

# Investigating the Role of Uses and Gratifications in Inappropriate Social Media Posting by College Students

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This study explores uses and gratifications (U&G) as a mechanism to better understand inappropriate posting by students on social media platforms. A cross-sectional survey of undergraduate college students (N=152) measured participants' motivations for using different social media platforms and their degree of inappropriate posting on each platform. Specifically, the current research explores the relationship between students' motivations to use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat and their level of general inappropriate posting. Further research investigated the relationship between students' motivations to use each social media platform and eight types of faux pas content. Findings show that U&G

motivations differ by platform, with some motivations being significantly related to general inappropriate posting. The results also indicate that U&G motivations are significantly related to specific types of inappropriate content. These relationships differed by platform, with Twitter having the most relationships between U&Gs and inappropriate content. The study results will inform future studies while also making it possible to design better interventions to prevent further faux pas posting by students.

*Keywords: social media, inappropriate posting, cybervetting, uses and gratifications*

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**T**he attraction of social media to college students is undeniable and is demonstrated daily on campuses across the globe. Students use several social media platforms to gratify powerful needs and motivations. Information sharing, self-documentation, social interaction, entertainment, passing time, self-expression, medium appeal, and convenience are frequently reported motivations for students to use social media (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

While social media is clearly very popular with college students, it also presents a danger to their career prospects because of the growth in cybervetting (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). As many as 93% of recruiters now commonly review candidate social

media accounts during the hiring process. This cybervetting leads to negative outcomes for up to 50% of reviewed applicants (CareerBuilder, 2018). Even with a changing employment landscape due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Jobvite's 2022 Quarterly Insights Report found that recruiters "are still very active in reviewing the social media presence of candidates" (Jobvite, 2022, p. 24).

Employers' growing use of cybervetting has not gone unnoticed by college students. On the contrary, most students are aware that their social media activity may be reviewed during the hiring process. Given their awareness of cybervetting, college students should be more vigilant in policing their posted content. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case. Although college students know that employers could review their social media content and that inappropriate posting could make securing a job after college difficult, many continue to post inappropriate content. Why would students persist in such risky behavior?

One possible reason that students engage in inappropriate posting may relate to their uses and gratifications of social media. Researchers have found that desired gratifications from inappropriate disclosures can outweigh the perceived risks for some users (Gruzd & Hernández-García, 2022). If this is the case, then it could explain why students persist in inappropriate posting behavior when they know the damage such behaviors can do to their careers. While certainly helpful, this explanation also raises a number of questions. Which uses and gratifications of social media are related to inappropriate posting behavior? Are specific uses and gratifications related to specific types of inappropriate content? The current study will address these questions by exploring the relationships between uses and gratifications of social media and inappropriate posting by college students. A better understanding of these areas can inform instructors, curriculum designers, policy makers, and scholars in their efforts to address social media use and cybervetting.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Cybervetting and inappropriate social media posting**

During their time in college, many students become experts in building impressive résumés and experience profiles. These documents present the student's education, skills,

and experiences in the best possible light. The obvious goal is to promote their “best self” to potential employers. At the same time, however, employers have discovered a way to see past the carefully crafted image presented on the resume. By reviewing a candidate’s social media presence, employers believe they can often get an unfiltered view of the real person behind the resume. This process, called cybervetting, can give an employer insight into a candidate’s personal views on various “hot button” topics, including social issues, religion, politics, etc. Employers can then use information gained through cybervetting to judge a candidate’s professionalism, trustworthiness, and overall suitability for employment. This has made cybervetting an increasingly common part of the hiring process (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). As such, college students now face the challenge that potential employers may view inappropriate content posted on their social media accounts that will effectively negate their efforts at self-promotion (Peluchette & Karl, 2010).

Even if a student successfully makes it through the cybervetting process, social media activity continues to have risks. Once the student is employed, they will still need to exercise caution when posting. Many companies take inappropriate postings by their employees very seriously. In fact, posting inappropriate content is one of the major reasons companies give for the dismissal of an employee (Robards & Graf, 2022).

Given the increasing use of cybervetting, it would logically follow that students would police their content and post positive information that draws attention to their skills and experience. At the same time, they would intentionally avoid negative or inappropriate posts. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case for many students. Despite the reality of cybervetting, many students continue to post inappropriately on their social media accounts. This raises the question of why students would voluntarily post content that could negatively affect their careers.

Before this question can even be addressed, however, it is important to define what is meant by inappropriate content. This is no small task, given the subjective nature of the term “inappropriate.” What might be viewed as appropriate by some social network members might be considered improper or undesirable by others. In the case of college students, their friends might view content positively, while other viewers see it quite

differently. How, then, should inappropriate content be defined? Who gets to make that decision?

In this study, inappropriate content is defined in the context of cybervetting – when recruiters review candidate social media sites during the hiring process. Using this context, inappropriate content can be defined as posted material that a company would view as problematic – leading to a candidate being reconsidered or rejected. Examples of this content have been identified and discussed in the recruiting literature (Jobvite, 2017). Specific examples include excessive use of profanity, discussions of alcohol/drug use, political rants, racist comments, sexually explicit photographs, etc.

