

**ADOLESCENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE
CLASSROOM**

Honors Thesis

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Introduction:

As a future educator, I am concerned with the growing influence of social media in the lives of adolescents. With technology constantly changing, educators must reevaluate their techniques in order to teach effectively. For example, teachers might consider the relationship between students' attention spans and their social media use. Teachers might also consider the effects of the different styles of writing students read online. This project examines the correlation between high school students' writing habits and their social media usage. Data has been gathered from 19 high school juniors in an AP Language and Composition class. The methodology for this project uses grounded theory research and includes surveys and writing samples. Students completed a survey about their social media usage that asked what websites they use, how often they use these websites, and whether or not they try to use proper spelling and grammar when posting online. In addition to the survey, students also provided an "on demand" writing sample of approximately 180 words. In order to discern any correlation between social media usage and writing habits, data was coded to identify differences in sentence length, spelling/grammar issues, incorrect punctuation usage, usage of transitions, awkward phrasing, and usage of the first person. This study found that there was no correlation between students' social media habits and their writing styles. However, the data revealed students' attitudes towards using social media in the classroom, information that is essential for teachers to understand in order to utilize technology effectively.

Literature Review:

Researchers around the world have been fascinated by social media and its effects on adolescents. However, researchers are not just concerned with the correlation between students' writing and their social media usage; they are concerned with social media's effects on student

behavior, attitudes, self-esteem, and relationships (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 2013; Barker 2009; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr 2010; Jelenchick, Eickhoff, and Moreno 2013).

Researchers have not concluded a definitive answer about how students are affected psychologically by social media. Some say social media raises adolescents’ self-esteem, while other claim this new media is diminishing their self-esteem. For example, Gwenn O’Keeffe and Kathleen Clarke-Pearson claim that social media is affecting students in a negative fashion.

They claim adolescents are suffering from emotional distress such as "Facebook Depression" and cyber bullying (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 2011). On the other hand, some researchers claim that because adolescents receive "likes" and positive feedback from their peers on these websites, social media can be a positive tool. Michael Doly-Cohen and Azv Barack discovered that social media allows students to relieve stress. In their experiment, they found that instant messaging made some adolescents feel a sense of belonging and emotional relief (Doly-Cohen and Barack 2012). If social media affects students’ moods and self-esteem in some way, then this could impact the way students write. If a student does not feel adequate and feels badly about himself/herself, he/she may not write to the best of his/her ability. Social media could impact writing by impacting students’ self-esteem. Understanding how social media affects adolescents’ moods is also an important consideration. For instance, if adolescents are using these websites for "emotional relief," this might cause their writing styles to be more expressive. Adolescence is a time of great change, especially emotionally. If a teenager is very emotional because of conversations occurring on social media, this inner turmoil can affect his/her academically. In order to understand adolescent social media use, it is vital to discover how these websites impact adolescents' self-esteem.

While social media affects students psychologically, adolescents also speak differently on social media than they do in real life. For example, students writing online might use “text speak” and/or break grammar rules. They may not capitalize proper nouns or use punctuation (Baron 2009; Livingstone 2008; Cingel and Sundar 2012; Van Cleemput 2010). For instance, Naomi Baron discovered that adolescents' use of social media and other technologies are changing the way that students are talking. Baron mentions that the “text speak” students use when interacting on social media and when texting each other is resulting in a more relaxed attitude about grammatical structures in the classroom (Baron 2009). “Text speak” refers to the way some adolescents speak to each other while texting, such as substituting “u” for “you” and “cuz” for “because.” However, Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos’ research yielded a different result; they found that many students often correct and watch for spelling errors when instant messaging with their friends. These researchers claim that students say they are cautious of using proper spelling and grammar because they do not want their peers to think less of them. These adolescents want to appear intelligent and do not want their friends to lose trust in them, so they are cautious of spelling (Lewis and Fabos 2005). If these teenagers made a spelling error, many of them admitted to sending a new message with an asterisk next to the word they misspelled with the correct spelling (Lewis and Fabos 2005). Although Lewis and Fabos had very different results from Baron, Baron's article came out in 2009, four years after Lewis and Fabos’. Therefore, by 2009, perhaps social media sites became more popular and there is a possibility that students became more casual about how they presented themselves on these websites. It can become time-consuming to constantly check one's spelling, and with the growing popularity of social media, students’ attitudes may have shifted. Therefore, this raises the question of whether or not students’ attitudes have shifted yet again in the six years since

Baron's article. Adolescents' attitudes may continue to shift as social media develops. It is possible that students' casual attitudes towards writing online may turn into more relaxed attitudes towards writing in general.

