



Examining students' social media use and ethical awareness: Class activities and “Coastal Succulents”

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Young adults and teenagers spend a significant amount of time each day using social media, but very few of them have thought about the ethical implications of what they post or view on these platforms. This activity provides students with the opportunity to (1) log and evaluate the amount of time and types of posts they are creating on social media, and (2) view a made-up social media story from Snapchat where student can assess their own ethical sensitivity (Rest, J. R. (1983). Morality. In P. H. Mussen (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 3: Cognitive development* 4th ed. (pp. 556–629). John Wiley) for a variety of ethical issues.

Courses: Communication Ethics, Social Media and Communication, Communication, Diversity, and Inclusion.

Objectives: The objectives of this single-class activity are to: (1) reflect on one's own usage and communication behavior on social media; (2) identify and reflect on ethical dilemmas and moral awareness; (3) discuss the intersections of communication ethics and social media; and (4) articulate how social media and digitally mediated communication impact communication ethics and communication behavior.

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Introduction and rationale

Social media use is ubiquitous for today's teens and young adults. However, there is concern over whether younger generations are aware enough to identify ethical dilemmas related to social and digital media usage (s.f., Lenhart et al., 2011; McHugh et al., 2018). This activity provides a basis from which to discuss ethical dilemmas and moral awareness based on James Rest's work (1986a, 1986b) using a personal inventory of social media usage and engagement with a fictionalized but true-to-life Snapchat story that depicts a variety of ethical transgressions. Ethical sensitivity is a key term from moral psychology (Rest, 1983) and is defined as one's ability to perceive “that something one might do or is doing can affect the welfare of someone else either directly or indirectly (by violating a general practice or commonly held social standard)” (Bebeau et al., 1985, p. 226). In other words, “sensitivity” is assessing how *aware* one is of an interaction that would involve a violation of ethical norms. While Rest's theory originated prior to the advent of social media, ethical or moral sensitivity remains relevant today,

with many scholars still citing it in business (Schmocker et al., 2021) and nursing (Milliken, 2018). In communication studies, scholars have examined ethical sensitivity for ethical issues in organizational communication (Swenson-Lepper, 2005), awareness of ethical issues related to media and diversity (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2017), and conflicts of interest (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013).

Little work has been done to examine the ethical issues that students perceive when they use social media, either the behaviors portrayed in social posts or the ethical behavior of the person posting. However, in two studies, Swenson-Lepper (2011; Swenson-Lepper & Kerby, 2019) identified some of the key ethical issues that students see in social media, including: “the use of inappropriate pictures, issues related to privacy, racism, hiding behind the screen, and being anonymous” (Swenson-Lepper & Kerby, 2019, p. 109). Most often, the issues that are identified are not labeled as ethical issues, even though they fit the most basic definition of ethical issues because they affect the welfare of others.

This activity allows students to begin discussing and raising questions about the intersections of communication ethics and social media and the effects of social media on their own ethical awareness and communicative behavior. Communicating ethically is central to the discipline of communication studies (Ballard et al., 2014), and is one of NCA’s learning outcomes in communication: students who graduate with a communication studies degree should be able to “apply ethical communication principles and practices” (What should a graduate, 2015, p. 7). Given the amount of time our students spend on social media and the number of jobs in social media that are performed by the graduates from communication studies programs, it is vital that students consider the ethical implications of social media use.

This activity is suitable for any course that includes communication ethics or social media, especially if instructors want to draw students in with an example that they are invested in. This activity was developed from a research study in progress about ethical sensitivity and social media and was initially used with upper division students in a communication ethics course that had fewer than 25 students. Between the two parts of the activity, it takes one 70- to 80-minute class period, plus some time outside of class for students to assess their social media use. The activity can be split across two different class periods to form a unit, starting with the video and identifying the ethical dilemmas on the first day and summary/making connections discussion on the next day.

