

Exploring Social Media as an Information Source in IL Instruction

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According to a 2021 Pew Research report, over 80 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds use social media. Studies also show that higher education students use social media in both academic and everyday life. However, there is minimal research about how, or whether, librarians utilize social media in their library instruction as a source of information for students' academic work. We examined 162 responses to a survey sent to an uncounted number of librarians in higher education, asking them about their teaching practices regarding social media to enable us to answer the following research questions: (1) How are teaching librarians using social media as an information source in their instruction?; (2) What are the benefits teaching librarians perceive regarding the use of social media in instruction?; (3) What are the challenges teaching librarians perceive regarding the use of social media in instruction? The survey results showed that most librarians surveyed are not utilizing social media as an information source in their library instruction. Although our results cannot be generalized, our study sheds light on how librarians incorporate social media in information literacy (IL) instruction, the tension between scholarly literature and voices not considered authoritative, and librarians' perceptions of benefits and challenges to incorporating social media in library sessions.

Introduction

In today's world, information moves fast, circulated by digital technologies such as social media. The first social media platforms, as we know them today, appeared in the late 1990s;¹ this led to dozens of sites captivating millions of people by the early 2000s, propelled by the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies. Today, social media is very much present in the lives of higher education students. According to a 2021 Pew Research report, over 80 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds use social media.² With people and organizations worldwide sharing information of varied authority, there is both potential—and a need—for librarians to teach students how to use social media critically to discover and access information for academic assignments. Addressing a gap in the literature, this paper explores whether and how teaching librarians utilize

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social media as a pedagogical tool in their library instruction to help learners find sources of information for their academic work. Additionally, our study reports on librarians' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of using social media in library sessions.

Inspired by a faculty member's request for a library session covering hashtags and social media skills to help students find reliable information sources, this exploration also responds to changes we have observed in higher education attitudes toward including underrepresented voices in addition to traditional scholarly perspectives in the academic narrative. First, we will summarize scholarly literature regarding college students' use of social media as an information source, social media in higher education classrooms, and social media within library instruction. Second, we will present data gathered through a survey. Third, we will discuss the data in relation to our research questions and address possible benefits and challenges of using social media in library instruction.

What is Social Media in this Study?

This paper follows Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein's definition of *social media*: "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."³ We favored this definition because it emphasizes the notion of user-generated content. The eleven social media platforms utilized in this study were taken from a Pew Research Center article on social media use in 2021. The platforms are: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok, Reddit, and Nextdoor.⁴

How is "Information Source" Defined in this Study?

In the context of social media, we understand an information source to be a primary or secondary source used for academic research or for assignments in a higher education setting. For example, students may access a report from a governmental office's social media account, or may find a scholarly article posted by an author or an academically affiliated account.

Literature Review

There is abundant literature about the use of social media in different academic fields.⁵ However, research about teaching librarians' utilization of social media as a source of information within the context of IL instruction is scarce.⁶ In a 2011 paper examining social media in the research workflow, David Nicholas expressed concern about librarians' disconnect with social media in the academic setting because scholars were using social media to share their research.⁷ His study surveyed 2,414 academics in 215 countries and found that researchers strongly agree that social media enhances their academic work "through the greater visibility it affords them."⁸ Nonetheless, a decade later, academic librarians still appear to be unlikely to introduce social media in IL instruction beyond minimal coverage of evaluation, shared content, online collaboration, and observation of informal scholarly interaction. This literature review considers studies addressing how students use social media as an information source for academic work, as well as social media applications in the higher education classroom.

Students' Use of Social Media as an Information Source

Within the last decade, a few studies have noted that students use social media as a source of both background information and news for their academic work.⁹ Referring to student use of

social media, both for information seeking and academic purposes, librarians Kyung-Sun Kim, Yuqi He, and Sei-Chin Joanna Sin noted in 2013 that, while undergraduate students utilized media sharing sites such as Social Q&A and Wikis, graduate students preferred blogs.¹⁰ These authors observed that students' majors also determined the social media platforms they utilized.¹¹

Similarly, in 2014, Kim, Sin, and Eun Young Yoo-Lee found that students use some social media platforms as information sources, including Wikipedia and social networking sites.¹² Recently, a 2021 literature review examining students' preferences on reading formats and the use of social media information sources for academic and non-academic purposes noted that college students use social media for "class assignments and projects."¹³ This review added that students use YouTube as a supplement for textbooks, blogs to follow topics of interest, and LinkedIn to check the authority of authors.¹⁴

Interestingly, a 2021 paper—in which Kim, Sin, and Yoo-Lee compared two undergraduate cohorts' (2013 and 2019) use of social media as an information source for academic and everyday purposes—found data that contradicts that of the Pew Research Center. Kim et al. found that the 2019 cohort utilized social media as an information source less frequently than the 2013 cohort did, suggesting a decline in use,¹⁵ while a Pew Research Center study showed the opposite, reporting increased use of social media in 18- to 29-year-olds in 2021.¹⁶ Although the Pew Research Center report did not specify data on the use of social media as an information source for academic purposes, the diverging data between these two sources is intriguing.¹⁷ Perhaps future research could address this dichotomy.

Social Media in the Higher Education Classroom

The literature reveals that social media has been incorporated into higher education classrooms for different purposes since the 2000s.¹⁸ Perhaps due to students' familiarity with social media, instructors often report using it to communicate with students, instructors often report using it to communicate with students, increase class participation, promote engagement with course topics, encourage further discussion outside the classroom environment, and build a sense of community among participants.¹⁹ For example, Anatoly Gruzdt et al. note that social media promotes "networked learning," in which students connect beyond classmates and instructors to broader academic and social communities with shared interests.²⁰ Scholars also observe that social media's popularity has grown for "formal and informal learning in many disciplinary areas."²¹

In addition, some studies address the advantages of including social media in the classroom, such as faculty exposing students to sources outside the traditional academic setting, and "promoting learning through social interaction and collaboration."²² Of particular interest to our study is the idea of expanding the learning environment, which Gruzdt et al. align with "discovery," permitting students and instructors to find and access resources outside traditional settings.²³

Another social media use in the higher education classroom relates to platform data analysis and career skills development. For example, Michele Ewing, et al. write about the importance of social media analytics for students in the public relations field, arguing that practical experience using tools and methods is vital for student success.²⁴ Similarly, other authors argue in favor of teaching strong social media skills in journalism programs, addressing news coverage and competencies to create content.²⁵ This disciplinary interest in various aspects of social media suggests there is value in including social media in IL instruction to support course curricula.

