“Yo Sir, That’s Creepy!” The Use of Social Media as a Pedagogical Tool in Toronto High School Classroom

By

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Abstract

Despite the fact that some school boards have identified social media as a tool that holds significant pedagogical potential, everything from a fear of cyberbullying to technology limitations has often convinced teachers to avoid using the medium in their classroom. This qualitative research study conducted with semi-structured interviews, explored how Toronto high schools teachers, who have actively adopted social media as a pedagogical tool, are using it in their classrooms. The findings of this study were separated into four main themes: 1) Using social media in the classroom reportedly improved the student learning experience; 2) External factors are the biggest barrier to using social media; 3) Adopting social media impacts teacher’s work-life balance 4) Resource storage and site popularity dictate a teacher’s choice of social media platform. These findings suggest that in educational circles teachers may be ignored by policymakers and overworked during the school day while also suggesting that GTA students may lack the parental support necessary to complete their schoolwork.

Key Words: Social Media, Toronto, High School, Teachers
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Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iv
Chapter 1: Introduction 1
  1.0 Research Context 1
  1.1 Research Problem 2
  1.2 Purpose of the Study 3
  1.3 Research Questions 3
  1.4 Background of the Researcher/Reflexive Positioning Statement 3
  1.5 Overview/Preview of Whole 5
Chapter 2: Literature Review 8
  2.0 Introduction 8
  2.1 Benefits of Using Social Media in High School Classrooms 8
    2.1.1 Improving student-student and student-teacher communication 9
    2.1.2 Increasing student collaboration 9
    2.1.3 Diversifying instruction, assessment and organization 10
    2.1.4 Enhancing student engagement and participation 10
    2.1.5 Encouraging parental involvement 11
  2.2 Challenges of Using Social Media in High School Classrooms 12
    2.2.1 Lack of technology available in schools 13
    2.2.2 Student disinterest in using social media for their education 13
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 High teacher time commitment</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Monitoring student behaviour.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5 Restrictive school policies regarding social media</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.6 Lack of training on how to use social media in the classroom</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Social Media Platforms Used at the High School Level</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Media and content sharing sites used in high schools</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Wikis and blogs used in high schools</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Social Media Platforms Used in Both Secondary and Post-Secondary Education</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 Similar benefits perceived by secondary and post-secondary educators about social media</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2 Similar challenges faced by secondary and post-secondary educators using social media</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Conclusion</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Methodology</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 Introduction</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Research Approach and Procedures</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Instruments of Data Collection</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Participants</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 Sampling criteria</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 Sampling procedures</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3 Participant biographies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3.1. Kevin McGuire</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3.2. Robert Stevenson</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4 Data Analysis
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths
3.7 Conclusion

Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Using Social Media in the Classroom Reportedly Improves the Student Learning Experience

4.1.1 Improved student-teacher and student-student communication
4.1.2 Better one-to-one support for students
4.1.3 Increased student engagement in course content
4.1.4 Increased student participation
4.1.5 Helping students complete schoolwork

4.2 External Factors are the Biggest Barrier to Using Social Media in High Schools

4.2.1 Outdated, inconsistent and unequal access to technology
4.2.2 Restrictive school board polices
4.2.3 Teacher and student resistance to using social media as an educational tool
4.2.4 Poor student behaviour on social media

4.3 Adopting Social Media Impacts Teacher’s Work-Life Balance

4.3.1 Impact of increased preparation time and student accessibility on a teacher’s personal life
4.3.2 Impact of immediate communication and privacy controls in protecting
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

Social media has become a major part of Canadians’ daily lives. By opening up new communication channels, helping old friends reconnect, and providing a platform where individuals can share their opinions, sites like Facebook and Twitter have changed the way society functions. In fact, a 2014 survey found that 82% of Canadians use a social networking site where they spend, on average, two hours and nineteen minutes every day (McKinnon, 2014). This ranks Canadians 12th worldwide when it comes to social media usage, with Facebook being the most heavily visited site (McKinnon, 2014). Teenagers make up a large portion of this data. According to Media Smarts (n.d.) 53% of Canadian teens use social networking sites where they can talk to friends and share pictures or videos with one another. Just like adults, Facebook is the most commonly used site by teens due to its perceived simplicity and entertainment value (Media Smarts, n.d.). As a result, it is obvious that social media has captured the attention of Canadian youth.

However, the adaptation of social media into high school classroom has been limited. According to People for Education (2014) only 51% of principals in Ontario Secondary Schools reported someone on staff using social media as an instructional tool. Even though it is considered by experts to be a “cutting edge pedagogy” teachers’ often feel they do not have the time or technology to properly use social media for instruction (People for Education, 2014, p. 8). In the United States, studies have also found that teachers are concerned that using social media will increase bullying and student access to inappropriate content (Ahn, 2010) as well as compromise teacher professionalism (Capo & Orellana, 2011).
Although reports about social media state that it could increase student collaboration and promote a sense of community in the classroom (Laird, 2014), school boards in Canada are still reluctant. In 2011, the Ontario College of Teachers (2011) released an official social media policy called “Professional Advisory: Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media.” This stated that while social media sites can help students “access assignments and resources related to classroom studies…the most popular social media applications were not created specifically for educational purposes” and are therefore risky to use (p. 3). In 2012, The Toronto Catholic District School Board (2012) expressed similar concerns. In their official “Electronic Communication System Acceptable Use Policy” they state that while electronic communication systems like social media can be used, access “can be restricted or…removed altogether” at the board’s discretion (para 1). In fact, many TCDSB computers currently have blocks on sites like Facebook that prevent teachers and students from logging in. In any case, this shows that while social media appears to have educational merit, it is not being used to its full potential.

1.1 Research Problem

As above, despite studies identifying social media as a tool that holds “significant pedagogical potential”, its adaptation by high school teachers is limited (People for Education, 2014, p. 3). This is because some fear that the medium will increase bullying, students’ access to inappropriate content (Ahn, 2010) and compromise teacher professionalism (Capo & Orellana, 2011). In Ontario, the OCT’s (2011) claim that using social media is “risky” has further convinced teachers to avoid using the medium (p. 3) However, studies have shown that failing to use social media in the classroom means that students are missing out on an opportunity to develop their collaborative skills (Laird, 2014; Platt 2011) and become more engaged in the
course content (Bartow, 2014). In addition, there appears to be a gap in the research as there are very few studies that examine the use of social media in Canadian high school classrooms.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how Toronto high schools teachers, who had actively adopted social media as a pedagogical tool, were using the medium in their classrooms. This was done by asking them about their experiences using specific social media platforms as well as exploring their perceived benefits and challenges of the pedagogy. With this study, it was my desire to increase awareness about the value of using social media in the classroom and alleviate concerns that educators may have about the new technology.

1.3 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study was: How are Toronto high school teachers, who have actively adopted social media as a pedagogical tool, using the medium in their classrooms?

The sub-questions guiding this study were:

-What benefits of using social media in the classroom do teachers perceive?
-What challenges do teachers encounter when using social media in their classrooms?
-What specific social media platforms do teachers find the most useful?

1.4 Background of the Researcher/Reflexive Positioning Statement

My own personal background has contributed to my interest in the topic of social media and education. As a twenty-two, year old, social media has not always been a part of my life. When I was little, these platforms were only beginning to be introduced and it was not until the latter half of my life that I became aware of their benefits. I feel that this unique perspective has benefitted this study as I can still remember an education system where technology was not
always present and therefore I am able to compare the benefits of a traditional classroom to one that uses social media, unlike other researchers. In addition, growing up in a middle class, family meant that I had access to a computer. Even though we did not purchase a computer until I was eight, the price was not out of my family’s income range and impossible to acquire. Also, growing up in Canada meant social media websites like Facebook have never been banned by the government like they are in China.

Since I did not use social media until Grade 11, I was also able to avoid a time in a student’s life when cyberbullying is more common. Due to the age restrictions on these websites and the fact that my high school and elementary school blocked us from accessing them, I only used social media once I was mature enough to know the proper etiquette. Even my position as a male has meant that I have avoided some of the stigmas that women often encounter when using social media (e.g., body shaming). Once again, this may have harmed my study as I came into it with a positive conception of social media already. Since I had not experienced the negatives often associated with these platforms, it may have prevented me from truly understanding teachers who had concerns about cyberbullying or inappropriate student behaviour online.

In my daily life, I use social media a great deal. I check my Facebook and Twitter accounts multiple times throughout the day as they help me keep in touch with friends and family. I also watch YouTube for multiple hours every day as it is slowly replacing T.V as my main source of entertainment. In university, I also majored in Media Studies and am very interested in how media and culture interact with each other. As a result, many of my classes forced us to use social media for educational purposes. For example, one class required us to make weekly Facebook posts about a particular issue while another asked us to analyze YouTube videos. In these experiences, I was conflicted on whether or not I liked social media as an
educational tool. Although it was a different kind of learning, part of me did not like using the same platform for educational and recreational purposes as it was as if my school life had crossed over into my social life. For the purposes of this study, this may have been both beneficial and harmful. Being an active user of social media and a teacher candidate, I hope my research has illustrated the benefits of social media in the classroom as this will make it easier for me to use in my own practice. In addition, since my high school never used social media, I often think I missed out on a valuable learning experience. However, my poor experiences with social media in university means that I already have pre-convinced notions about its effectiveness in education. This means I had to monitor my study in order to make sure that I did not pre-determine the results.