The video link provided was produced by the first author and an undergraduate research assistant in 2018 while they were at Pepperdine University. It is a short, fictional Snapchat “story.” It depicts a group that started with a common yet innocent theme of taking pictures with succulents at a fictional university called “Coastal University.” Taking pictures with random items is a frequent Snapchat activity. In the video for this activity, the initial posts start out as innocent and fun, but they soon devolve into behavior such as cyberbullying, privacy invasion, drug and alcohol use, cheating, racism, xenophobia, and other unethical acts and posts. Since suicide and sexuality are hinted at, students may need to be warned. The video may make some students uncomfortable. Yet, our research and Institutional Review Board clearance reveals consistent feedback that the video is true to life and, in some ways, tame compared to what college-aged students are exposed to daily on their social media feeds.

The activities

Part 1: Personal inventory

During a four-day period (this could be more or less, depending on your preference as the instructor), students should inventory every instance of *their own use* of social media. We recommend that you include the following requirements: (1) The log must include at least two weekend days, but the days do not have to be consecutive. Students may select their own days. (2) Students should pay attention to what social media they use, when they use it, the nature of the use (i.e. talking with friends, posting photo, tweeting, posting videos, watching videos, etc.), and who they are communicating with (i.e. parent, friend, Internet audience, friends on Facebook, interacting during online role-playing games, etc.). (3) Students should submit their inventory using a log such as the one shown in [Table 1](#).

After they have completed the log, students should submit a typewritten, one- to two-page, double-spaced assessment. The assessment paper challenges them to reflect on patterns they see in their social media usage, identify discoveries and surprises, and compare their social media usage to broader national patterns. Ortiz-Ospina's (2019) report, the Pew Research Center's "Social Media Fact Sheet" (2021), and the Pew Research Center's "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022" (2022) provide research-based, accessible results of national surveys and data.

The assessment paper should address the following:

- (1) Were there days and times where your social media usage was higher or lower? Explain why the discrepancies and patterns existed.
- (2) On what platform did you spend most of your time? Why?
- (3) Read Pelletier et al. (2020). In what ways did different platforms help you accomplish different uses and gratifications? How did your social media usage compare in terms of uses and gratifications to Pelletier et al. (2020)? In what ways are you similar? In what ways are you different?
- (4) What surprised you about your social media usage? What didn't surprise you?
- (5) What would you change about your behavior? Why?
- (6) Do you think your social media usage is healthy? Explain.

Table 1. Personal Inventory of Social Media Use

Day, Date	Time/Length	Platform	What Did You Do?	Brief Observations
Monday, 8/17	8:32am–9:10am	IG	Posted selfie on new haircut, liked friends' and family's pages	I follow a lot of influencers on makeup and pets; I'd like more followers and likes, especially on how I look
Monday, 8/17	11:50am–12:00pm	Snapchat	Kept streaks going, learned about news, liked some friends	I literally ran into one of my friends (like bumped into him) because I wasn't looking up from my phone. I was running late for class and didn't say anything to anyone. Are my friends all online now?
Tuesday, 8/18	4:00pm–5:00pm (1 hour)	Twitter	I got into a Twitter war about campus parking	I didn't do my homework engaging in a Twitter war. Ugh.

Part 2: “Coastal Succulents” video

The provided video is a short, fictional Snapchat “story.” It depicts a social media group that started as a common yet innocent theme of taking pictures with succulents at a fictional university called “Coastal University.” While the initial posts start out as innocent and fun, they soon devolve into unethical and questionable behavior. We include a trigger warning with the video because suicide and sexuality are hinted at, and there is swearing, as well as racist and homophobic content (<https://youtu.be/tezr4B4kxLI>; Ballard & Jiang, 2018). We advise that you watch the video beforehand and consider working through the activity on your own, so that you are familiar with the video content as well as the debriefing and discussion questions.

