



Cyberbullies, Trolls, and Stalkers: Students' Perceptions of Ethical Issues in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Little research has been done to examine users' perceptions of ethical issues related to communication on social media. This exploratory, descriptive study examines undergraduate students' perceptions of ethical issues in how they and their peers use social media and the consequences the ethical issues have on themselves and others. An online survey was distributed to students at a regional university ($N = 201$). Results show that most students have observed violations of ethical norms; they believe that the most common ethical issues are inappropriate pictures, privacy concerns, and people harassing others.

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Over the past several years, controversies related to social media have roiled campuses across the country. On our campus alone, we have seen issues related to cyberbullying because of pictures posted on Fade (an app that no longer exists; Gerard, 2014), controversy surrounding a video about alcohol use on our campus that was posted on social media (Bailey, 2016) but not created by local students, and more typical episodes of cyberstalking and trolling. In 2015, the news prominently featured YikYak for a wide variety of ethical issues, including anonymous posts about the instructors during a lecture class at Eastern Michigan University that were seen as “demeaning, ... using crude, sexually explicit language and imagery” (Mahler, 2015, para. 2). According to Mahler, other universities that had issues with YikYak, included Kenyon College, “University of North Carolina, Michigan State, Penn State, Clemson, Emory, Colgate, and the University of Texas” (para. 5). Although YikYak died in the spring of 2017 (Carson, 2017), the same issues continue to arise on other social media sites like Snap Chat, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

According to the Pew Research Center about online harassment (Duggan, 2014), many people have observed negative behavior on the internet, often through social media. Duggan notes that:

- 60% of internet users said they had witnessed someone being called offensive names
- 35% had seen efforts to purposefully embarrass someone
- 25% had seen someone physically threatened
- 24% had witnessed someone being harassed for a sustained period of time
- 19% said they witnessed someone being sexually harassed
- 18% they had seen someone be stalked. (para. 3)

When asked what their own experiences were with online harassment, people told the Pew Research Center that they had been “called offensive names,” “purposefully embarrass[ed],” “physically threatened,” “stalked,” “harassed,” or “sexually harassed.” These results are consistent with the types of issues that college students noted about Facebook in 2008 and 2009 (Swenson-Lepper,

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2011). Results showed that students were concerned about people posting inappropriate pictures of themselves or others, invasion of privacy through employers' use of social media in hiring decisions, stalking, others hacking their accounts, and the distraction that Facebook played when peers use it during classes. However, when these issues are discussed, they are not discussed in terms of ethics or moral behavior. Little research has been done that discusses social media use in terms of how online behavior affects others from a moral or ethical perspective. The primary aim of this study is to explore how college students perceive social media use from a moral or ethical perspective.

This article explores many issues related to social media and ethics, but specifically focuses on the ethical issues that college students perceive in social media use. First, we briefly discuss the prevalence of social media use among young adults; next, we review the literature about ethical issues in social media, including cyberbullying. Then we discuss the method we used to explore the ethical issues students on one campus perceived related to communication ethics in their use of social media. We compare the current data to similar, but not identical, data from nearly a decade ago.

Social media use

According to the Pew Research Center, ("Social media fact sheet," 2017), as of November 2016, 86% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 use social media, compared to 80% of 30- to 49-year-olds, 64% of 50- to 64-year-olds, and 34% of those who are 65 and above. Facebook continues to be the most popular platform, followed by Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitter. According to Rideout (2015), teenagers spend nearly 9 hours a day on "entertainment media use" (p. 15); girls spend, on average, an hour and 32 min on social media and boys spend 52 min. This level of usage pales in comparison to the amount of time teens spend watching videos, playing games, and listening to music, but makes up a significant portion of each day. According to Shaul (2016), Facebook is still the most popular social media platform for Millennials, with 41% of respondents noting that they check it daily, though YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat are nearly as popular. Given that teens and young adults spend a fair amount of time on social media platforms each day, many users have observed ethical issues related to their own and others' behavior online.