1.5 Overview/Preview of Whole

I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful and convenience sampling to interview two Toronto high school teachers about their use of social media in the classroom. Specifically, I discussed with them the benefits, challenges and specific social media platforms they were using in their classrooms. In Chapter 2, I review the literature regarding teachers’ use of social media at the high school level. In Chapter 3, I expand upon my research design and methodology. In Chapter 4, I report my research findings and discuss them in the context of previous studies about social media and high school education. Finally, in Chapter 5 I illustrate the effect that this research will have on the educational community as well as my own teaching career. I also make recommendations regarding the teaching profession and propose areas of future research about social media place as a pedagogical tool.

Before I move on, however, a note on terminology is warranted. In order to discuss social media, there are a variety of different terms that need to be defined. For the purposes of this
study, I will be using the definition put forward by Bryer and Zavattaro, (2011) who define social media as “technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders. These technologies include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (including Facebook), and virtual worlds” (p. 327). However, there are other terms that are often used interchangeably with social media. For example, Facebook and Twitter are commonly referred to as social networking sites. These were defined by Boyd and Ellision (2008) as platforms that allow users to create profiles, display “friends” or “contact” lists and that allow users to view each other’s profiles. Another term found in the literature regarding is Web 2.0. According to Buffington (2008), this refers to the technologies and websites that have made it inexpensive and simple for anyone to create and share their own content over the Internet. As a result, although the terminology is different, they are essentially defining the same thing. For the purposes of this study, I will be using the term social media to refer to all types of social networking and Web 2.0 platforms.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature pertaining to the benefits and challenges of using social media in the high school classroom. I also review the literature regarding what types of social media platforms high school teachers use most frequently and the use of social media at the post-secondary level. More specifically, I review the themes that emerge from various studies about why teachers feel social media can improve education and what factors prevent them from doing so. Next, I review research on what types of social media platforms teachers are gravitating towards. Finally, I examine the similarities between post-secondary and high school educators’ use of social media to instruct their students.

2.1 Benefits of Using Social Media in High School Classrooms

According to the Ontario College of Teachers (2011) since “most popular social media applications were not created specifically for educational purposes” they are risky to use (p. 3). However, the literature regarding social media and high schools shows that teachers might value the educational potential of these platforms more than these perceived risks. Research has found that anywhere from 53 (Capo & Orellana, 2011) to 100% (LeNoue, 2012) of U.S. high school teachers feel social media is a viable tool for teaching and learning. This reveals that some teachers might be open to using social media in their classrooms if it will enhance the learning experience. In fact, studies have shown that the more a teacher perceives social media as a positive educational tool, the easier it will be for them to use it in their classroom (Quadri, 2014). This section will explore some of the benefits of adopting social media into the classroom commonly found throughout the literature. Specifically, it will highlight some studies that found social media could have a positive impact on communication, peer-to-peer collaboration, teacher instruction, student engagement and parental involvement both inside and outside the classroom.
2.1.1. **Improving student-student and student-teacher communication.** Research has shown that some students believe that social media has the power to improve communication. At the student-student level, studies reveal that some students view social media as a way to communicate with their classmates about assignments, clubs and school activities (Ahn, 2010) as well as way “to support their academic achievement” (Marciano, 2015, p. 74). These studies also indicated that social media may help quieter students feel more comfortable sharing their opinions with the class and allow everyone to build stronger friendships with one other (Hunter-Brown, 2012). With regards to student-teacher communication, both students and teachers recognize the value in social media. Research has shown that 60% of teachers feel that these technologies would improve student-teacher interactions (Capo & Orellana, 2011) and that some students enjoy using Facebook groups to quickly contact their teacher (Hunter-Brown, 2012). As a result, new research has begun to highlight the ways social media can help improve communication between high school students and teachers.

2.1.2. **Increasing student collaboration.** One of the most common themes in the research on social media use in high school classrooms centers around the positive impact it may have on students’ collaborative skills. According to some studies, American high school teachers felt that using social media allows students to easily share their ideas and work together (Bartow, 2014; Boksz, 2012). This is because these platforms allow students to edit each other’s work, have open discussions, and teach one another content via Facebook posts, open threads and class forums (Hunter-Brown, 2012; Page, 2015; Platt, 2011). Studies interviewing students have produced similar results. In Australia, high school students using Ning, a platform that allows users to create their own, private social networking websites, found that communal blogs allowed for quick peer feedback and helped improve the quality of their work (Casey, 2013;
Casey & Evans, 2011). Similarly, research on American high school students revealed that some drew inspiration from their peers after they posted their work on social media sites (Mao, 2014). In any case, social media may have an impact on students’ collaborative skills as it provides them a platform to share, assist and work with one other.

2.1.3 Diversifying instruction, assessment and organization. Research has also shown that social media may help teachers. When it comes to assessment, some studies reveal that 60% of students believe assignments over Facebook are more interesting than regular classroom lessons (Hunter-Brown, 2012) and that some prefer using social media for daily instruction (Mourlam, 2013). This is because these assignments can allow them to take “more ownership over their learning” and are typically more fun than an essay (Hunter-Brown, 2012, p. 65). Research also reveals that social media might help improve instruction. By making teachers available outside normal school hours (Bartow, 2014), and making it easier to incorporate multimedia into one’s lesson, (Casey, 2013) studies show that social media might make content delivery easier and more engaging (LeNoue, 2012; Mao, 2014). In fact, some studies state that social media can help a teacher become more organized as platforms like YouTube, Edmodo, an educational social media platform designed to mimic the features of Facebook, and Ning allow them to store all their resources in one place (Casey, 2013; Mao, 2014). Teachers can even use social media to help their students become more organized as they can make Facebook posts to remind them of important due dates and events (Bartow, 2014). Thus, while using social media in the classroom may appear dangerous, studies have shown it can facilitate teaching and learning.

2.1.4 Enhancing student engagement and participation. Studies have also revealed that social media may have a positive impact on student engagement. According to some U.S
high school teachers, using social media can help bring the class content to life as students can engage with the material in a way that suits their needs (Boksz, 2012). Studies have also shown that some students who used Facebook in class were more engaged and felt their classes were more “interesting, fun [and] cool” (Hunter-Brown, 2012, p. 62). In the U.K., some research studies also found that high school students using Facebook and YouTube were more engaged and used these sites to support their schoolwork (Clark et al., 2009). Research has even indicated that using platforms like Facebook in the classroom might encourage introverted students to participate more as they do not have to speak out loud (Boksz, 2012; Hunter-Brown, 2012). As a result, these studies show that incorporating social media into lessons may be the key to getting students interested in school.

2.1.5 Encouraging parental involvement. In Ontario, parents are actively encouraged to be a part of their child’s education. According to the Ontario College of Teachers (2016), “parents play an important role in their child’s education” (para.1), while the Toronto District School Board (2014) states that parents are “an important part of student success” and should be included in the decision making process (para.1). As a result, teachers are encouraged to let parents know what goes on in their classes outside of formal interviews. According to the research, social media may help teachers achieve this goal. In the U.S. some studies have shown that posting class content on Facebook helps parents feel more involved as they can see what their child is doing in class (Bartow, 2014). Studies have also shown that some parents were appreciative of the quantity of online resources and additional instruction available when teachers used social media as it helped create a better learning environment (Casey & Evans, 2011). Although they may not be allowed directly into the classroom, social media ensures parents feel involved and connected to their child’s education.
The literature examined in this study shows that using social media in the high school classroom may benefit education. These studies point out that the medium has the power to improve student-student and student-teacher communication, enhance collaboration opportunities and help teachers diversify their instruction, assignments and become better organized. Some studies have even mentioned that social media has the power to increase student engagement and participation as it provides them with a safe space to share their opinions while simultaneously allowing parents to take on a bigger role in the child’s education. However, although the literature does acknowledge these benefits of using social media in high school classes, it also reveals the challenges. These are reviewed in the next section.

2.2 Challenges of Using Social Media in High School Classrooms

According to specific studies, anywhere from 75.7% (Boyd, 2015) to 85.9% of U.S. high school teachers do not use social media while only 3.2% use it on a daily basis (Pan, 2010). In Ontario, these findings were echoed in a study conducted by People for Education (2014) in which 51% of Ontario principals reported someone on staff using social media in the classroom. This resistance could be the result of anything from a lack of confidence in one’s ability to use new technology (Pan, 2010) to a fear of compromising one’s professionalism and personal privacy via the internet (Howard, 2013; LeNoue, 2012). Some studies even found that students who participated in an online survey and focus group expressed concerns that using social media for education would be too distracting as they would be tempted to use these sites for recreational purposes in class (Mao, 2014). As a result, the research reveals that teachers and students are concerned about how social media in a variety of different ways.

The following section will examine the literature detailing some of the challenges teachers who use social media in their classrooms encounter. Specifically, it will focus on studies
that found that the lack of technology available in schools, student disinterest in using social media and the large time commitment that comes with adopting social media into the classroom dissuade teacher from using the medium. It will also highlight some studies that found that student behaviour, restrictive school board policies and a lack of teacher training were severe barriers preventing teachers from using social media in their classrooms.

2.2.1 Lack of technology available in schools. According to the literature, teachers often feel as if they do not have the proper technology to use social media in the classroom. In these studies, some of the problems that American high school teachers encounter include a lack of available computers, unreliable internet connections, (Ahn, 2010; Boksz, 2012; LeNoue, 2012) and a lack of new technology at their disposal (Pan, 2010). As a result, even if they wanted to use social media, the technology given to them by the school may not allow for its utilization. Although the above-cited studies are based in the United States, this may explain why the Ontario Government invested one hundred and fifty million dollars into iPads for education as they realize their technology is outdated and inefficient (Rieti, 2014). Research has also shown that some students do not have access to technology outside of school, which means that using social media for assignments may be difficult and make some students feel uncomfortable (Pan, 2010). In any case, the research reveals that until more high schools improve their hardware and internet access, many teachers who want to use social media will continue encounter problems.

