

Episode 247—Carol Scott: Frequency and Engagement: Analyses of Emerging Adults' Social Media Use

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[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo! Snapchat, Venmo, Whatsapp. Have you ever wondered how mobile apps can help you in your social work classroom or out in the field? Well we at the inSocialWork podcast series would like to take this opportunity to tell you about a new resource from the UB School of Social Work called Helping Apps for Practitioners and Educators. Or HAPPE. That's with an E. HAPPE is a new monthly blog series created to connect practitioners and educators in the helping professions with mobile apps that they might find useful in practice or in their pursuit of lifelong learning. We encourage you to check out HAPPE, again that's with an E, at socialwork.Buffalo.edu/HAPPE. Welcome back academic calendar types! Well two things. The annual Elmwood Festival for the Arts, the last big Buffalo festival of the summer and Labor Day are in the bag. Time to get back into the swing of focused learning and enjoying our beautiful Western New York fall season. I'm Peter Sobota. Steve Jobs and Bill Gates apparently were pretty militant about their own children's screen time. In this episode our guest Carol Scott discusses her work examining emerging adults social media use and the risks to their well-being. Dispensing with good or bad characterizations, Ms. Scott describes the importance of understanding the measures of social media use currently in place. Largely centered around frequency and engagement. Ms. Scott will tell us that she is learning that engagement, or what people are actually doing using social media, is the big player here and is now asking questions about what may drive that engagement behavior. Bridging research to practice. Carol Scott offers guidelines for talking with emerging adults about their engagement and use of social media. Carol Scott MSW is currently a Ph.D. student here at the UB School of Social Work. Ms. Scott was interviewed in May of 2018 by our own Melanie Sage Ph.D., assistant professor here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:02:38] Hi, I'm Melanie Sage. I'm an assistant professor at the UB School of Social Work and I'm here today interviewing Carol Scott who's a doctoral candidate in our program. Hi Carol!

[00:02:48] Hi Melanie, how are you?

[00:02:49] Good.

[00:02:50] Good.

[00:02:50] I'm so excited to be talking to you today about your research related to social media because we say that we're the human behavior profession and technology and social media play such a big role in our lives now yet very few social workers are exploring this issue. Can you tell me a little bit about what brought you to this work?

[00:03:09] Absolutely. First let me start off by saying thank you for taking the time to interview me about my research. I love to talk about this because I completely agree not enough people do it. I think there's this fear of social media and I think we need to break that circuit. I was always interested in development and context. In my undergrad, during my undergrad in a research lab we studied peer relations, specifically bullying. Then when I went into my Masters of Social Work I largely focused on alcohol use in the youth and emerging adult, young adult population. When I entered into the Ph.D. program I came with that interest of youth alcohol use and Tom Nochajski, who is an author on this paper as well in the chair of my Ph.D. committee said to me we know a lot

about young adult drinking. How are you going to contribute to the literature? What is going to be your area of interest your thing? So I went back to the literature with a data focused on peer influence peer relations because I've always been interested in how friends influence us for better or for worse. And then that's when I came across social media. That's when I started becoming interested in social media use with the realization that majority of emerging adults, especially in the U.S. use social media. 90 percent or more are on it almost every day. That's where our lives are that's where friends are. I mean even Facebook has the use of the word friends. So then that's when I started to look at how does social media use impact or associated with their drinking. Stemming from that and growing from that, now I really identify as someone who's interested in social media use and the risks for consequences and well-being including alcohol use.

[00:04:42] It's an important topic and it's hard to think about peer influence now without thinking about the social media mediated peer influence. So how did you go about exploring this issue?

[00:04:54] For me, when I started this dissertation, so this study is one of three parts of my dissertation research, and this one I started by looking at social media news. Like we have the definition, we know that social media us is, it's really defined as a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and permit the continuous exchange of user generated content. That's lofty, that's academic. I thought how do we break this down, how do we really operationalize it as they do in media studies and communications research. Like Kaplin and Helen 2010, they include things like blogs, virtual world, social networking sites, content communities. So looking at that I thought to myself OK how do we really operationalize and look at social media. And in the beginning I'll be honest, I thought social media use was this one construct, this one thing. And from this research I learned that it's actually two distinct groups. There's two distinct concepts. So social media use is defined as, or includes social media frequency, So the frequency to which one uses social media, and social media engagement, so that's the degree or the Central or the meaning of social media use. So that's basically breaks down two of the things that people do while they're online. Because through this study in the background although it's not in here, I'll be honest with you I tried everything to make those two things stick together. To make one concrete group and they're not. Social media use is two distinct ways of measuring frequency and engagement.

