Cybersocial Connectedness: A Survey of Perceived Benefits and Disadvantages of Social Media Use

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review the results of a 2014 survey of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of the Adler Graduate School in Richfield, Minnesota. The survey aimed to explore the use of social media and other virtual connectors in Adlerian higher education and professional development, as well as in maintaining general social ties in our society. A total of 170 individuals responded to the 19-item questionnaire. Most respondents were students at the Adler Graduate School, and almost 70 percent reported living in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area. Results of the survey are discussed along with implications for educators and other concerned professionals.

Keywords: social media, connectedness, Adlerian

The research and public discussion related to social media use is picking up speed. Studies in e-dating (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012), e-impacted family functioning (Lee & Chae, 2012), and e-communities (Hampton, 2013; Sum, Mathews, Pourghasem, & Hughes, 2009; Valentine & Skelton, 2008) reflect this new multifaceted virtual reality.

The debates encompass the perceived inclusiveness or exclusiveness created by social media (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009; Smith & Phillips, 2006), the psychological usefulness or uselessness of blogging and other online activities (Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012; Novotney, 2014), the social and emotional harm or benefits of playing video games (Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014; Saleem, Anderson, & Gentile, 2012), and the depth or shallowness of online education and professional development (Jackson, Jackson, & Chambers, 2013). Despite extreme caution, dictated by the nature of the field, e-reality is making its way into the arena of mental health care (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014a), both as an issue to care for, such as Internet addiction and e-infidelity (Griffiths, 2012; Jones & Hertlein, 2012), and as the new practice reality (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014b; Tatlilioglu, 2013), which is rife with ethical dilemmas (Lannin & Scott, 2014) and methodological and philosophical challenges (Hockridge, 2013).

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The major problem with existing research is a combination of its age and its nature. Claims about the damaging effects of social media on individual human behavior, societal morale, and mass processes are usually passionate. However, research has failed to produce a diversity of participants or more stable longitudinal data, and often because of that, it does little to establish causation beyond correlation. Paradoxically, the modern technology that is able to provide ample opportunities for greater participation in research and more reliable ways to track data over the years may have the inherent limitation of not appealing to those who mistrust technology. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the recent debate over experimental research by Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock (2014), who explored "massive-scale emotional contagion" (p. 8788) among 689,033 apparently unsuspecting Facebook users, when such massive studies take place, a host of unprecedented ethical issues arise. Finally, even the most robust and advanced research methodologies of today, and the traditionally lengthy research approval processes, may have a very difficult time matching the speed of the digital revolution, thus rendering many results obsolete by the time they are published.

In summary, research in technology, as a player in professional development, education, and general social life remains limited.

Adlerian Psychology and Social Media

The unique characteristic of Individual Psychology is that communal life—listening to and participating in communal concerns and being a part of "all the great movements" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 463)—is central to its philosophy and social practice. Despite that strength, researchers in and practitioners of Individual Psychology seem largely disinterested in virtual matters. Very few articles (identified via EBSCO search) devoted to the impact of technology on human development and interpersonal relationships, as seen through an Adlerian lens, have linked advances in technology to "intensifying loneliness" (Katz & Nikelly, 1983, p. 78) and desensitization to violence (Edwards & Mullis, 2001). A serious Adlerian examination of the impact of technology and social media on human relationships has produced only a few recent articles (e.g., Allen, El-Beshti, & Guin, 2014; Brack et al., 2013).

The scarcity of Adlerian research in the area of technology and social media is in stark contrast to Rudolf Dreikurs's belief in technology being "the second great social revolution" (Grey, 1998, p. 145). Balanced Adlerian research in communal content and the social implications of virtual matters has yet to appear. This current study is an attempt to add more voices to the Adlerian understanding of social media and role of technology in the advancement of human relationships.

Methods

This research examined participants' involvement with various social media in social life, education, and practice in mental health, and how that involvement influences the development and/or perception of a sense of communal belongingness or connectedness; personal growth and mastery; and the unique interpersonal attunement that Adlerian students, scholars, and practitioners strive to achieve. The Institutional Review Board at the Adler Graduate School (AGS) in Richfield, Minnesota, approved the study.

Participants

The SonisWeb list aggregates 1,814 AGS alumni, students, staff, faculty, and prospective students (with corresponding email addresses). An email inviting individuals to participate was sent to the entire SonisWeb list. The list is routinely used for announcements going to the populations identified above.