2.2.2 Student disinterest in using social media for their education. Student interest can also affect whether or not high school teachers use social media for educational purposes. In both U.S. (Ahn, 2010; Bartow, 2014) and U.K. (Grant, 2009) research studies, some high school teachers mentioned that their students did not care about using social media to complete assignments and give each other feedback, especially if they were not being marked. From the
student’s perspective, studies have also shown that many are uncomfortable using the same platform for social and educational purposes (LeNoue, 2012). This indicates that while teachers may be accepting of social media in the classroom, students’ desires determine whether or not it is used. If they feel social media is encroaching on their personal space or useless to their learning, it may not matter what teachers think about these platform.

2.2.3 High teacher time commitment. Throughout the literature, some teachers expressed concern about the time required to set up lessons involving social media. In some U.S. (Bartow, 2014; Boksz, 2012) and Australian (Casey & Evans, 2011) studies, high school teachers found that they spent extensive personal time exploring new technologies and creating a resource bank before they could even bring social media into their classrooms. Once set up, these teachers spent more time monitoring and communicating with students than they had in the past thanks to the communicate features of platforms like Ning (Bartow, 2014; Casey & Evans, 2011). Although this provided students with better resources and communication channels, this extra effort may be very stressful for teachers who already lack free or preparation time. As a result, the research reveals that incorporating social media into the classroom requires a teacher who is willing to make the time commitment necessary to prepare the proper materials. Even though some studies mentioned that teachers felt they saved time on marking thanks to increased peer-to-peer collaboration, (Casey & Evans, 2011) using social media in the classroom may require many of them find more time in their schedules.

2.2.4 Monitoring student behaviour. When it comes to social media in the classroom, one of high school teachers’ greatest concerns is inappropriate student behaviour (Bartow, 2014; Capo & Orellana, 2012; LeNoue, 2012; Pan, 2010). This is reflected in the research as some U.S. high school teachers felt using social media would require too much policing, make it easier for
students to “cut and paste off the internet” (Capo & Orellana, 2012, p. 246) and result in students wasting their time on recreational sites (Mao, 2014). In a study done by Lyndsay Grant (2009) about wiki use in U.K. high schools, there was even an example of student hostility. After correcting a mistake on a classmate’s wiki about the history of bicycles, the original poster responded with “I DONT (sic) CARE….DO UR (sic) OWN PAGE!” (p. 110). This shows that some teachers fear that their students will act inappropriately if they introduce a platform where interactions are typically more vulgar and casual. Although these sites appear to have educational potential, if cyberbullying is a possibility, teachers may avoid using them entirely.

2.2.5 Restrictive school policies regarding social media. Research shows that teachers and students are often prevented from using social media due to school policies that block these websites (Boksz, 2012; Pan, 2010; Platt, 2011; Rodgers 2012). Although studies have shown that some teachers are encouraged to use Facebook as an instructional tool, (Platt, 2011) other schools reportedly have such policies in place to protect the school from lawsuits (Rodgers, 2012). Some school boards also require teachers to use certain programs to plan a lesson which makes using a Facebook Group too difficult and time-consuming (Mourlam, 2013). For teachers who want to use social media, this has made their job more difficult as they have to find ways to work around these policies. In fact, even though some school boards have adopted tiered access systems where different grade levels can access different sites (Rodgers, 2012) there is still no guarantee that their school policy will allow for the medium’s full use. In any case, school policies that ban social media, prevent teachers from capitalizing on the possible educational potential of the medium.

2.2.6 Lack of training on how to use social media in the classroom. Research studies have revealed that teachers might not have the proper training about how to use social media as a
pedagogical tool. According to studies conducted in the U.S, high school teachers often lack the support, (Bartow, 2014) skills (LeNoue, 2012) and confidence to use these sites in the classroom (Pan, 2010). Even if they do decide to use social media, students have reported that teachers often use YouTube to replace actual teaching or to simply “goof off” (Mao, 2014, p. 219). This reveals that some schools are failing to properly train their staff on how to use social media, which forces them to experiment with platforms like YouTube when figuring out their lessons. Pan (2010) has even suggested that students might benefit from social media training as they are “trial and error learners” who often become discouraged if they find a site difficult to navigate (p. 150). In fact, one study found that school districts that had implemented social media education programs had fewer online incidents (Rodgers, 2012). Nevertheless, a school’s inability to provide training programs on social media use often prevents teachers from using these platforms effectively.

The literature examined in this study suggests that teachers may face challenges when implementing social media into their classrooms. Although some studies suggest that teachers want to implement the medium, their school may lack the infrastructure to do so. Additionally students may not be receptive to using social media for educational purposes while teachers themselves may not have the free time required to set up these platforms. Some studies even suggest that school board policy and a lack of teacher training make setting up social media sites in a classroom setting impossible to do correctly. Nevertheless, even though teachers may face barriers that make this process more difficult, studies show that some teachers have been able to pinpoint certain platforms that are conducive to this new style of teaching.
2.3 Social Media Platforms Used at the High School Level

In high school, teachers are using a variety of social media platforms in their classrooms. Some U.S. research studies report that the most commonly used site is Facebook (LeNoue, 2012; Mao, 2014; Pan, 2010). This is because teachers often view Facebook as an easy way to set up groups (Mourlam, 2013), a convenient place to post resources students can access (Marciano, 2015), and know that a majority of students are already using the site (Hunter-Brown, 2012).

Studies have also shown that other commonly used sites like Ning and Edmodo are only used as they appear similar to Facebook but are better at protecting student’s privacy (Mao, 2014; Casey, 2013). As a result, the literature indicates that features like groups, simple communication and the ability to post documents are elements some high school teacher’s value. The following section will explore some of the literature regarding what types of social media platforms are being used in high schools worldwide. Specifically, it will explore some studies that have highlighted media and content sharing sites, wikis and blogs as social media platforms that could be beneficial educational tools.

2.3.1 Media and content sharing sites used in high schools. Sites that facilitate the sharing of different media have grown in popularity with high school teachers. For example, select studies have shown that teachers are using YouTube to help teach about unfamiliar topics (Mao, 2014; Pan, 2010) and to encourage their students to work together to produce their own video projects (Clark et. al, 2009). In addition, some teachers are using tools like Glogster and Flickr to share pictures with their students (Mao, 2014; Pan, 2010), Prezi to present material more easily and podcasting sites to talk about complex issues in the classroom (Boksz, 2012). This indicates that the ability to organize and share a variety of different media is important for high school teachers. Although there is a learning curve when using these platforms, research
shows that teachers are willing to utilize media sharing sites if it makes their lessons more enjoyable for students.

2.3.2 Wikis and blogs used in high schools. Research has also revealed that some high school teachers use blogs and wikis for educational purposes (Capo & Orellana, 2012; LeNoue, 2012; Pan, 2010). With regards to Wikis, some teachers enjoy using sites like Wikispaces as they allow students to collaborate and give each other feedback on their work (Ahn, 2010; Grant, 2009). In a similar vein, some students and teachers interviewed by Mao (2014) and Boyd (2015) felt that Google Docs could mirror the features of a wiki as the platform allows for collaboration and communal editing. Conversely, blogs and microblogging services like Twitter have been used to help students engage with different topics and encourage them to work together to solve problems (Kim et al., 2014; Pan, 2010). As a result, teacher’s adoption of blogs and wikis in the classroom appears to be benefitting students and although they are not as widely used as Facebook, they allow them to increase student engagement and collaboration just as effectively.

The literature explored in this study suggests that teachers are experimenting with variety of different social media platforms within the high school classroom. While some may prefer to adopt sites like YouTube and Flickr as instructional or organizational tools others have introduced Twitter and Wikispaces as a way to enhance opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration. In fact, the diversity of platforms discussed in the literature may suggest that social media use in educational is beginning to become more commonplace. However, even with the possible increase in social media at the high school level, the literature examined reveals that post-secondary institutions may be leading the way with regards to this new pedagogy.
2.4 Social Media Platforms Used in Both Secondary and Post-Secondary Education

Although this study focused on the use of social media at the high school level, there is a great deal of literature about its effectiveness in post-secondary education. In fact, when comparing the two, studies show that the use of social media in university and college mirrors what is being done in high schools. For example, research reveals that some professors consider Facebook, Wikis and blog services like Twitter to be the most effective social media platforms for education (Chen & Bryer, 2012; Shemberger & Wright, 2014). Just like at the high school level, Facebook groups and Twitter conversations have been found to allow for easy communication as these are the sites that are reportedly being used most by students (da Rocha & Lombard, 2013; Shemberger & Wright, 2014). As a result, the literature indicates that similar platforms are being used throughout all levels of education. This section will explore studies that discuss some of perceived benefits and challenges of using social media at the post-secondary according to post-secondary educators. These perceptions will then be compared to those studies focused on high school teachers in order to highlight the similar experiences amongst the two levels of education.

2.4.1 Similar benefits perceived by secondary and post-secondary educators about social media. Post-secondary educators’ perceived benefits of social media mirror those of high school teachers. According to specific studies based in the U.S (Chen & Bryer, 2012; Shemberger & Wright, 2014), Malaysia (Al-rahmi et. al, 2015) and South Africa (da Rocha and Lombard, 2013) professors felt that social media increases student engagement, helps diversify instruction, improves student-teacher communication and increases collaboration. Specifically, professors felt these platforms allowed for more creative freedom, helped them introduce new assignments like portfolios into their courses (Chen & Bryer, 2012), increased student-teacher
collaboration when solving problems (Al-rahmi et. al, 2015; Shemberger and Wright, 2014) and increased the speed of their feedback (da Rocha and Lombard, 2013). Once again, these ideas mirror the beliefs of high school teachers as both parties saw social media as a tool with great educational potential. However, unlike high school teachers, post-secondary educators mentioned that social media could be used by students to find jobs, internships and maintain professional connections (Chen & Bryer, 2012; Shemberger & Wright, 2014). Nevertheless, research reveals that both high school and post-secondary educators see the value of using social media into their classrooms.

