value, Integrity, that include issues of privacy, consent, confidentiality, and boundary setting, among others ([Kolmes et al., 2011](#); [Peek, 2015](#); [Pies, 2009](#)).

The term social good, however, arguably entails not only micro level social work practice, but extends to the macro level of social work practice, as well. Examples of how social media have negative bearing on broader society (i.e., social work macro practice) include: (1) The spread of disinformation, and interference in democratic processes, including voter suppression and influence campaigns, vis-à-vis microtargeting practices; and, (2) as a result of democratic interference, changes to

funding and implementation of social policy and programming (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Hall, Tinati, & Jennings, 2018; Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, & Ortega, 2016). These two examples share in common that they are arguably antithetical to clients' and constituencies' exercise of socially responsible self-determination, a tenet of the core value, Dignity and Worth of the Person.

2.3.3. *Just Society & social media*

With regard to the domain, Just Society, social media corporations have amassed a vast amount of wealth and user data (Oyedele, 2018), and are able to act beyond their areas of professional competence in order to accrue further profit and power. This digital expansion, or overreach, owes to the advertisement-based business model used by social media corporations, microtargeting practices, and the current lack of regulation and data protection (Noujaim & Karim, 2019). To this end, in 2017, human data surpassed oil as the "world's most valuable resource" (Noujaim & Karim, 2019; Spurzem, 2017). The issue of data privacy is arguably a civil rights issue (George, 2018), and one of growing importance. Digital privacy and fair data practices should be of paramount concern to the social work profession because the nonconsensual selling of people's data (Hern, 2018, April 17; Hern, 2018, December 19) is arguably exploitive and antithetical to social work's ethical mandate to challenge social injustice.

Another example of how social media have the potential to exploit people and violate rights is law enforcement's use of racially-biased facial recognition programs (Harwell, 2019; Schechner, 2019; Snow, 2018), as well as their use of social media to assist in the apprehension of persons merely accused of committing a crime. Both risk exacerbating ingrained racial and economic disparities within the U.S. Criminal Justice System (Thomas, 2018), furthering the effects of mass incarceration. According to the challenge, Promote Smart Decarceration:

The United States has the world's largest proportion of people behind bars. Mass incarceration and failed rehabilitation have resulted in staggering economic and human costs. Our challenge is to develop a proactive, comprehensive, evidence-based 'smart decarceration' strategy that will dramatically reduce the number of people who are imprisoned and enable the nation to embrace a more effective and just approach to public safety. (American Academy of Social Work & Welfare, 2019, Promote smart decarceration).

Social workers not only practice at the micro level with individuals and families impacted by such institutions, but as well, at the macro level, social workers are positioned in related policy arenas in order to further the ethical mandate for social justice. Finally, the rollback of the principle, Net Neutrality, which ensures equal access to web-based content for all, violates the domain, Just Society, and social work's ethical mandate to advance social justice. Table 1 relates the 12 Grand Challenges to both social work practice and ethics in the context of social media.

2.4. *Rationale and purpose*

Because much of the scholarly literature in the social sciences, as well as the social work professional standards and ethics, have focused on the impact of social media to the micro level of practice (e.g., privacy, consent, boundaries, and confidentiality), the present study seeks to broaden this focus to include the macro perspective, and to draw ethical implications for the social work profession accordingly. The purpose of this pilot survey research study is two-fold: (1) To describe and explore variables of interest, and their ethical implications, within the data pertaining to social work students' use and knowledge of, and attitudes toward, social media; and, (2) to make recommendations for follow-up research studies seeking to more deeply ascertain the intersection of social media, ethical social work practice, and professional development. To this end, the following research question was posed: How do social work students who are currently enrolled in an accredited undergraduate and graduate social work program at a university in the Southeastern

Table 1

Using the 12 challenges to contextualize social work practice and ethics, and social media.

