Suspended Because of Social Media? Students’ Knowledge and Opinions of University Social Media Policies and Practices

Kimberly W. O’Connor  
*Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, oconnork@ipfw.edu*

Gordon B. Schmidt  
*Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne, schmidtg@ipfw.edu*

Michelle Drouin  
*Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne, drouinm@ipfw.edu*

This research is a product of the Organizational Leadership faculty at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs](http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs)

Part of the [Industrial and Organizational Psychology Commons](http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs) and the [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs)

Opus Citation


[http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs/92](http://opus.ipfw.edu/ols_facpubs/92)
Suspended because of social media? Students’ knowledge and opinions of university social media policies and practices

Kimberly W. O’Connor*, Gordon B. Schmidt, Michelle Drouin

Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, USA

ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, we examined undergraduates’ (N = 298) knowledge of their university’s social media policies, understanding of free speech and privacy protections, opinions about university monitoring and discipline for personal social media posts, and perceptions of fairness regarding recent cases of student discipline for personal social media use. The results of our study indicate that most undergraduates are highly underinformed as to whether or not their university has a social media policy, particularly if the students are early in their academic careers and do not engage in many online privacy protection behaviors. Most participants were also misinformed as to whether free speech and/or privacy protections will shield them from university discipline. In addition, most participants (78%) were opposed to the idea of universities monitoring students’ personal social media accounts, though significantly fewer (68%) were opposed to monitoring student athletes’ social media. Finally, when asked about several recent cases involving student discipline, most participants were generally opposed to a variety of university disciplinary actions regarding students’ social media posts. We discuss these findings as they relate to the need for better social media policy training for students, as well as the potential impact on students’ academic and future careers.

1. Introduction

Colorado College junior, Thaddeus Pryor, was suspended from school after he posted six words on the popular social media site, Yik Yak. In response to #blackwomennmatter, he wrote, “They matter. They're just not hot.” The initial suspension of two years was reduced to six months after the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a civil liberties nonprofit, got involved (Kingkade, 2015).

Elon college football player Jamal “Gucci” Shuman took to Twitter to complain about his lack of playing time. Referring to head coach Pete Lembo, he used the hashtag #SlapGuccisCoach. As a result, Shuman was suspended indefinitely from the football team. He later stated that he did not know his tweets were public (Burke, 2011).

Texas Christian University (TCU) student, Harry Vincent, was disciplined for a tweet following the Baltimore riots. He wrote, “#Baltimore in 4 words: poor uneducated druggy hoodrats.” He also was disciplined for a second tweet that referenced his spring break trip. He wrote “Almost as tan as a terrorist. Going to be thoroughly disappointed if I am not racially profiled on my trip to Gulf Shores.” In response, TCU placed Vincent on academic probation, ordered him to perform 60 hours of community service, and required him to take a diversity and sensitivity course. Vincent was allowed to remain in school (Mosier, 2015).

These are just a few examples of recent headlines where universities have disciplined students for their personal social media use, defined as the use of instant messaging or social networking sites to connect, communicate, and interact with other subscribers (Correa, Hinsley, & Zuniga, 2010). Reported instances involving university students have ranged from minor penalties, such as sensitivity training, to outright dismissal from universities. In addition, their posts can also be problematic when they go into the labor market, with recruiters looking at social media posts for recruitment and selection of new employees (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). With this much at stake, it is imperative for students to know and understand the social media policies at their college or university; likewise, it is crucial for higher education institutions to examine what their students know about their policies and to educate students on appropriate social media use.
Our research looks to build a greater understanding of students’ knowledge of their universities’ social media policies, the characteristics of those students, the monitoring of student social media by universities, and the students’ perception of university-mandated punishments in social media cases. As such, our exploratory study has three major goals: (1) to examine students’ awareness of the existence of their university’s social media policy and whether students understand the potential for discipline due to the lack of legal protections that exist for their personal social media posts; (2) to examine the attitudes and beliefs of students about how universities should monitor student social media and punish students for behaviors, and (3) to examine whether individual student characteristics impact these beliefs. We then discuss the implications of these results for students, universities, and employers.