Another consideration is how many students are actually using social media and how they are using it. The 2010 Pew data research shows that "73% of wired teenagers are now using social networking websites" (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr 2010, 1). In a more recent research study facilitated by Piper Jaffray, he discovered that nine out of ten teenagers use social media (Blaszczak-Boxe 2014). This survey discovered that Instagram is the most popular social media website among teenagers, followed by Twitter, and then Facebook (Blaszczak-Boxe 2014). While Instagram focuses on simply sharing pictures with a brief caption, there is no limit to how much one can write on Facebook. Conversely, Twitter only allows its users to share messages that are 140 characters or less. Teenagers are using the two websites that require them to write the least, Instagram and Twitter, the most often. Perhaps by using these websites, students are learning to write more concisely. On the other hand, using the websites might increase adolescents' desires to commit grammatical errors so that their thoughts can fit in a concise message. Stephanie Banchemo explains that SAT writing scores have hit new lows because there are more ESL students taking the test. However, a large number of native speakers are still doing poorly. Banchemo noticed these new scores, but did not have an explanation as to why native speakers are doing poorly (Banchemo 2011). If there is no explanation as to why native speakers are performing poorly, perhaps there are outside factors, like social media, that are encouraging students to develop poor writing skills. These statistics play a critical role in defining what students are using for social media and how often they are using these websites.

Because adolescent use of social media is on the rise, many teachers are using these websites in the classroom. Their practices are allowing quieter students to participate in class discussions and are changing the way students write. For instance, Trip Gabriel writes about a classroom in which the teacher has a Twitter feed projected on a screen during her in-class discussion. This Twitter feed allows students who would not normally speak up to participate in class discussions (Gabriel 2011). Another teacher asked her students to write their own Twitter biographies in order to practice concise writing (Gross and Schulten 2013). In the Pew results, researchers also found that students are shifting from longer forms of blogging to “microblogging” (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr 2010). By microblogging, researchers mean that adolescents are still sharing their opinions online, but instead of using longer, more traditional “blogs,” they are using quick forms of social media, such as Tweets and Facebook statuses. If teachers are regularly incorporating short Tweets into their lesson plans, how is this affecting students’ writing? Teachers are showing students how to write concisely using these tools, but does this affect students’ abilities to write longer, cohesive pieces?

Social media is also being used in the classroom to teach students how to give and receive relevant feedback. Students use these websites in order to practice being more professional. Janet Atkins wrote that one teacher was using social media when she taught her students Frankenstein. Students were asked to post and comment on each other's writing, which the teacher closely monitored (Atkins 2011). In another classroom, it was found that students learned how to respond professionally to each other's blogs, and students were encouraged by others' feedback because they knew people were actually reading their work (Lapp, Wolsey, and Shea 2012). If students are being exposed to and asked to use these websites academically, it is

important to find out how they are writing on these websites. If students are using these websites in an academic way, then they are practicing skills and could be improving their writing.

Before using social media in the classroom, teachers must consider how familiar students are with these websites. There is a preconceived notion that adolescents are more familiar with technology and enjoy using technology more than older people; adolescents are called “digital natives” (Prensky 2010). The assumption is that adolescents are constantly submerged in technology, and have a better understanding of digital technology than people of other ages. However, researchers have found that this term is not necessarily accurate (Selwyn 2009; Bennett, Maton, and Kervin 2008; McHale 2005; Brown and Czerniewicz 2010). A variety of factors contribute to someone’s knowledge of technology, including socioeconomic status. For instance, if an adolescent does not have the means to purchase and practice using new technology, he/she might not be comfortable using it in the classroom. Also, some teenagers may simply shy away from new technology. Therefore, it is unfair to simply assume an adolescent has digital knowledge, which may play a role in the classroom. If teachers decide to include social media in the classroom, they cannot have any assumptions about students’ knowledge. Assuming adolescents understand social media can lead to an uncomfortable class session and a drop in adolescent self-esteem. If teachers are asking students to participate in websites they are uncomfortable with, students will not be as inclined to learn. If teachers are so inclined to use digital media in the classroom, it is important that they explain how to use certain websites and allow students to practice.