Domain	I. Individual and Family Wellbeing	II. Stronger Social Fabric	III. Just Society
Challenges	Ensure healthy development for all youth Advance long and productive lives	Eradicate social isolation Harness technology for social good	Promote smart decarceration
Relevance to Micro Social Work Practice	Cyberaggression/bullying Sexual assault, sex trafficking Ideological radicalization Depression and suicide	Internet Addiction as potential diagnostic classification Social media apps used for treatment/intervention	Individuals and families involved with/impacted by the U.S. Criminal Justice System Reformative policy practice
Relevance to Macro Social Work Practice/ Broader Society	Health and wellbeing of future generations	The harmful spread of disinformation that magnifies lines of social and political division	Disparately high rates of incarceration and disparate practices/treatment based on race (i.e., mass incarceration) Nonconsensual mining and use of private data to micro target users (i.e., civil rights violations) Social justice
Corresponding Core Value/s	Social justice Competence	Integrity Importance of human relationships Dignity and worth of the person	Social justice

United States self-report their use, attitudes, and knowledge of social media?

3. Methodology

A survey method was selected for use in this research project. The survey method was considered commensurate with a desired outcome in this research—namely, the ability to describe well the characteristics of a group of research respondents (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). The survey method also matched the intent to collect data about what were the opinions and speculations of the respondents rather than achieving the more arduous task of observing their actual behaviors (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Social work students, the targeted respondents in this research, as well, are familiar with the survey method—either through their experience of taking surveys or their study of such refinements of survey research as Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2014). Even though the Tailored Design Method has undergone numerous refinements through the decades and now includes consideration of the use of web-based and Internet research, it has maintained its conceptual foundation in a theoretical framework familiar to social work students, Social Exchange theory (Dillman, 2014).

3.1. *Ethical considerations*

The authors received Human Subjects approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to recruiting participants. Informed consent was achieved with each individual research participant. An IRB approved recruitment/consent script was provided to each potential research participant via the online Qualtrics survey method. Potential research participants were not asked to sign a consent form, but instead were given the option of reading the recruitment/consent script, choosing to continue on and completing the Qualtrics survey, and then

pressing the submit button. A guarantee of confidentiality, the gathering of no identifying data, and the reporting of data in only aggregate fashion were included as mechanisms to ameliorate any potential conflict due to dual roles of the researchers as researchers and also faculty in the social work programs. Additionally, all participants were informed via the recruitment/consent script of the potential for dual roles. Recruitment for research participation was separate from classroom structure and collegial activity. Potential participants were additionally informed in the recruitment/consent script that declining to complete the online survey would in no way influence any of their grades or standing in a social work class/in the social work program.

3.2. Survey instrument

When presented with the opportunity to teach Human Behavior and the Social Environment in Fall 2018, the lead author tailored the course to become, Human Behavior and the Social Media Environment. The lead author organized this course by initially culling the scholarly literature available through the university online library system, and then structuring the course to flow from macro to micro social work practice. To this end, the nine-week course covered the following content areas: (1) social media and society; (2) social media and democracy; (3) social media and capitalism; (4) social media and mental health; and, (5) social media and child/adolescent development. The overarching purpose and primary focus of the course was the exposure to, and acquisition of knowledge about, the development of human behavior within the social systems of individuals, families, groups, communities, institutions, and organizations in the modern, digital age. The lead author taught this course to undergraduate and graduate social work students alike. The survey in the present study is inspired by a shorter survey that was developed for both course sections so that the lead author could present to students the trends in their aggregated data on the first and last days of class.

3.3. Methods and materials

To better understand social media use, knowledge and attitudes among social work students, the authors administered a 55-item survey to undergraduate and graduate social workers attending a public university in the Southeastern United States. The authors administered an online Qualtrics surveys via program listservs with permission from program directors. Human Subjects approval was sought and approved from the university's Institutional Review Board.

3.4. Measures

The survey asked bachelors- and masters-level social work students to provide demographic information (i.e., age, gender, race, and level of social work education), and information related to social media use, attitudes toward social media, and knowledge of social media's impact upon society. Demographic information was used solely for the purpose of sample description. Of the 55 variables measured in this study, 14 were categorical with nominal/ordinal scaling, 17 were 4-point Likert scaled variables, 23 were 5-point Likert scaled variables, and 1 variable prompted respondents to select all choices that applied.