Instruments

The research question was "What are the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media in higher education, professional development, and in general human connections?" This general question was broken down into seven specific statements. Participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The following statements were used:

1. Participating in social media (blogs, Listservs, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other media) inspires people to reflect on self, others, and the world as people strive to "see with the eyes of another" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p.135).
2. Participating in online professional activities (professional Listservs, LinkedIn, emailing with colleagues, virtual continuing education) provides an opportunity to benefit from and contribute to ongoing professional development.
3. The "pooled intelligence of the social group" (Adler, 1929, p. 63), or a communal wisdom, is one of the major and unique benefits of online education.
4. Participating in social media instills and maintains a sense of one's connections to the community and one's responsibility toward that community.
5. Online academic activities are a reflection of true democracy in which one is responsible not only for his or her own academic success but for the success of other students by actively co-constructing learning experiences in the class.

6. Professionals actively participating in professional social media activities are more concerned with social implications of knowledge (and that is how knowledge may lead to changes in society) than those who are not engaging in professional social media activities.
7. Social media, virtual professional activities, and online education are true equalizers allowing participants to move on an interactive horizontal plane—erasing the barriers set by level of education, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and physical abilities.

Before being introduced to the seven research questions, participants were asked several demographic questions, including their primary affiliation with AGS, place of residence, gender, age range, use of social media (average number of hours per week), and whether they had ever participated in online education. The survey did not seek any identifying information.

Procedures

Responses were collected via an online survey designed and entered in SurveyMonkey. The solicitation script was sent to the AGS SonisWeb email list as a bulk mailing. The purpose of the study, its benefits and risks, and its terms were entered in SurveyMonkey, effectively allowing prospective participants full (and, if needed, repeated) access to all information concerning the study, along with an opportunity to agree to and enter and complete the study, or to anonymously withdraw from the study at any time. Participants consented to the research terms by voluntarily entering the survey, advancing through the self-paced and self-directed informed consent process, and entering an "agree to participate" statement at the end of the consent process. The nature of the study was exploratory. Therefore, no inferential statistics were used to analyze the data.

Results

Demographics

Out of 178 prospective participants who accessed the survey via the email link, 170 respondents (96%) consented to participate. Therefore, 170 data sets were used for analysis and discussion. Most responses were submitted during the first week of the survey, including 147 (86.5%) during the first four days after the survey was opened. Basic descriptive statistics were used in the data analysis provided by SurveyMonkey, with observations focusing on demographic characteristics of the sample and measures of central tendency generated by available data. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the age range of the participants.

Table 1
Participant Demographics (Self-Reported Age Range)

Age range (in years)	*n*
20–30	27
31–40	38
41–50	38
51–60	42
61–70	19
71–80	6
Total	170

Out of 170 participants, 82 (48%) defined their primary affiliation with AGS as students, 6 (3.5%) as staff members, 17 (10%) as faculty instructors, 60 (35%) as alumni, and 5 (3%) as Adler friends. At the time of the study, 117 (69%) respondents lived in the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, 31 (18%) lived in the greater Minnesota region, 20 (12%) lived in states other than Minnesota, and 2 (1%) were non-U.S. residents. The majority of participants (n = 134, 79%) identified themselves as female, and 32 (19%) as male. Four participants skipped the gender demographic question. The percentage of males in this sample closely resembled the percentage of males in AGS's SonisWeb database (17%), but the percentage of females in the sample was higher than the corresponding percentage in the SonisWeb list (63%). Because of the way gender was entered (respondents typed in a word rather than clicked a box), data could not be used in a meaningful way. The majority of respondents (59%) indicated an average weekly use of social media ranging from one to five hours. See Table 2 below for a breakdown of weekly social media use by age range. Almost 50% of the sample had never taken an online course through AGS, but those who had taken an online course reported using social media more frequently per week than those who had never taken such a course. Table 3 displays the response pattern to each of the seven survey statements.

An optional comment section was added to each question. Combined, there were 90 optional narrative responses. Because of the varied nature of the comments, the most representative examples are included at the end of each statement description in the following sections. The responses are taken verbatim from the survey data file. Statement 2 generated the lowest

Table 2
Average Number of Hours Per Week of Social Media Use by Age Range

Age range (years)	Average Hours Per Week of Social Media Use					
	Do not use at all	Less than 1 hour	1–2 hours	3–5 hours	6–10 hours	10+ hours
20–30	0	2	7	10	6	3
31–40	0	2	14	14	5	4
41–50	1	7	14	8	2	7
51–60	6	5	10	14	5	2
61–70	0	4	8	2	1	4
71–80	1	1	1	1	0	2

number of additional comments (5 comments), and Statement 4 generated the highest number of additional comments (19). A full list of responses can be requested in writing (please see first author's contact information).