Some research has also been done specifically on how social media affects students’ writing, which is the focus of this research project. Researchers claim that social media both

hinders and helps to improve students' writing (Lytle 2011; Stern 2013; Assadullah 2014). Terry Wood, a high school teacher, claims students "do not capitalize words or use punctuation anymore. Even in E-mails to teachers or [on] writing assignments, any word longer than one syllable is now abbreviated to one" (Lytle 2011, 1). If social media is affecting students' writing significantly, it is worth conducting more studies to understand what changes are occurring. If one teacher is seeing this trend occur so rapidly, it is vital to examine what other trends are occurring.

On the other end of the spectrum is the idea that social media is helping students improve their writing skills. Stern claims that according to one study, "40 percent say digital technology makes students more likely to use poor spelling and grammar, 38 percent say it is 'less likely' to cause those mistakes" (Stern 2013, 2). Conversely, Stern also argues, "Forty-six percent of teachers said that digital tools have made students write too fast, causing mistakes and carelessness" (Stern 2013, 2). However, some teachers claim social media gives students a greater ownership of their writing, which motivates them to write better.

There is a discrepancy about whether or not social media is beneficial or detrimental for students' writing. It is necessary to take a step back from trying to determine whether social media is a positive or negative influence, and to try and figure out how these websites are affecting their writing in the first place. The main purpose of this study is to determine whether social media affects adolescent writing, a precursor to determining the effectiveness of social media in the classroom

Methodology:

Social media has been changing the landscape of communication and education drastically. High school students stereotypically spend more time than anyone on social media.

In fact, according to Pew, 81% of online teens use some kind of social media (Pew 2012).

Because I am going to be a high school English teacher, I was curious to uncover whether or not there is a correlation between high school students' writing and their social media usage. This led me to my research question: What kinds of correlations are there between high school students' writing and their social media usage?

In order to learn about adolescents' social media usage, I distributed a survey. With a survey, specific questions can be asked about students' social media usage; the questions could be tailored to fit the research question. The survey was created for students to complete in one class period and allowed them to share information about what social media websites they use, how much time they spend on these websites, and how they feel about writing in general. Questions were also included to discover students' attitudes towards writing, their writing habits, and their thoughts about using social media in the classroom. Students were also asked to reflect on their own use of "slang" on the internet. In addition to the survey, students provided an "on demand" writing sample so their writing could be compared with their social media habits. Students wrote without warning so that their initial writing tendencies could be examined. A polished piece of writing, such as an essay that had been reviewed by the student, his/her teacher, and/or his/her peers, would not be an accurate depiction of an adolescent's initial writing habits. By using this "on demand" writing piece, students did not have time to edit or collaborate with others in order to improve their writing. For example, a student might be inclined to write "u" instead of "you" when writing. However, if students were given time to fix their writing, the student would most likely edit this grammatical error.

A critical part of the survey was having students include their "number" in the top right hand corner of their papers. Each student was assigned a number in order to keep the results

confidential. However, it was necessary that students complete the survey with some sort of identification in order to study the correlation between their writing and their survey answers. Therefore, students were given a number that they provided on both their survey and writing sample. Below is a copy of the distributed survey.

Social Media Survey

Student Number _____

1. Please circle any of the following social media websites that you use:

- | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|
| Facebook | Blogster |
| Twitter | Foursquare |
| Tumblr | Instagram |
| Other | I don't use any social media accounts |

2. On average, how much time would you estimate that you spend on social media sites **daily**? (Circle your answer)

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-2 hours
- 2-3 hours
- 3-4 hours
- 4 or more hours

3. Do you use "slang" when using social media? (For instance, substituting "k" for "okay" or "cuz" for "because," etc.)

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

4. Do you try to use proper spelling and grammar when posting on social media? (For instance, using periods at the end of sentences, etc.)

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

5. When you are posting on social media, do you think of it as a form of writing?

Yes
No
I don't know.

6. Do you enjoy writing for your English class?

Yes
No

7. Do you ever write in your free time? (For example, composing poems or stories just for fun.)

Yes
No

8. Have any teachers ever used social media during a class session?

Yes
No

9. Have any teachers ever assigned you homework/projects that required you to use social media?

Yes
No

10. Do you think social media would be beneficial to use in the classroom?

Yes
No

The next step in the research process was finding a school to distribute the survey. The survey was eventually given to an AP English class at Pentucket Regional High School. Pentucket was selected because the researcher is a former student of this school and is familiar with the student population. In response to requesting to survey juniors, the English department suggested that the survey should be distributed to the AP Language and Composition class. First semester juniors were selected because they were in the middle of their high school careers. Surveying new freshmen and sophomores would not be beneficial because they are still

developing vital writing skills. For this project, writing samples needed to be a representation of the average high school student, not seniors, who are closer to college-level writing, or freshmen, who are closer to middle school-level writing.