3.5. Missing data

Among the 77 observations in the initial dataset, 18 observations were removed due to either extremely low response across all variables (i.e., greater than 75% were missing). Two observations possessed a low percentage of missing data (i.e., less than 1%), with no particular pattern found for these missing cells. Due to this extremely low percent of missing data, item-mean substitution was performed for these two observations. Item-mean substitution replaces a missing cell with the mean value for the variable across all observations. This procedure is

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for demographic variables (N = 57).

	%	or	M (SD)	95% CI	Range (Median)
Age (years)	26.93		(10.74)	24.08, 29.78	18–67 (23)
Gender (%)					
Male	5.26			–	–
Female	91.23			–	–
Other	3.51			–	–
Race/ethnicity (%)					
Black/African American	14.04			–	–
Hispanic, Latino, or	3.51			–	–
Spanish Origin					
White/Caucasian American	70.18			–	–
Asian Indian	1.75			–	–
Chinese	5.26			–	–
Other	5.26			–	–
Social Work Program Level					
BSW 1st Year	1.75			–	–
BSW 2nd Year	10.53			–	–
BSW 3rd Year	12.28			–	–
BSW 4th Year	10.53			–	–
MSW - Advanced Standing	21.05			–	–
2-Year MSW - 1st Year	17.54			–	–
2-Year MSW - 2nd Year	26.32			–	–
Social Work Practice Interest					
Micro-level	68.42			–	–
Macro-level	31.58			–	–

considered appropriate for dealing with missing data when the percent of missing data is very low and distributed randomly (Hawthorne, Hawthorne, & Elliott, 2005; Roth, Switzer, & Switzer, 1999). The final dataset possessed 57 observations.

3.6. Sample description

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for demographic variables in the current study. In brief, the average age of social work students was approximately 27 years, $M = 26.93$, $SD = 10.74$, and 91% of respondents were female. Moreover, approximately 70% of respondents reported being White/Caucasian, 14% Black/African America, 5% Chinese, 4% of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin, 2% Asian Indian, and 5% reported Other. In addition, respondents' social work education level at the time of the survey was reported. Among respondents, approximately: 26% were 2-year MSW students in their second year; 21% were in the Advanced Standing, single year MSW track; 18% reported being in their first year of the 2-year MSW program; 12% were third-year BSW students; second-year as well as fourth-year BSW's each comprised 11% of total respondents; and finally, 2% reported being first-year BSW students. Among all social work students, 68% reported a focus on micro-level social work practice, while 32% reported a macro-level focus.

3.7. Statistical methods

Data preparation and analyses of sample characteristics was performed using SAS software, version 9.4 (SAS Institute, 2013). In addition, graphical plots were created using the statistical software R 3.4.4 (R Core Team, 2018).

4. Results

Examining key variables measuring aspects of social media use, Fig. 1 displays a barplot that provides the percentage of social work students who endorsed using social media currently, approximately 96%, and previously, but not currently, 4%. No students endorsed never using social media. In addition, Fig. 2 displays a barplot providing the percentage distribution of agreement with the survey statement, *I access the news through social media*. A large majority of students endorsed this

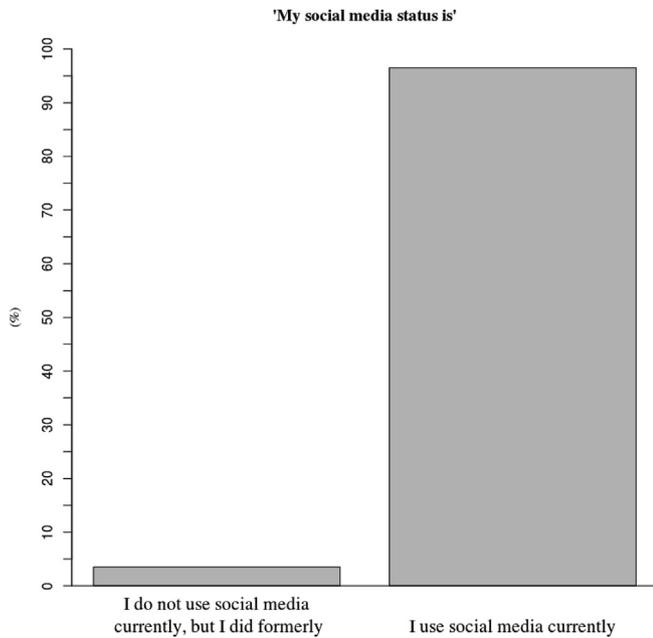


Fig. 1. Social work students' reported social media use (N = 57).