Statement 1: Social Media Inspires People to See With the Eyes of the Other

Approximately 56% of the sample responded in agreement (*agree* to *strongly agree*) with Statement 1. When analyzing the statement by average weekly social media use, those who reported higher usage tended to report stronger agreement with Statement 1. No other differences were seen as related to other demographic characteristics. The following represents the most typical additional comments for this statement: "Social Media does not create empathy in itself."

Statement 2: Online Professional Activities Provide Opportunity to Benefit or Contribute

Almost 91% of sample participants agreed (by endorsing *agree* or *strongly agree*) with Statement 2. When analyzing the statement by average weekly social media use, those who reported higher usage tended to report stronger agreement with Statement 2. No other differences were found in terms of other demographic characteristics. The most typical additional comments for this statement are represented by the following: "The concern for me is the amount of time people spend in these endeavors and what activities they are not attending to as a result, e.g., family and friends time, connecting with the physical world, etc." and "is great for us introverts."

Table 3
Overall Response Pattern to Seven Statements of Interest

Statement number	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Statement 1	15 9%	81 48%	37 21%	30 18%	7 4%
Statement 2	55 33%	99 58%	12 7%	2 1%	2 1%
Statement 3	20 12%	70 41%	48 28%	27 16%	5 3%
Statement 4	17 10%	67 39%	46 27%	33 19%	7 4%
Statement 5	18 11%	68 40%	53 31%	26 15%	5 3%
Statement 6	10 6%	43 25%	52 31%	49 29%	16 9%
Statement 7	19 11%	72 42%	43 25%	29 17%	7 4%

Statement 3: Pooled Intelligence of Group Is Major Benefit of Online Education

For Statement 3, 53% of the sample reported agreement (*agree* or *strongly agree*). When analyzing the statement by average weekly social media use, those who reported higher usage tended to report stronger agreement with Statement 3. No other differences were found in terms of other demographic characteristics. The following represent the most typical additional comments for this statement: "I think any group situation offers benefits associated with collective knowledge," and "Online education doesn't foster communal wisdom in my opinion."

Statement 4: Social Media Instills Connection and Responsibility Toward Community

Approximately 49% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with Statement 4. Those who reported higher weekly usage tended to report stronger agreement. No other differences were found in terms of other demographic characteristic. The most typical additional comments for this statement are "I think it can just as often isolate individuals from the community and give them false sense of superiority or inferiority based on comparison"; "A sense of connection, but responsibility has nothing to do with media"; "It depends upon one's intention when he/she is using social media"; "I think for very small, highly-focused communities, online forums are a great source of support, connection, and collective action"; and "The energy of human interaction cannot be substituted in an electronic format."

Statement 5: Online Courses Are Reflection of True Democracy

About 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with Statement 5. When analyzing the statement by average weekly social media use, those who reported higher usage tended to report stronger agreement with Statement 5. No other differences were found in terms of other demographic characteristics. The most typical additional comments for this statement are the following: "Co-constructing learning, yes, but 'true democracy' no"; "Not sure about 'true democracy' however their [*sic*] is a degree of social interest as is true for the classroom."

Statement 6: Professionals Using Social Media Are More Concerned

Only 31% of respondents were in agreement (*agree* or *strongly agree*) with Statement 6, and 38% indicated disagreement (*disagree* to *strongly disagree*). When analyzing the statement by average weekly social media use, there was no clear pattern of response to Statement 6 on the basis of this factor. The sample was divided almost equally between those who agreed and those who disagreed. Therefore, average weekly use of social media did not seem to play a part in respondents' answers. Age did seem to create differences for this statement, such that more respondents in the 51–60 age group disagreed or strongly disagreed (approximately 57%) than in any other age group. Almost 40% of students disagreed with this statement, more than any other affiliation group. Upon investigating any links between affiliation group and age, 24 students indicated their age range as 51–60; however, students were fairly evenly distributed across age. Thus, it may not have been older students who disagreed more than others but perhaps older respondents in general and students who disagreed more with Statement 6. No other differences were found in terms of other demographic variables. The most typical additional comment for this statement is "Social media has nothing to do with social implications of knowledge."