Ethical issues in social media use

Users encounter a wide variety of ethical issues on social platforms, including cyberbullying, trolling, stalking, hacking, privacy violations, and more, though these issues are not typically framed as ethical or moral issues in the studies discussed in this literature review. Because there are so many issues and there are many studies about each, only a brief summary of the literature for each is provided. These terms are not mutually exclusive; some authors use them interchangeably and others would make *cyberbullying* or *cyber-harassment* umbrella terms for all those that follow.

Cyberbullying

Various nonprofit and academic organizations have their own definitions of cyberbullying, though they all state that it is "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" ("What is cyberbullying?" 2014, para. 1). Other definitions include the types of harm that might occur, like embarrassment, threats, humiliation, or harassment ("STOP cyberbullying," n.d., para. 1). The American Psychological Association more generally defines bullying as "a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. Bullying can take the form of physical contact, words or more subtle actions" ("Bullying," n.d., para. 1).

Some organizations state that cyberbullying occurs only when minors are involved. For instance, it has been defined as "when a child, preteen or teen is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed, or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen, or teen using the Internet, interactive

and digital technologies, or mobile phones” (“STOP cyberbullying,” n.d., para. 1). Lipton (2011), using Fertik and Thompson’s (2010) definition of bullying, does not specify the age of those involved; Fertik and Thompson stated, “Bullying is an attempt to raise oneself up directly demeaning others; the attacker hopes to improve his [or her] social status or self-esteem by putting others down” (Fertik & Thompson, as cited by Lipton, 2011, p. 1108). Lipton went on to note that this definition typically applies to minors, but can also be used to describe behavior between adults, specifically behavior that is not based on race or gender. She noted that behavior that targets race or gender is more correctly called *cyber-harassment*. Laer’s (2014) definition of cyber-harassment is more akin to the definitions of cyberbullying provided earlier; she noted that cyber-harassment is “a course of action in which an adult individual or groups of individuals use digital media to cause another individual to suffer emotional distress” (p. 85). These definitions of cyberbullying and cyber-harassment share the idea that one individual or group targets or attacks another, causing emotional harm and distress with little to no repercussions for the perpetrator. Because of these similarities and the main definitional difference being age, some researchers use the two interchangeably (Beran & Li, 2005). Although these definitions focus on the harms done online, the studies do not overtly frame cyberbullying as a moral or ethical issue.

In looking at how teenagers use social media, boyd (2010) adopted Olweus’s definition of bullying. Olweus (1978), similar to the definitions provided in the preceding paragraphs, stated that for bullying to have occurred, the situation must have aggression of one toward another, repeated offenses, and an imbalance of power between the perpetrator(s) and the victim(s). What is particularly interesting about boyd’s work is that, even with the previous definitions in mind, she found that many of the students she interviewed did not think bullying or cyberbullying occurred at their schools (boyd, 2010). Similarly, Allen (2012) found that the media through which the harassment occurred may also play a role. Allen found in her interviews that teachers and students didn’t consider aggressive or offensive texting to be a form of bullying. This disconnect led to a hesitancy or failure to report incidences of cyberbullying. boyd also asked adolescents about their perceptions of what qualifies as cyberbullying. According to her work (2014, p. 16), some teens downplay cyberbullying by calling it “drama.” Marwick and Boyd (2011) speculated that using the term *drama* “allows teens to distance themselves from practices which adults may conceptualize as bullying” (p. 1). Instances of gossip, rumors, or even name-calling and targeting can be dismissed as teasing.

Unfortunately, some do recognize behaviors, their own or others, as bullying and do not see it as abnormal. In a news article, a girl who had cyberbullied a classmate stated, “I get bullied, everyone gets bullied. You get used to it, so who cares” (Johnson, 2013, para. 5). In the same article, the principal noted that, “I think real bullying is when it occurs against someone who can’t defend themselves or doesn’t have the ability to support themselves emotionally. ... Much of what I see that is being called cyberbullying is mean drama and conflicts between teens” (Johnson, 2013, para. 9).