[00:06:24] It's good to think about, because we're hearing so much about "Oh, more social media use causes more depression or more anxiety" and it seems like it has to be more complex than that. And it sounds like you're trying to get to the root of that complexity. So can you talk about what you mean when you say those two groups and how you define or split up what an engaged social media user looks like?

[00:06:45] Absolutely. So social media use frequency is basically that. It's a quantitative measure of how much time one spends online. So in my study, and largely it's based on those that came before me including Pew Research Center. So I included measures of how often they visited social networking sites, how many minutes in a day they would spend on social media. How many sites out of the top 15 at the time which were measured by Pew Research Center did they use, those kind of things. So it's really a quantitative measure of how much people use. That engagement is really about what they do. So I had ten measures in this study that looked at things from how often do they post pictures, videos, status updates, how often they comment on other people's pictures or status updates, how often they even deleted friends or deleted comments, regretted sharing things, various different indicators of the things that they do online. So that's largely the difference is a marker of how much time versus how they spend their time. Engagement is largely the one that's missing in the literature. Most people when they look at social media use associated with depression, they're really looking at frequency and in this research as we continue to talk about it what really seems to matter is engagement.

[00:07:56] Who were your participants in the study?

[00:07:58] So I had 249 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 26. They were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk, AmTurk for short. So for those of you that don't know what Amazon Mechanical Turk is, AmTurk is an online labor source, crowdsourcing if you will, of people who are employed by Amazon and ready and willing to do various different tasks including research surveys. Those people that are already employed by Amazon Mechanical Turk, so AmTurk is who I recruited the sample from. I went on to AmTurk, I posted this hit-- they call it a hit, it's a study add, those that fit the description between 18 and 26 who use social media at least occasionally were recruited into the study and completed the survey.

[00:08:40] Okay great. So you really are talking about post high school youth primarily or 18 and up. And what did you learn about them related to their frequency and engagement in social media?

[00:08:52] I did some fancy statistics and basically what the statistics did is that build profiles or groups of people. Although it's not necessarily accurate. You could almost look at it like typologies of use. So from the frequency of the data suggested that there's three profiles. The first profile being low frequency, the second profile being moderate, and then the third profile is high. How that worked is that those in the low profile or low social media use frequency group barely interacted online. They said that they might have used it three out of seven days. Used it every few days and when asked how many minutes they might spend 21 to 30 minutes a day. The moderate group pushes 35 percent of the sample, they used it four out of seven days, they were on about once a day and they used it almost every day, where the high frequency group, which was majority of the sample, so that worked out would be 55 percent of the people, they use it almost constantly and they were on it 61 to 70 minutes a day they used on average, they were on it every day, they used several times a day and they used at least five social media sites. So when you added them together it was at least five. So those were the three different types of people or young adults when it comes to use, frequency. Then there were three separate profiles of engagement. Again that's what they do when they're online. And those three people were equally low moderate and high. The low group barely engaged, rarely did almost anything; rarely shared pictures, rarely showed status updates, rarely commented on things. The moderate group was exactly what you would assume them to be, they were moderately doing those things. The highly engaged profile, which was a small group of people, only 5 percent of the sample which is largely supported in the literature. The moderate group I'll tell you was the biggest group it was 67 percent of the sample and that's supported the literature. People on average as the research shows use it most days, they do most things, right? The high group, the 5 percent, they were highly engaged. They posted regularly, they were the people who constantly posted updates of themselves or pictures or videos. They were constantly messaging people, posting comments, etc. So it's that small group of people that were uniquely different. So I call them the high engagers and then the high frequency users.

[00:10:59] It sounds like there's probably some overlap between those groups but your high engaged users is a much smaller group than your high frequency users. So there must be a group of people who are on social media a lot but aren't just doing that kind of constant engagement.

[00:11:16] Yes. So how much time you spend online has absolutely nothing to do with what you do online. Those variables, those indicators, so those five indicators of frequency and the 10 indicators of engagement are not at all correlated. And that's why they didn't fall together as one profile. That's why I had two distinct groups. So how much time you spend really does not matter. With respect to what you do online. There's not like there's overlap there's distinct ideas.

[00:11:41] That might be important to our research about correlates to social media use or

engagement.

[00:11:46] Agreed.

[00:11:46] What do you suppose drives the level of engagement or frequency?