Have students view the video, preferably during class. Prior to class, you may want them to read the read Fuentes’ (2018) and Vince’s (2018) online articles that explain unethical behavior on social media/the Internet as preparation for discussion. After students have watched the video, have them identify ethical dilemmas they observed in the videos; this can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Additionally, have them explain why they perceive the ethical dilemmas they identified as ethical dilemmas by outlining the situational characteristics, ethical issues, stakeholders, and consequences (following Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013). You can create a simple form for them to complete with four columns listing out the dilemma and each of the four areas: situational characteristics, ethical issues, stakeholders, and consequence to each stakeholder. In small groups or as a class, have them report on what they found. It is best to have them report on the dilemmas they identified first. Listed below are 15 ethical dilemmas and issues we identified, but students sometimes come up with more:

Ethical issues

- (1) Privacy violation: binge drinking/drinking games posted on social media, drug use posted on social media, posting others on social media without permission
- (2) Racism: e.g. build the wall, black face succulent
- (3) Sexism/sexualization
- (4) Xenophobia/nationalism (build the wall)
- (5) Academic cheating
- (6) Relationship cheating
- (7) Sexual ethics
- (8) Cyberbullying
- (9) Normalizing bad behavior
- (10) Legal/illegal—also drinking, drug use
- (11) Choice of medium—best place to post or respond?
- (12) Style of presentation (insults, cut downs, etc.)
- (13) Noninvolvement/bystander
- (14) Voyeurism
- (15) Disrespect (of others on post, of authority figures)

After students have written down the situational characteristics, ethical issues, stakeholders, and consequences they notice, help them see commonalities, patterns, and differences. The following questions might help:

- (1) What are common ethical dilemmas that you all identified based on frequency?
- (2) What situational characteristics led you to identify it as an ethical dilemma?
- (3) Who are the stakeholders involved? What consequences will they face, depending on decisions made regarding the dilemma?
- (4) What are some unique ones that only one or a few identified, based on frequency?
- (5) Use the same follow-up questions on situational characteristics, stakeholders, and consequences above.
- (6) What are some none of us identified? [You should consult the list above and point a couple out.]
- (7) Why do you think we did not identify them?
- (8) Use the same follow-up questions on situational characteristics, stakeholders, and consequences above.

Once the ethical dilemmas are identified, move to a summary conversation. The aim of the summary conversation is to help students see connections between the video, their journal, and ethical sensitivity (i.e. awareness). If there is enough time, put them back into their original groups (or time alone individually) and have them briefly consider or discuss the following:

- (1) If you were to tell your peers about how to identify ethical dilemmas in social media, what advice would you give?
- (2) When you review your own social media usage, what ethical dilemmas can you identify in what you view and what you post? Explain the situational characteristics, stakeholders, and consequences for a couple you have identified.
- (3) In general, do you think that your generation is good at identifying ethical dilemmas on social media? Why or why not?
 - a. If so, explain why you think so.
 - b. If not, why not? What would you recommend to help social media users improve their skills at identifying ethical dilemmas?

Additional discussion questions

We anticipate that this activity can be completed during one to two class periods. However, in some situations the discussion might be completed with time left in class. The following discussion questions are provided to (1) foster additional class discussion, or (2) inspire additional ideas for you to consider.

- (1) Ask if the video is realistic. Ask if any of them can relate to it. Is it too tame or does it go too far based on other social media they have viewed?
- (2) What does social media have to do with these ethical violations? That is, how does social media change what is an ethical dilemma versus what you might experience offline (IRL)?

- (3) Using the Fuentes (2018) and Vince (2018) articles listed below, ask why or how these kinds of behavior can emerge on social media? That is, what impact does social media have on our communication behavior that would be different face-to-face, over a video chat, or even a phone call?
 - a. Have them consider factors such as physiological benefits, community, social construction of reality, emotional payoff, the bystander effect, and others from the article.
 - b. Ask them if these kinds of behaviors would have occurred IRL, and in what ways they think social media influenced the situation. Issues such as acceleration of cyberbullying, groupthink, peer pressure, and trolling often emerge.
- (4) Ask why they think no one spoke up for Julia in the Snapchat story. Explain to them the social pressures of going against the grain and cyberbullying. Use the framework from Gino (2015) to help them understand intentional versus unintentional ethical behavior and the individual–environment dynamic.
- (5) Encourage them to consider their own behavior on social media. If “Coastal Succulents” was true, how many of them would have participated? In what way? Would they have bullied or stood up for Julia? Or simply watched from the sidelines? What role would social pressure play in their decision?
- (6) Ask them to consider the role of social media in causing “good people” to act unethically or immorally.