Social Media in Library Instruction

Social media literature connected to information literacy emerged in the early 2000s, showing that librarians have utilized social media to help students understand the quality of sources, share content, promote online collaboration, and discuss informal scholarly interaction.²⁶ However, as mentioned earlier, not many studies provide data on teaching librarians' incorporation of social media as an information source in IL instruction.²⁷ One study—examining Mississippi academic librarians—found that, even when these librarians concurred that social media was an essential component of IL instruction that would improve students' ability to consume, disseminate, and create information, fewer than half of them attempted or planned to use social media in their library sessions.²⁸

Benefits of Using Social Media as an Information Source in Instruction

Some librarians see benefits to using social media in instruction. Sheila Stoeckel and Caroline Sinkinson emphasize the value of social media concerning its, “participatory nature of research and knowledge negotiation,” as opposed to the passive collection of resources.²⁹ Additionally, Natalie Burclaff and Catherine R. Johnson invite librarians to go beyond the demonstration of databases to incorporate social media as a research tool to access different perspectives and voices.³⁰ Kim et al. also recognize that social media provides information not found in traditional academic sources, offering a broader range of voices and opinions to consider.³¹ Other librarians encourage using social media as a source of information based on its ability to disseminate information, the usefulness of hashtags to cover subject headings, and its ability to engage students in the research process.³²

Students' familiarity with social media is another potential benefit that some authors consider when addressing social media in instruction. Scholars note that students' comfort and previous experience with social media help them to practice critical thinking and become a part of informal scholarly interaction by participating in discussions in library sessions.³³ Critical thinking is crucial for students when evaluating information and sources. In a discussion about the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Framework* and metaliteracy, Valerie J. Hill and Thomas P. Mackey highlight the initial inception of metaliteracy to promote critical thinking and collaboration in social media and other digital communities.³⁴ The authors add that a primary goal for metaliteracy is for learners to, “actively evaluate content while also evaluating one's own biases.”³⁵ Additionally, Casey Fiesler—addressing information reliability in news disseminated on TikTok—asserts that this platform may provide accurate information, but advises us to, “consider the credibility of sources and information we choose to believe and share.”³⁶

Challenges of Using Social Media as an Information Source in Instruction

Some authors have expressed concerns about social media as an information source. These concerns include privacy and ethical implications, disinformation, and instructor competency.³⁷ Alison Hicks and Caroline Sinkinson discuss privacy issues within active learning activities, cautioning that digital tools may expose learners to tracking and surveillance.³⁸ Regarding personal data shared on social media, Lucy Pangrazio and Neil Selwyn emphasize the importance of including social and ethical considerations in “digital literacy” instruction, noting that students need to know how to engage with social media responsibly.³⁹

Other scholars have voiced concerns about the quality of information available on social media. Donna Witek and Teresa Grettano recognized that social media is an environment

where “formal and informal sources of information” meet, and where it is important to teach students how to evaluate information.⁴⁰ This concern results from information being generated within a social context that is “directly related to how others in their networks value that information and whether the information is relevant to their friends or to themselves.”⁴¹

This literature review addressed college students’ use of social media for academic purposes, social media use in the classroom, and favorable and critical views on integrating social media in instruction. Our study seeks to address the gap in the literature, and to advance the scholarship by shedding light on whether teaching librarians utilize social media as a pedagogical tool in IL instruction, as well as considering how teaching librarians perceive the benefits and challenges of teaching social media in library sessions.

Methodology

This research paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How are teaching librarians using social media as an information source in their instruction?
2. What are the benefits teaching librarians perceive regarding the use of social media in instruction?
3. What are the challenges teaching librarians perceive regarding the use of social media in instruction?

Instrument

We used a thirty-five-question Qualtrics survey approved by the University of Colorado Institutional Review Board. The branched survey had thirty-three multiple-choice questions and two free-text questions. The survey was open from August 13th to October 6th, 2021. Although 162 respondents filled out the survey, the number of individuals who completed each question varied. The data collected were quantitative and qualitative. The closed-ended questions gathered data on the participants’ institutional affiliations and responsibilities as academic librarians. The multiple-choice questions gathered data on social media platforms used in library instruction sessions, frequency of use, and type of use. The survey had two hybrid questions and two fully qualitative questions. Questions 32 and 33 utilized a hybrid question design, where partially close-ended questions allowed respondents to select from the options provided and write additional comments using the field “Other.” Questions 32 and 33 gathered data on the challenges and benefits of using social media in IL instruction. Questions 34 and 35 collected qualitative information in free-text boxes about librarians’ perceptions of faculty’s reaction to social media in IL instruction. We organized the data in a spreadsheet for analysis. See the Appendix for the complete survey instrument.

Participants

We distributed the survey via email to the following disciplinary listservs: the Association of College and Research Libraries, History Librarians Interest Group, Education and Behavioral Sciences Section, Literature in English Section, the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, the Council on East Asian Libraries, the Collaborative Initiative for French and North American Libraries, the Colorado Council of Medical Librarians, and the Engineering Library Division. We chose these organizations due to their connection with library instruction in academic libraries. Due to low levels of participation, we also distributed

the survey directly through email to 139 librarians with teaching responsibilities at eleven universities.⁴² We searched the directories of these university libraries, identified all librarians who appeared to have teaching responsibilities, and emailed them directly.

Our Approach to the Data

Our study used a survey research approach. We identified our target audience as librarians with teaching responsibilities. We designed the questionnaire and piloted it with three instruction librarians who provided feedback to improve this instrument. Rather than approaching the data with a pre-existing hypothesis, the two main authors conducted three rounds of coding. First, we individually identified keywords from each response to the four questions with qualitative data and organized these keywords (codes) in a spreadsheet. Second, we compared our keywords and agreed on themes. Third, we reviewed our data again and allocated each response to the thematic categories we created.

Results

Respondent Demographics

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between social media use and respondents’ background information. We separated responses into “Yes” and “No” categories of social media use, based on whether the respondent selected the option: “I have not used social media platforms in my instruction.” This table shows that 110 of 139 respondents work in a university that confers doctoral degrees, with only 29 respondents at other types of institutions. Table 1 also shows how respondents identified the nature of their positions, with a large representation of subject specialists followed by librarians who categorized their positions as instruction and reference. The largest percentage of librarians who used social media were those who identified their job as involving “outreach.” However, this group represents a smaller pool of respondents compared to subject specialists or those who categorized their position as “instruction.”