1.1. Social media’s increased role in student discipline: a legal perspective

Statistics regarding young adult social media use show that 90% of those age 18–29 years old regularly use social media sites (Perrin, 2015). Facebook has over one billion users worldwide, with 96% of university students saying they access it on a typical day (Capano, Deris, & Desjardine, 2009; Facebook, 2015). Many young adult users also frequent multiple sites each day, including Twitter, Snapchat, Yik Yak, and Instagram, among others (Capano et al., 2009). With such widespread use, there is no doubt that social media use has become an issue that many universities have had to address.

Currently, over 50% of doctorate-granting universities have a social media policy. For master’s colleges and universities, 32.1% have a social media policy. And for baccalaureate colleges, 16.4% have a social media policy (Pomerantz, Hank, & Sugimoto, 2015). Estimates vary for universities having social media policies that specifically govern student athletes, with a 2013 study by The College Sports Information Directors of America suggesting 33% of universities have written student-athlete social media policies and Sanderson, Snyder, Hull, and Gramlich (2015) suggesting about 69% of NCAA member institutes have such student-athlete policies. Despite the fact the social media policies seem to be prevalent in universities, scant research exists on this phenomenon. The existing research mainly focuses on student athletes (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson, Browning, & Schmittel, 2015), or the incidence rate of social media policies for particular programs such as medical and dental schools (Henry & Webb, 2013; Kind, Genrich, Sudhi, & Chretien, 2010).

As we have seen in the aforementioned examples of student discipline, students’ lack of awareness and/or understanding of their university’s social media policy can lead to instances where university students are punished for their personal social media posts. This may be because many students are under the mistaken impression that the First Amendment or privacy protections apply to protect them in these situations. Alternatively, it may be that students have very little actual understanding of how laws may or may not apply to university discipline cases involving social media.

When it comes to university students, the law is clear. If students attend a private college, then First Amendment protections do not exist to protect their speech from university discipline. Private universities may respond to student issues involving personal social media use according to their own policies, or however they otherwise deem to be appropriate (Burl, 2011). On the other hand, if a student attends a public university, there is some measure of free speech protection because of the First Amendment. There are many exceptions, though. Fighting words, obscenity, threats, harassment, and defamation are not protected speech (e.g., Burl, 2011). Courts also routinely find in favor of universities in First Amendment cases, holding that “public institutions can regulate speech if the speech does or will materially and substantially interfere with the requirements of appropriate discipline in the operation of the school.” (Burl, 2011). This legal precedent has been applied specifically to social media discipline cases (Tatro, 2011).

As far as potential privacy arguments, courts have consistently ruled that, when it comes to social media, there is no reasonable expectation of privacy because users are voluntarily posting information, status updates, and pictures (Taylor, 2011). There are a few state law protections, however, that prevent some employers and universities from asking applicants, employees, or students for their social media usernames and passwords. Currently, there are approximately twenty-three states that have such privacy protections in place with regard to employers, and fifteen state statutes apply to educational institutions. (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016).

1.2. Existing research on university social media policies

While calls have been made for universities to create social media policies (Junco, 2011), the academic literature examining universities’ social media policies is sparse. Moreover, the existing research has generally focused on particular types of students (e.g., student athletes) and programs (e.g., medical school or dental school programs).

One focus has been universities’ social media policies for student athletes. Because student athletes are often high profile and can act as representations of a university to the public, universities have sometimes employed strategies to inform student athletes on acceptable social media use and/or restrict their social media use. As discussed previously, estimates on what percentage of universities have student athlete social media policies vary. Sanderson (2011) found that about 64% of NCAA Division I athletic programs had such social media policies, with Sanderson, Browning et al. (2015) finding a rate of approximately 69% for a sample made up of NCAA Division I, II, and III athletic programs.