Many scholars have examined cyberbullying and looked at a wide variety of personality, behavioral, and demographic variables that are correlated with being a bully or the victim. Guo (2016) examined 77 studies of cyberbullying and found that men were most likely to be the bullies and that those who were bullies in the real world were more likely to be bullies in online settings. Similarly, if people were the victims of cyberbullying online, they were also likely to have been bullied offline.

Trolling

Trolls on social media are those people who behave “in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014, p. 97). Trolls find enjoyment in harassing and tormenting others because there is no consequence for the troll, who gets enjoyment from the anger and discomfort of others (Phillips, 2015); according to Phillips, “Trolls are keenly aware of how their behaviors impact others, and know exactly which issues will get the greatest rise from their chosen targets. What makes a troll successful ... is his or her ability to empathize” (2015, p. 35). Buckels et al. (2014) found that trolls tend to score high on negative personality traits, including “sadism, psychopathy, and

Machiavellianism” (p. 100). Examples of trolling include mocking people who have recently died on their Facebook memorial pages (Stein, 2016) and harassing women with threats of rape and abuse (Mantilla, 2013). In one of many specific examples, a star of the remake of *Ghostbusters* was targeted; trolls “harassed the film’s black co-star Leslie Jones so badly on Twitter with racist and sexist threats—including a widely copied photo of her at the film’s premiere that someone splattered semen on—that she considered quitting the service” (Stein, 2016, para. 12).

Trolling is widespread; according to *The Guardian*, a survey done in the United Kingdom showed that nearly one-quarter of teens were trolled, with those of some sort of minority status (including “gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, disability or transgender identity”) suffering the most (Gani, 2016, para. 2). According to Gammon (2014), nearly one-fourth of Americans have trolled others; Gammon cites a survey distributed by YouGov and notes that:

23% have maliciously argued over facts. 12% admit to making deliberately controversial statements. Men are more likely to get into a malicious argument than women and Millennials are twice as likely as those aged 55 + to engage in trolling behavior. 12% of posters admitted to having crossed the line so far that they have had their comment removed by a moderator. (para. 4–5)

Although trolling is widespread, it is not always clear how it is distinguished from cyberbullying. In fact, a recent meta-analysis of cyberbullying research lumps trolling and cyberbullying together (Guo, 2016). Like cyberbullying, trolling is not often discussed as a moral or ethical issue. Instead, it is discussed in psychological terms such as sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

Cyberstalking

In general, cyberstalking is similar to offline stalking and is defined as “using the Internet as part of a targeted campaign that causes fear, distress, or alarm” (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014, p. 1–2). Typically, cyberstalking involves a former romantic partner and is distinguished from trolling because cyberstalking includes behavior targeted at a specific individual, normally known by the stalker, and it occurs over an extended time (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014). Cyberstalking includes a wide variety of behaviors, such as:

repeated unwanted emails or instant messages; posting false or hostile information about victims online; using social networking sites to harass the victim; subscribing to services or products in the victim’s name; hacking into victim’s personal accounts; online identity theft; impersonating the victim online; spamming or sending the victim computer viruses; and recruiting others to harass or threaten the victim via the Internet. (Cavezza & McEwan, 2014, p. 2)

At the college level, Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, and Cratty (2011) found that some former romantic partners used Facebook most commonly to “view pictures or [post] comments in reference to the ex-partner, but in a passive or ambiguous fashion” (p. 714). Less common, but more threatening, were behaviors that publicly harassed or vented about their former partner.