2.4.2 Similar challenges faced by secondary and post-secondary educators using social media. Just like high school teachers, professors face the same challenges when using social media in their classrooms. In research studies conducted in the U.S. (Chen & Bryer, 2012) and South Africa (da Rocha & Lombard, 2013), certain professors expressed concern about comprising their personal privacy, the time required to design social media based lessons and the poor technology available. In the U.S. study, there were also concerns about cyberbullying, and a lack of student and teacher training about how to use social media for educational purposes (Chen & Bryer, 2012). Since social media is a relatively new medium, teachers at all levels appear to have the same concerns. Although university and colleges are not bound by the same rules as high school teachers, they still are concerned about being professional and using social media in the proper manner. Similar to their high school counterparts, if these professors feel they do not have the training or resources to use social media properly, they tend to find alternative methods.

Although the secondary and post-secondary environments are inherently different, these select studies revealed that educators at both levels of education perceive similar benefits and
challenges when using social media as a pedagogical tool. While both parties felt that the medium could improve communication, collaboration and increase student engagement in the classroom, they both feared poor student behaviour, time restraints, poor training and poor technology would prevent them from using social media effectively. As a result, although educators at both levels deal with different students and institutional problems, the literature examined in this study suggests that their experiences using social media may be similar.

2.5 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examined the research regarding high school teachers’ perceived benefits and challenges of using social media in their classrooms. I also looked at research outlining which platforms high school teachers commonly use and how social media is being used at the post-secondary level. This review shows that a lot of attention is placed on the potential benefits and risks that social media poses. Specifically, while increased collaboration and student engagement were commonly cited as potential advantages, some teachers were concerned about the time commitment and increased chance of bullying that would result from using these platforms. The literature also shows that Facebook appears to be the most commonly used platform in education as its simplicity and high number of users are attractive to educators. The literature also raises questions about the quality of teacher training and technology available in schools as well as the benefits of social media policies designed to prevent students and staff from accessing social media sites at school.

Lastly, this review shows that there is a need for research about how Canadian high school teachers are using social media. This is because the majority of the studies reviewed were based in the U.S. U.K. or Australia meaning the experience could be different in Canada. In light of this, the purpose of my research was to learn how teachers in Toronto high schools are using
social media in their classrooms in order to help fill this gap in the research and help educators feel more comfortable adopting the medium into their own teaching.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe my research methodology. I begin by outlining my research approach, procedures and methods of data collection. Specifically, I define qualitative research and qualitative interviewing and then explain how my study will benefit from a qualitative and semi-structured interview approach. I also explain the development of my interview guide and outline its basic components. After that, I provide my sampling criteria, describe the sampling procedures used and provide short bios for each of my participants. Next, I discuss the methods of analysis, ethical challenges and the limitation and strengths of qualitative research both in relation to my study and in general. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary of the methodological decisions I made and provide a rationale for each given my focus on social media in Toronto high schools.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews. In general, qualitative research involves the collection of data regarding a participant’s experiences, understandings and interpretations of a particular topic (Jackson II, Drummond & Camara, 2007). Usually conducted in an ordinary setting such as a workplace or home, (Hammersley, 2013), these studies aim to “uncover the understandings that already exists in people's experience” (Smythe & Giddings, 2007, p. 38) As a result, researchers tend to focus on a small number of cases as this helps them conduct an in-depth examination (Hammersley, 2013). Qualitative research studies are also very flexible as the emphasis on experiences allows the researcher to adapt their questions and methods throughout the research process (Hammersley, 2013). Qualitative research is also different than its quantitative counterpart which
relies on finite questions to produce numerical data (Jackson II et al., 2007). The researcher in a qualitative study also acknowledges their own personal bias and admits that their proximity to participants may lead to tainted data or analysis (Hammersley, 2013; Jackson II et al., 2007). However, a quantitative study considers the researcher to be a detached, impartial party who only uses the data to prove their hypothesis (Campbell, 2014). In any case, qualitative research’s focus on “human beings’ richly textured experiences and reflections,” leads to in-depth explorations of various topics (Jackson II et al., 2007, pp. 22-23).

For this study, I used a qualitative research approach as it helped me explore teachers’ social media use in much greater detail. According to Campbell (2014) qualitative research “allows for a study of an exploratory nature” (p. 3). Since I wanted to explore how Toronto high school teachers were using social media in their classrooms and their rationale for doing so, a study where I could learn about their experiences was more valuable than statistics. In addition, since qualitative studies focus on a small group of participants, I got detailed responses about why my participants used social media and what challenges they encountered. Campbell (2014) also mentions that qualitative studies are typically used when “not much [is] written about….the topic of study” (p. 3). Although there is a wide range of literature regarding the use of social media in U.S. high schools, very little is situated in Canada. As a result, performing my own qualitative study helped me contribute to the literature and learn about the experiences of high school teachers in Toronto.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

In qualitative studies, researchers often use interviews to gather data. Lasting anywhere from thirty minutes to several hours, these researchers ask their participants questions based on their research topic that are designed to explore the issue in depth and reveal personal
experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In some studies, group interviews are preferred due to the larger number of participants they provide (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) while some studies utilize phone interviews due to their convenience (Knox & Burkard, 2009). However, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews are usually used as they allow for a more personal conversation and the observance of non-verbal body language (Knox & Burkard, 2009). In fact, a key component of the qualitative research interview is the relationship between researcher and participant as a positive interaction can lead to more disclosure (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

There is also a wide variety of formats that the qualitative research interview can take. The unstructured interview acts as a guided conversation where the interviewer observes their participant’s behavior (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and asks questions about what they see (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Although this helps the participant feel at ease, the wide variety of questions makes it difficult to compare findings across interviews (Knox & Burkard, 2009). On the other end of the spectrum, structured interviews ask each participant the exact same questions which ensures standardization but limits the chance of unique experiences being shared (Knox & Burkard, 2009). There are also semi-structured interviews where the interview is organized around a set of open-ended questions which can be interrupted to peruse a topic that arises (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Knox & Burkard, 2009). This allows for a more flexible interview process and ensures each participant can fully explain themselves with assistance from the interviewer (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

In this study, I used semi-structured, face to face interviews to conduct my research. By conducting an interview, I was able to ask Toronto high school teachers about their experiences using social media and receive in-depth answers. In addition, meeting in person helped me develop a better rapport with my participants and encouraged them to disclose more information.
Using a semi-structured format also allowed me to explore other topics that emerged through our conversations. However, unlike a structured interview, a semi-structured approach meant I was able to compare my findings across all interviews as each participant answered the same basic questions.

As seen in Appendix B, my interview guide was divided into four main sections. First, I asked about my participant’s background and basic information regarding their teaching practice. I then asked how they used social media in their classrooms and what platforms they found to be the most effective. Next, I asked them about their perceived benefits of using social media in the classroom and the challenges they have encountered. Finally, I concluded by asking my participants about their overarching goals while using social media in the classroom and asked them to make recommendations to other teachers who may want to explore the pedagogy in the future.

The development of these interview questions was a product of the literature regarding social media and high schools. Throughout a wide variety of studies, the major themes that emerged were the benefits and challenges of using social media in the classroom as well as the wide varieties of platforms being used. As a result, the interview questions became an extension of the existing literature as I wanted to take what was prominent in these studies and apply them to the Toronto context. Some of these questions include:

- Can you explain the different social media platforms that you use in the classroom?
- In what ways do you think using social media in the classroom has helped you as a teacher?
- When using social media in the classroom, how do you monitor student behaviour?
3.3 Participants

In this section, I review my sampling criteria and the sampling procedures used to recruit research participants. I then provide a bio of each individual interviewed for this study.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria. For this study, teacher participants had to fit these criteria:

1. Consistently and actively use social media as a pedagogical tool.
2. Have at least three years of teaching experience
3. Be an active, full-time teacher at the high school level.
4. Currently work at a high school in a Toronto school board

In order to answer my research questions, my participants had to be consistent and active users of social media as a pedagogical tool. Since I wanted to learn about teachers’ experiences using the medium, I needed to talk to those who were actively making it apart of their teaching and therefore had experiences to draw upon. For example, teachers who used a course Facebook group throughout the term were a lot more valuable as they had more experiences to draw upon than those who occasionally showed a YouTube clip in their class. As a result, I needed to interview teachers who were using social media to teach either throughout an entire course or intensively during a specific unit in order to meet the goals of this project.

I also needed to interview teachers with at least three years teaching experience in order to ensure that my participants had enough to talk about. Although this may seem like a small amount of time, younger teachers may be quicker to utilize social media in their teaching practice due to its familiarity. However, older teachers may also have interesting experiences regarding how social media polices have changed in their school. As a result, a combination of younger and older teachers was selected in order to gain access to a wide range of experiences.