Sanderson (2011) and colleagues (2015) also found that universities’ social media policies generally focus on restricting student behaviors and typically frame social media use in a negative way for students. There is also significant ambiguity, with “mixed-messages” given to student-athletes such as “be careful what you post,” yet “post on social media for marketing purposes.” Studies by Sanderson and Browning (2013) and Sanderson, Browning et al. (2015) suggest that even when student athletes are educated about their university’s social media policy, such ambiguous language means that student athletes will have to use their own judgment about what is, or is not, appropriate to post. This may be especially problematic because a student athlete’s perception of appropriateness may vary significantly from a college administrator’s. These studies ultimately point to the need for clearer social media policy language, as well as more effective training by the universities and coaches. Sanderson and colleagues advocate for better social media education at the beginning of a student athlete’s academic career, as well as involving student athletes in policy formation and revision.

Other research on university student-related social media policies has focused on students in particular college programs, primarily focusing on the incidence rates of social media policies. Research by Kind et al. (2010) found that at the time of their study only 10% of the 128 medical schools they surveyed even mentioned student social media use in their student guidelines. More recently, Frazier, Culley, Hein, Williams, and Tavakkoli (2014) examined social media policies in nursing education programs and found that 62.1% of students and 93.6% of faculty felt a social media policy was
needed. Henry and Webb (2013), meanwhile, focused on social media policies at dental schools with 47.8% of academic deans saying the university had a social media policy and 34.8% saying there was a specific dental school social media policy.

While the aforementioned research helps to build our understanding of university social media policies, it does not focus on the knowledge and perceptions that the general student population has about such policies. In the existing empirical literature, there are no known studies that examine university students’ social media policy knowledge, or their understanding of the legal implications of their personal social media use. However, a recent study by Drouin, O’Connor, Schmidt, and Miller (2015) measured university students’ perceptions and opinions of the fairness of employers’ use of discipline in social media cases. In the study, less than one third of the young adults sampled expressed agreement with their employers disciplining them for their personal social media use. Additionally, almost half of the participants (44%) stated that social media should not be used in hiring and firing decisions, and 28% were neutral. (Drouin et al., 2015). Those who were opposed to this practice were more open to experience, had little self-control, and were more accepting of the hookup culture. Drouin et al. (2015) point out the fact that regardless of their overall opposition to this practice by employers, young adults need to be aware that their personal social media use can have long term effects on their careers.

In another study, O’Connor, Schmidt, and Drouin (2016) measured young adults’ understanding of workplace social media policies. In their study, only one third of the participants indicated that their company had a social media policy, and only half of those participants whose companies had a social media policy actually knew what the policy said. Meanwhile, 35% of participants reported that they did not know if their companies had a social media policy, and 34% of participants said that their companies did not have a social media policy. These results were concerning in light of the fact that 80% of companies in fact do have a social media policy. Such statistics point to an overall lack of understanding by college students about potential discipline issues they may face at work for their social media use. Additionally, O’Connor et al. (2016) found that the longer workers had been with the company, the more likely they were to indicate that their company did have a social media policy. As breaches of policy could occur at any time in a worker’s tenure, these results highlighted the need for early and systematic social media policy training for workers.

These studies of workers’ social media knowledge and perceptions helped to inform the current study. Building on the work of Drouin et al. (2015) and O’Connor et al. (2016), we examined students’ knowledge and perceptions of their university’s social media policies, as like workers, students also face potential disciplinary and legal repercussions for violations of those policies.

1.3. The current study

The current study examines students’ knowledge of their university’s social media policy. Based on the results of O’Connor et al. (2016), we expected to find that university students are similarly uninformed or under informed as to whether or not a social media policy exists at their university. Just as a substantial number of workers may not know what social media behaviors can result in employer discipline, we expected to find that university students generally do not know that universities can discipline or expel them for their personal social media use. This may be due to the fact that university students lack awareness of their institution’s social media policy or perhaps that many believe that the law protects them in such situations. We also expected, as found in O’Connor et al. (2016) that those with longer tenure with the institution (in this case, semesters enrolled), would be more likely to know that the university had a social media policy, based on the premise that the more time with the institution, the more likely they would have encountered some sort of formal or informal exposure to policies. Regardless, just as employers need to do a better job of training workers on their social media policies, it is likely that universities need to also. Examining the characteristics of those students who have no knowledge of their university’s social media policy may help a university target those students who are most in need of training.