Privacy

People who use social media consider privacy an important issue; students and employees are concerned about the information that universities and employees gather from social media sites. O’Connor, Schmidt, and Drouin (2016) provided a summary of recent literature about employees’ knowledge of their organizations’ social media use policies. Typically, the literature they reviewed showed that the longer employees worked for an organization, the more likely they were to know what the employers’ social media policies were. Drouin, O’Connor, Schmidt, and Miller (2015) found that most young adults believe that people’s employment status should not be affected by what employees post on their private social media networks. Hurrell, Scholarios, and Richards (2017) also found that students perceive that some employers’ viewing of social media is unethical and an invasion of their privacy. Students are also worried about their universities examining their social media profiles and disciplining them based on what they post. O’Connor et al. (2016) found that most students do not want their own or their peers’ social media accounts monitored by their college or university, and they

generally believe that students should not be punished for their social media posts. They also found that students were more in favor of student athletes' accounts being monitored.

Ethics

When looking at *social media* and *ethics* in a number of academic databases, including *Ebsco Megafile*, *Academic Search Premier*, and *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, very few articles were found with ethics in the title, though thousands were found with ethics as a keyword. Most of the articles about social media and ethics are from professional fields such as nursing (Ferguson et al., 2016; Schmitt, Sims-Giddens, & Booth, 2012; Westrick, 2016), medicine (Chandra & Chatterjee, 2011), social work (Barsky, 2017), law (Bennett, 2010), education (Warnick, Bitters, Falk, & Kim, 2016), and psychology (Brady, 2016).

Flores and James (2013) wrote one of the few articles that examined people's perception of ethical issues in online environments. They completed interviews with teens and young adults and examined "where moral and ethical thinking is present or absent" (p. 837), based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. However, their focus included gaming, social networks, and blogs, but this study focuses on students' perceptions of ethical issues they perceive in social media use. Although Mainiero and Jones (2013) examined workplace romances and sexual harassment that might occur through computer-mediated communication, including social media, they did so from a theoretical and hypothetical perspective. Their research did not examine how real people in organizations evaluate or decide what online behaviors might raise ethical issues. Thus, little research has been done on students' perceptions of ethical issues in social media use.

Research questions

Previous research by Swenson-Lepper (2011) has shown that students perceive that most of their friends had, more often than themselves, acted inappropriately on social media. For instance, they believed that their friends were much more likely to have posted inappropriate pictures than they had (Swenson-Lepper, 2011); they were also concerned about people hacking or logging into other people's accounts and pretending to be the owner of the social media profile. This leads to the following related research questions:

RQ1: What experiences do college students perceive themselves and their friends having on social media related to ethical issues? If relevant, how do the current results compare to the previous results?

While there are many definitions of cyberbullying from anti-cyberbullying websites, boyd's (2014) study of high school students is the primary source that discusses students' understandings of cyberbullying. As college students transition from high school to adulthood, it is important to examine their perceptions of the definition of cyberbullying, which led to the following research question:

RQ2: How do students define cyberbullying?

Besides Flores and James's (2013) study, little work has been done to elicit students' thoughts on the ethical issues that they face in their online interactions in social media, leading to the research question identified here:

RQ3: What are typical ethical issues perceived by college students and the most unethical uses seen on social media?

Methods

Participants

Participants in this descriptive study were recruited at a medium-sized, midwestern university from large lecture classes that primarily serve first-year students. Women made up the majority of this convenience sample ($n = 138$), with an average age of 19.33 ($SD = 2.77$); 63 men participated in the study, with an average age of 19.59 ($SD = 1.10$). This sample reflects the student body moderately well, as the campus is approximately 63.2% women, and women make up 68.7% of the sample (“Winona State University Fast Facts 2016-2017,” 2016). Because of the nature of the courses where the survey was distributed, most of the students were in their first year ($n = 123$, 61.5%), with the remainder of the sample consisting of 59 sophomores (29.5%), 10 juniors (5%) and 8 seniors (4%).