[00:11:52] That's a really good question and that's largely what I'm thinking of in the future. So that's like a next step for me is to understand who are the people that are the highly engaged, who are those 5 percent of people that spend a lot of time online doing a lot online. My guess is similar to "It's a personality indicator." I'm proposing and that's where I'll go down the road in future studies, is that the group of people who are highly engaged my guess is they are also those that are very extroverted. They're also the ones that are out there in the day-to-day life offline doing the lot. Out there, they're very social. That's my guess. That study is yet to come.

[00:12:27] It would be interesting to know though because we think of social media as maybe like a risk for some people and a protective factor for others. That would be good for our future of interventions I suppose to know which is which.

[00:12:39] Agreed.

[00:12:39] What other things do you think that researchers should consider when they're thinking about peer relationships and social media use?

[00:12:47] So I think some of the big take homes from this study that I really think people should listen to whether that be parents, practitioners, policy makers, researchers, is largely that frequency, first and foremost as I've repeatedly say, frequency and social media user engagement. And we have much to gain from viewing social media use in the light of those distinctions, and this distinction deepens our understanding of the purpose it serves for youth. Throughout my research I use mass communications theory, it's called uses and gratifications and basically the undertone is that people use media in a certain way to meet or to gratify certain needs such as interaction, self-expression, sharing and gaining of information. And so now more and more researchers are using uses and gratifications theory to understand social media use. So as we're striving to understand the purpose that it serves I think the engagement piece is really where we need to go because as social media use becomes more and more ingrained into the daily fabric of our lives I really think it, or it's conceivable at least, to understand that frequency is an outdated measure. I think the frequency to which one uses social media is largely outdated because majority of people are online. And I think that's only going to increase as technology increases like tablets and watches now you can use and connect with your friends right and go online. So I think as technology improves our access to technology or access to social media, frequency is an outdated construct. I think it's a descriptive purpose so we can understand "OK, yes, the people I as a practitioner have seen or the child that I have, yes my child uses it about the same amount as everybody else." What I think we really need to start looking at is engagement because I think that that's really where we're going to find the risks and benefits of social media use. I really think that that's, we're trending towards this idea that we're all online, Great. Check. Move on. Now let's start looking at the things we do while we're online.

[00:14:37] What kind of questions might social workers ask their clients about?

[00:14:42] That's something that, again that's a future study that I'm looking at. So look for that, it's coming up. I've really gone back to the population to ask them every single way they could possibly think of that they engage. And what I'm coming to understand is that there's basically three overarching labels that we look at. So whether they're passively engaged, so these are the people who are just looking. Lurking is a common word used, but looking. Well, these are your young

adults who we're looking online, constantly online looking at posts but not really saying anything not liking, not commenting, nothing. Then there's the active engagers. So these are the people participating, commenting, liking, posting pictures, posting photos. And then you have your reactive group. So these are the people that might not necessarily be actively posting their own content but they are likely reacting to what's already out there. Whether it be their friend's content or other groups or businesses or stars, famous people following, their liking and they're commenting back on it or posting it. So the questions that you need to ask when you're getting at as a social worker or a mother or father or any parent of type who are concerned, is ask your kid the kinds of things that they're doing, how often do you post pictures of yourself or how often do you post videos, how often do you post status updates or react to those that are already out there or are you the type of young adult who is just looking. And I think once you get out and you start to understand those are the types of questions you can ask your young adult then you'll start to understand how much are they at risk, what's the benefit of social media used to them. I have yet to figure out, and that's a paper yet to come, all the long term effects. But I think that those are the types of questions that you really want to start asking.

[00:16:20] So do we know much yet about how the level of engagement might impact risk?

[00:16:26] In this paper in this first study that I have, Computers in Human Behavior, I see that the high engagers tend to identify as as white and higher income and higher education. So what that tells me is that those that are of higher SES are the ones who are doing it more often. Those are the high engagers, right? So there's something interesting there. The high engagers also compared to everyone else posted more videos, like substantially more videos. So there might be something interesting there to look at. That could be an idea of technology but it could be something about the individual. Also, what we know is the digital divide. So that's essentially the idea that it's not "Do people have access," It's just the level to which they have access. So the idea that those that are of higher SES tend to have more access to the Internet than those of lower SES. So I think there could be something there with markers of SES. And I think the idea is that when we think of risk we think of certain populations, usually persons of color or lower SES, lower income, lower education to be at greater risk. What this might suggest is that might not be the case. What might be the case are those that are higher SES might be at greater risk.

[00:17:39] Sounds like there are more protective factors associated with that more highly engaged use.