Based on the findings of O’Connor et al. (2016) and Drouin et al. (2015), we expected:

H1. Many students would not know if the university had a social media policy or the specific parameters of their university’s social media policy.

H2. Those who had been enrolled longer at the university would be more likely to know that the university had a policy.

H3. Students would be likely to disagree with monitoring or disciplinary actions of other universities based on students’ personal social media use.

Additionally, as other researchers have focused on student athletes (e.g., Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson, Browning et al., 2015), we examined students’ opinions about student athlete monitoring and discipline. However, as there is no known research that has examined students’ opinions regarding this topic, we made no a priori predictions. Understanding student perceptions may result in less backlash from the student population or public on particular types of cases, and may result in less litigation over time. Moreover, identifying student characteristics that predict knowledge of and opinions about university social media policy may help university administrators target their information to the most under informed audiences.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 298 undergraduates (M age = 19.49, SD = 2.00) recruited from an introductory psychology class at a mid-sized Midwestern public university. There were over 30 different majors represented in this sample. This university has a 6-page social media policy posted on its website, which has been approved since 2011, and includes a statement of policy, guidelines, responsibilities, and exclusions. In terms of characteristics of the participants, the sample was 80% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% Asian, and 3% other ethnicity. Meanwhile, women (54%) outnumbered men (46%). In terms of class standing, most were Freshmen (59%), and Sophomores (28%), and fewer were Juniors (11%) and Seniors (3%). More than 25 majors were represented. Most of the participants (75%) were employed, and 80% of those who were employed worked full-time.

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed an online consent form and then completed an online anonymous survey including demographic questions, questions about their knowledge of social media policies at the university, their online privacy behaviors, their opinions of university social media-related cases, and personality measures, as described below.
2.2.1. Knowledge of university social media policy

To measure whether students knew if the university had a social media policy and their knowledge of specific policy provisions (e.g., whether the university could discipline students for their personal social media posts), students answered eight questions with response choices of “yes,” “no,” or “I don’t know.” answered eight questions with response choices of “yes,” “no,” or “I don’t know.” These questions, adapted from O’Connor et al. (2016), were included to measure common social media policy elements and beliefs about the appropriateness of use. See Table 1 for the complete set of questions.

2.2.2. Social media use

To examine the extent to which students engaged with social media on a weekly basis, they were asked to “Please indicate the frequency with which you post or send messages/media via following technologies,” and were asked to respond with regard to five popular social communication platforms: text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, a scale previously used by Drouin et al. (2015). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = very frequently. Their ratings of their frequency of use of these five types of social media were averaged to create a combined social media use measure (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.74).

2.2.3. Privacy protection behaviors

Participants were asked about the extent to which they engaged in 14 different privacy protection behaviors (e.g., “Deleted or edited something you posted in the past” or “Cleared cookies or browser history”). These questions were based on a Pew Research Center survey on American’s attitudes about privacy and security (Madden & Rainie, 2015). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = always. These ratings were averaged to create a combined privacy protection behavior measure (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.88).

2.2.4. Students’ opinions of university engagement with students’ social media behaviors (SUESSMB)

To measure students’ opinions of the university’s engagement in students’ social media behaviors, we created an 11 item-scale consisting of questions about university monitoring, disciplinary behaviors (including recent social media discipline enacted by various U.S. universities), and student athlete issues. See Table 4 for complete list of questions. These items were created by the authors based on existing social media discipline cases and situations that have arisen at universities. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree on their opinions about whether or not the university should engage with students’ social media use on these issues.