Before taking the survey, students were given a "parental consent" form. The research question and process were also explained to students. One week after the parental consent forms were issued, the survey was handed out. The students' teacher already had the students write their "on demand" samples the day before and assigned each of them a number to put on their sample and survey. The writing prompt the teacher assigned asked students to discuss whether or not the Habits of Learning (HOL) project was a beneficial project to end students' junior year. The HOLs are a set of five learning goals that the Pentucket Regional School District enforces in all of their classrooms. The HOLs are thinking, collaboration, independence, communication, and creative exploration. At the end of students' junior year, they are required to create a presentation describing how they exemplified the five HOLs throughout the school year. Therefore, the teacher asked students to write at least one page about whether or not they think this project will be beneficial.

Students' writing was examined for spelling errors, grammatical inaccuracies, use of the first person, repetition, transitions, and punctuation errors. Students' survey answers and a word count of their responses were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet. Based on the data, graphs were created in order to uncover any correlations between students' social media usage and their writing styles.

Results:

Upon finishing research, the results suggested that there is no correlation between time students surveyed spent on social media and their writing habits. The following charts were created in order to examine any correlations:

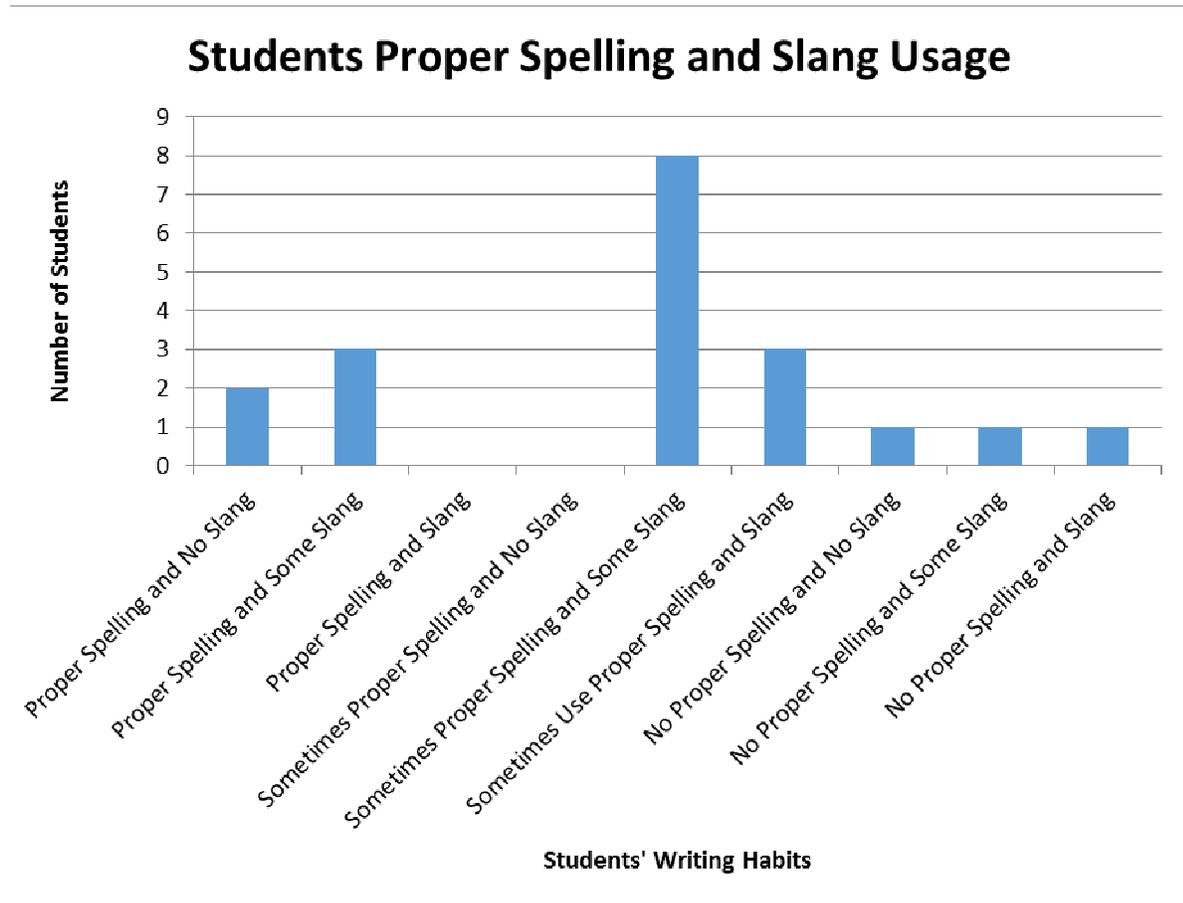


Chart A

This chart displays the different categories of students based on questions 3 and 4 of the survey. Questions 3 and 4 asked students whether or not they use slang on social media and whether or not they try to use proper spelling and grammar on social media. For the above chart, students were placed in one of 9 categories. These categories correspond with how students answered these two questions. The purpose of the chart is to examine how students are posting online.

Almost half of the students (8) admitted to creating posts on social media with some proper spelling and some slang.

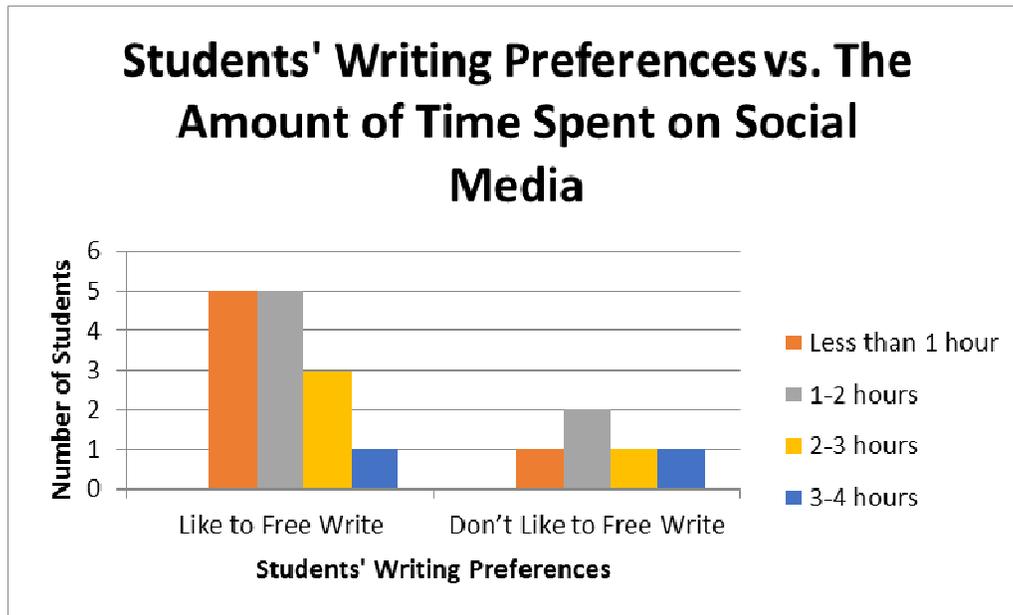


Chart B

This graph displays students' attitudes towards writing in their free time and how often they post on social media. The categories of time are color-coded. The bars on the left hand side represent those students who like to write in their free time, and the bars on the right side display those students who do not like to write in their free time. Students who liked writing in their free time spent less time on social media.