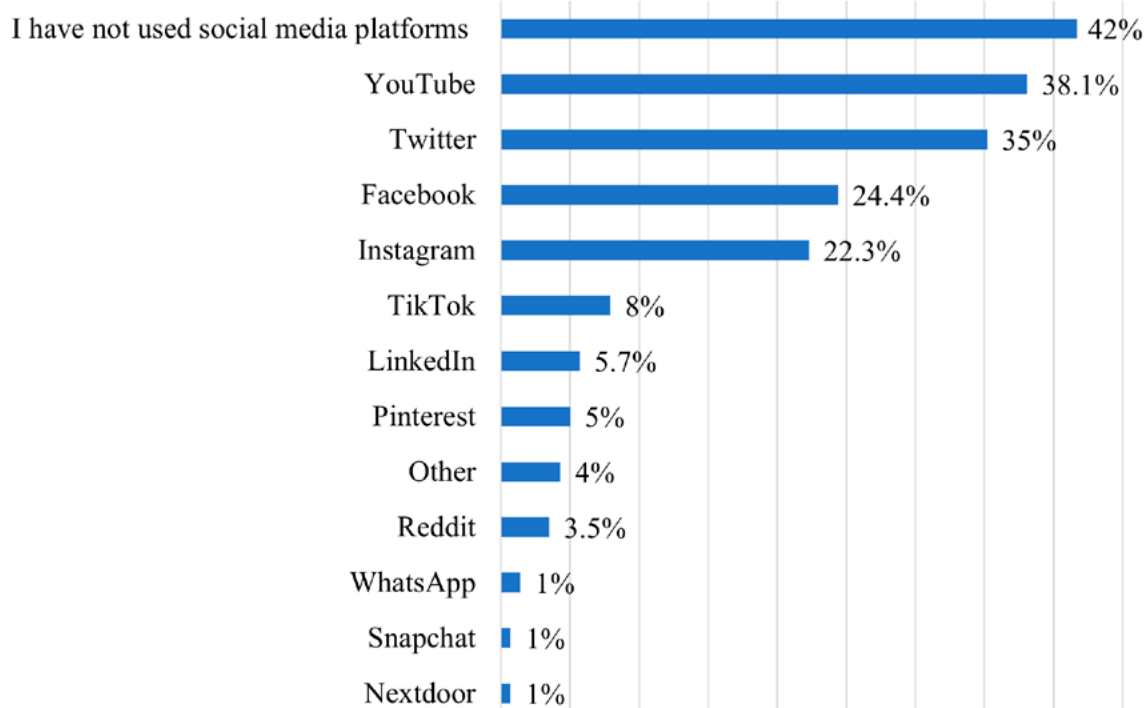
In addition, respondents reported supporting a wide variety of departments and programs, ranging from the sciences and humanities to the social sciences. The small percentage of respondents who supported departments related to communication, journalism, and media studies utilized social media more frequently than those supporting other academic programs. While it is interesting to note some of these trends in the data, we make no statistical claims about the relationship between respondents’ background information and their social media use. Additional data collection is necessary to ensure adequate subgroup sample sizes before this analysis is useful.

TABLE 1 Summary of Background Information and Social Media Use		
Background information	Do you use social media?	
Do you have one shot or course instruction responsibilities? (Select all that apply)	Yes	No
Yes, courses (multiple related sessions) (n = 55)	42	13
Yes, one-time sessions (workshops, one-shots, webinars, etc.) (n=84)	39	45
What category best describes your institution?	Yes	No
Doctorate University (n = 110)	60	50
Other (n = 29)	21	8

TABLE 1
Summary of Background Information and Social Media Use

Background information		Do you use social media?	
<i>How long have you taught library instruction sessions in a higher education context?</i>		Yes	No
0-2 years (n = 15)		7	8
3-5 years (n = 32)		23	9
6-10 years (n = 37)		25	12
11 or more years (n = 55)		26	29
<i>How would you categorize your position? (Select all that apply)</i>		Yes	No
Subject specialist, liaison (n = 113)		65	48
Instruction (n = 89)		53	36
Reference (n = 77)		46	31
Outreach (n = 45)		32	13
Acquisition, collection development, management, strategy (n = 39)		26	13
Scholarly communication (n = 21)		14	7
Digital initiatives, systems information, technology, web development (n = 13)		9	4
Data services, GIS (n = 10)		7	3
Assessment, analytics, user experience (n = 10)		7	3
Archiving, curational, rare books, preservation, conservation (n = 9)		7	2
Access Services (n = 10)		9	1
Other (n = 12)		8	4
<i>Do you support specific academic programs or departments? (Select all that apply)</i>		Yes	No
Math/ Computer Science/ Statistics/ Technology/ Engineering (n = 38)		21	17
Humanities (n = 31)		18	13
Art/Art History/Theater/Music/Film (n = 27)		20	7
Social Sciences (n = 23)		15	8
Health/Medicine/Nursing (n = 22)		13	9
Natural Sciences (n = 22)		14	8
Literature (n = 21)		13	8
Languages (n = 19)		14	5
Business (n = 13)		10	3
Communication/Journalism/Media Studies (n = 14)		12	2
History (n = 32)		24	8
Undergraduate Writing and Rhetoric (n = 11)		7	4
Education (n = 9)		5	4
Other (n = 37)		20	17
I do not liaise with any departments (n = 12)		9	3

FIGURE 1
Which Social Media Platforms have you Used in your Instruction Sessions?
(Select all that Apply)



Percentage Response (%; n=139)

Use of Social Media in Instruction

Figure 1 shows the social media platforms respondents used in their instruction sessions. Data indicate that 42 percent of 139 respondents do not use social media platforms in their library sessions. Fifty-eight percent of respondents noted that they had used social media platforms in IL instruction. This percentage represents all the purposes of use as listed in table 2, and not just social media as a source of information. Figure 1 also indicates that the online video-sharing platform YouTube, and the microblogging and social networking site Twitter, have the highest use in library instruction, with 38 percent and 35 percent, respectively. Over 20 percent of respondents utilized Facebook and Instagram in their instruction. However, seven of the eleven platforms considered in this study had minimal use in library sessions, with fewer than three respondents selecting Nextdoor (platform for reporting news and events at the neighborhood level,) Snapchat (multimedia instant messaging app,) and WhatsApp (instant messaging and voice-over-IP service).

Table 2 shows how respondents used social media platforms in their instruction sessions (81 respondents). Table 2 indicates that 33 respondents (40 percent) reported that they referred to social media platforms in their instruction, but did not demonstrate their use. In addition, table 2 shows that most respondents (38 respondents) utilized a platform in their instruction session to teach about the context of information and what information is available on social media, although none of the purposes selected were utilized by even half of the respondents. Fewer than 45 percent of respondents (36 respondents) utilized social media for teaching lessons on citing, copyright and fair use, or to teach evaluation skills.