Finally, participants had to be active, full time high school teachers in the city of Toronto. Since I
wanted to learn about what was occurring in Toronto schools, talking to retired teachers or those outside the city would not have produced the proper data.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures. In qualitative research, there is a variety of different sampling methods that a researcher can use. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on who is the most readily available and easiest to contact (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008; Marshall, 1996). Although this saves the researcher time, the familiarity of those involved means that they may unintentionally generalize the data (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008). Related to this method is snowball sampling in which the researcher interviews and then asks their participants for recommendations (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008; Marshall, 1996). Another method commonly used is purposeful sampling where the researcher looks for individuals who possess qualities that will best fit the study (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008; Marshall, 1996). Here, the researcher is most concerned with selecting participants with a wide range of viewpoints as this will help them create a diverse data set (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008). However, researchers have to be careful not to pre-determine their data by selecting individuals who are too similar (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008). Finally, the researcher may use theoretical sampling where their criteria changes every time a new trend emerges (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008; Marshall, 1996). While this can help them change their focus quickly, if it is not done properly it can create interpretation problems (Koerber, & McMichael, 2008). In any case, all sampling done in qualitative research must help the researcher select participants that will provide relevant information.

In this research study, I used a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling. By using purposeful sampling, I was able to locate teachers who actively and consistently used social media as a pedagogical tool in their classroom. I achieved this by simply talking to people
about my research and researching Toronto schools that actively promoted the use of social media as a pedagogical tool. I also used convenience sampling in my study. Since I completed this project while in a teacher training program, I was surrounded by educators from a variety of different school boards across Toronto. As a result, I employed my network of contacts to help me find teachers who were actively using social media as a pedagogical tool and who would be best suited to answer my research questions.

3.3.3 Participant biographies. Two teachers Kevin and Robert Steven (pseudonyms) were interviewed as a part of this study

3.3.3.1. Kevin McGuire. Kevin has been teaching for over ten years. Predominately, he has taught Science and Math from Grades 9-12 as well as Leadership courses in Grades 11 and 12. The student population at Kevin’s school is primarily new Canadians of Tamil, Sri Lankan and Filipino descent as well as both second and third generation Canadian families. Recently, a small number of students from exchange programs in China and newly arrived Syrian refugees have also been enrolled in the school. In his personal life, Kevin is an active user of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp to communicate with family and friends. Finally, Kevin began adopting social media as a pedagogical tool as far back as his practicum where his associate teacher introduced him to Edmodo. Ever since, Kevin has adopted this pedagogy as he believes in the educational potential of the platform.

3.3.3.2. Robert Stevenson. Robert has been teaching for almost twenty years. Although he started off as a Geography and English teacher, he eventually became the head of the English department. As a result, he primarily teaches senior level (Grades 11-12) English and media courses but attempts to teach one Grade 9 or OSSLT preparation course every year. The school he works at is predominately a middle class community with most students coming from South
East Asian, Filipino and Chinese backgrounds. In his personal life, Robert has his own Facebook and Twitter accounts and enjoys visiting a variety of blogs and websites in his spare time. Finally, Robert became interested in using social media as an educational tool after talking to colleagues who set up Facebook accounts for their classes. This inspired Robert to experiment with social media platforms like Twitter as well as technology like podcasts and QR codes.

3.4 Data Analysis

In qualitative research studies, data analysis often occurs at the same time as the data collection (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Liamputtong, 2009). However, the type of analysis varies from study to study. In most studies, textual data is coded into segments or chunks that identify what each section is about (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Liamputtong, 2009; Seers, 2012). For example, if a paragraph in a transcript talks about cancer, the segment would be labelled “cancer.” Text segments are then sorted by theme so that the data from all interviews can be compared and contrasted (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Liamputtong, 2009). These then force the researcher to make judgements about what information is important (Seers, 2012) and which categories will most accurately reflect the data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Data can also be analyzed narratively by retelling the participant’s story, via discourse where comparisons are made with reality or through semiotics where the hidden meanings in the texts are examined (Liamputtong, 2009). Some researchers have even used computer assisted programs to analyze their data as this ensures a quicker and more efficient process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In any case, data analysis in qualitative research involves taking what has been collected and determining how it answers the study’s central research questions.

In this research study, data analysis was done in multiple steps. First, interview
transcripts were coded by keywords, phrases and themes that were deemed relevant to the study. Next, codes of similar data were organized into categories in order to explore the patterns that emerged through both interviews. Finally, the data in these categories was interpreted and organized into four themes which became the major findings of the study.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Due to the nature of qualitative research, there are some ethical risks researchers must deal with. Since participants are asked to discuss their personal experiences, the stories brought up may elicit bad memories (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Knox & Burkard, 2009; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000). For instance, if discussing homophobia, a teacher may be forced to recount a time where a student in their class was bullied. In these cases, an ethical dilemma arises as researchers have to judge whether or not to continue the study (Orb et al., 2000). To counteract this, some studies suggest that developing a positive rapport with the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) or undergoing researcher training can help one recognize negative situations before they occur (Knox & Burkard, 2009). The sharing of personal stories also is an ethical issue as it puts participants’ anonymity in jeopardy. As what is said is often very personal, it is recommended that pseudonyms be used to protect participants’ identities and make them feel safe (Orb et al., 2000). It may even be a good idea to limit the circulation of the study so that the information cannot be traced back to those involved (Orb et al., 2000).

Due to the topics sometimes discussed in qualitative studies an ethical dilemma may also occur if a participant does not fully understand what they are signing up for (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). To counteract this, the researcher must obtain written or verbal consent before the process begins and clearly indicate to the participant what the study is about (Shaw, 2008). Lastly, researchers have to remain ethical when they are analyzing their data. Since the nature of
the qualitative research means that each participant will have a unique experience, the data obtained may be unexpected. As a result, researchers have to make sure they do not exploit their participants by altering their testimony to make certain claims (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). To ensure an ethical process, researchers should also acknowledge the contributions of their respondents (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and allow respondents to see copies of interview transcripts before analysis occurs (Orb et al, 2000). By utilizing these strategies, qualitative researchers can ensure they are acting ethically and are respectful of their participants.

In this study, there were a few ethical concerns. Although the topic of social media in education does not appear controversial, some teachers may have had bad experiences using the medium. For example, using a class Facebook group could have led to cyberbullying and uncomfortable interactions with students. As a result, I asked my participants to sign a letter of consent (See Appendix A) that disclosed my study’s expectations and central research questions. I also indicated to them that I would be recording the proceedings and that they were free to skip any question or opt out of the process entirely if they feel uncomfortable. I also let my participants know that they could ask any questions regarding the interview process or my research in general.

I also realized that discussing the challenges of social media use could have led to uncomfortable conversations. For example, if a participant clashed with school administration about their social media policy, they may have felt that talking about it would compromise their professional well-being. To counteract this, I used pseudonyms for each participant and removed any information that could be used to identify them. I also stored all audio data on a password protected computer and will be deleting this data after five years.
3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Qualitative research studies have methodological strengths and limitations. Unlike quantitative surveys, conducting interviews with a small number of participants helps researchers learn about specific experiences and dive deeper into a particular topic (Carr, 1994). The data collected in these studies can also be very honest and accurate (Carr, 1994) as participants are there by their own choice and often want to make a contribution to the research (Knox & Burkard, 2009). In addition, these studies can be very flexible as unstructured and semi-structured interviews allow for more open discussion (Carr, 1994). Unfortunately, qualitative studies have their limitations. Although they allow researchers to hear specific experiences, their small-scale nature means that the results cannot be generalized (Jackson II et al, 2007; Knox & Burkard, 2009). In addition, if a participant feels uncomfortable they may withhold information and give the researcher little to analyze (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Qualitative research interviews can also be physically exhausting as they require a lot of attentive listening (Smythe & Giddings, 2007), transcribing (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and can produce an overwhelming amount of data (Carr, 1994). The lack of standardization in interviews evens means that the researcher may unintentionally influence their participants thereby reducing the study’s reliability (Carr, 1994). As a result, qualitative research studies can either aid or harm a researcher depending on how the process unfolds.

The methodology used in this study had a variety of strengths and weaknesses. Conducting interviews with teachers who actively used social media in their classroom allowed me to explore my research questions in greater detail. Since I learnt about their specific experiences, I had access to a much richer data set, helping me draw more insightful conclusions. In addition, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore any topic that arose
throughout the interview process and ensured that my participants could share any experiences they deemed relevant. Using methods of selective sampling also meant that I was able to pick interviewees who actually want to be involved in the research process which, hopefully, lead to more honest and insightful responses.

The methodology used in this study also resulted in some limitations. Due to the ethical parameters outlined in the MTRP guidelines, I could only interview teachers. Although asking students about their views on social media in education would be interesting, I was unable to do this in my study. Due to the small number of teachers I interviewed, the data from my study is also not generalizable or applicable to teachers outside Toronto. Finally, since social media as a pedagogical tool is a relatively new field, there is a possibility that my participants exaggerated their practices to appear at the forefront of this movement. Even though this did not appear to be the case, the interview process meant I was at the mercy what my participants told me, even if it is was inaccurate.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained my research methodology. I began by discussing the nature of qualitative research and how this approach allowed me to explore teacher’s use of social media in great detail. I then discussed the various methods of qualitative interviewing and outlined how semi-structured interviews helped me become more flexible in my data collection. I also discussed the development of my interview guide and outlined its basic organization. Next, I provided my criteria for selecting participants and explained the different types of qualitative sampling. I then explained how using purposeful and convenience sampling helped me find teachers who were both social media users and easy to access. I then provided a brief bio of each research participant and outlined the different methods of data analysis and ethical risks found in
qualitative studies. This was followed by an examination of how risks such as consent, anonymity and topic sensitivity were addressed in this study through the use of consent forms, pseudonyms and opt-outs. Finally, I described the methodological strengths and limitations of qualitative research and mentioned that although my study explores social media in great detail, MTRP guidelines prevented me from interviewing students or making generalizations. Next, in Chapter 4, I report the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I introduced my topic: how Toronto high schools teachers, who have actively adopted social media as a pedagogical tool, use the medium in their classrooms. As a result, my research questions focused on the specific platforms, benefits and challenges these teachers encountered upon introducing social media into their classes. In Chapter 2, I examined the literature pertaining to the benefits and challenges of using social media in a high school setting as well as the platforms teachers find useful at the secondary and post-secondary levels. In Chapter 3, I defined my research methodology as a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews, purposeful and convenience sampling, and provided my participant biographies.