statement, suggesting that most social work students in the current study access news content through social media. Furthermore, Fig. 3 below displays the distribution of students' reported purposes for using social media. The response, *Reading the content that others post*, was endorsed by approximately 63% of students, while communicating with friends and posting/sharing content comprised another 23% of the responses. The response, *Accessing fact-based news*, was endorsed the least, approximately 4% of students.

In addition, Table 3 displays responses to key variables measuring social media attitudes held by social work students. The majority of students strongly agreed with four items, (1) a belief that social media would impact the social work profession, (2) worrying that others spend too much time using social media, (3) suspecting that private companies profit from his or her social media data, and (4) viewing disinformation as a problem on social media, deserving more attention. Furthermore, as Table 3 also indicates, across all items, no other response choices achieved a majority among social work students. However, when *Somewhat Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree* response choices are combined, over 30% of social work students disagree that: (1) the social work profession should use social media as a treatment modality, (2) they would like to delete their social media account, but feel as though they cannot, and (3) they would be willing to pay money for better protection of their social media data.

Moreover, Table 4 below displays responses to key variables measuring social media knowledge among social work students. Of note, the majority of students endorsed the *Definitely True* response for a single item, their belief that social media can be used to disrupt democratic processes. Likewise, for the *Probably True* response, the majority of students indicated their belief that the social media company Facebook is developing artificial intelligence for detecting suicidal ideation among its users. In contrast, when the responses of *Probably False* and *Definitely False* were combined, over 30% of social work students denied the truthfulness that net neutrality is the principle that Internet Service Providers treat all data on the Internet equally. What follow next are five key findings that emerged from the survey data across social media use, knowledge, and attitudes.

4.1. Students perceive the need to include social media in social work curricula

Social work students—presumably, future social work

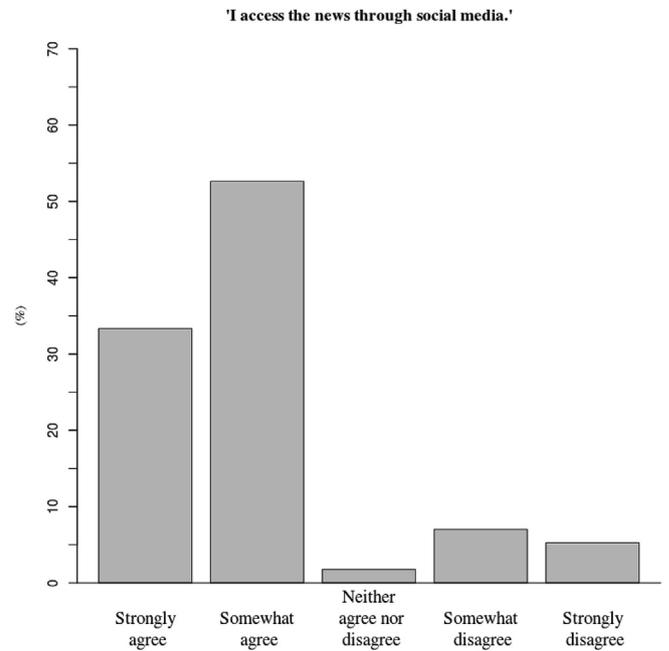


Fig. 2. Social work students' reported access to news using social media (N = 57).

professionals—indicated strongly that they view social media as an important topic that should be included in the social work curricula. This sentiment and other findings underscore the need for the inclusion of social media information in the explicit and implicit social work curricula. As future social workers, social work students overwhelmingly expressed the belief that social media will impact the profession. Students, who again represent the future of the profession, also expressed ambivalence with regard to whether social media should be considered for use as a treatment modality and as to whether Internet Addiction should be classified as a discrete diagnostic category in the sixth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This ambivalence, also reflected among clinical social work professionals, is worthy of further discussion in the classroom, and especially against the backdrop of the ethical values, principles, and standards of the social work profession.