TABLE 2
How Social Media Platforms were Used in Instruction Sessions

Purpose of Use	Number of Respondents n = 81
Teaching context of information and what information is available on social media platforms (e.g., currency of posts, who can post information to this platform, etc.)	38
Used platforms to teach lessons on citing, copyright, fair use, and/or Creative Commons	36
Used platform to teach evaluation skills	36
Taught platform posts using the platform itself	35
Used platform to engage with students with the goal of creating relevant examples	34
Taught platform with references to platform but do not demonstrate/use the platform	33
Used platform to teach how to find posts or other information by authoritative sources	29
Used platform to teach lessons on fake news/misinformation	28
Used platform to engage with students to increase classroom participation by using a familiar platform	28
Used platform to find posts by general public, or to observe social interactions	27
Used platform to teach how to find news and current events	25
Used platform to engage with students with the goal of communicating with students	25
Used platform to teach platform specific skills, such as how to use platforms in future professions	23
Used platform to engage with students to build classroom community	17
Used platform to engage with students to teach analytics and data skills for platform	16
Used platform to teach platform specific skills, such as teaching how to create content for the platform	14
Used platform to teach how to find instructions and solutions to problems	9
Taught platform using third-party platform that makes data available	8

Only 29 respondents (36 percent) used a social media platform to teach how to find information by scholarly sources; 25 respondents (31 percent) utilized a platform to teach how to find news and current events. Fewer than sixteen respondents used platforms to teach data analytics, how to create platform content, or to find solutions to problems. In addition, respondents utilized platforms for other purposes, such as student engagement and classroom community building, as table 2 indicates.

Figure 2 shows the three most utilized platforms (YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter), as well as their purpose of use related to social media as an information source. We chose seven “purpose of use” categories based on the number of respondents and on their relevance to teaching. Respondents most frequently used Twitter to teach: evaluation skills, lessons on fake news, context of information and what information is available, and how to find news and current events. Respondent utilized YouTube the most often to teach lessons on citing, and on how to find posts by scholarly sources. Respondents most often used Facebook as a reference, but respondents who selected this option did not demonstrate or use this platform in instruction.

FIGURE 2
The Three Most Used Platforms and the Purpose of Use Related to Social Media as an Information Source

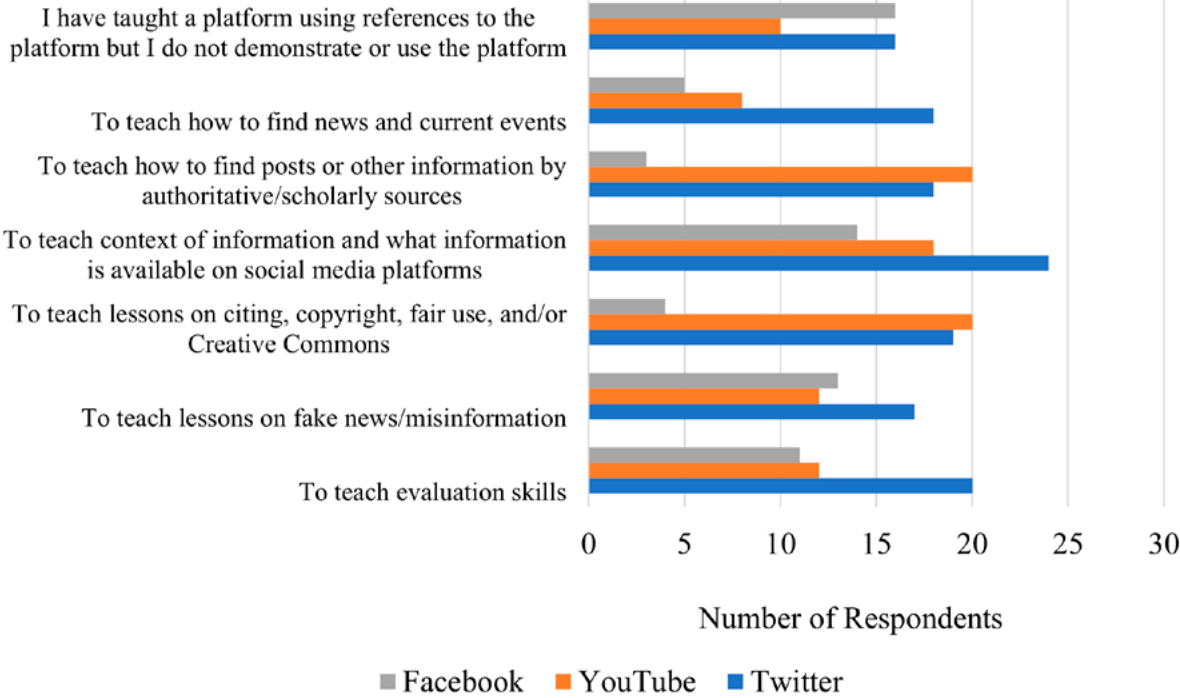
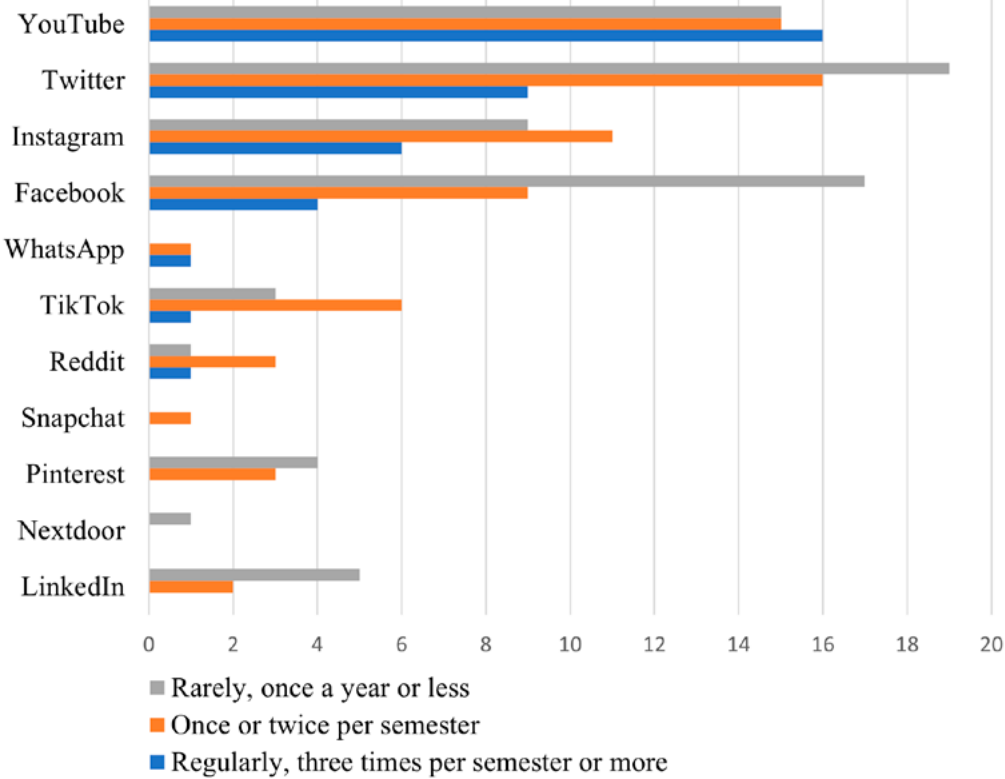


