



Social media diaries and fasts: Educating for digital mindfulness with pre-service teachers^{☆, ☆ ☆}

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants reported using social media intentionally and due to unconscious habits.
- Participants were able to identify what was gained and lost with social media.
- Participants rated social media experiences above neutral, but Facebook rated lowest.
- Preservice teachers planned to conduct similar lessons in future.
- Pedagogical guidelines for social media mindfulness should allow for complexity.

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ABSTRACT

With social media access nearly ubiquitous, teachers and students must explore how to mitigate distractions and unhealthy uses. In this mixed methods study, the authors invited 60 pre-service teachers across two universities to cultivate mindfulness around social media beliefs, habits, and behaviors by completing a social media survey, diary, and fast. Participants identified reasons for regular social media use, including unconscious impulses, and made new realizations about what is gained and lost in social media engagements. Participants were optimistic about teaching similar lessons. The authors recommend pedagogical guidelines for social media mindfulness that allow for complexity, variance, and idiosyncrasy.

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1. Introduction

For better and worse, we live in a fast-paced world. Smartphones, tablets, and laptops can help people stay connected in meaningful ways and afford collaboration with others that transcend traditional geographic, temporal, or logistic constraints. However, the blessing of perpetual connectivity to notifications, tweets, or snaps can also morph into a burden that can actually leave users feeling more distanced and distracted. One recent study

indicated that adults check their smartphones an average of 85 times a day (Andrews, Ellis, Shaw, & Piwek, 2015). This pull of participatory media can paradoxically pull the attention of individuals away from the very tasks, thoughts, or people with which they wish to connect. For example, social media companies profit from designing platforms and algorithms that draw on the neurological and psychological impulses that capture users' attention (Harris, 2017), and changing online habits of consumers might even be rewiring their brains to prioritize immediate and efficient information (Carr, 2010). One recent study suggested that frequent social media users have lower levels of mindfulness and experience more emotional exhaustion (Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016) and another indicated that digital technologies can even diminish the scholarly endeavors of university students (Selwyn, 2016). Moreover, reflexive and unreflective social media use can lead to depression, suicide, and other mental-health maladies (Twenge, 2017). Unfortunately, some educators have labeled the current

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generation of students as “digital natives” who already possess online knowhow and this assumption implies that students do not require the development of digital skills (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017) (see Fig. 1).

Howard Rheingold (2012) argued that while we must investigate “whether or not Google is making us stupid, Facebook is commoditizing our privacy, or Twitter is chopping our attention to microslices,” we must simultaneously explore “how to use social media intelligently, humanely, and above all mindfully” (p. 1). In a time when there is nearly unlimited access to information, knowing how and where to focus attention becomes a salient social media literacy, and there is ample evidence that social media experiences offer benefits in personal, professional, and educational spaces. However, if the media habits of students and teachers have shifted, teacher educators should respond accordingly to prepare pre-service teachers (PSTs) to use social media and other technologies mindfully in their personal and professional lives.

Unfortunately, there is little research or practice that suggests teacher educators have answered the call to prepare pre-service teachers for this new media ecology. In this study, we will present our research with 60 participants across two universities to better understand how pre-service teachers might develop personal and professional mindfulness. We will introduce mindfulness concepts and then review literature related to social media in education. We describe our contexts and methods for this study and share findings from our social media assignment. Finally, we will discuss the implications of this research for teacher educators, teachers, and researchers who hope to bring attention to mindful social media practices in their contexts.

2. Theoretical lens

Professionals in many fields (e.g., business, health, education) have begun to adopt and apply the Eastern philosophical practice of mindfulness. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145) mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience.” Citizens of the 21st century have access to unprecedented opportunities for connectivity through nearly ubiquitous digital technologies. Paradoxically, this extraordinary access means people must also make an unprecedented number of decisions about where, when, and how to direct their attention. As David Levy (2016a) suggests,

We are all continually making moment-to-moment micro-decisions...., both online and offline, about what to pay attention to, what to ignore, and how to manage the thoughts and feelings, the bodily movements, postures, and breathing that inevitably accompany these decisions. And it is from the accumulation of such microdecisions that the fabric of our days is woven. (pp. 21–22).