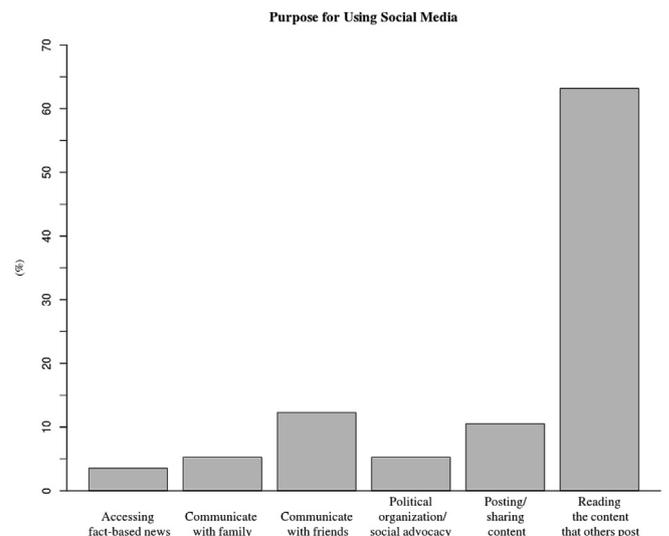


Fig. 3. Social work students' reported purpose for social media use (N = 57).

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of social media attitudes among social work students (N = 57).

Survey Items	Strong Agree (%)	Somewhat Agree (%)	Neither Agree or Disagree (%)	Somewhat Agree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
It is important to include information about social media in social work education curriculum.	42.11	42.11	12.28	3.51	0.00
I believe social media will impact the social work profession.	70.18	28.07	1.75	0.00	0.00
As a profession, social work should use social media as a treatment modality.	5.26	38.6	22.81	15.79	17.54
The next edition of the DSM should classify Internet Addiction as its own mental disorder.	24.56	24.56	31.58	10.53	8.77
The protection of peoples' private data online should be treated like a civil or human right.	45.61	47.37	5.26	0.00	1.75
I worry that others spend too much time on social media.	61.40	17.54	14.04	1.75	5.26
I worry that I spend too much time on social media.	28.07	40.35	14.04	8.77	8.77
I often think about deleting my social media account/s, but I feel unable to do so.	21.05	29.82	15.79	19.3	14.04
Law enforcement should be able to utilize social media in order to assist in the apprehension of persons accused of committing a criminal offense.	29.82	35.09	17.54	12.28	5.26
I believe the primary function of social media is to connect people.	19.30	43.86	14.04	17.54	5.26
Private companies profit off the use of my data.	54.39	29.82	14.04	1.75	0.00
Overall, social media has been a positive influence on society.	3.51	35.09	33.33	21.05	7.02
I view disinformation as a problem on social media that deserves our attention.	71.93	26.32	0.00	0.00	1.75
I have negative experiences on social media.	21.05	45.61	14.04	14.04	5.26
It is important to me that I protect my data.	40.35	38.6	15.79	3.51	1.75
I would be willing to pay money to access social media if it meant that my data would be better protected.	5.26	22.81	19.30	29.82	22.81

4.2. Students regard data privacy protection as a civil rights issue

In addition to presenting implications for direct practice, social media has impacted macro systems within the sociopolitical environment. Data breaches as well as social media corporations' exploitive practices with regard to users' private data have consequences for the rights of people,

Table 4
Descriptive statistics of social media knowledge among social work students (N = 57).