FIGURE 3
Frequency of use of a Platform in Library Instruction



Frequency of Use of the Eleven Platforms

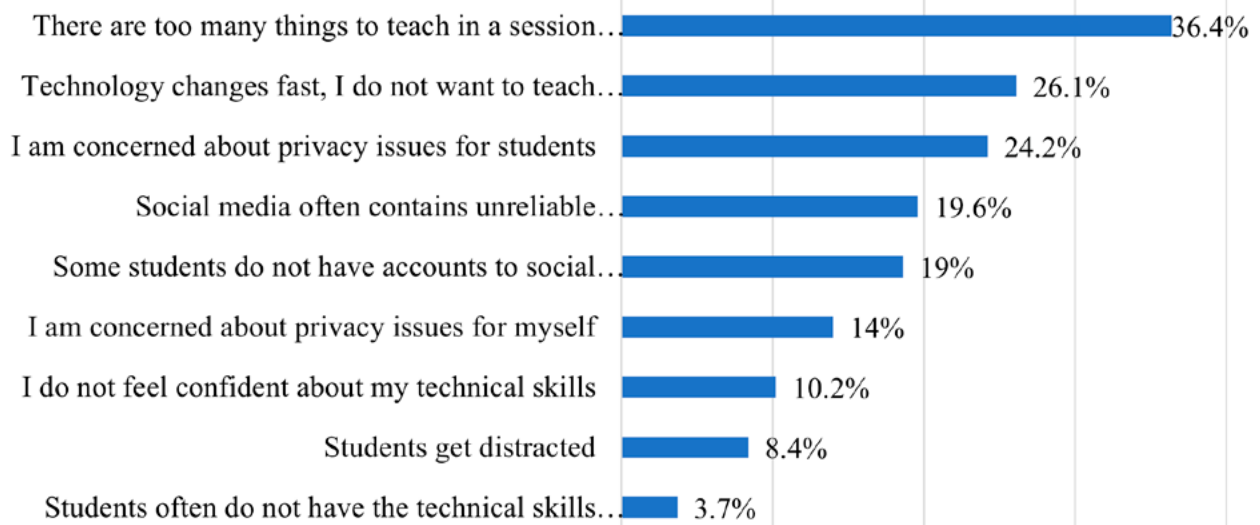
Figure 3 represents how frequently respondents reported using each of the 11 social media platforms in their instruction. Data showed that Twitter and YouTube had the highest frequency of use of the eleven platforms, with nine respondents utilizing Twitter, and 16 utilizing YouTube about three times per semester or more. It is important to note that platform use totals in figure 3 may not match the totals in table 2, as not all respondents answered all survey questions.

Challenges When Using Social Media in Library Instruction

Figure 4 indicates that 36 percent of respondents selected “there are too many things to teach in a session to include social media in library instruction.” Nearly 25 percent of respondents indicated concern regarding fast technological changes and privacy issues. Figure 4 also shows that there was no substantial consensus when selecting challenges. In addition, fewer than ten percent of respondents noted that students lack the skills and become distracted. Only 20 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: “social media often contains unreliable information.” Ten percent of respondents felt apprehensive about their own technical skills.

Thirty-six percent of respondents selected the option “other,” not shown in figure 4. We coded their statements using keywords derived from respondents’ answers. The following keywords represent these answers about challenges to using social media in IL instruction: “not useful,” “changes in technology access,” “lack of support,” and “not suitable and not scholarly.” Three respondents did not answer this question directly; however, they displayed a pessimistic attitude towards social media, stating: “I am disgusted by social media, which pervades my instruction,” “Giving off the ‘hello fellow kids’ vibe,” and “I do not want to support social media platforms in general so I don’t want to encourage using them for any purposes...”

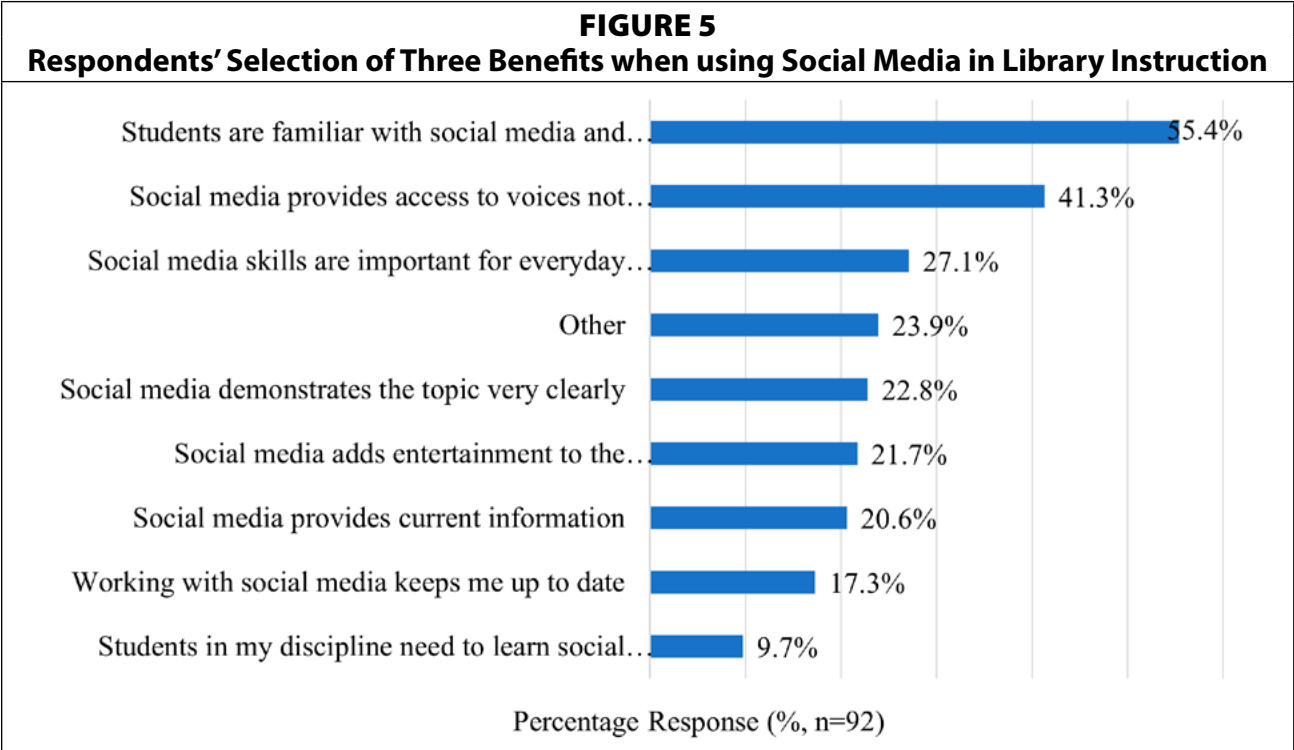
FIGURE 4
Respondents’ Selection of Three Challenges when Using Social Media in Library Instruction



Percentage Response (%; n = 107)

Benefits When Using Social Media in Library Instruction

Figure 5 shows that 55 percent of 92 respondents perceived students’ familiarity with social media as a benefit of including it in library instruction. Forty-one percent of respondents noted that social media provides access to voices not represented in academic sources, and 27 percent considered social media skills necessary for everyday life. Slightly more than 20 percent indicated that social media provides current information, adds entertainment to the instruction session, and demonstrates a topic well.