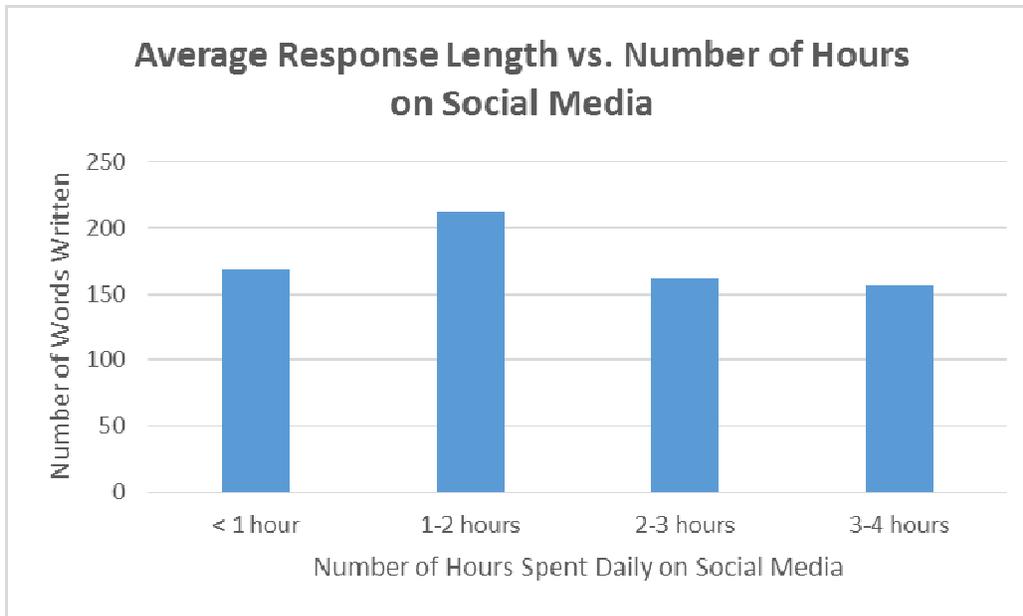


Chart C

This graph represents the number of hours students spend on social media and compares it to the number of words students wrote in their writing samples. This is part of the foundation of the project: to examine whether or not social media affects students' writing. As the graph displays, students spending less than one hour on social media everyday wrote about 170 words. Students spending between 1 and 2 hours on social media wrote about 213 words, students spending between 2 and 3 hours on social media wrote about 161 words, and students spending between 3 and 4 hours on social media wrote about 157 words. There is not a huge difference between the different categories of data, suggesting that with this group of students, the amount of time spent on social media did not significantly affect their writing styles.

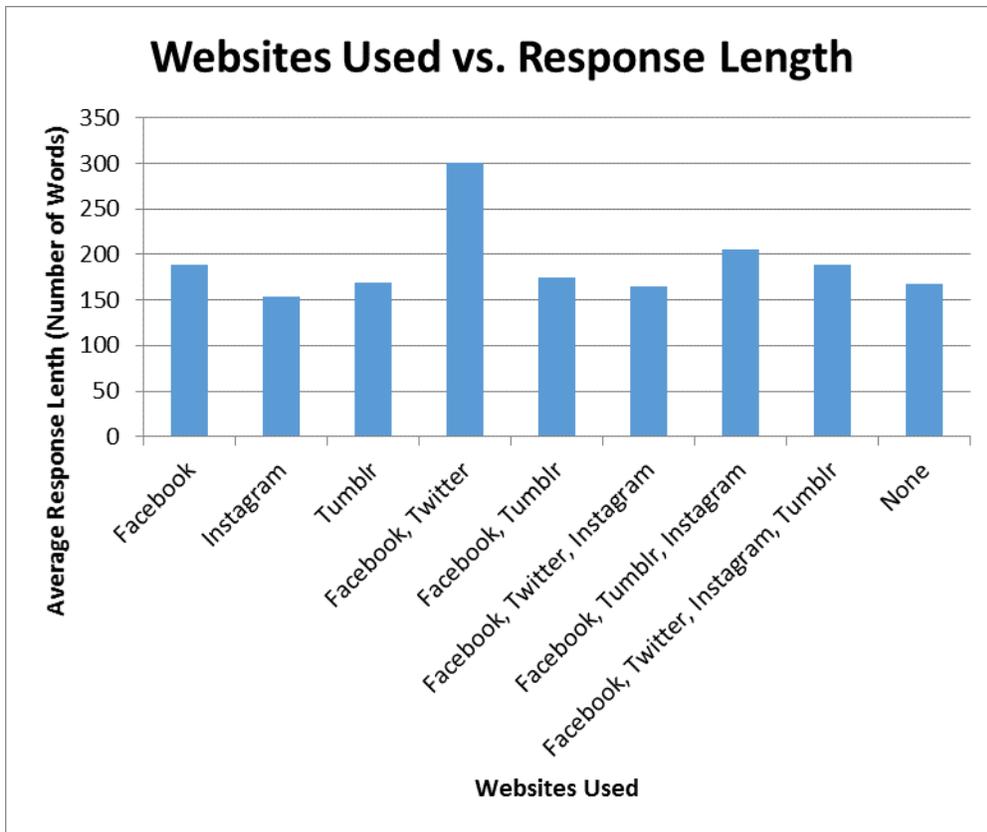


Chart D

This bar graph displays the websites students used and their response length. Similar to the previous bar graph, the numbers were very close together. The only skewed result occurs with students who use Facebook and Twitter only. This result was skewed because while most students wrote between 150 and 200 words, one student in this category wrote over 300 words. Again, these results suggest that for this group of students, there is not a strong correlation between students' social media usage and their writing habits.