As cybervetting has become more prevalent, researchers have noted an increased use of privacy settings to manage the audience of social media accounts (Duffy & Chan, 2019). When social media users perceive a threat to their privacy, such as cybervetting, they activate privacy settings designed to protect their posted information. It's as if social media users have decided that restricting access to their inappropriate content is a better solution than removing the content itself. Unfortunately, there are limitations to every privacy setting. No setting will make the posted content totally secure. The companies who manage the social media platforms, third parties who can access information, and the shared community of the users themselves can be potential risks when posting on social media. Gruzd and Hernández-García (2022) studied the power of risk management and its effect on self-disclosures on social media sites. The results of their study indicate that users have a clear understanding of the threat posed by inappropriate posting, yet the gratifications perceived when self-disclosing outweighed the risks of compromising their privacy. This imbalance is especially evident in users who report a positive attitude toward communicating with friends and family on social media. If college students, who commonly use social media for communicating with their friends, also perceive greater gratification from posting inappropriate content, then it would help explain why they continue to engage in such image-damaging behavior.

### **Uses and Gratifications**

Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory identifies why users are psychologically drawn to a particular media and the motivations for using the media to fulfill a behavioral need (Katz et al., 1973). Users on social media platforms feel connected due to their use, which,

in turn, can gratify needs and motives (Chen, 2011). Each social media platform provides different U&Gs to college-age users.

Alhabash and Ma (2017) explored the motivations of college students on four different platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. The study measured the intensity and time spent on each platform. The authors identified eight motivations for college students to use social media platforms: information sharing, self-documentation, social interaction, entertainment, passing time, self-expression, medium appeal, and convenience (Alhabash & Ma, 2017 p. 7). When evaluating users' motivation to use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, the main motivation across all four platforms was to share information.

Facebook is a platform designed to help users stay connected with family and friends. As such, Facebook users value opportunities for social connection, immediate communication, self-expression, and passing time (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Giannakos et al., 2013). When using Facebook, students often self-disclose to add a personal and more intimate quality to the online relationship. Students often communicate with an extensive network of people and are known for bridging social capital. Bridging results from “weak ties” in a user's network where they gather information and perspectives from each other but not emotional support (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Specific motivations influence these disclosures. Exhibitionism and a need to connect were motivations for self-disclosure on Facebook (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). Seminal research conducted by Quan-Haase and Young (2010) identified Facebook as a media that students use “as a diversion from schoolwork.” Passing time has been studied extensively as a gratification of Facebook (Ryan et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019).

Twitter is a microblogging platform that allows users to send short messages about what they are doing or links to resources of interest. Of the four platforms in this study, Twitter is the least used in terms of time spent by college students (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Connecting with others is a primary U&G of Twitter (Chen, 2011). Phua et al. (2017) studied U&G Theory and social capital formation among social media users. The authors found Twitter ranks lowest regarding online bonding social capital or close relationships. However, Twitter is the highest in online bridging social capital, possibly due to Twitter users often having weak ties to others on the platform (Phua et al., 2017).

In Alhabash and Ma's (2017) study, the top U&Gs of Twitter were identified as medium appeal, passing time, self-expression, information sharing, social interaction, and self-documentation.

Instagram is a photo-sharing platform that allows users to take pictures, apply filters, and share them with friends on the site and other platforms. It is the social media platform on which college students spend the most time (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). A primary motivation for using Instagram is to share information. Lee et al. (2015) found five motivations for using Instagram: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking. Alhabash and Ma (2017) identified users' top three motivations for using Instagram are entertainment, convenience, and medium appeal. The motivation of medium appeal refers to ubiquitous accessibility, independent of the user's location and time of access (Liu et al., 2010). The authors found that Instagram and Snapchat account for the greatest amount of time spent on social media platforms and are used at greater intensity in comparison to Facebook and Twitter.

Snapchat is a mobile application that allows users to send and receive photos and videos. It is the second most used social media platform by college students after Instagram (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Users view Snapchat as a more private form of communication and as an "escape from the public one-to-many communication that is the default on Facebook" (Vaterlaus et al., 2016, p. 595). The U&Gs of Snapchat differ from other platforms because users have private relationships with those they snap. Users of Snapchat communicate more often with close friends and family and view it as a more private network (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Snapchat users often communicate with a single person instead of with a group of friends or followers, which allows for bonding. Distraction and procrastination were the primary motivations for using Snapchat (Utz et al., 2015).

Alhabash and Ma (2017) identified the "prevalence of use motivations related to self-documentation, social interaction, entertainment, passing time, and convenience related to all four platforms. Snapchat takes the lead in these five motivations, followed by Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, respectively" (p. 5). These motivations are often powerful and enticing. Understanding how these motivations influence students is key to

educating and mentoring them. Students need to learn how to enjoy their social media accounts while protecting their privacy and online images.

Given their enduring and stable usage among young adults and previous research upon which to build, these four social media platforms were selected to be included in this study. This decision necessarily excludes other social media platforms. For example, TikTok has gained popularity recently, though it should be noted that among 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States, its usage rates still lag behind those of Instagram and Snapchat (Pew, 2021). Given this fact and Tiktok's more limited history, it was not included in this study; however, it could be a good addition to future research. YouTube was likewise not included. Although it is popular among young adults, it is often not actively used in the same way as other social media platforms. These are sensible limitations, especially since the main aim of this study is not to survey all social media platforms in use but rather to build on previous research to explore comparative uses and gratifications as they relate to social media platforms in an organized way. Having established this base, other social media platforms could be subsequently added.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Although motivations may differ by platform, it is clear that uses and gratifications are important factors in a user's social media activity. Users select the platforms they use and how they use them based on these motivations. Since many of the motivations involve information sharing, social interaction, and self-expression, they might also be related to the types of content that are posted. By extension, they could even be related to inappropriate posting behavior. Given the increased use of cybervetting and the associated risks for college students, understanding any potential relationships between uses and gratifications and inappropriate posting behavior would be very beneficial.