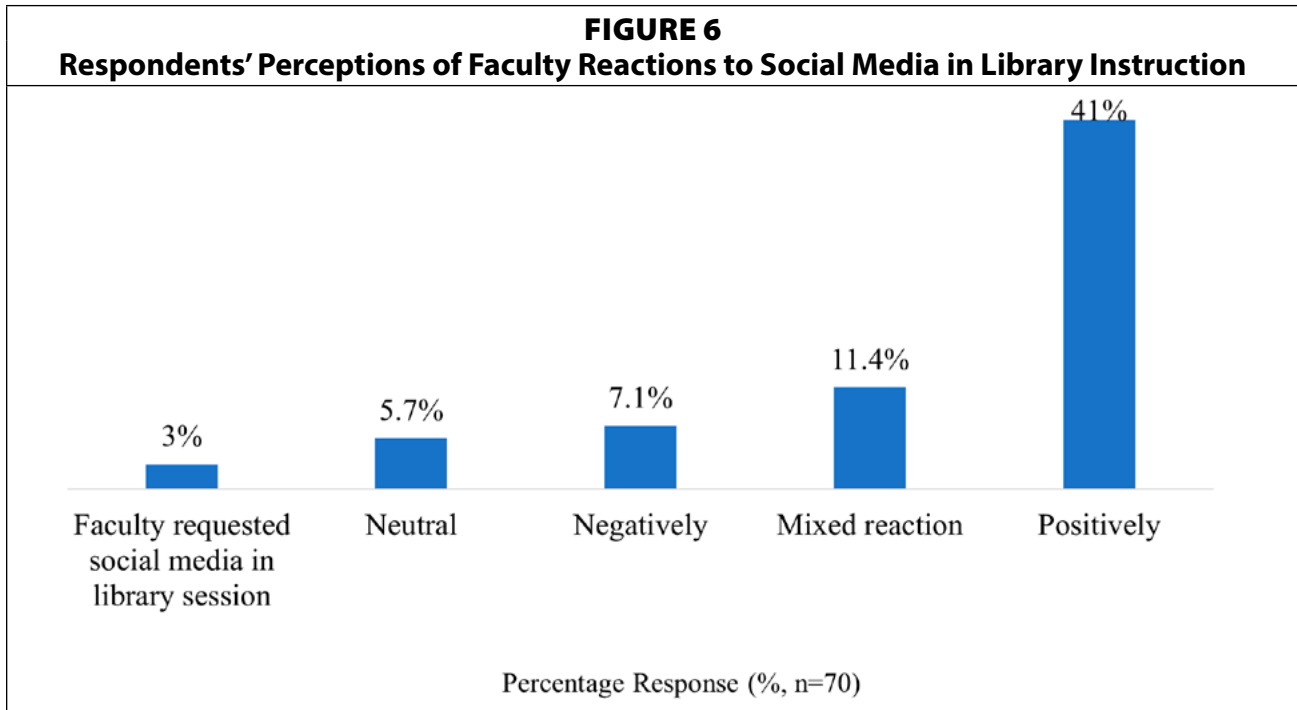


Twenty-two respondents (24 percent) noted additional benefits in the option “Other.” This “Other” category revealed a few minor themes in how librarian instructors see teaching social media as beneficial, including that the platforms provide a convenient and helpful medium for instruction. Three respondents reported using social media in this way, two of whom specifically named YouTube. The third remarked that “videos” help them to teach about using the library catalog. Another theme was that social media provided data for students to work with and analyze. Other individuals identified benefits such as social media allowing them to teach concepts in classes, reach broader audiences, and learn to interact with social media in ways essential for their academic field.

Reactions of Faculty in Academic Departments to Social Media in Library Instruction

Seventy respondents shared their perceptions about departmental faculty’s reactions to social media in library instruction in a free-text box. Twenty-four respondents selected “not applicable” (N/A), or did not answer the question. Figure 6 shows that forty-one percent of respondents perceived their faculty to react positively to using social media in library instruction. Some librarians commented that professors were curious, supported the evaluation of

contextual information and real-life examples, found social media fun, trusted the librarian, or considered the inclusion of social media inconspicuous because it was used in a limited capacity in IL instruction.



General Comments from Survey Respondents

The survey's final question asked respondents if they had anything else to share about using social media in instruction. Forty-two people provided comments. Eight respondents advocated for teaching social media in library instruction, suggesting that social media is a part of modern life used by students and researchers, and thus should be addressed in library sessions. Three respondents expressed an interest in learning more about how others included social media in their instruction, or about the support they received from their institutions. Some participants mentioned that social media was helpful to them for teaching concepts and ideas. Other comments included the importance of social media for scholarly communication, engagement and outreach, and research interests.

Discussion

Research Question 1: How are Teaching Librarians Using Social Media in their Instruction?

Our data indicate that, while respondents are using social media platforms in instruction, they mostly use them to provide examples and to help students understand the current information landscape, but not as a source of information that could help students find resources for their academic assignments. Specifically, our findings show that many respondents had either used—or referred to—a social media platform in instruction to teach a concept (e.g., citation, evaluation, fair use) or for classroom community building (table 2). However, fewer librarians use social media platforms as a source of information to find posts by authoritative sources, to teach lessons on fake news, or to find news and current events.

As mentioned above, some librarians utilize social media for lessons about fake news and misinformation; however, most respondents did not prioritize this option. Considering the amount of literature published in library science journals on evaluating sources, metaliteracy, and the challenges of doing research in the age of misinformation, it is intriguing that the librarians who responded to our survey did not report more actively using social media to address fake news and misinformation in IL instruction.⁴³

On the other hand, respondents' relatively low use of social media in library instruction to seek information from authoritative or scholarly sources is somewhat predictable. Social media's reputation as a credible or even acceptable source of information has plummeted in response to many scandals, such as when people used social media platforms to spread false news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, or when publications—such as the *New York Times*—highlighted the negative effects of social media on youth, and published articles related to the Facebook whistle-blower (which prompted Congress to call for increased regulation of this platform).⁴⁴ Despite the many critiques of social media, we wonder whether teaching librarians should introduce these platforms as a pedagogical tool for students to find information for academic work in higher education. To this end, we consider how respondents perceived benefits and challenges to including social media in library instruction.