This chapter discusses the findings that emerged after analyzing the data collected in my interviews. This data was organized into the following four themes:

1. Using social media in the classroom reportedly improves the student learning experience.
2. External factors are the biggest barrier to using social media in high schools.
3. Adopting social media impacts teacher’s work-life balance.
4. Resource storage and site popularity dictate teacher’s choice of social media platform.

Each theme is divided into sub-sections in order to better present the findings of the study. I will begin by describing each theme. I will then report on my data and discuss how my findings support, challenge and divert from previous literature regarding social media use in high schools. Finally, I will end this chapter by summarizing the key findings of the study.

4.1 Using Social Media in the Classroom Reportedly Improves the Student Learning Experience

Participants reported that introducing social media into their classrooms helped improve
student learning. Specifically, these teachers felt that using social media helped them enhance communication channels, provide more support to students, and create an environment where student were more engaged, participatory and able to complete their work.

4.1.1 Improved student-teacher and student-student communication. Participants revealed that social media helped them improve student-teacher communication by allowing their students to ask questions outside of classrooms hours. Robert commented upon this phenomenon as he found that before using social media “even just a simple…question or clarification…would not have come because [students are]…far away from you at that time”. However, with social media, he found they were more willing to ask casual questions like ”Hey sir, just wondering can I do this?” due to the ease of communication. Even though this increased the number of questions these teachers received on a daily basis, they felt that giving students unlimited access to their teacher put them in a better position to succeed. This finding was similar to that of Hunter-Brown (2012) whose study revealed that students loved using Facebook groups because they could ask their teachers questions about schoolwork whenever they wanted. As a result, my study found that some teachers believe that their use of social media improved student-teacher communication and therefore enhanced the student learning experience.

Kevin and Robert also found that using social media enhanced student-student communication. In Kevin’s classroom, he found that using Google Classrooms allowed his students to work more effectively on projects together as they could edit the same document simultaneously. Similarly, Robert’s students began using the comment sections on Twitter and Google Classrooms to share ideas and help each other understand course material. In sum, my participants used social media to promote collaborative learning in their classrooms and create an environment where students did not have to rely on their teacher. Once again, this finding was
consistent with multiple studies (Bartow, 2014; Boksz, 2012; Page, 2015; Platt, 2011) where teachers stressed social media platforms’ ability to help students share their ideas, have open discussions and teach one another. Thus, my participants deemed that social media’s ability to enhance communication at both the student and teacher level made it essential for a teacher if they wanted to improve student learning in their classroom.

4.1.2 Better one-to-one support for students. While participants felt social media improved communication channels, they also believed that using it helped them provide better one-to-one student support. With Edmodo, Kevin found that using the text and private messaging features allowed him to reach out to struggling students and help them fill in “gaps in understanding of the course material.” Robert echoed this sentiment as he felt that Google Classrooms allowed him to give an “individual moment to each [student]” which is often hard to do in the context of the classroom. This shows that the ability to provide personalized feedback to students in a private forum was a major incentive to these teachers as they wanted to ensure their students could learn from their mistakes and produce better work in the future. However, these findings are different than those in the existing literature as although Capo and Orellana (2011) found that student-teacher interactions improved thanks to social media, no studies surveyed in Chapter 2 explicitly mentioned one-to-one support. This may be because these studies focused on more public platforms like Facebook with less privacy features where teachers are less likely to have a personal conversation with a student. Regardless, teachers in my study found that social media helped them provide more personalized feedback to their students and therefore improved their learning experience.

Participants also felt that using social media helped them become facilitators of student learning instead of sources of information. For example, when communicating over Edmodo,
Kevin found that the medium allowed him to make sure his “vocabulary and the way that [he] respond[ed]” to a student’s question did not give them the answer, but encouraged “continual learning.” Robert expressed a similar feeling about Google Classrooms which helped him get students to “take a look around and talk about what [they saw]” as opposed to giving them the answers from the textbook. In fact, this illustrates that both participants felt social media could help them move away from a traditional teaching model and encourage students to become more independent thinkers. Once again, using social media to facilitate student learning is not mentioned in the literature as researchers like Mao (2014) have largely focused on the mediums’ ability to deliver and store content. As a result, the teachers in my study used social media in a way that allowed students to ask questions yet challenged them to become more independent thinkers in the process.

4.1.3 Increased student engagement in course content. In addition to personalized support, both teachers said that social media had helped increased student engagement in course content. For Robert, increased student engagement was evident when students began to send him links and videos via Google Classrooms. After posting Obama's 2008 inauguration speech for discussion one on site, one student in his class said:

“Oh this reminds me of slam poetry." And so they posted a slam poet link…and then other students started responding to that post and then they asked “Could we do a slam poet unit in the class? I mean that’s fantastic.

Since students used what Robert posted on Google Classroom to alter the curriculum, social media helped them engage with the course material. This shows that using social media can

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1 For this study, “student engagement” was defined as students taking an interest in and showing passion towards a certain topic. For example, if students undertook their own creative projects or proposed their own ideas, the activity was said to have increased student engagement. This differs from participation which refers to students answering questions and sharing their opinions but showing no additional engagement.
reportedly help students take hold of their learning. In fact, Hunter-Brown (2012) had similar findings as she discovered students enjoyed using Facebook because it allowed them to take ownership over their learning and impact the curriculum. In any case, participant experiences revealed that what they posted on social media could impact student engagement.

Participants also felt that using social media helped them increase student engagement because the platforms allowed for more creativity. While Kevin encouraged students to create YouTube videos that discussed their life stories, Robert had students share memes over Twitter that illustrated course content. In both cases, participants felt that the creative freedom these platforms offered made doing school work a lot more enjoyable. As a result, this shows that these teachers wanted to use social media in a way that made their students look forward to coming to class and that encouraged active engagement in activities. The literature reinforces these ideas as Clark et al (2009) found that when students got to use social media platforms like YouTube in class, they were more interested in completing their schools work and actively sought out videos to improve their understanding. Even though participants did acknowledge that what will work with one class may not work with another, they both stressed that social media could get students engaged in the classroom.

**4.1.4 Increased student participation.** Outside of improving student engagement, participants stressed social media’s ability to help improve participation. In both their experiences, Kevin and Robert found that some students rarely shared their opinion during discussions. However, they found that by using social media, these students actively shared their opinions as it was a safer and more controlled environment. With Edmodo, Kevin found that quieter students’ self-confidence increased as to them the platform is:

> a place where you can say something to your peers and not feel the fear of repercussion.
Because if you say something stupid in the class, and stupid is the term they use, they would be crucified for it. Whereas maybe online someone else might be more prone to saying "I also had that idea" and that builds their sense of "Oh hey, I contributed…"

This sense of validation shy students felt online helped them feel more comfortable sharing their opinions on a daily basis. In fact, Kevin spoke about a moment when one of his students received so many positive comments from his peers on a video project posted on Edmodo that he saw a “change in his will-power” and the way he interacted with others in the classroom. This indicates the anonymity and indirectness of social media helped these teachers make sure that their quieter students could share their voice with both their peers and teacher. These findings mirror that of Hunter-Brown (2012) and Boksz’ (2012) who also discovered that quieter high school students who used social media in their classroom were more likely to participate and connect with their peers. While these studies focused on Facebook and not Edmodo, my study reveals that some teachers feel that using social media in their classrooms increases student participation and makes the classroom a richer learning environment.

4.1.5 Helping students complete schoolwork. While social media increased the number of students who felt comfortable sharing their opinions, teachers also felt that the medium helped them complete their schoolwork. As mentioned earlier, participants felt that social media enhanced peer-to-peer communication as students could use platforms like Google Docs and slides to work on group projects simultaneously. However, Kevin found that since the platform gave him live updates of what the group was doing in class, his students became “a little more aware of their efforts… [and] put forth a heightened effort” as they did not want him to see they were “goofing off” in class. This not only helped improve their time management and overall work completion skills, but it ensured that every member of the group pulled their own weight.
Robert also mentioned that social media helped students complete their homework as he found that he could post updates, material and direct students to Google Classrooms when they were absent. By using social media in this capacity, these teachers were reportedly able to help their students develop better work habits and become more responsible for their own learning.

Work completion is surprisingly absent in the literature as although Bartow (2014) does discuss how teachers can use the newsfeed feature to remind students of due dates, no reviewed studies explore its impact on homework. This may be due to the fact that platforms like Google Classroom, which allow the teacher to monitor “every single keystroke,” are very recent and therefore few teachers have adopted these programs as of yet. Regardless, my participants perceived that adopting social media into their classrooms helped their students stay on task and complete their work more efficiently.

4.2 External Factors are the Biggest Barrier to Using Social Media in High Schools

While participants felt that using social media in their classrooms resulted in a better student learning experience, they admitted that there are often factors beyond their control that make using the medium difficult. These barriers ranged from systemic ones like technology and restrictive policies to more specific ones like collegial and student resistance and poor student behaviour.

4.2.1 Outdated, inconsistent and unequal access to technology. Similar to the findings of Ahn (2010) and LeNoe (2012), participants commented that the technology available to them is often too inconsistent and outdated to use social media. In both cases, these teachers mentioned that they were forced to use old computers that were not compatible with Google Classrooms, never knew if the internet and wireless routers were working, and often did not having a projector available. In fact, Kevin commented upon the difficulty of using Google
Classrooms in a lesson stating that “it's rare to have twenty five to thirty netbooks that all work flawless without any issue in an activity delivery.” This shows that even though teachers want to make social media a part of their teaching, the technology and infrastructure in schools can make it difficult.