In the charts presented previously, there was no steady increase or decrease in the number of words written and time spent on social media. In certain graphs, such as Chart C, there appears to be a significant jump in the data. In Chart C, it looks like students who spend between 1 and 2 hours on social media wrote much more than other students. Upon further

review, these students only wrote about 50 more words. Also, because a small sample size was used, one student could significantly impact the data. For example, on average, the students surveyed wrote about 182 words. However, one student went above and beyond and wrote 301 words. The next highest response was only 211 words. Because the sample size was so small, whatever category the student who wrote 301 words fell in significantly impacted that particular group. This is evident in Chart D, as the student who wrote 301 words fell in the “Facebook and Twitter” category. Because this student wrote much more than his/her peers, it appears as though all students who use Facebook and Twitter write significantly more than other students. In reality, only one student wrote significantly more, which is not an accurate representation of the other students in that category.

The results were also impacted by the demographic of the students surveyed. The students surveyed were AP juniors. Therefore, these students are regarded as some of the best and brightest students in the school. These students are more aware of their writing habits; they are less likely to write with grammatical errors and use “text speak” in their compositions. Because students who are more conscientious of the conventions of Standard English were surveyed, the results were affected.

Another piece that has impacted the survey results was the subject of the writing sample. The students’ teacher assigned and collected the writing sample and asked students to answer the question: “What changes do you suggest to the HOL presentation? Why?” Juniors present a project discussing the HOLs to a panel in lieu of taking final exams. Because the question for the writing sample pertained directly to students and asked for their opinion on an important subject to them, they wrote with a lot of passion. Students were interested in this issue and wanted their ideas to be heard, especially because many students expressed their desire to change

this final presentation. After examining their writing, many students wrote more informally than they would when handing in an essay. A student is going to write much differently, even “on demand,” when they are writing about something occurring in their lives rather than writing about a piece of literature. Students’ attitudes towards a subject can impact their writing.

Discussion:

Although the study did not identify a correlation between social media and students’ writing habits, it provided revealing information about students and social media. In the survey, students were asked if social media would be beneficial to use in the classroom. It was found that only 58% of the students think social media would be beneficial to use in the classroom. According to outside research, some educators also believe that social media would be valuable for educational practices. Allen Teng, a middle school Language Arts teacher, was asked to incorporate technology into his classroom. Teng took it upon himself to use Mahara, a Facebook-like program, so his students could interact with each other online, providing feedback to one another. Teng found that social media websites can be used to help students brainstorm, respond to one another, and to be exposed to feedback on their own writing (Teng 2012). Diane Lapp, Thomas Wolsey, and Andrea Shea explore three students’ journeys with blogging in a second grade classroom. These researchers found that, “blogs are a perfect instructional tool for developing audience awareness” and “blogs have the potential to assist young authors to connect more quickly and efficiently with the reader” (Lapp, Wolsey, and Shea 2012, 15).

Although Lapp, Wolsey, Shea, and Teng’s findings pertain to students younger than the high school age, their findings can easily translate into the high school setting. Time and again, high school students have a difficult time writing because they do not feel connected to their compositions. They do not see the point in perfecting their writing because their teacher is the

only one who is going to read it. Students write a certain way to appease their teacher. However, if students could expand their audience to a wider group, their writing could change. Instead of writing simply to appease their teacher, they could write with feeling and purpose, as displayed by Teng, Lapp, Wolsey, and Shea's research. Allowing students to use social media as a form of writing can be beneficial, as they will have a sense of audience, giving them a purpose in writing.