In addition to this activity, the video can also be used to generate conversation about what is and is not an ethical dilemma or what is and is not ethical in general. It could even be used as a pre/post assessment activity in order to assess the depth to which students can identify and explain the dilemmas they notice along with issues related to the situation, stakeholders, and consequences. The video also makes a good stimulus in discussing digital or social media ethics at any point during the term.

Appraisal

Given how much time people spend on social media each day and the continual upward trend of the usage and dependence by college-aged students, it is important to consider how aware users are of ethical issues in their own posts or in the posts they view and interact with. Social media is home to myriad ethical issues: privacy violations, cyberbullying, trolling, and misinformation, to name a few (Swenson-Lepper & Kerby, 2019). But people won't be able to act more ethically online unless they recognize that ethical issues are inherent in social media use. This activity allows students to assess their own levels of ethical sensitivity—a key aspect of moral behavior (Rest, 1986a). Since the video is theoretically guided by ethical sensitivity (Rest, 1983), it is important to remember that three of the learning goals are to (1) identify and reflect on ethical dilemmas and moral awareness, (2) discuss the intersections of communication ethics and social media, and (3) articulate how social media and digitally mediated communication impact communication ethics and communication behavior. In other words, it is not important to pass ethical or moral judgment on whether the individuals in the video are acting ethically or not or to interject your own opinions; rather, let students identify and debate what is and is not an ethical dilemma and allow

the conversation to organically involve a give and take between students about the ethicality of any decision.

Our experience using this in class and during pretest focus groups at both private and public universities with students ranging from first-year students to seniors revealed the following:

- When paired with the inventory activity, students are much more highly analytical of the video because they have become more attuned to the ethical dilemmas presented. Yet, connections between their own social media use, ethical dilemmas, and unethical behavior had to be explicitly connected. A simple “Have any of you engaged in these kinds of activities before and did you recognize them as ethical dilemmas when you engaged in them?” helped students to make this connection. Reflective students were willing to recognize their own unethical behavior, whereas others became defensive, which is where a focus on identifying the dilemmas rather than judging them became important.
- At times, a “moral superiority of the uninvolved” emerged, where students felt they could unreflectively criticize choices made by actors in the video, and instructors needed to help draw similar connections as noted above.
- Because there are so many ethical dilemmas depicted in the video, most discussions do not move beyond identifying between five and seven issues. Instructors may have to present the unrecognized dilemmas and ask students where they were in the video and why or why they were not identified. On the other hand, the first author recalls one student saying, “I don’t know where to start! There are so many!”
- It is important to keep bringing students back to identifying dilemmas rather than passing judgment on the actors, classmates, or themselves. We recommend presenting the component of ethical sensitivity as the first of four components of Rest’s four-component model of moral behavior (component 1: ethical sensitivity; component 2: ethical/moral judgment; component 3: ethical/moral motivation; component 4: ethical/moral character; Rest, 1983). This can be helpful in (a) teaching Rest and (b) helping students understand that there is no rush to judgment and decisions, but instead they need to do the key step of recognizing ethical dilemmas in the first place.
- The first author used a pre-/post-test design in one section of a communication ethics course where the video was shown the first day and students were asked to identify ethical dilemmas. The video was then shown at the end of the semester as a summative exercise. The video was referred to throughout the semester as a common case study and basis from which to illustrate and explain a variety of ethical perspectives. A post-test analysis revealed a 400% increase in identifying ethical dilemmas by the class as a whole, but students also demonstrated an enhanced use of ethical perspectives to justify comments, a shared common language from which to articulate points of view, and more analytical and grasp of course content overall.

In sharing with colleagues, we discovered that some faculty, usually those who are not as at ease with social media, are sometimes less comfortable with the subject and content of the video. They expressed a concern that discussing issues such as racism, sexism, nationalism, and suicide in today’s social climate would result in pushback from administration on their campus or violate the cultivation of a safe space in the classroom. While

faculty should always use their own best judgment, we encourage faculty to take advantage of this opportunity for students to learn valuable lessons through this video about how communication ethics is relevant in the present moment and in their own communication behavior, helping them to have a heightened attunement to these challenging and controversial ethical subjects.

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