3. Results

As shown Table 1, and in support of our H1, 70% of students were unaware whether or not the university had a social media policy. Accordingly, many students (approximately half) did not know about the specific components of the university’s social media policy, like whether their social media posts were monitored by the university (74%) or whether they could be disciplined or expelled for their personal social media behavior (58%). That said, 43% believed that they had a right to privacy for their personal social media posts, and 37% believed that students had First Amendment protection for their private social media posts.

In order to examine whether tenure at the university was related to knowing whether or not the university has a social media policy (H2), we conducted an ANOVA. As shown in Table 2, those who indicated that the university did have a social media policy had been enrolled for more semesters than those who did not know if the university had such a policy and those who stated it did not have a policy, \(F(2,285) = 4.49, p < 0.05\). However, Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons revealed significant differences for only the “yes” versus the “don’t know” group. Thus, our H2, which predicted that those who had been at the university longer would be more likely to know that the university had a social media policy, was mostly supported. As a post-hoc analysis, we also examined how other student characteristics such as age, GPA, overall social media usage, and personal privacy protection behaviors online predicted knowledge and opinions of university policies. As shown in Table 2, those who indicated that the university did have a social media policy were slightly older and engaged in more privacy protection behaviors than those who stated that the university did not have a policy or they did not know if the university had a policy. The differences between groups were significant only privacy protection tools used, and Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons revealed significant differences for only the “yes” versus the “don’t know” group, \(F(2,285) = 9.73, p < 0.001\). Meanwhile, there were no significant differences between groups based on their age, GPA, or reported use of social media.

Next, we examined the extent to which students agreed with the university’s engagement in personal social media behaviors. As shown in Table 3, overall, fewer than half of students agreed that the university should be able to monitor students’ posts (22%–23% agreed with this practice) or discipline students for their personal social media posts (22%–47% agreed with this). For the four items that referenced actual disciplinary actions taken by universities

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
<td>M(SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>19.64(1.47)</td>
<td>19.37(1.34)</td>
<td>19.48(2.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semesters in college</td>
<td>3.12(2.56)</td>
<td>2.47(2.50)</td>
<td>2.25(1.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>3.00(0.60)</td>
<td>3.11(0.44)</td>
<td>2.99(0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media use</td>
<td>3.48(0.92)</td>
<td>3.62(0.78)</td>
<td>3.32(0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy protection</td>
<td>2.37(0.72)</td>
<td>2.13(0.74)</td>
<td>1.98(0.95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Yes: n = 68; No: n = 19; Don’t know: n = 201. Values with different subscripts differ at the \(p < 0.05\) level. \(^* p < 0.05\) \(^* * p < 0.001\).

Table 1

| Percentage of student responses to questions on school related social media factors. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                  | % yes                           | % no                           | % don’t know                    |
| Does your university have a social media policy? | 23.6%                           | 6.6%                           | 69.8%                           |
| Does your university monitor students’ social media posts? | 17.1%                           | 9.1%                           | 73.9%                           |
| Can your university discipline students for their social media posts? | 34.7%                           | 7.3%                           | 58.0%                           |
| Students have a right to privacy for their personal social media posts. | 32.2%                           | 5.6%                           | 62.2%                           |
| Students have First Amendment protection for their personal social media posts | 43.2%                           | 15.0%                          | 41.8%                           |

Please cite this article in press as: O’Connor, K. W., et al., Suspended because of social media? Students’ knowledge and opinions of university social media policies and practices, Computers in Human Behavior (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.001
during recent social media cases, fewer than one third (22%–28%) of students agreed with the university’s actions, except for the case involving a student posting a culturally-insensitive Snapchat, where 47% of students agreed that the university should be able to discipline a student for his personal post. Similarly, for the three items that referenced general disciplinary actions, only 22%–30% of students agreed that the university should be able to take disciplinary action (i.e., undefined disciplinary action, expulsion, or mandated sensitivity training) against students for their social media posts. Therefore, our H3 was supported. Meanwhile, with regard to their opinions regarding student athletes, 32% of students believed that student athletes’ social media posts should be monitored, and students were significantly more likely to agree that student athletes should have their social media posts monitored than themselves ($t(1,286) = 3.36, p < 0.001$) or other (non-athlete) students ($t(1,284) = 3.58, p < 0.001$). Notably, there were no significant differences in students’ opinions of the university monitoring their own social media posts versus other student non-athletes ($t(1,285) = -0.69, p = 0.49$). Moreover, approximately one out of seven students (13–16%) agreed that the university should be able to mandate that student athletes relinquish their social media accounts or that these athletes should have restrictions placed on them about how they use social media.