In order to better understand these relationships, the current study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: Are a student's uses and gratifications for a social media platform related to their level of general inappropriate posting?

RQ2: Are a student's uses and gratifications for a social media platform related to their posting of specific inappropriate content?

## **METHODS**

On the basis of previous literature and these research questions, the following measures were applied. Participants were recruited and surveyed, as explained below.

### Measures

**Uses and Gratifications.** To measure the participants' uses and gratifications for each social media platform, a modified version of Alhabash and Ma's (2017) list of motivations was used. Participants were asked to report their level of agreement/disagreement with statements pertaining to their motivations for using their social media accounts. The statements covered motivations including information sharing, self-documentation, social interaction, entertainment, passing time, self-expression, medium appeal, and convenience. Participants were asked to respond to the motivation statements for each of their social media accounts separately using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).

**Inappropriate Posting.** The Revised Faux Pas Scale was used to capture the level of inappropriate posting by the participants and their close friends. The scale was developed by Miller (2020), combining items from the original Faux Pas Scale (Karl et al., 2010) and items drawn from current recruiting literature (Jobvite, 2017). Participants were asked to report how much they believed their social media accounts contained the given item. The eight items include "alcohol references", "drug references", "sexist comments", "racial comments", "gun references", "profanity", "sexual references", and "political comments". Participants responded using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).

Since previous research has shown that students do not exhibit the same posting behavior on all social media platforms (Miller & Melton, 2015), participants were asked to complete the revised Faux Pas scale for each of their social media accounts separately. Reliabilities for all measures are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Measure Reliabilities*

	$\alpha$
Faux Pas	0.929
Information Sharing	0.905
Self-Documentation	0.866
Entertainment	0.940
Self-Expression	0.930
Convenience	0.947



## Participants

The participants were 152 undergraduate business students (38.8% women) attending a large university in the Midwest United States. Given the research questions, the use of college students is appropriate since they are avid social media users preparing to enter the job market, and their posting behavior can impact their employability. The mean age was 21.49 years (SD = 2.439), with a range from 18 to 37. Of the 152 participants, 125 (82.2%) had Facebook accounts, 89 (58.6%) had Twitter accounts, 132 (86.8%) had Instagram accounts, and 124 (81.6%) had Snapchat accounts. The students were recruited from business courses and asked to complete an online survey. Based on the nature of the questions, the students were assured that their responses would remain anonymous if they chose to participate. All survey questions were evaluated and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## RESULTS

To address the first research question, correlations were calculated between the eight use and gratification motivations and the Faux Pas scores for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. The correlations are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Motivation-Faux Pas Correlations*

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
Information Sharing	0.088	0.169	0.265**	0.187*
Self-Documentation	0.048	0.173	0.134	0.154
Social Interaction	0.074	0.273**	0.205*	-0.007
Entertainment	0.143	0.128	0.013	-0.004
Passing Time	0.189*	0.273**	0.088	0.076
Self-Expression	0.095	0.293**	0.137	0.147
Medium Appeal	0.132	0.306**	0.318**	0.112
Convenience	0.088	0.150	0.060	-0.001

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

For Facebook, passing time was the only motivation that had a significant correlation with the student's Faux Pas score. The correlation (0.189) indicates that students who use Facebook just to pass the time are more likely to post inappropriate content on their accounts.

When looking at Twitter, there were multiple uses and gratifications that had significant correlations with the student's Faux Pas score. The correlations for social interaction (0.273), passing time (0.273), self-expression (0.293), and medium appeal (0.306) were all significant and positive. This indicates that students who use Twitter to socialize or pass the time are more likely to post inappropriate content. The same is true for students who use Twitter for self-expression or who find the immediacy of the medium appealing.

Much like Twitter, there were also multiple motivations that had significant correlations with the student's Instagram Faux Pas score. The correlations for information sharing (0.265), social interaction (0.205), and medium appeal (0.318) indicate that students who use Instagram with these motivations are more likely to post inappropriate content.

For Snapchat, information sharing was the only motivation significantly correlated with the Faux Pas score. The positive correlation (0.178) indicates that students who are motivated to use Snapchat to share information are more likely to post inappropriate content on their accounts.

While the initial correlations indicate relationships between motivations and general inappropriate posting (Research Question 1), there is still a question of how motivations are related to specific inappropriate content (Research Question 2). To address this question, correlations were calculated between the eight use and gratification motivations and the eight items of the Revised Faux Pas Scale for each social media platform (see Tables 3-6).