Beyond giving students a sense of purpose, social media can also teach students how to write concisely. Wordiness is a problem that plagues adolescent writing across the country. Students try to use more words to explain simpler sentences, as I have seen in my student teaching career. Sometimes students write unnecessary words in order to meet a required page length; other times, students think using more words makes them sound "fancier." When composing a tweet, Twitter users must limit their thoughts to just 140 characters. While this character limitation could lead to students breaking cardinal grammar rules in order to share their thoughts, under the right guidance, these tweets can actually train students to write more concisely. Sarah Gross, a "connected educator," created a lesson plan that teaches students how to write concisely using Twitter. In her classroom, Gross asks students to create their own Twitter biographies. Gross also has an idea for "boiling down essays," which requires students to look at their last written assignment, and decide what main idea or theme they would Tweet if they had to (Gross and Schulten 2013). These writing practices do not teach students poor grammar practices, but force them to practice concise writing skills. If teachers create a classroom Twitter, or have students create Twitter pages specifically for school use, teachers can monitor students' spelling and grammar, and allow students to practice concise writing. If students have Twitter accounts and enjoy expressing their ideas on these accounts, perhaps they

would like to bring these ideas into the classroom. Teachers need to find any hook to connect students to classroom activities. Therefore, if teachers monitor students' Twitter pages, Twitter can actually be a useful tool to teach students about writing for a specific audience, picking out the main point of a certain passage, and writing concisely.

Although only 58% of students surveyed claim they would like to use social media in the classroom, it would certainly be a beneficial venture for students who suffer academically. The students surveyed are AP students; they have more practice with advanced, professional writing. However, students in College Prep classes have less experience with this advanced writing because their skills are not as developed. Therefore, having a classroom Twitter or Facebook page could allow these students to become interested in writing; it gives them a platform they can connect to that is not intimidating.

Although social media allows students to reflect on their own writing and comment on their peers' work, these websites can also subtract from the personal relationships established in the classroom. Social media allows students to be distant. Even though they are interacting with each other online, it is easier for students to type a negative comment than say it to another student in person. Therefore, although social media might be a beneficial tool for students to interact on, it cannot replace personal contact. For example, during my student teaching, I asked my 11th grade students to participate in an online discussion on a website called, "Today's Meet." On this website, students are put into separate chat rooms, and can respond to each other using only 140 characters. The students can only see the responses, which come through a Twitter-like feed, of the other people in their "room." After completing the assignment, I gave my students a reflection, which asked them what they liked about the online discussion and what

they disliked. Out of the sixty students I taught, only 22 of them actually liked the online discussion. Many of them decided they would rather discuss in person.

While my students were writing their online responses, I also noticed that they were not using proper spelling and grammar. I constantly reminded them that they were being graded, but they had a difficult time bridging the gap between academic writing and writing on social media. The online discussion was not timed and I encouraged students to slow down, check their spelling and grammar, and use specific examples from the book. Students' codes switched, and they could not recognize social media as a platform to use academic writing. Students wrote impulsively, disregarding the conventions of Standard English.

Both research and observation suggest that there are barriers to using social media in the classroom. For example, many students are not interested in combining their casual social interactions with academic work. Also, many students have difficulty using academic language on social media websites. In order to combat these obstacles, teachers should practice using social media with students. Teachers cannot merely expect students to jump into their social media websites and be ready and eager to communicate. Social media can also be used in different ways in education. Teachers can make social media websites for students to look at when they are home. Once a student goes home, it can be beneficial to have a lifeline to reach for when his/her classmates are not around. For instance, with the students I have been teaching, many of them admitted to texting and Tweeting about homework. If a student is absent from the class, often times, they come in with the homework they missed from the previous day when they are back in class. Students have disclosed that they text and Tweet their friends in order to learn about what homework they missed. If students are already conversing online about classwork, why not provide them with an official website to have these conversations on?

Providing students with a “lifeline” while doing homework could give students a sense of belonging and encourage communication. If students have a question, discover something interesting, or want to share with their classmates, why not allow them to do so on a social media site at home? Given that many teachers only see their students for 5 hours a week, social media offers the possibility of expanding learning beyond the classroom. By using social media to extend learning outside of the classroom, students have additional time to work on their written communication skills to supplement the emphasis of verbal communication skills in the classroom.

While this project began with a search for a correlation between students’ social media usage and their writing habits, it instead revealed adolescents’ attitudes towards using social media in the classroom. The study determined that although many teachers are eager to use social media in the classroom, there are barriers to doing so: students’ interest levels, students’ online writing styles, and students’ desires to interact with each other face-to-face. As a future educator, I have learned that one cannot assume students are digital natives who will enjoy using social media academically. This project has discerned that social media can be a beneficial educational tool, but educators must consider their students’ technological abilities, reactions, and perceptions before using these websites in their classrooms.

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