Finally, we conducted a principal components factor analysis followed by a varimax rotation with the 11 university engagement items (SUESSMB). As shown in Table 4, three factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Guttman, 1954). When these items were examined they seemed to fit into distinguishable conceptual categories: one for monitoring, one for disciplinary actions, and one for student athlete issues. Together, these three factors explained 73% of the variance. The three factors were also strongly correlated with one another ($r = 0.51$ between Monitor and Discipline, $r = 0.45$ between Monitor and Student Athletes, and $r = 0.52$ between Discipline and Student Athletes, all ps < 0.001).

To examine the student characteristics that predicted the three factors for opinions about university engagement in students’ social media practices, we conducted a series of regression analyses using the same student characteristics we examined for knowledge of social media policy. See Table 5. For monitoring, no significant model emerged. However, for disciplinary actions, a significant model emerged: Those with higher GPAs, greater weekly social media use, and greater privacy protection behaviors were more likely to agree that the university should take disciplinary action in response to inappropriate student social media behavior. Additionally, for student athlete issues, those with greater social media use and greater privacy protection behaviors were more likely to agree with rules or sanctions for student athletes with regard to their personal social media behavior. In both models, the variables accounted for a small (8%) but significant amount of the variance in these opinions.

Table 4

Rotated factor matrix for the students’ opinions of university engagement with students’ social media behaviors scale (SUESSMB). As shown in Table 4, three factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than one (Guttman, 1954). When these items were examined they seemed to fit into distinguishable conceptual categories: one for monitoring, one for disciplinary actions, and one for student athlete issues. Together, these three factors explained 73% of the variance. The three factors were also strongly correlated with one another ($r = 0.51$ between Monitor and Discipline, $r = 0.45$ between Monitor and Student Athletes, and $r = 0.52$ between Discipline and Student Athletes, all ps < 0.001).

To examine the student characteristics that predicted the three factors for opinions about university engagement in students’ social media practices, we conducted a series of regression analyses using the same student characteristics we examined for knowledge of social media policy. See Table 5. For monitoring, no significant model emerged. However, for disciplinary actions, a significant model emerged: Those with higher GPAs, greater weekly social media use, and greater privacy protection behaviors were more likely to agree that the university should take disciplinary action in response to inappropriate student social media behavior. Additionally, for student athlete issues, those with greater social media use and greater privacy protection behaviors were more likely to agree with rules or sanctions for student athletes with regard to their personal social media behavior. In both models, the variables accounted for a small (8%) but significant amount of the variance in these opinions.

Table 4

Rotated factor matrix for the students’ opinions of university engagement with students’ social media behaviors scale (SUESSMB).
4. Discussion

4.1. Student knowledge of university social media policy and their characteristics

The results of our study suggest that students (like workers) are highly underinformed as to the existence (or non-existence) of their university's social media policy (O'Connor et al., 2016). Of particular note is that 70% of students did not know if their university had a social media policy. This is especially troubling given the rate at which young adults use social media, as well the fact that many universities, including the one from which the participants were recruited, do have a social media policy in place. More troubling is the fact that the majority of students surveyed did not know that their university can discipline students for their personal social media posts. Like the previous worker study of O'Connor et al. (2016), these results point to the fact that universities (like employers) need to do a better job of educating students about their social media policies. This is especially true for college students who are early in their academic careers. This group in particular is less likely to know whether or not their university has a social media policy.