Table 3

*Motivation-Facebook Faux Pas Items Correlations*

	Alcohol	Drugs	Sexist	Racial	Gun	Profanity	Sexual	Political
Information Sharing	0.135	0.103	-0.045	0.002	0.029	0.047	0.160	0.117
Self-Documentation	0.068	0.034	-0.039	-0.015	0.046	-0.004	0.132	0.067
Social Interaction	0.088	0.107	0.020	0.045	-0.052	0.002	0.158	0.117
Entertainment	0.108	0.061	0.087	0.093	0.148	0.088	0.170	0.164
Passing Time	0.227*	0.141	0.124	0.120	0.126	0.124	0.207*	0.178*
Self-Expression	0.049	0.088	0.018	0.049	0.043	0.053	0.134	0.155
Medium Appeal	0.131	0.137	0.115	0.106	0.077	0.026	0.172	0.135
Convenience	0.136	0.113	0.005	0.027	0.077	0.056	0.109	0.056

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

A review of Table 3 shows that Passing Time is significantly correlated with three types of inappropriate content on Facebook. The correlations for alcohol (0.227), sexual (0.207), and political (0.178) content indicate that students who use Facebook to pass the time are more likely to post content about alcohol use, sexual activity, and politics.

While the relationship between motivations and specific content on Facebook may be limited, the correlations for Twitter show something quite different (Table 4).

Table 4

*Motivation-Twitter Faux Pas Items Correlations*

	Alcohol	Drugs	Sexist	Racial	Gun	Profanity	Sexual	Political
Information Sharing	0.194	0.208	0.047	0.094	0.110	0.140	0.098	0.229*
Self-Documentation	0.219*	0.250*	0.092	0.134	0.122	0.048	0.076	0.229*
Social Interaction	0.269*	0.279**	0.149	0.203	0.175	0.225*	0.228*	0.319**
Entertainment	0.028	0.069	0.052	0.101	0.095	0.215*	0.145	0.167
Passing Time	0.232*	0.218*	0.162	0.198	0.219**	0.290**	0.245*	0.292**
Self-Expression	0.190	0.252*	0.206	0.295**	0.290**	0.226*	0.222*	0.343**
Medium Appeal	0.194	0.204	0.300**	0.351**	0.284**	0.291**	0.249*	0.244*
Convenience	0.094	0.124	0.059	0.120	0.103	0.221*	0.137	0.158

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 4 shows that motivations are significantly correlated with all eight items of the Revised Faux Pas Scale on Twitter. In fact, of the eight uses and gratifications, only entertainment had no significant relationship with posting inappropriate content. Taking each motivation in turn, information sharing was significantly correlated with posting political content (0.229). Self-documentation was significantly related to posting about alcohol (0.219), drugs (0.250), and politics (0.229). Social interaction was significantly correlated with posting about alcohol (0.269), drugs (0.279), profanity (0.225), sexual activity (0.228), and politics (0.319). Passing time was significantly related to posting about alcohol (0.232), drugs (0.218), guns (0.219), profanity (0.290), sexual activity (0.245), and politics (0.292). Self-expression was significantly correlated with posts containing drug references (0.252), racial comments (0.295), gun references (0.290), profanity (0.226), sexual references (0.222), and political comments (0.343). Medium appeal was significantly related to posts containing sexist comments (0.300), racial comments (0.351), guns (0.284), profanity (0.291), sexual references (0.249), and political comments (0.244). Finally, convenience was significantly correlated with posts containing profanity (0.221).

Much like Twitter, there proved to be a large number of significant correlations between motivations and inappropriate content posted on Instagram (Table 5).

Table 5  
*Motivation-Instagram Faux Pas Items Correlations*

	Alcohol	Drugs	Sexist	Racial	Gun	Profanity	Sexual	Political
Information Sharing	0.362**	0.187*	0.115	0.129	0.193*	0.291**	0.188*	0.229**
Self-Documentation	0.225**	0.098	0.010	0.028	0.109	0.174*	0.124	0.058
Social Interaction	0.240**	0.171	0.060	0.044	0.170	0.246**	0.226**	0.136
Entertainment	0.129	0.002	-0.098	-0.153	-0.036	0.107	0.016	0.021
Passing Time	0.193*	0.110	0.014	-0.041	0.026	0.163	0.089	-0.022
Self-Expression	0.212*	0.077	-0.018	-0.004	0.118	0.200*	0.120	0.116
Medium Appeal	0.334**	0.271**	0.141	0.147	0.270**	0.345**	0.271**	0.275**
Convenience	0.123	0.027	-0.026	-0.060	0.023	0.158	0.064	0.022

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 5 shows that information sharing was significantly correlated with posting content about alcohol (0.362), drugs (0.187), guns (0.193), profanity (0.291), sexual activity (0.188), and politics (0.229). Self-documentation was significantly related to posts containing references to alcohol (0.225) and profanity (0.174). Social interaction was significantly correlated with posting about alcohol (0.240), profanity (0.246), and sexual activity (0.226). Passing time was only significantly related to posting references to alcohol (0.193). Self-expression was significantly correlated to posts about alcohol (0.212) and profanity (0.200). Finally, medium appeal was significantly related to posting about alcohol (0.334), drugs (0.271), guns (0.270), profanity (0.345), sexual activity (0.271), and politics (0.275). Neither entertainment nor convenience had significant relationships with posting inappropriate content.

The correlations between motivations and inappropriate content on Snapchat (Table 6) also proved to be a mixed bag.