Survey Item	Definitely True (%)	Probably True (%)	Probably False (%)	Definitely False (%)
Social media can be used to disrupt democratic processes such as voting.	50.88	45.61	3.51	0.00
Social media has complicated the issue of consent.	47.37	40.35	8.77	3.51
Facebook is developing artificial intelligence aimed at detecting suicidal ideation in users.	7.02	66.67	26.32	0.00
In March 2018, a political data firm called Cambridge Analytica collected the personal information of 87 million Facebook users via an app that did not violate its agreement with Facebook.	42.11	47.37	8.77	1.75
Net neutrality is the principle that Internet service providers treat all data on the Internet equally.	29.82	31.58	22.81	15.79
'Pizzagate' refers to the conspiracy theory that Hillary Clinton/top Democratic officials were running an underground child sex ring out of a pizza restaurant in Washington D.C.	38.60	15.79	29.82	15.79

and relatedly, for democratic practices and processes. In this vein, student respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the protection of people's data should fall within the purview of a human and civil rights issue. Despite framing the protection of their own private data as a human and civil right, students expressed contradictory beliefs elsewhere in the survey, highlighting again the need for social media inclusion in curricula and further discussion around ethical implications.

4.3. Students are permissive of law Enforcement's use of social media

The authors noted several instances across the data in which seeming contradictions arose within and between students' reported social media use, knowledge, and attitudes. One seemingly contradictory response was social work students' permissiveness toward law enforcement's use of social media to apprehend persons merely suspected of committing a criminal offense, despite viewing the protection of private data as a human and civil rights issue. Approximately 65% of student respondents endorsed this practice. However, as Loyola Law School professor of criminal law, Priscilla Ocen argues, this represents professional overreach, with law enforcement legitimately tasked only with the investigation of crimes, but playing a prominent role in their adjudication (Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, law enforcement's use of social media to apprehend persons who are merely suspected of committing a crime violates due process and equal protection rights. These practices exacerbate underlying social and economic inequalities that bely the U.S. Criminal Justice System. The concern for social justice, and the recognition of human and civil rights falls, within the purview of the social work profession.

4.4. Students worry most about others' use of social media

There was strong consensus among student respondents that they worry others spend too much time on social media. There was also consensus among respondents that they worry they themselves spend too much time on social media. A point of observation was the inversion between *Somewhat Agree* and *Strongly Agree* responses across the two survey items: students mostly expressed strong agreement with regard to concern for others, while most students selected *Somewhat Agree* with regard to self. Perhaps this is related to their self-reported primary purpose for use—i.e., to read the content that others post. Most students also indicated that they often think about leaving social media, but feel unable to do so.

4.5. Students still believe social media primarily function to connect people

In another seemingly contradictory position, students expressed the belief that the primary purpose of social media is to connect people and the belief that companies profit off of users' private data. Further, students endorsed the belief that social media has been a positive influence on society while also endorsing the following statements: *Disinformation is a problem; social media is being used to disrupt democracy; I have negative experiences on social media; I worry about my use of social media; I worry about others' use of social media; and, I often think about leaving social media, but I feel unable to do so.* Students agreed that privacy is important and that private companies profit from user data, but they also indicated they would continue to use social media and a reluctance to pay for it. A fee-for-service model would be one way to avoid the pitfalls of an advertisement-based model, which essentially deals in user data.

5. Discussion: Ethical implications for the Social work profession

Given the survey findings, there is reason to believe that the future of the social work profession is ambiguous, at best. Noted internal inconsistencies within social work student responses seem to suggest a potential erosion of the profession's standardized ethical foundation, and may translate to practices that are indeed harmful to the clients and constituencies served. For example, permissiveness of law enforcement's use of social media (e.g., facial recognition programs and true crime podcasts) demonstrates a lack of understanding for how such practices violate constitutional rights (i.e., due process and equal protection) and serve to exacerbate inequalities within the U.S. Criminal Justice System (i.e., mass incarceration). More generally, it demonstrates a limited expressed ability to extrapolate implications for broader society from the micro level of social work practice (68.4% of student respondents identified as micro social work students), which ties to the core values, Dignity and Worth of the Person and Social Justice. Moreover, this finding in the context of the other finding that students overwhelmingly agree that their private data protection should be treated as a civil right, highlights a stilted perception of self and other. This stilted view is also exemplified in the response regarding the concern for self-use of social media *versus* the concern for others' use of social media. The skewed perception of self and other may have important implications for empathic response, and is certainly in the vein of paternalistic social work programs, practices, and related policies. Overt paternalism is arguably counter to the Dignity and Worth of the Person, among other social work values and ethical principles.