Statement 7: Social Media and Other Internet Activities Are True Equalizers

Almost 53% of study participants indicated agreement (*agree* or *strongly agree*) with Statement 7. When analyzing the statement by average weekly social media use, those who reported higher usage tended to report stronger agreement. Almost 20% of students disagreed with the statement, more than any other affiliation group. No other differences were found in terms of other demographic characteristics of this sample. The most typical additional comments for this statement are the following: "You cannot equalize for years of systemic oppression. Does it give more access[? Certainly.] But you have to have access in the first place," and "The use on the Internet will not remove social barriers; a collective shift in consciousness is needed."

Discussion

The results of this study should be understood in a context of demographic characteristics. Among participants, 162 (95%) reported some use of social media, with 48 participants (28%) using social media 3–5 hours per week, 19 (11%) using it 6–10 hours per week, and 22 (13%) reporting more than 10 hours of social media use per week. These numbers are higher than the 73% of US adults using social networking sites, as reported in the 2013 Pew Research Center's (2014) Pew Research Internet Project. The age-related trend in use of social media is similar to that reported by the Pew Research Center for the U.S. adult population. That is, usage gradually declines with age but never reaches non-use. For this sample, the most dramatic age-related difference in the self-reported use of social media was observed for participants aged 51–60, and usage then plateaued through two age brackets (51–60 and 61–70). Average weekly social media use appeared related to how strongly respondents agreed with each statement, such that those reporting more use agreed more strongly with the statement. The one exception was Statement 6, for which there was no clear trend based on usage in the level of agreement respondents indicated.

Although social media usage may differ across age groups, in this sample age did not have a significant impact on how individuals responded to the seven statements. The one exception was Statement 6, to which older respondents indicated more disagreement than other groups. The researchers can only speculate as to the reason for this. Perhaps respondents in the 51–60 age bracket view themselves as aware of the social implications of knowledge and do not see a link between that and social media use, especially because they reported using it less often than other age groups. It is also possible that the wording of the question was off-putting, so respondents disagreed with the implication that not using social media means one is less concerned with the social implications of knowledge. For the rest of the statements, though, age did not seem to play a huge role in how people responded.

Other demographic variables did not seem to have much impact on participants' responses to statements (except for the response pattern connected to Statement 6): 50% or more of respondents reported agreement (*agree* or *strongly agree*) with each statement. Statement 2 had the highest percentage of respondents agreeing, with 91% of the sample indicating *agree* or *strongly agree*. It is possible that the theory of Individual Psychology, and specifically one's training in the Adlerian view on connection and contribution, plays a special role in this response pattern. Other factors need to be considered in forming a deeper understanding of the various implications of this research. The study relied on a convenience sample, which affects its generalizability. The methodology (volunteer online survey) could also have

produced a certain response bias by overrepresenting individuals who are, at the very least, comfortable with online communication, who have greater experience with web-mediated communication, and who might hold strong opinions (favorable or not) on a subject.

There are many ways "community" can be defined through social media activities, and those definitions, or interest areas, are uniquely determined by each individual. The common denominator among all respondents in the sample is the connection to a philosophy or value regarding being and feeling connected with others. That value possibly influences a person's choice of educational environment, place of work or interest area, and—we can conclude—responses to this survey. Perhaps a different sample in which respondents have no understanding of the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler would yield different results.

The outcome of this study demonstrated that those who share a common language or viewpoint—the view that connection to others is extremely important for sustaining life and that one's sense of being connected is largely created and maintained by an individual regardless of a physical connection—would most likely use social media in socially useful ways. This may potentially stand in stark contrast to individuals who do not hold this belief about connection with others and/or who may possibly use social media as a way to act in self-serving or harmful ways toward others. Future research may clarify this dichotomy, lending more support to Adler's ideas about social embeddedness, mutual respect, encouragement, and *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. Adlerian mental health practitioners, researchers, educators, and parent educators may benefit from the results of this survey in designing treatment approaches and educational activities. Certainly, at least some participants found this survey to be inspiration for such research, as evident in one of the general comments: "Hope this survey and the interest it inspires serve as foundations for continued research, especially differentiating among different modalities and different purposes. Adlerian focus on social interest makes this a perfect research topic."

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Daniel Haugen (haugen@alfredadler.edu) has been associated with the Adlerian community since 1988 and currently serves the Adler Graduate School in Minnesota as president. His relationship to technology has changed dramatically over time, moving from novice casual user to having a strong reliance on technology. Currently, technology is not only essential to the fulfillment of his professional responsibilities; it is also one of the growing edges at the Adler Graduate School's ongoing development that Haugen must monitor and influence.