Research Question 2: What are the Benefits Teaching Librarians Perceive Regarding the Use of Social Media in Instruction?

The two greatest benefits to using social media in IL that respondents identified were students' familiarity with social media platforms, and the access social media provides to voices that are often not represented in academic sources (figure 5). Some respondents considered social media to be helpful for the development of skills for everyday life, the ability to demonstrate topics, and for providing access to current information. Additionally, a few respondents mentioned that social media provided data for analysis, and that it was good for instruction using videos, or for teaching a concept.

Since social media is a part of everyday life for many people, including higher education students, it is unsurprising that some librarians would seek to harness students' familiarity and comfort with social media to teach them about library research. The survey data reflects this use: many librarians felt that students' familiarity with social media helped them relate to library instruction topics. One respondent offered the statement: "Great evaluation examples." Similarly, another respondent stated, "I use social media as an example in discussions about how information moves in online spaces..." These statements help us reflect on the possible uses of social media in IL instruction.

Another use of social media is the dissemination of underrepresented voices. Scholarly literature represents one source of information commonly recognized as academic due to the peer review process, but it is not the only source of information. Social media may allow access to additional, different voices—such as those of activists, Indigenous peoples, members of underrepresented communities, and governmental and non-profit organizations—as well as to different contexts for information. Kim et al. acknowledge social media's function as a place where different voices may be found:

Social media takes[sic] advantage of the wide range of experiences and expertise that people have. While their quality varies, social media information sources can

provide information that traditional resources cannot efficiently provide. It would therefore be beneficial to acknowledge their usefulness as information sources and to develop IL programs for helping individuals to effectively evaluate and use them.⁴⁵

While we acknowledge the benefit of student familiarity with social media in IL instruction, we consider the more important benefit to be the access to first-hand knowledge and experiences from a wide variety of perspectives it provides, which may broaden students' exposure to different ideas, and to help them understand the world more comprehensively.

Question 3: What are the Challenges Teaching Librarians Perceive Regarding the Use of Social Media in Instruction?

Respondents identified three substantial challenges to using social media in IL instruction: limited time to cover more material in sessions; fear of not being up to date due to fast changes in technology; and concern about privacy issues (figure 4). The biggest challenge—the lack of time to cover social media in IL instruction—suggests that respondents view social media as an additional or “extra” topic, rather than a source of examples for concepts already integrated within their lesson plan. Since time is a major concern for librarians using the one-shot instruction model, one solution could be incorporating social media into the topics they already cover. This model could benefit students by teaching them evaluation skills, and by providing access to a wide range of voices they could include in their academic work.

Another challenge respondents identified relates to the amount of time required to stay current using these technologies. The quickly evolving nature of social media “poses[sic] significant challenges for users,” forcing them to develop new skills and different types of competencies constantly.⁴⁶ Recognizing that technology changes continually, and that social media will probably continue to exist, we wonder whether teaching librarians would consider planning lessons where social media is seen as a source of information.

Privacy was another challenge respondents identified, including privacy issues for themselves as well as for their students. However, only 41 out of 107 respondents selected privacy concerns as one of their top three challenges for including social media in IL instruction. This data is remarkable, as we anticipated that privacy would be a top concern for many respondents, given the criticism of social media companies who use information from user accounts and social media posts to target users with political propaganda and advertisements. Social media has also been criticized for exposing users to illegal data appropriation and compromising users' accounts. These issues are relevant to our discussion because librarians using social media platforms in instruction may legitimize the use of social media platforms, which subsequently exposes students to these risks.

Another risk associated with the use of social media in IL instruction relates to students' ethical use of platforms. To illustrate: if students decided within a class research activity to search for information about their classmates or instructor instead of the research topic, then students might be infringing on the privacy of others. For this reason, any IL instruction activity involving social media would need to be carefully designed to include a discussion about using platforms in an ethical, responsible, and safe manner.⁴⁷

Another topic that received surprisingly little interest from respondents was that of misinformation. Few librarians indicated that “unreliable information” was a challenge when using social media. Given the degree of attention this topic has received in both scholarly

and popular spaces, it is curious that so few respondents would identify this as an issue. A few respondents included comments such as “inappropriate content,” and “not useful,” but none specifically referred to “fake news,” or similar concerns.

Librarians’ Perceptions of Faculty Attitudes Towards Social Media in IL Instruction

Our data suggest that many librarians perceived positive reactions from departmental faculty toward using social media in IL instruction. This positive reaction might encourage librarians to explore using social media in IL instruction for a variety of purposes, including using it as an information source for academic work. However, advocacy for social media could be difficult if teaching librarians have a negative attitude toward it.

A few respondents openly expressed disapproval of social media, suggesting that some librarians may not approve of using social media in IL instruction. As discussed earlier, librarians are often in the position of trying to teach a great deal of content in very limited time frames. Therefore, it is understandable that teaching librarians would not want to spend time on something they consider not useful in the academic context.

However, a negative attitude toward including social media in IL instruction could have consequences. Teaching librarians may miss an opportunity to help students use platforms critically and effectively for scholarly research or other information-gathering purposes. Additionally, ignoring social media and its impact on the world could prevent librarians from understanding how students look for information, generating a disconnect between librarians and students. As teaching librarians ourselves, we recognize the concerns about social media as a source of information for academic work. Nonetheless, we invite our colleagues to investigate further the pedagogical use of these platforms as a source of information in IL instruction.

Limitations to This Study

The data collected in this study represents the responses of a small number of participants within the United States. Therefore, the findings cannot be used to make generalized assumptions, and statistical information is considered exploratory. In addition, it was challenging to create keyword codes for some of the qualitative data due to difficulties in interpreting responses. The survey also presented a limitation concerning some of the multiple-choice questions, which prompted respondents to select from author-created options rather than allowing respondents to generate their own answers.

Conclusion

Our study examines whether and how teaching librarians are using social media in their IL instruction, as well as the benefits and challenges they encounter when they do so. The desire to include other voices and resources in addition to traditional scholarly perspectives in the academic narrative motivated this exploration.

Despite the challenges of utilizing social media in IL instruction, these platforms provide a medium for people to participate in global conversations, to share many types of information—as well as experiences, beliefs, and solutions to problems—that may otherwise go unnoticed by scholars, and that may be useful to students’ academic work. Finally, given the popularity of social media, it seems likely that people will continue to use it extensively,

and that voices representing societal changes and trends may be found there. Therefore, we encourage librarians to participate in the conversation about incorporating social media and non-scholarly voices into IL instruction.