Participants also acknowledged that their students often do not have the technology at home to access social media. When his school adopted digital agendas, Robert came to this realization as multiple students asked him for a paper copy since they did not have a phone or data plan. Kevin also stressed that teachers cannot “assume that everyone has the tech either” as asking students to bring their own devices in may disadvantage some and make other feel uncomfortable. Once again, this shows that full social media integration into the classroom is often difficult because teachers have to ensure that every student benefits from the medium which is difficult to do. This is reaffirmed by Pan (2010) whose study found that high school students who did not have access to social media were left feeling uncomfortable and separated from the rest of the class. Since they could not control the school resources or their students’ personal lives, my participants felt that social media use in high schools has its limitations.

4.2.2 Restrictive school board polices. Even when the technology to use social media is available, however, participants revealed that school board policies are often restrictive. While both teachers found the Google Classroom to be an effective teaching tool, part of the reason they adopted it was because it was board-certified and using non-board certified programs could get them into trouble. In Kevin’s case, although he found Edmodo effective, he knows that teachers “can be sued for students posting assignments on Edmodo” because “what students write and what you post becomes [Edmodo’s] property.” Since the board does not “…support
anything that is not board certified,” that legal risk might be too much for some teachers and turn them off of social media use entirely. In fact, Kevin was told by a board employee that:

...a student in English class posted a poem and Edmodo...was like "Cool let's spotlight what this kid is doing, put it up on the website." Whatever dad, lawyer or just looking for money, who knows, says “All right, this is my son’s copyrighted work. I didn’t give permission, he didn’t give permission to put it up there, I’m gonna sue the teacher, the board and Edmodo.

As a result, Kevin’s comments reveal that in his board there are often systematic barriers that teachers who want to use social media as a pedagogical tool may have to navigate through. In fact, these findings are consistent with Morulam (2013) and Rodgers (2012)’ who both found that school boards often required teachers to use a certain platform in order to protect themselves from lawsuits. As a result, any teacher who wants to use a social media platform in their class has to judge whether the educational merits outweigh the legal risks.

Robert also mentioned that Facebook and other social media sites are blocked completely throughout his school board. In his opinion, this was because when these sites were first introduced the board panicked, thought they were unsafe, and banned them “before they knew how [they] could work.” However, Robert stressed that these bans were likely intended for elementary schools as the board wanted to prevent students from accessing graphic content. As a result, he felt banning high school students from these sites because “six grade six kids all huddled around a computer and looked at a boob” is a disservice to teachers who know how to use the medium. Although he understood why these policies were enacted, this reveals that teachers often feel helpless as there is little they can do to overcome systemic bans. In addition, while both Platt (2011) and Pan (2010) found that boards tend to ban first and ask questions later,
no surveyed studies mentioned whether social media bans are intended to protect specific students. Since there appears to be no student-centered motive for these bans, Robert’s theory that boards ban sites because they have failed to alter their policies, may have some validity. Even though teachers have realized the educational potential of social media, my study reveals that policy prevents teachers from its full use.

4.2.3 Teacher and student resistance to using social media as an educational tool.

When social media platforms are accessible, participants found that colleagues and students were often resistant to its use. Contrary to Bartow’s (2014) findings that high school teachers lacked professional development, the teachers interviewed in this study claimed that PD sessions about social media were readily available. In Kevin’s school the administration encouraged those interested in Google Classrooms to attend PD days while Robert stated that formal and informal meetings where colleagues shared the platforms they were using occurred frequently. However, Kevin found colleagues often dismissed social media in these sessions asking him “Why don't you just use the classroom like me?” Having led sessions himself, Kevin said that “when you’re talking to ninety adults, it’s hard to tell them what to implement in their class. To some they take it as an insult.” This shows that the fear of being judged by one’s colleagues may prevent some teachers from adopting social media as they value positive relationships with other staff more than the educational potential of the medium.

Participants also found that their students were not always receptive to using social media in the classroom. Whenever Kevin shared photos or videos of class activities on Instagram, students would say “'Yo sir that's creepy that you want to use these.'” This reveals that the fear of making students feel uncomfortable and being perceived as ‘creepy’ might prevent teachers from using the medium, even though there may be education potential. In fact, LeNoue (2012)
reported that students often felt uncomfortable when their teachers tried to instruct using social media as they associated these platforms with socialization not education. Kevin also found that students in his applied classes refused to log on to Edmodo as they did not believe accessing assignments or other course materials online would add anything to their learning experience. Once again, this shows that even though there is benefit to using these sites, student’s lack of interest in the medium may render it useless. Although they do not explore the difference between academic and applied students Ahn (2010), Bartow (2014) and Grant et al. (2009) also found that when no marks are attached to social media, students do not use the sites. Regardless, my participants found that the reactions of their colleagues and students made it more difficult to use social media as an educational tool.

4.2.4 Poor student behaviour on social media. Even if they were able to convince others about the merits of using social media as a pedagogical tool, participants revealed that dealing with student behaviour was a major deterrent to using the medium in class. While using Edmodo, Kevin found that kids would make fun of each other if they posted assignments in the wrong area or spelled things incorrectly just because it gave them a chance to “hit those kids who [weren’t] perfect in their eyes.” Kevin even recalled one student who harassed another so much that he had to remove him from the site and contact his parents. Robert also admitted that preventing bullying on these sites is a major concern as a student can make hurtful comments in a brief second just “like a bomb.” Even though Kevin adopted a one strike policy and Robert set up rules beforehand, both acknowledged that incidents did occur. This shows that although teachers actively try to limit the amount of behavioural problems that occur via social media platforms, the inability to prevent “a kid from sitting at home and sending a message that can hurt,” is a huge downside that prevents the medium from being used. As a matter of fact, being
afraid of cyberbullying is a common theme in the literature as both Capo and Orellana (2012) and Grant et. al. (2009) found that high schools avoid using social media due to the fear it would increase bad behaviour. At any rate, my participants found it difficult to monitor student behaviour on social media making it a challenging medium to use.

Participants also felt that communicating via social media resulted in negative interactions with students. For instance, Robert found that students often made demands of him like “I don’t understand how I got this mark and I want you to explain it to me” thanks to the nature of social media while Kevin found that his students developed a “greater sense of entitlement” online. In fact, Kevin commented upon this sense of entitlement in his students stating:

I find that as a somewhat of a negative, if you are that person who constantly puts all the information up on for free every year or not just for free but just makes it available, students get lazier in your class. Because now they know they don't have to work for it.

As a result, this apparent lack of respect for the teacher could make adopting social media unappealing to some teachers who want to maintain certain professionalism in the classroom. However, this change in the relationship between student and teacher is not evident in the reviewed literature, perhaps because teachers who have had these types of interactions may have abandoned the medium before research was conducted. In any case, the teachers in my study felt that the behaviour of their students towards them impacted how they used social media.

4.3 Adopting Social Media Impacts Teacher’s Work-Life Balance

Although participants believed that social media could benefit the student learning experience, they also revealed that using the platform might impact one’s work-life balance. Specifically, they pointed out that the large amount of prep time and increased teacher
accessibility reduced their free and family time outside of school. However, my participants sought out social media platforms with instant communication and privacy protection built in, in order to minimize the impact social media had on their personal lives.

4.3.1 Impact of increased preparation time and student accessibility on a teacher’s personal life. Participants mentioned that there is often not enough time in the day to do all the preparatory work required to run a social media platform for one’s class. According to Kevin, “because you have to start from scratch” upon creating an Edmodo account, designing all the necessary folders and files requires a huge time commitment. Robert echoed this stating that before posting anything he has to make sure the links are safe which involves “copying [the link] and putting it on your own Google Drive, renaming it and then posting it on your own.” In fact, Robert outlined the problems he often encounters when trying to post homework on social media, stating:

…let’s say you build in five minutes to post homework at the end of the class but if you’re having a great class, why would you want to walk away and enter some homework at that time? So that means it gets to "Well I’ll do it on my prep." But your prep is usually used to prepare for that particular day, so sometimes you'll go "Well I’ll do it later tonight."

This shows that although teachers want to provide their students with new learning opportunities via social media, the rigours of an everyday teaching job means that they do not have a whole lot of extra time. As a result, if they want to use these platforms, they often have to give up their free time in order to design suitable materials and post them in the proper areas.

Participants also acknowledged that using platforms like Remind and Edmodo that allow students to contact them whenever they want, can significantly impact their home life. For instance, Kevin mentioned that using a platform like Remind might be “a little too cumbersome,
especially for newer teachers who are just starting families” as they would not want to be on their phones responding to students while nursing a newborn. However, Kevin explained that if one wants to adopt social media, they have to be willing to give up some free time. This is because if you tell students you will be using social media but “don't respond to them for five days, they’re not going to use it.” As a result, even though participants saw the benefits of communicating with their students outside of school hours, the platforms does put stress on one’s home and family life. In fact, this notion of increased teacher time commitment was something both Bartow (2014) and Casey and Evans (2011) found in their studies as although teachers felt that using social media increased communication, it prevented them from relaxing outside of class. At any rate, my participants acknowledged that upon introducing social media to their classrooms, it became more difficult for them to balance their professional and personal lives.