Mindfulness advocates argue that by increasing awareness in any present moment, people become more satisfied, engaged, and reflective (Greeson, 2009; Langer, 1989; Shapiro & Carlson, 2017). As such, mindfulness is not limited to the awareness of one's current state, but also includes how they might adapt that awareness to change their current state for the better. For example, while social media platforms provide portals for connecting with people, information, and interests, many people report their uses of social

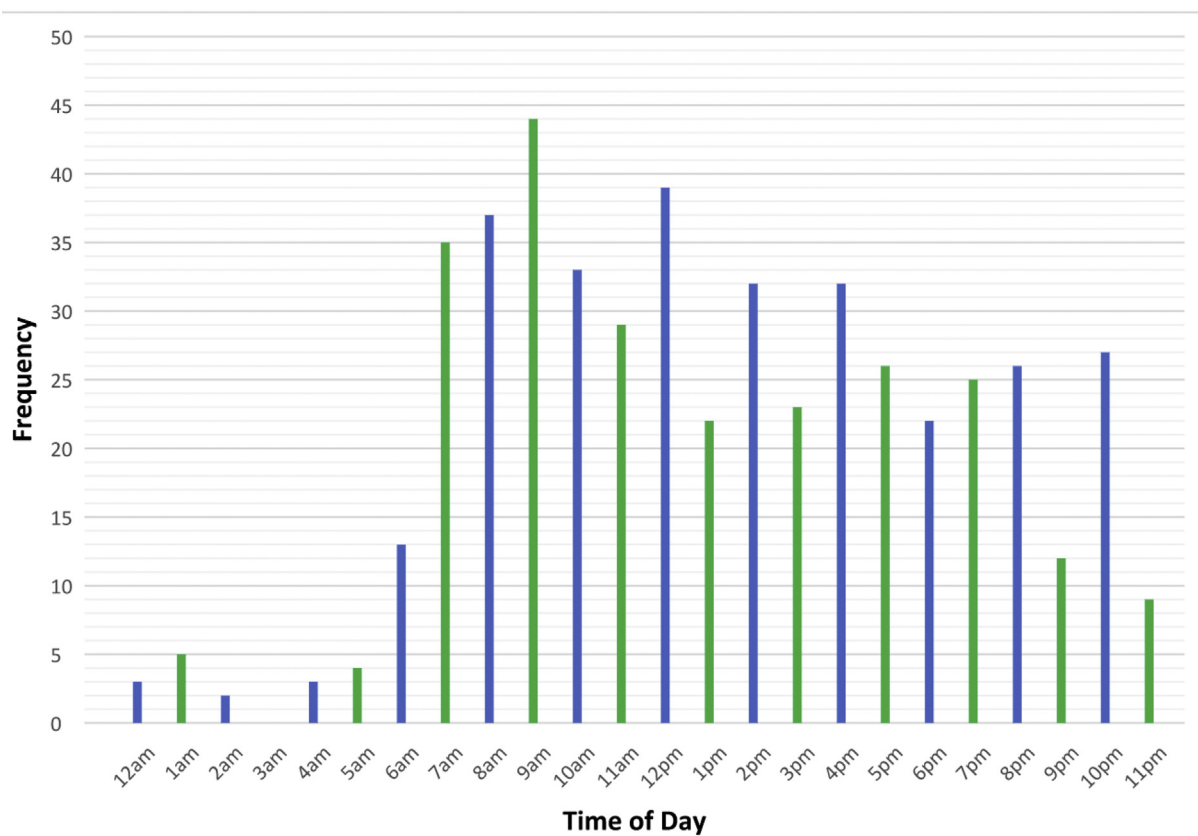


Fig. 1. Social media diary entries by time of day and frequency (^aN = 503).
^aN = Number of entries, not number of participants.

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