Universities should also consider when to train their students about their social media policies. Building in policy training at student orientation makes sense based upon the results of our study. However, social media policy training only once at student orientation may not be enough. For example, though upperclassmen are more knowledgeable about the existence of a social media policy, they may not actually understand what the policy language means. Repeated instances of policy training throughout students' college career therefore could help to ensure that students at all levels are informed. In addition, social media policies often get updated over time, as technology, site popularity, and students' personal social media use change. Retraining students prior to the implementation of policy changes is important.

It is also important for universities to educate students about the potential impact their personal social media use has on their future careers, including their upcoming job searches. Recent data from CareerBuilder indicates that most employers (60%) look to an applicant's social media for purposes of selection. Nearly half (49%) of employers found postings about candidates that turned them off, whether it was inappropriate photos, evidence of drinking and/or drug use, or disparaging comments about previous employers (Massimo, 2016). Therefore, training about personal social media use as it relates to candidate selection should be incorporated into social media training for university students.

4.2. Student knowledge of legal protections and personal social media use

Our study also indicated that students are underinformed and even misinformed as to their legal rights when using social media. As far as privacy protections, 43% of students indicated that they do have a right to privacy for their personal social media posts, and 42% of the students in our study indicated that they do not know. However, as previously discussed, legal precedent on this issue is clear: Students certainly do not have privacy protection to shield them from university discipline for their personal social media posts. The confusion may be due to the fact that many social media sites have so-called “privacy settings,” which students (such as Jamal “Gucci” Shuman) may interpret to mean that they have a right to keep information that they post from their university. But, this is simply not the case.

Additionally, 37% of participants reported that they believe that students have First Amendment protection for their personal social media posts, and 50% of students indicated that they do not know. As discussed, First Amendment protection in this area is limited. It only applies to students who attend a public university, and courts have found in favor of public universities in student free speech cases if the restriction on speech is “narrowly tailored” (Chin, 2012; Tatro, 2011). Universities, whether public or private, therefore need to make sure that students understand the limited nature of their legal rights in social media discipline cases. Including discussion of the law as a portion of their social media training would be good practice. It could also potentially reduce the number of complaints filed by students against their university, and it could help reshape students' perceptions of social media disciplinary cases when they do occur.

4.3. Student opinions of university monitoring of social media, student perceptions of recent cases, and their characteristics

Our study assessed student opinions of university monitoring of social media accounts. Most students disagree with the university’s ability to monitor their personal social media accounts, as well as that of other students. Students also generally disagree with a university’s ability to take disciplinary action against students for their personal social media posts. Only 22% of participants agreed that students (such as Thaddeus Pryor) should be expelled for their personal social media posts. However, there is a slight uptick in the percentage of students who think that a university should be able to order “sensitivity training” as a means to discipline a student, with 30% of students agreeing that this is acceptable in social media discipline cases. This is likely due to the fact that sensitivity training is something that will educate a student about what is improper social media use versus a more serious type of disciplinary action, such as suspension or expulsion.

When participants were asked about their perceptions of some recent cases involving student discipline and social media, the majority of participants again disagreed with the practice. When asked about Harry Vincent’s tweet about the Baltimore riots, “#Baltimore in 4 words: poor uneducated druggy hoodrats”, only
24% of students agreed that a university should be able to take disciplinary action against him. When asked about his spring break tweet “Almost as tan as a terrorist. Going to be thoroughly disappointed if I am not racially profiled on my trip to Gulf Shores,” 28% of participants agreed with the university's disciplinary action. The slight perceptual difference from participants may be due to the general practice of using social media for news/current event gathering, with more participants perceiving Vincent’s tweet about the Baltimore riots as less worthy of discipline. It might also be due to some participants’ negative personal perception about racial profiling.