Materials

Because little research has been performed in which students are specifically asked about the ethical issues they perceive or have experienced in social media, this survey collected descriptive data. Students completed a survey that was developed (Swenson-Lepper, 2011) and modified to meet the current social media environment. Students in an upper-level undergraduate course in social media ethics assisted with modifying and distributing the survey. Participants were asked about how long they had been using social media, as well as about the social media platforms they use. For each of the social media platforms they used, they were asked to estimate how much time they spent on each app. They were also asked about what they and their friends post on social media. Questions included items like, “While I’ve been [here], I have posted pictures on my social media page where I am pictured doing something that could get me in trouble. (i.e., underage drinking, pranks, etc.),” “I’ve experienced cyberbullying at [this university],” and “Here at [this university], I have friends who’ve felt stalked on social media.” Finally, they were asked open-ended questions like “How would you define cyberbullying?” and “What is the biggest ethical issue you notice in the use of social media? Why do you think that is in an issue?”

Procedure

All students distributing the survey completed IRB training and were responsible for collecting the data. They visited classrooms, discussed the study, and asked people to complete the online survey. Participants were given a link to an online survey tool to complete the survey. No additional identifying information was collected from the participants.

Results

Research question 1

The first research question of interest was targeted at students’ perceptions when it comes to cyberbullying; specifically, the experiences they perceive themselves and their friends having on social media related to ethical issues (e.g., cyberbullying, inappropriate posting of pictures, cyberstalking, etc.). Additionally, it is of interest to compare these survey results to those gathered previously.

Table 1 summarizes students’ opinions toward ethical issues surrounding the use of social media platforms. Students were asked to rate their agreement (where *strongly agree* = 1 and *strongly disagree* = 5) with statements involving various ethical issues and the use of social media. It appears that students tend to witness cyberbullying of their friends ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.43$) more than they experience it themselves ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.04$), or quite possibly are willing to admit. Two of the most common ethical issues identified by students are that others have shared something of theirs on

Table 1. Students' opinions on ethical issues regarding social media platforms.

Item:	N	Mean	SD	*SA	A	N	D	SD
I've experienced cyberbullying at [university].	166	4.20	1.04	4	13	13	52	84
I've witnessed my friends or classmates being cyberbullied at [university].	169	3.41	1.43	21	35	19	41	53
Someone has shared something of mine on social media without my permission.	168	3.18	1.25	15	45	30	50	28
Someone has tagged me in something that I found inappropriate without my permission.	168	3.23	1.34	17	48	20	46	37
Others have found things I've posted that I didn't think they would be able to see.	168	3.54	1.10	6	29	35	65	33
I have refined my privacy settings to keep things more private.	168	2.04	1.05	56	74	20	11	7
I thoroughly read the terms of service for the apps and social media that I use.	167	3.93	1.17	9	15	21	56	66
Negative experiences online have decreased my use of social media.	166	3.50	1.12	11	19	43	62	31
I have a more positive opinion of social media than I did three years ago.	167	3.01	1.08	15	34	71	29	18

*SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

social media without their permission ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.25$) or they have been tagged in something the student found inappropriate ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.34$).

There were five statements regarding ethical issues in social media that were addressed in a survey distributed in 2008, as well as the survey in 2015. Comparisons for those questions are summarized in Table 2. It appears that students were in more agreement with the statements in 2008 (smaller mean scores) than in 2015 (larger mean scores). These responses indicate that fewer students felt stalked or saw their friends being stalked via social media. Additionally, it seems that students and their friends are not posting as many things on social media that they believe could get themselves or their friends in trouble.

Students from 2008 were more likely to agree ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.39$; 2015: $M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.43$) that they had posted pictures that were inappropriate on social media, $t(301) = 3.49$, $p = .000$; similarly, students from 2008 ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.79$, 2015: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.43$) agreed that their friends were more likely to post inappropriate pictures, $t(302) = 5.09$, $p = .000$, than in 2015. There was no difference between the samples (2008: $M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.88$; 2015: $M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.00$) about whether they use the social media platforms' privacy settings, $t(301) = 1.37$, $p = .17$. Students from 2015 disagreed more strongly ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.07$; 2008: $M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.14$) with the statement that they have felt stalked on social media, $t(300) = 4.47$, $p = .000$, but there was no difference between the year groups (2008: $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.03$; 2015: $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.73$) in whether they observed that their peers were stalked on social media, $t(230) = .31$, $p = .76$.