Topics for Future Research

Future studies could examine the attitudes of professors toward the use of social media in IL instruction and their expectations about students' inclusion of non-scholarly voices in their academic work. Future research is also needed about the most effective methods of integrating social media into IL instruction.

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Appendix. The Survey Instrument

1. Are you a librarian in higher education (academic librarian)?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
2. Do you have one shot or course instruction responsibilities? Select all that apply
 - ☐ Yes, one time session (workshops, one-shots, webinars, etc.)
 - ☐ Yes, courses (multiple related sessions)
 - ☐ No instruction responsibilities.
3. What category best describes your institution?
 - ☐ Doctorate university
 - ☐ Master's college/university
 - ☐ Baccalaureate college/university
 - ☐ Associate's college/community college
 - ☐ Special focus institution/technical college
 - ☐ Tribal college
 - ☐ None of the above
4. How long have you taught library instruction sessions in a higher education context?
 - ☐ 0-2 years
 - ☐ 3-5 years
 - ☐ 6-10 years
 - ☐ 11 or more years
5. How would you categorize your position? Select all that apply.
 - ☐ Subject specialist/liaison
 - ☐ Instruction
 - ☐ Data services/GIS
 - ☐ Reference
 - ☐ Assessment/analytics/user experience
 - ☐ Archiving/curatorial/rare books/preservation/conservation
 - ☐ Digital initiatives/systems/information technology/web development
 - ☐ Outreach
 - ☐ Media/multimedia specialist
 - ☐ Access services
 - ☐ Cataloging/bibliographic control/metadata
 - ☐ Scholarly communication
 - ☐ Press/publishing
 - ☐ Acquisitions/collection development/management/strategy
6. Do you support specific academic programs/departments? Select all that apply.
 - ☐ Communication/journalism/media studies
 - ☐ Business
 - ☐ Math/computer science/statistics/technology/engineering
 - ☐ Social sciences
 - ☐ Natural sciences
 - ☐ Health/medicine/nursing
 - ☐ Education
 - ☐ Art/art history/theater/music/film

- ☐ Social work
 - ☐ Undergraduate writing and rhetoric
 - ☐ Humanities
 - ☐ Literature
 - ☐ Languages
 - ☐ History
 - ☐ Other, please specify
 - ☐ I do not liaise with any department
7. Which social media platforms have you used (e.g., as an information source, demonstrated, discussed, used data from) in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
- ☐ Facebook
 - ☐ Instagram
 - ☐ LinkedIn
 - ☐ Nextdoor
 - ☐ Pinterest
 - ☐ Reddit
 - ☐ Snapchat
 - ☐ TikTok
 - ☐ Twitter
 - ☐ WhatsApp
 - ☐ YouTube
 - ☐ Other
 - ☐ I have not used social media platforms in my instruction
8. How do you use Facebook in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
- ☐ I've used Facebook to teach evaluation skills (accuracy, relevancy, currency, etc.).
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach lessons on fake news/misinformation.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach lessons on citing, copyright, fair use, and/or Creative Commons.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach content of information and what information is available in social media platforms (e.g., currency of posts, who can post information to this platform, etc.).
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach how to find posts or other information by the general public, or to observe social interactions.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach how to find posts or other information by authoritative/scholarly sources.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach how to find news and current events.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach how to find instruction and solutions to problems.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to engage with students with the goals of increasing classroom participation by using a familiar platform.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to engage with students with the goals of communicating with students.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to engage with students with the goals of building classroom community.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to engage with students with the goals of creating relevant examples that students can relate to the instruction.

- ☐ I've used Facebook to engage with students with the goals of teaching analytic and data skills for this platform.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach platform-specific skills, such as how to use the platform in their future professions.
 - ☐ I've used Facebook to teach platform-specific skills, such as teaching how to create content for this platform.
 - ☐ I've taught Facebook or Facebook posts using the platform itself.
 - ☐ I've taught Facebook or Facebook posts using a 3rd party platform that makes the data available (e.g. Netlytic, Social Studio, etc.).
 - ☐ I've taught Facebook or Facebook posts using references to the platform, but I do not demonstrate or use the platform.
9. How do you use Instagram in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
10. How do you use LinkedIn in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
11. How do you use Nextdoor in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
12. How do you use Pinterest in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
13. How do you use Reddit in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
14. How do you use Snapchat in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
15. How do you use TikTok in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
16. How do you use Twitter in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
17. How do you use WhatsApp in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
18. How do you use YouTube in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
19. You indicated you use an "other" social media platform. How do you use the "other" social media platform in your instruction sessions? Select all that apply.
20. How often do you use Facebook in your Instruction?
- ☐ Regularly, about three times per semester or more.
 - ☐ Once or twice per semester.
 - ☐ Rarely, about once a year or less.
21. How often do you use Instagram in your Instruction?
22. How often do you use LinkedIn in your Instruction?
23. How often do you use Nextdoor in your Instruction?
24. How often do you use Pinterest in your Instruction?
25. How often do you use Reddit in your Instruction?
26. How often do you use Snapchat in your Instruction?
27. How often do you use TikTok in your Instruction?
28. How often do you use Twitter in your Instruction?
29. How often do you use WhatsApp in your Instruction?
30. How often do you use YouTube in your Instruction?
31. You indicated to teach an "other" social media platform. How often do you use your identified social media platform in your instruction?
- ☐ Regularly, about three times per semester or more.
 - ☐ Once or twice per semester.
 - ☐ Rarely, about once a year or less.
32. What are the top three challenges when using social media in your library instruction? Select up to three challenges.
- ☐ Students get distracted.

- ☐ I do not feel confident about my technical skills.
 - ☐ Students often do not have the technical skills needed.
 - ☐ I am concerned about privacy issues for myself.
 - ☐ I am concerned about privacy issues for students.
 - ☐ Technology changes fast, I don't want to teach something outdated.
 - ☐ There are too many things to teach in a session to include social media.
 - ☐ Social media often contains unreliable information.
 - ☐ Some students do not have accounts to social media sites I present.
 - ☐ Other
33. What are the top three benefits of using social media in your instruction? Select up to three benefits.
- ☐ Students are familiar with social media and can relate to the instruction.
 - ☐ Students in my discipline need to learn social media skills for their future careers.
 - ☐ Working with social media keeps me up to date.
 - ☐ Social media demonstrate the topic very clearly.
 - ☐ Social media adds entertainment to the instruction session.
 - ☐ Social media provides access to voices not represented in academic sources.
 - ☐ Social media offers current information.
 - ☐ Social media skills are important for everyday life.
 - ☐ Other
34. In your experience, how do most faculty/instructors from the departments you support react to social media in your library instruction?
35. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your use of social media in instruction?

Notes

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41. Ibid, 199.

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