One marked difference was when participants were asked about a recent case involving a university student who took a picture of a Muslim student wearing a hijab and posted it on Snapchat with the caption, “Isis.” Almost half (47%) of participants agreed that this situation warranted university discipline. This perceptual increase among participants could be due to the fact that this case involved a student harassing a classmate about her religion. This could be seen in the vein of bullying, as well. However, it is still noteworthy that the majority of students were still opposed to disciplinary action in this case. Future research should look more directly at different scenarios of student social media behavior that vary in consistent risks involved (which results in extra safeguards for their privacy), and believe that student athletes who fail to take similar precautions can and should have their social media use restricted by their universities. These characteristics should be taken into consideration when universities are targeting audiences for social media policy training.

5. Limitations

At the university where this research was conducted, there is a social media policy; however, there is no official training in social media policy nor other known university-governed mechanism by which students would learn about their university-related social media rights and responsibilities. Therefore, we expect that those students who indicated that they knew that the university had a social media policy likely learned of this policy through non-formalized means, like word-of-mouth or other social media experiences. Although this phenomenon is probably common across many higher education institutions, we would expect that those institutions that explicitly teach their students social media policy would have a much greater percentage of students who are aware of the specifics of the policy. That said, the existence of a policy does not necessarily mean that students agree with monitoring of personal social media behavior as to disciplinary actions imposed by the university. Thus, although our knowledge of social media policy results might not be generalizable to all institutions, it is likely that the beliefs related to monitoring and disciplinary actions have greater generalizability.

Additionally, although we examined the characteristics of those who knew or did not know about the university policy, we did not ask students how they learned about the policy. This is a shortcoming of the present research, and future work should examine this question more specifically to determine whether such knowledge comes from peers or university resources, and which source equips students with the most accurate knowledge of the policy specifics. Finally, the student variables we examined accounted for only a small amount of the variance in students’ opinions of university engagement with social media issues. Considering the incongruence between lawful university actions and student opinions, a more detailed examination of the characteristics that influence these student opinions is necessary.

6. Conclusion and future directions

This study examined student knowledge of university social media policies and student perception of disciplinary action taken by universities in social media cases. There are still many unexplored areas in social media research as it relates to universities and students. For example, one area of particular interest to higher education would be predictors of student awareness of university policies. Identifying factors other than students’ tenure may help to better identify students who are most in need of social media policy education. Also, with regard to privacy protections, studying the demographics and/or characteristics of students who are highly invested in their online privacy versus those who are not might be highly informative. Finally, with regard to student athletes, further study of people’s perceptions of the fairness regarding social media discipline cases might help inform future social media policy procedures, decisions by college athletic departments, or even National Collegiate Athletic Association rules.

In light of this exploratory study, what is suggested is that students are underinformed about their social media policy and likely misinformed as to privacy protections and free speech rights as applied to social media. Universities, like employers, therefore need to do a better job of educating students in both areas. The study also suggests that students are generally opposed
to university disciplinary action for students’ personal social media use, though more students find it acceptable for a university to monitor student athletes’ accounts. We also found that students generally disagree with the outcomes of several recent newsworthy cases. The most positive reaction from students with regard to university discipline was when a student’s religion was the subject of online harassment. However, the majority of students still disagreed with the university disciplining a student in that case.

This study also suggests that universities need to communicate their social media policies to students early and often to avoid the potential disciplinary issues associated with personal social media use by college students. Social media use by college students is here to stay, and universities need to help students understand what online behaviors they deem to be appropriate. As it currently stands, most students do not know if their university even has a social media policy, and they certainly do not understand that they can be disciplined for their online behaviors. Most importantly, students need to know that their personal social media use can have a long-term, negative impact on their college education, as well as their future careers.

References


Tatro v. University of MN, 800 N.W.2d 811(Gt. App. Minn. 2011).


Kimberly W. O’Connor is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership and Supervision at Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Gordon B. Schmidt is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Organizational Leadership and Supervision at Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Michelle Drouin is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Please cite this article in press as: O’Connor, K. W., et al., Suspended because of social media? Students’ knowledge and opinions of university social media policies and practices, Computers in Human Behavior (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.001