Table 6  
*Motivation-Snapchat Faux Pas Items Correlations*

	Alcohol	Drugs	Sexist	Racial	Gun	Profanity	Sexual	Political
Information Sharing	0.194*	0.164	0.177	0.217*	0.202*	0.059	0.051	0.180*
Self-Documentation	0.268**	0.177	0.105	0.096	0.097	0.07	0.050	0.062
Social Interaction	0.055	-0.006	-0.028	-0.016	0.042	-0.135	0.100	-0.027
Entertainment	0.112	-0.038	-0.046	-0.029	0.014	-0.063	-0.046	0.052
Passing Time	0.137	0.054	0.024	0.043	0.064	0.030	0.050	0.059
Self-Expression	0.212*	0.132	0.087	0.065	0.106	0.053	0.139	0.094

Medium Appeal	0.228*	0.156	0.049	0.068	0.067	0.040	0.065	-0.024
Convenience	0.115	-0.012	-0.056	-0.010	-0.015	0.015	-0.051	-0.045

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 6 shows that information sharing was significantly correlated with posts containing alcohol references (0.194), racial comments (0.217), gun references (0.202), and political comments (0.180). Self-documentation, self-expression, and medium appeal were all significantly related to posting content about alcohol (0.268, 0.212, 0.228, respectively).

## DISCUSSION

The objectives of this study were 1) to better understand the relationships between students’ U&G for particular social media platforms and their level of inappropriate posting; and 2) to gain insight into how students’ U&G for each social media platform are related to their posting of specific inappropriate content. The findings of this study underscore the intricate relationship between college students’ motivations for using social media platforms and their likelihood of engaging in inappropriate posting behavior. These correlations provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics that influence students’ online activities. Additionally, a better understanding of the relationship between motivations for using social media and inappropriate posting will inform efforts to help students navigate in an environment where cybervetting has become a standard part of the hiring process. Comments on key findings for each of the two research questions are included below, followed by a discussion of overall conclusions, limitations, and opportunities for future research.

### **RQ1: Are a student’s uses and gratifications for a social media platform related to their level of general inappropriate posting?**

For Research Question 1, it was expected that the correlation between students’ motivations and faux pas scores by platform would vary widely, and indeed, this was the case. More specifically, some general patterns emerged for each platform. Some results were predictable, particularly for Facebook, while those for Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat were more nuanced.

**Facebook Faux Pas: Passing the Time.** The findings were the most restricted for Facebook, with “passing time” as the only statistically significant motivation (0.189) correlated to students’ Faux Pas scores. It is likely that most participants use Facebook in

a very limited way (Pew, 2021), due to its status as a general-use legacy platform. In that sense, it is somewhat surprising that users would post inappropriate content on Facebook at all.

**Twitter Faux Pas: Call and Response.** In contrast, Twitter was a rich and complex site in its relationship to participants' motivations. Several aspects of participants' U&G stand out.

First, it was somewhat surprising, given Twitter's reputation as a site focused on information and news, that information sharing was not significantly correlated to users' faux pas scores. Perhaps students are not motivated to use Twitter for faux pas information-sharing posts due to employment and cybervetting concerns.

On the other hand, Twitter had significant correlations between faux pas scores and the motivations of passing time (0.273), self-expression (0.293), and social interaction (0.273). This suggests that students who use Twitter primarily for scrolling, expressing themselves, or socializing are more prone to posting content that recruiters could deem inappropriate, putting them at increased risk from cybervetting.

The finding that self-expression is correlated with faux pas posting on Twitter seems natural given the quasi-anonymity of users and the platform's reputation as a sort of Wild West of social media. At the same time, however, the finding that social interaction was significantly correlated to faux pas on Twitter belies the common assumption that users don't use Twitter to maintain their personal social networks. This finding suggests that Twitter's perceived value as a site for social interaction must necessarily be interpreted in a more nuanced way. What are users doing when they commit faux pas in the context of social interaction on Twitter? How do they define social interaction? Are they maintaining their long-time personal social networks on Twitter, or is this a place for meeting new people? Or, perhaps more likely, is it a mix of both, where users share Twitter interactions with friends they already know while also engaging with others? We might view this third option as a certain kind of social interaction mixed with self-expression, a combination that is fostered by Twitter's openness—with most users not keeping their accounts private—and its immediacy, especially when it comes to trending topics.

If all these things are true, then it makes sense that Twitter would have a strong correlation between faux pas scores and the U&G of medium appeal (0.306), as it seems to be fulfilling several roles simultaneously. Findings also seem to suggest that social media faux pas may be more likely to occur in the environment fostered by Twitter than in the more circumscribed social media settings of the other platforms explored in this study.

**Instagram Faux Pas: Following the Crowd.** Instagram is the most popular social media platform for young people (Pew, 2021), so it is not surprising that a major correlation would exist between faux pas scores and generalized U&Gs such as information sharing, social interaction, and medium appeal. This indicates that students using Instagram for these purposes may also be more inclined to post content that could harm their professional image, especially if revealed through cybervetting.

Instagram is so popular among young adults (Pew, 2021) that it almost seems mandatory for those who want to fully engage in social interactions. It is also a visually based platform that focuses on photos and videos, including built-in tools to modify that visual content for the user's own social and informational purposes, likely making this an appealing medium to engage with others—and potentially post faux pas content.