Research question 2

The second research question explored how students defined cyberbullying Figure 1 summarizes the students' definitions. Three key words/phrases stick out when viewing the student responses: harassing, putting people down, and making people feel bad. Additionally, making fun of people,

Table 2. Comparison of students' opinions on ethical issues regarding social media platforms.

Item:	Year	N	Mean	SD	*SA	A	N	D	SD
While I've been at [university], I have posted pictures on my social media page where I am pictured doing things that could get me in trouble. (i.e., underage drinking, pranks, etc.)	2015	170	3.78	1.43	17	25	17	30	81
	2008	133	3.21	1.39	13	42	18	24	36
My friends from [university] have posted pictures of themselves on social media that could get them in trouble. (i.e., underage drinking, pranks, etc.)	2015	170	2.39	1.43	57	56	19	9	29
	2008	134	1.69	0.79	61	60	9	2	2
I have used social media's privacy features to protect personal information from others.	2015	170	1.81	1.00	81	58	17	10	4
	2008	133	1.66	0.88	72	45	6	10	0
While I've been at [university], I've felt stalked by people on social media.	2015	169	3.96	1.07	4	16	28	56	65
	2008	133	3.39	1.14	9	26	19	62	17
Here at [university], I have friends who've felt stalked on social media.	2015	167	2.48	1.73	4	29	33	49	52
	2008	65	2.41	1.03	9	34	11	8	3

*SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree



Figure 1. Student definitions of cyberbullying.

being mean, hurting, and attacking seem to be other popular definitions given by the students. Students also find that posting pictures is another form of cyberbullying. One can infer that these are the actions on social media that students find most hurtful.

Research question 3

Another research question investigated the typical ethical issues perceived by students (Figure 2) and the most unethical issues seen on social media (Figure 3).

From Figure 2, it can be seen that a few key issues surrounding the ethics of social media use are the use of inappropriate pictures, issues related to privacy, racism, hiding behind the screen, and being anonymous. Although cyberbullying is noted, it does not seem to be a major issue.

Similarly, Figure 3 indicates that the posting of inappropriate pictures seems to be the most unethical use of social media; however, anonymity is not far behind. Racism, cyberbullying, and bullying again seem to be prominent unethical uses of social media. Interestingly, there seem to be more instances of sex-related (e.g., pornography, posting about sexual interactions, hook-ups, etc.) instances of unethical uses than were perceived in Figure 2 above.

Discussion

Cyberbullying has become an important issue for those using social media. In our study, we found that although only 10% of students believe that they have experienced cyberbullying via social media, a much larger percentage (33%) have observed friends or classmates being cyberbullied. These numbers are lower than those reported by the Pew Research Center, which indicated that “60% of Internet users said they had witnessed someone being called offensive names” (Duggan, 2014, para. 3). These differences may have occurred because the questions were asked differently, or it may have occurred because the sample was limited to students at a single university who may have less experience with cyberbullying.



Figure 2. Students' perceptions of ethical issues in social media.



Figure 3. Unethical uses of social media observed.

For the most part, students from both samples (2008 and 2015) had similar beliefs about cyberbullying, stalking, and using the privacy settings on social media, though students in 2015 were less likely to have posted inappropriate pictures of themselves or to have observed others doing so, and they were less likely to believe that they have been stalked on social media. This result may have occurred because students are more aware of what is appropriate to post and how what is posted affects their reputations. In 2008, social media was fairly new; Facebook had only been around for 4 years and started out limited to Harvard's campus (Phillips, 2007).