[00:17:45] Right, or could be risk. So coming out yet again this is a future study, it's under review. What I looked at the difference between the profiles of frequency and engagement with respect to alcohol use and a little secret, the studies yet to come between you and me and our listeners, frequency had nothing to do with alcohol use nothing. Nothing. No matter how much or how little you use social media did not impact how much you drink, how often you drink, whether you binge drink or not, or your alcohol related problems. Engagement did, or the highly engaged user drank more frequently and in higher quantities.

[00:18:19] We have a lot still to know about. And you've referenced the next studies so it sounds like you have a lot on your mind about how this work might lead to the future agenda of how social workers think about social media use. You've referenced your paper a few times which was published in 2017. So have you gotten other writing in progress?

[00:18:43] Yes, that is yet to come. It's under review and that one is latent profile analysis of again fancy statistics, but generally looking at the profiles of social media use in general and related to alcohol use.

[00:18:55] What else do you think that practitioners or researchers or policymakers should know about these emerging issues?

[00:19:01] So we know that social media use is popular. We know the vast majority of people are using it. We know that there's risks and benefits and I think like I want to make that crystal clear to the listeners, I sit in the camp of social media is not the Devil. It has wonderful benefits to it. Yes there's risks, but just like anything else in life, there's also equal benefits. And that is also a goal of mine to come out of in the future is to know that yes, it may increase drinking but it might also help with social support and social capital and there might be some protective factors there so know that I sit in the camp of it's not the Devil. And I think that that's what I would really like practitioners and policy makers to really grasp too, is that it's not this terrible thing that is nothing but risk and just because your young adults or your child or your student, you find them constantly online. It's not necessarily or doesn't automatically equal a bad thing. I think the take home message is that we use it a lot and I don't think that's going anywhere. I think that's just something that we're just like yep, check, that's true move on, right? And also just because you use it or engage a lot doesn't necessarily mean there's a risk. I think we have yet a lot to come and to understand about this but know that at the end of the day I don't think it's the Devil that people see it as or fear it to be.

[00:20:14] That's a good point and something that a lot of people who are working with emerging adults need to hear. So I talk to some social workers who say I'm not a, I'm not a technology person I'm a people-person. What message do you have for them?

[00:20:29] That's an interesting concept. so they're not technology people are people? Say that again.

[00:20:34] They're people-people.

[00:20:35] They're people-people. But so is online. And you can't be a people-person without acknowledging the importance of technology. It's with us everywhere we go. Our friends are in our pocket. So back in the day when I was younger we used to know that in order to be influenced whether positive or negatively by our friends we used to have to be with them face to face. We don't have to anymore because it's all online. And I think that's the hardest thing I have many people to wrap their brains around. I've even had in this first study so many people who are like well how does it affect development. Well how does it not? Development occurs in context. We develop within systems and part of the system in context now includes technology, particularly social media.

[00:21:16] So you really can't engage around relationships if you're not also thinking about how technology is affecting those relationships in positive and negative ways potentially.

[00:21:26] Exactly.

[00:21:27] I'm so excited to see what's next for you. Is there anything else that you think that we should know?

[00:21:33] Yeah I'll reiterate the importance of realizing that frequency is outdated or potentially. Engagement is the thing. Start asking your clients, your young adults in your life what they do online because I think that's the real important take home. Ask them the kinds of behaviors the kinds of things they do.

[00:21:53] And don't just discount the ones that may not be actively doing anything because there might be something unique about the passive engager that's yet to come. We're just learning to figure that out. And I think realize that there's benefits to it. Don't just say it's the Devil it scares me.

I think people are disconnected now because they're always on the phone. That's not necessarily the case because we know from research that there's actually a lot of benefits. It decreases depression, It increases social support and perceived capital. And for those, for example, sexual minority groups it's now giving them a place to truly identify and work through their identity in a safe way. It also gives those that have terminal disease, for example cancer, who can't go outside and hang out with their friends, now feel like they're part of a group. So it's not necessarily the Devil. I think we have to see that it has many benefits and to actually learn to work with it instead of fight against it.

[00:22:45] It connects with so many social work issues.

[00:22:48] Agreed.

[00:22:49] Well thank you for answering that. It's been really nice to interview you. And I wish you the best in your future research.

[00:22:57] Thank you so much for taking the time.

[00:22:59] You've been listening to Carol Scott discuss emerging adults use of social media and impact on their well-being on inSocialWork.

[00:23:15] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth, professor and Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history, our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work resource center. You'll find that under the Community Resources menu.