However, given users' ability to post highly engaging visual content on Instagram, it is interesting that self-expression did not have a significant correlation to participants' faux pas scores, as was the case with Twitter. More inquiry in this area is needed, particularly regarding how users define self-expression. Perhaps despite having tools at their disposal that could potentially aid or enhance self-expression on Instagram, users feel less anonymous and more constrained within a more closely drawn circle of connections. They do not feel as free to engage in uninhibited self-expression as on Twitter.

This general lack of correlation between self-expression and faux pas scores for Instagram does not mean that users do not engage in potential social media faux in all areas, as will be explored later. As with other platforms, the kinds of information being shared, and the kinds of social interactions users are pursuing seem highly relevant to outcomes.

**Snapchat Faux Pas: Sharing Information.** Like Facebook, Snapchat shows a narrower range of correlations between motivations and participants' faux pas scores than

other platforms in this study. However, rather than being correlated with passing time, as in the case of Facebook, the correlation emerges for Snapchat primarily in the realm of information sharing. Again, one question not explored in the study that can be followed up on in future research is what *kinds* of information are shared for each platform.

Snapchat originated as a person-to-person photo sharing app, and its functionality has evolved to a display of users' last 24 hours of content, along with being a popular instant messaging app. Given its modality as a facilitator of individual social connections, it is likely that Snapchat users are sharing information to augment relationships with other individuals. For this reason, it is surprising that a significant correlation does not exist between social interaction and Snapchat participants' faux pas scores. Clearly, more research is needed regarding how users define information sharing and social interaction in the context of various platforms.

The environment Snapchat creates for potential social media faux pas is unique. The platform's original and continuing draw seems to give the impression that users' posts are not permanent and that users can control what is seen, including a password-protected area called "my eyes only." The platform includes limited end-to-end encryption, with plans to expand this in the future. In this sense, it is logical that users would share certain information on this platform. However, it is not clear why correlations would not exist between other motivations and participants' faux pas scores.

The findings discussed above indicate that there are significant correlations between motivations and faux pas posting. While these motivations may enhance social connectedness and self-expression, they may also inadvertently lead students to share content that could harm their professional image and, ultimately, their employability.

**Comparison Across Platforms.** Overall, the correlation between students' motivations and faux pas scores by platform varied greatly. Users' engagement with Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat showed some seemingly paradoxical characteristics, with the supposed information-sharing platform, Twitter, not evidencing a faux pas score correlated to information sharing but instead for social interaction and self-expression. Snapchat, on the other hand, the platform that built its reputation on being a private and protected way to connect with friends, did not evince a faux pas score correlated with social interaction but rather for information sharing. Instagram, the platform with the



greatest functional capability for personal customization of content, did not reveal a faux pas score correlated with self-expression but did for several other motivations. Facebook was a not-unexpected outlier among the platforms, in that the correlation found between student faux pas scores and motivations was extremely limited, with passing the time being the only significant one. The only common findings across all platforms were that the motivations of entertainment, self-documentation, and convenience were not found to be significantly correlated with student faux pas scores.

The existence of meaningful differences by platform confirms that U&G, in this context, is a relevant and potentially important area of study requiring more exploration to understand fully. Some of this research can focus on how participants apply or express each motivation within a given platform, which would provide additional insights into how participants engage in potentially problematic behavior on each platform. This research can inform instructors, curriculum designers, parents, and others who might influence students' choices. It can also influence policy makers in their efforts to protect and support users and citizens.

**RQ2: Are a student's uses and gratifications for a social media platform related to their posting of specific inappropriate content?**

This section discusses the findings related to Research Question 2, which focuses on the relationships between motivations and specific kinds of inappropriate content for each platform. As described in the results section, these relationships were calculated between the eight use and gratification motivations and the eight items of the Revised Faux Pas Scale for each social media platform.

Building on this inquiry can help instructors, curriculum designers, parents, and individuals to become aware of these patterns and tendencies and to counter them to blunt any negative impact. It can also inform policy makers who are working to regulate platforms or protect users. The following sections discuss the findings for each platform.

**Facebook: Limited Relationships Between Passing Time and Content Categories.**

For Facebook, one motivation, passing time, is correlated with three categories of inappropriate content: alcohol (0.227), sexual (0.207), and political (0.178). This relatively scope-limited result is unsurprising, given the limited use students likely make of Facebook. A correlation for one of these content areas, political posts, might be expected on

a platform where young people might attempt to interact with older relatives or community members.

However, the two other types of inappropriate content that were correlated to passing time, those related to alcohol and sexual content, do not fit this narrative. Again, we do not know from the results what kinds of content respondents are posting in these areas, and it may be that posts falling under these topics are light humor or memes, which could be very different from other kinds of content that also falls into these same categories on the other platforms included in this study. Notably, posts about drugs were not correlated to passing time on Facebook (in contrast to Twitter), which may show some circumspection on the part of participants who may be taking into account a different audience on Facebook.

### **Twitter: Complex Relationships Between Multiple Motivations and Content**

**Categories.** While the relationships shown above for Facebook may be weak, the findings for Twitter were more substantial. Seven of the eight uses and gratifications (except entertainment) had a significant relationship with posting inappropriate content. This suggests a potentially wide range of faux pas posting on Twitter.