Additionally, the finding that the majority of social work students access news content via social media, but endorse this type of use the least, seemingly paints a picture of passive information absorption. Again, it is important that social work students and practitioners are able to understand the process by which information is assessed for validity and reliability, so that they themselves can be critical consumers and purveyors of information. Otherwise, the social work profession risks compromising the core values: Dignity and Worth of the Person, Importance of Human Relationships, Social Justice, and Integrity. Finally, these issues all raise the existential question as to what degree personal and professional use of social media renders the user complicit with the resultant harms to broader society that include, among others: The health of future generations; the spread of disinformation and disruption to democratic processes that include voter suppression and influence campaigns, and undermine self-determination; practices that exacerbate inequalities within the U.S. Criminal Justice System; and, the nonconsensual exploitation and monetization of people's private data (Hern, 2018, April 17; Hern, 2018, December 19), which may one day come to be classified as a civil rights violation or even a violation of the 13th Amendment. The authors maintain that social work professionals and educators alike should evaluate their own social media use, attitudes, and knowledge in order to more ethically shape the pedagogy of the upcoming generation of social work professionals.

5.1. Limitations

Limitations of the present study include that it used a convenience sample. Different findings might be discovered using a randomly selected sample, which is more representative of the larger population of social work students. Additionally, there are limitations associated with survey research that include self-response and social desirability biases. Most notable of the limitations, however, is that the survey instrument was not validated, as this was a pilot study. Therefore, there are no validity and reliability metrics to report for the present instrument.

5.2. Recommendations for future research

Recommendations are now made for future research studies seeking to better understand the intersection of social media, ethical social work practice, and professional development. In particular, social work professionals might consider focusing their research efforts on social media and issues of human development and behavior, including mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, dependence, self-esteem, suicidality), to better inform best practices in a quickly changing array of treatment modalities and interventions. A comparative study would be helpful to provide further context to findings and contrast findings across locations. Similarly, nationwide and international surveys could be administered with the goal of achieving generalizability and noting differences, for example, between the United States and the United Kingdom. In-person and focus group interview methods should be used in addition to the survey instrument so that seeming contradictions can be better understood from the emic perspective. Finally, there may be value in conducting a study comparing social work faculty social media use, attitudes, and knowledge with that of social work students, noting interesting congruences and incongruences, which may have important implications for social work education.

6. Conclusion

This pilot study sought to explore U.S. social work students' use of, and knowledge and attitudes about, social media. To do so, a 55-item Qualtrics survey was administered to undergraduate and graduate social work students attending a public university in the Southeastern United States in Fall 2018. There were a number of limitations to this study that include among them the need to validate the survey instrument itself. Overall, findings revealed that social work students hold seemingly conflicting attitudes toward social media that are at times also contrary to their self-reported knowledge and use of social media. Specific findings included that social work students: (1) supported inclusion of social media information in social work curricula; (2) regarded data privacy protection as a human and civil rights issue; (3) were permissive of law enforcement's use of social media, despite viewing their own privacy as a human and civil rights issue; (4) worried about their own use of social media, but worried more so about others' use of social media; and, (5) believed that social media's primary function is to connect people. The authors addressed implications for social work that included the potential destandardization of professional ethics; the demonstrated skewed sense of self and other, and further implications for empathy and paternalism; and, the growing need to ascertain valid information from reliable sources.

Auhor contribution statement

Lauren A. Ricciardelli: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing-Original Draft, Writing- Review & Editing, Visualization, Formal Analysis, Project Administration.

Larry Nackerud: Methodology, Writing- Review & Editing, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis.

Adam E. Quinn: Methodology, Writing-Original Draft, Visualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis.

Mary Sewell: Formal Analysis, Writing- Review & Editing.

Beatrice Casiano: Formal Analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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