Students' definitions of cyberbullying are similar to those presented by anti-cyberbullying groups ("STOP cyberbullying: What is cyberbullying, exactly?" n.d.; "What is Cyber Bullying?" 2017; "What is cyberbullying?" 2014), in that the students included words such as *harassing*, *repeatedly*, *degrading*, and *putting down*. This might indicate that education at the secondary level is effective or that college students have heard a lot about cyberbullying from a variety of news sources.

Although the most common issues discussed in the literature about ethical issues in social media are related to cyberbullying, trolling, privacy, and cyber-stalking, students do not generally use these

terms. Instead, they discuss *inappropriate pictures*, *hiding behind a screen*, *anonymity*, *posting without permission*, and *racism*, though they do specifically note privacy and cyberbullying. Students may use these terms because they have a less sophisticated way of understanding the issues or they perceive some of the issues as being separate. For instance, students identified cyberbullying and racism, which could be lumped together, as *posting without permission* and privacy. Future research should explore how social media users categorize ethical issues on social media; doing so would allow scholars to relate users' perceptions to ethical perspectives discussed in scholarly literature, develop educational materials for social media and communication courses, and assess their students' growth in understanding of ethical issues after a communication ethics course. When students are asked about the ethical issues that they observe, they are concerned with anonymity, which is generally not considered a separate ethical issue, except when discussing problems related to trolling.

Based on this study and previous research on cyberbullying, trolling, and stalking, we argue that it is important for college and high school students to have more education about the ethical implications of social media use. Because teenagers and young adults spend so much time online, courses that help students understand moral theories in the context of social media would be particularly relevant. Because deindividuation is a particular problem in online forums, we agree with Christians (2007) that dialogic ethics is a particularly relevant ethical perspective. Although Christians was talking about dialogic ethics in the context of "the media professions" (p. 114), dialogic ethics seems appropriate in the social media environment where others are often treated as objects, not as human beings who might be affected by cyberbullying, stalking, or other online behavior. As Arnett, Arneson, and Bell (2006, p. 80) noted, "A dialogic communication ethic is a response to a relational space that invites content and insight to emerge between persons. ... A dialogic ethic both invites and prescribes—prescribing an alternative to individualism that precludes attentiveness to the other." Thus, although it would be important for college and high school students to understand utilitarianism and deontology in relationship to their use of social media, the primary moral problem of social media is most related to the dehumanization of others, which could most effectively be discussed using dialogic ethics as the foundation.

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations exist for this study. The sample drew from students at a single university, so the age range and geographical diversity of the sample are limited, though people in this age group tend to be the heaviest social media users (Perrin, 2015). Because this study is based on a survey, we could not ask in-depth questions about the ethical issues participants perceive or for specific examples of situations where they observed ethical issues. Because the first sample from 2008 was focused on Facebook, there is not direct parity between the items of the survey. However, given the fluid nature of social media platforms used by college students, this is likely to be a problem for future researchers as well.

Future studies should examine larger samples from across the country of a variety of different ages, given that people of all ages now use social media. According to the Pew Research Center, "35% of all those 65 and older report using social media, compared with just 2% in 2005" (Perrin, 2015, para. 5). Additionally, research, similar to Flores and James (2013), should be conducted using vignettes or other stimuli, to see whether students can identify ethical issues in social media. Because people can be anonymous online, integration of work about deindividuation with communication ethics might lead to fruitful research. Finally, research should be conducted about the most effective ways to teach teens and young adults about some of the ethical problems inherent in social media.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the ethical issues that students perceive in their own use of social media. As the social media environment evolves, it is important to examine how people

understand the ethical implications of what they post, either using their own identity or posting anonymously. As students noted, anonymity is a feature of many social media platforms that seems to lead to ethical issues related to privacy, trolling, and stalking. Regardless of the platform or app, many of the same ethical issues are likely to arise whenever people are interacting online.

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