Politics is one of the reasons Twitter is well known, and, indeed, political content is correlated to six different motivations on Twitter, including social interaction (0.319), information sharing (0.229), and self-documentation (0.229). It is expected that politically engaged individuals would want to share information supporting their causes or candidates or to tear down opponents in the quintessential quasi-public social media platform. Yet, the problematic aspect of this dynamic is that while sharing political opinions and passions is part of the democratic process, it is also true that these same sentiments are relatively permanent online and may later affect one's career prospects. The ethical and civic tensions inherent in this kind of posting activity are complex and not simple to resolve; however, it can be said that young people using Twitter in this way should be aware of the medium- to long-term implications of what they are doing. How instructors, curriculum designers, and policy makers might help individuals engage meaningfully in the public square via social media is an important area for continuing research.

More interesting are the findings that suggest that many users are not concerned about faux pas posting on Twitter. Self-documentation is related to posting about alcohol (0.219) and drugs (0.250). Likewise, social interaction shows significant correlations with posting about alcohol (0.269), drugs (0.279), profanity (0.225), and sexual activity (0.228), as well as politics (0.319).

One crucial aspect of self-documentation and social interaction with regard to Twitter is that because of the platform's design, most user accounts are completely open and not set to private, thus not providing any protection from cybervetting. It seems that in the realms of self-disclosure and social interaction, many participants were not concerned about the potential effects of their posts on career or other prospects but were instead content for their proclivities related to alcohol, drugs, and other activities to be known, at least to their social ties. It may be that being "real" about one's activities and opinions is valued by individuals who want to be seen as authentic by their social groups, even if this might end up being harmful to them in the professional realm. Again, the downside is that social media is relatively permanent, so documentation that may be "real" in the moment may have real effects on one's career later on. The tendency towards a short-term bias in posting behavior has not changed from earlier studies that showed a continuing willingness to post potentially problematic content despite the potential negative consequences (Miller & Melton, 2015).

Passing time on Twitter, similar to Facebook, shows significant relationships with posting about alcohol (0.232), sexual activity (0.245), and politics (0.292). Passing time also has a connection to posts related to guns (0.219), profanity (0.290), and drugs (0.218). It is interesting that even though Twitter is a more public-facing platform than Facebook, the motivation of passing time is connected to more potentially controversial and career-diminishing content on Twitter than it is on Facebook, suggesting that perhaps the threat of Grandma reading one's faux pas posts is more ominous than that posed by one's future boss. The correlation of posts about guns with the motivation of passing time is also interesting, given that this content category is not correlated to self-documentation or information sharing on Twitter.

Self-expression on Twitter is one of the motivations with the most relationships to content areas, being correlated with drug references (0.252), racial comments (0.295), gun

references (0.290), profanity (0.226), sexual references (0.222), and political comments (0.343). We do not, of course, know the specific details about this content. However, it is interesting that racial comments are related to self-expression on Twitter but not to some other motivations. It may be the case that these comments are negative or derogatory, but it also might be that they are positive or neutral—for example, posts about a racially- or ethnically-focused holiday such as Juneteenth or Lunar New Year. More research is needed to understand the scope of self-expression on Twitter.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that the motivation of medium appeal on Twitter exhibits significant correlations with sexist content (0.300), racial content (0.351), gun-related content (0.284), profanity (0.291), sexual references (0.249), and political comments (0.244). This suggests that there may be something about Twitter that is appealing to users who are producing content in these areas. In a related way, it is somewhat amusing that the sole relationship found for the convenience motivation on Twitter is for posts containing profanity (0.221).

Even though adults under 30 years old do not use Twitter as frequently as they do some other platforms, research in this area is still important, given the risks users face related to the openness and permanence of content on the platform and the high number of significant correlations that were found between users' motivations and faux pas content. This is especially acute with the apparently strong correlations between U&G and sexist content (0.300), racial content (0.351), gun-related content (0.284), profanity (0.291), and sexual references (0.249) that could potentially hinder or derail a career or job offer.

**Instagram: Extensive Relationships Between Several Motivations and Content Categories.** Instagram, similar to Twitter and unlike Facebook, showed many significant correlations between motivations and potentially inappropriate content areas. Many of these correlations (six) focused on alcohol, including information sharing (0.362), self-documentation (0.225), social interaction (0.240), passing time (0.193), self-expression (0.212), and medium appeal (0.334). Clearly, Instagram is a well-loved or at least well-used app for this topic area among participants. Its visual orientation and focus on videos would facilitate sharing posts about drinking among friends and acquaintances, reflected in the significant correlations to self-documentation, self-expression, and social interaction. Interestingly, information sharing seems to evince an especially strong

correlation with alcohol-related content on Instagram, as does medium appeal. Perhaps the reason for these two significant correlations is the app's ubiquity among this age group, making it an ideal site for communication and coordination about parties and activities.

The content area of drugs on Instagram showed far fewer significant relationships to motivations compared to those about alcohol, with only information sharing and medium appeal being significantly correlated. It is unclear what kind of drug-related information users might be posting on Instagram, which could conceivably range from posts about cannabis to posts about hard-core, illegal drugs. Either way, it is noteworthy that the posting of drug-related content is not correlated on Instagram to self-documentation, social interaction, or self-expression, as is alcohol-related content.

Profanity had a number of significant relationships (five) on Instagram, some of which might be expected, such as social interaction (0.246) and self-expression (0.200), but also some for which the logic is less clear, such as information sharing (0.291) and self-documentation (0.174). In any case, medium appeal was strongly correlated with profanity (0.345) on Instagram.

On the other hand, the areas of racial and sexist content showed no significant relationships to motivations on Instagram. These seem to be taboo areas of content on three of the four platforms, with the exception of Twitter, adding weight to the idea that individuals may feel more accountable to their online friend groups than to strangers (or future employers). Gun-related and political posts were significantly related only to the motivations of information sharing and medium appeal on Instagram.

Overall, medium appeal was significantly correlated with all content areas on Instagram, except sexist and racially-oriented content. Again, group pressure may cause users to avoid these areas, which is clearly not the case for other potentially problematic content. The numerous content-area correlations to the motivation of medium appeal suggest that users are comfortable posting on a wide variety of topics, even including potential faux pas posts. However, this same appeal and comfort level may also lull users into sharing the kinds of content that may later be subject to cybervetting and its consequences. Users aged 18-24 are especially at risk for this, as they are the most likely to keep social media accounts public or partially public (Griffith, 2020).

For this reason, Instagram may be a good place for educators, parents, and individuals to focus. Not only is it widely used by this demographic; it also seems to foster certain kinds of potential faux pas posting. Research in this area could focus on better understanding students' motivations and finding ways to helpfully intervene.

**Snapchat: Focused Relationships Between Motivations and Content Categories.**

Snapchat is a unique platform, and this is shown in the results of this study. Only one content area, alcohol, was correlated to multiple motivations (four), those being information sharing (0.194), self-documentation (0.268), self-expression (0.212), and medium appeal (0.228). On the other hand, zero significant correlations to any motivations were found in the areas of drug-, sexist-, profanity-, or sexual-related content. Racial, political, and gun-related content were correlated only with the motivation of information sharing. In other words, the correlations between motivations and potentially inappropriate content were fairly weak for most content categories except alcohol and for most motivations except information sharing.

Perhaps concomitant with Snapchat's role as a one-to-one-oriented, information-sharing-based platform focused on individual connections, it does not seem to be an environment where controversy reigns. Yet this relative lack of potentially problematic content also seems to go against its unique privacy- and time-horizon-based functionalities that send the message that "what happens on Snapchat stays on Snapchat."

Clearly, something else is going on here. Why does Snapchat, the structurally least open and most protected platform, foster a low volume of motivational correlations with potentially problematic content, while Twitter, the structurally most open and least protected platform, contains the highest volume of motivational correlations to potentially problematic content? More research is needed in this area to understand users' motivations regarding these platforms.

**LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

It is important to acknowledge the study's limitations, such as its reliance on self-reported data. Future research could benefit from looking closely at the posted content, longitudinal studies, and additional measures to capture the multifaceted nature of motivations and content on social media platforms. Likewise, this study was limited by

excluding popular platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, which might be included in subsequent studies.

However, this study is a much-needed step that builds on previous research and allows for the development of continuing inquiry. Its findings underscore the significant associations found between motivations and participants' faux pas scores for the platforms of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, as well as between motivations and specific kinds of content on these platforms. For most platforms, there was not an extensive number of correlations between motivations and faux pas score, except Twitter and, to a certain extent, Instagram.

Students select media platforms based on their personal U&Gs. While these motivations may enhance social connectedness and self-expression, they may also inadvertently lead to disseminating content that could harm students' professional image. Motivations such as information sharing, self-documentation, social interaction, passing time, self-expression, medium appeal, and convenience exhibit, to varying degrees, significant correlations with specific content items. Alcohol-related content seems to be particularly prominent in this regard, suggesting a comfort level with or tolerance of this kind of content among participants across several platforms. Other correlations to racially based or sexist content were rare, suggesting that individuals feel greater constraints or are less interested in these topics.

The outcomes of this study shed light on the nuanced relationship between motivations and specific content on different platforms. However, more research is needed to understand how motivations are being applied and what the quality of the content is in various categories. For example, what kinds of information sharing take place in various content areas? What types of social interaction are occurring? These questions are vital, especially for Twitter and Snapchat, platforms that produced some complex findings in this study. Instagram, due to its ubiquity and the apparent comfort level its users have in sharing potentially problematic content, is worthy of more in-depth study. It would also be beneficial to learn to what degree users are aware that, at some level, others who are viewing their posts can still capture and share their photos or other kinds of posted content. Further research can contribute to the development of targeted interventions and

policies aimed at promoting online behavior that will help provide individuals with a solid basis for career and personal development.

The findings of this study emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of motivations and their relationship to posting potentially inappropriate content on social media platforms. Students' motivations for using social media platforms can influence their posting behavior in both positive and negative ways. While some motivations, such as social interaction and self-expression, may enhance engagement and connection with peers, they may also inadvertently lead to the dissemination of inappropriate content cybervetted by prospective employers. By recognizing the underlying motivations driving students' social media use, interventions can be developed to promote responsible online behavior and safeguard their future career prospects. Understanding these relationships is crucial for educators, policy makers, and employers aiming to mitigate the risks associated with cybervetting and ensure that students are equipped with the necessary digital literacy skills to navigate the professional landscape effectively.

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