4.3.2 Impact of immediate communication and privacy controls in protecting a teacher’s personal life. In order to prevent their use of social media in the classroom from overwhelming their personal lives, my participants sought out platform like Edmodo and Remind that allowed for immediate communication with their students. For Robert, Remind’s “immediate interrupting,” texts was of great benefit as it forced students to stop whatever they were doing and respond to his questions. Not only did this help students remember important dates and assignment, bit it reduced the amount of time he spent waiting for student responses outside of class. Kevin echoed these sentiments as since many of his students are “heavily involved outside of the classroom” using a platform where he could send an “an actual push notification” that students received on their phones, saved him from waiting at home for students to submit assignments. Even though this may appear small, the teachers in this study recognized that platforms that were conducive to quick communication saved them time that they could then
use to attend to personal matters. In fact, these findings may point to a gap in the literature as although Hunter-Brown (2012) discovered that students enjoy using social media to quickly contact their teacher, no studies explored in the literature review focused on how teachers value instant communication to maintain their work-life balance.

Participants also selected sites with built-in privacy features in order to maintain a work-life balance. For example, both Kevin and Robert found Remind to be an appealing platform as it allowed them to create “office hours” that limited when students could ask them questions. Since, as Robert stated, this prevents students from sending “a text at 3 AM, begging you for a mark,” the platform allowed these teachers to address student concerns yet still have time to themselves. Participants also used Remind as it helped them keep their personal information to themselves. According to Kevin:

…Remind 101 is great because you can send out information with your phone number kept to yourself, so you’re part of this clique or group and you can send out information anonymously to remind all the students without sharing personal information.

Since students did not have access to their actual phone number, Remind prevented participants from being contacted by students whenever they wanted. Robert’s creation of a “broadcast account” on Twitter worked in a similar way as by refusing to follow students back, he limited the amount of interactions he could have with students while at home. Once again, this may point to a gap in the literature as while Mao (2014) found that teachers valued sites like Edmodo because of their privacy settings, no studies discussed in the literature stated how this layer of privacy might help teachers maintain control over their personal lives. In any case, my participant’s selection of social media sites that allowed for both immediate communication and
the protection of their personal privacy reveal how important maintaining a proper work-life balance is to teachers who use social media in the classroom.

4.4 Resource Storage and Site Popularity Dictate Teacher’s Choice of Social Media Platform

Participants identified two major features that determined whether or not they used a particular social media site in their classroom. First, the teachers interviewed valued social media platforms that allowed them to upload and store documents for students to access outside of classroom hours. For example, Edmodo helped Kevin upload PowerPoint slides and assignments into easy to navigate folder while Google Classrooms helped Robert create “a personal repository of stuff.” In fact, the ability to store links on Google Classroom was of great benefit to Robert, leading him to state:

… I’ve got an entire calendar of posts that if I’m somewhat on track, the next year I can post the same thing I did last year or edit it and keep it fresh, keep it new and give better examples. And the cool thing is it's all linked to Drive. You don't have to recreate things.

I think as an arena for teachers, I think it’s one of the best that I’ve ever seen.

This reveals that using a social media site that aided both teacher organization and student access to materials was something that participants valued. Marciano (2015) reaffirms these findings as she found that teachers who used social media valued having a central place where students could access material. However, while Mao (2014) did mention Edmodo’s place as a content hub for course materials, no studies mention Google Classroom as the majority were published before the platform was introduced in 2014. Nevertheless, participants actively sought out platforms that allowed them to share and store course material in a way that benefitted both teacher and student.
Participants also explained that the popularity of a social media platform does impact whether or not they use it in their classroom. Although multiple studies found that Facebook was the most popular social media site being used in high schools (LeNoue, 2012; Mao, 2014; Pan, 2010) my participants dismissed Facebook as an educational tool as none of their students used it. In Kevin’s case he noticed that his students had abandoned Facebook in favour of Snapchat and Instagram as Facebook’s user base became “more an adult population.” Similarly, Robert felt that while using Facebook “in 2003…would have seemed cool,” the kids today just laugh at him. In fact, Robert recalled a moment where the mere mention of Facebook triggered laughter. This lead him to the realization that:

…Facebook is over. It's been over for a long time but at least before, they would have just rolled their eyes. Now it’s actually, it was the equivalent of me saying I sent a smoke signal. So that was kind of funny.

This indicates that teachers are very aware of what their students are using and know when a certain social media site would be useless to adopt. In fact, this explains why no literature examined in this study questioned Facebook’s relevance to teaching in 2017 as the technology and what interests teenagers “moves too quick” for the academic world to keep up. Even though platforms like Facebook do have educational potential, my participants realized that if a social media site is not popular with students, then there is no reason to use it.

4.5 Conclusion

This research study produced four main findings. First, it revealed that high school teachers who are using social media feel that the medium allows them to improve student learning. This is because these platforms allow teachers to improve communication channels and give better one-to-one support while increasing engagement, participation and work completion
at the same time. Next, this study showed that although teachers want to use social media to its full potential, factors beyond their control like technology, school policy, general resistance and student behaviour are a major barrier to its implementation. This study also found that the increased prep time and enhanced teacher accessibility that comes with using social media, impacted teachers ability to balance their work and home lives. However, teachers adoption of platforms with built in privacy and instant communication features help them maintain balance in their lives. Finally, this study revealed that teachers desire to store resources online and tap into what their students find interesting are major factors when they determine whether or not to adopt a specific social media platform in their classroom. As a result, although this study highlighted the potential benefits of using social media, it also revealed the complexities that teachers must navigate through if they want to successfully adopt it as a pedagogical tool.

Upon undertaking this research study, I did not believe that social media was being used in high school classrooms at all. However, what I found was that there are teachers who are truly committed to using the medium in their classrooms and are making a positive impact on student learning. Even though they have encountered challenges along the way, seeing the impact of social media use on student confidence and engagement has made the challenges worthwhile. Going forward, more research needs to be done on why school policies and technology are still barriers that are preventing teachers from fully using social media in their classrooms and how new platforms like Snapchat could be used for educational purposes. While technology and student interest does move quickly, finding the answers to these questions could help teachers connect with their students on a more personal level. This will be explored further in in Chapter 5, where I discuss the implications of my findings on both a personal and broader educational
level, provide recommendations regarding the use of social media in high schools, and propose areas of future study.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I provide an overview of this study’s key findings and explain their significance to existing educational research. I then explore the implications of these findings on the broader educational community and my own personal identity and teaching practice. Next I propose recommendations and areas of further research with regards to how social media is being used in Toronto high schools. Finally, I conclude by providing some closing comments about the future of education and social media.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

This study produced four major findings about Toronto high school teachers’ use of social media. First, teachers interviewed felt that social media improved the overall student learning experience. Specifically, they pointed to improved communication, personalized student support and a higher degree of engagement, participation and homework completion on a daily basis as evidence that social media was a beneficial pedagogical tool. This is significant as it reveals that social media may have educational potential if used properly in a high school.

This study also found that factors beyond a teacher’s control might be the biggest barrier to using social media in the classroom. According to participants, their use of social media was often impacted by outdated and broken school computers, equity concerns around access to technology and restrictive school board policy which often blocked social media sites. They also revealed that collegial and student resistance to the medium and the fear of cyberbullying made social media less-appealing as these were not issues teachers wanted to deal with. Once again, these studies indicate that even if a teacher wants to use social media in their classroom, the system around them may make it difficult to use this pedagogy.
Participants also reported that social media had an impact on their work-life balance as the large amount of prep time and increased accessibility associated with the medium reduced their free time outside of school. To combat this, these teachers sought out platforms that allowed for instant communication and privacy protection so that they could better separate school from their home life. As a result, this revealed that although teachers may want to help their students learn they still need personal space.

Finally, participants in this study pointed to resource storage and popularity with students as the two major reasons why they adopted a certain social media platform. Specifically, they felt a site that allowed them to upload course materials helped teacher and students become more organized while using one that students enjoyed, increased the likelihood they might engage in online learning. This was important as it indicated that a teacher might select social media platforms based on how well they serve the needs of both teacher and students in the classroom.

Overall, these findings were significant as they confirmed some educational research regarding social media use in high schools. For example, enhanced communication, fear of cyberbullying, high teacher workloads and the ability to post materials were major themes explored in the literature review that also emerged in this study. In contrast, statements that participants did receive professional development and avoided using Facebook entirely were new findings that challenged what was examined in Chapter 2. This study also helped fill a gap in the research regarding social media use in Canadian high schools. Since the literature review focused mainly on U.S. and post-secondary institutions, this study helps contribute to the research by focusing on how Toronto high school teachers are using the medium in their classrooms.
5.2 Implications

The following section will explore the implications of this research study. First, I will explore the study’s impact on the broader, educational community, with a specific focus on high school teachers and students. I will then examine the narrower implications of the study on my own professional identity and beliefs about education.

5.2.1 Broad: The educational community. While participants felt that social media had the potential to be a great pedagogical tool, they stressed that restrictive school policies often made it difficult to use the medium. This suggests that in education, the opinions of teachers may not be taken into consideration by policymakers. Even though they are the ones who are the most connected to the classroom, these findings suggest that board officials are creating policies to avoid legal problems rather than best serving the interests of students. As a result, it appears that even though teachers might be the best judges of what works, government officials may influence what pedagogies they can use without consultation.

Social media was also viewed by participants as a valuable communication tool that could help teachers provide quick feedback to their students outside of schools hours. However, this need to communicate after hours infers that some students may lack parental support when doing homework. Although developing independent work habits is important, many high school students still need adults for assistance. If this figure is not available to them, this might explain why access to teachers is important to them as they might be their only source of help. In Toronto, this could be a product of language barriers or intense work schedules that prevent parents from assisting their child. In any case, participants’ insistence on communicating with their students via social media may suggest that some lack support at home when it comes to their school work.
This study also revealed that participants often sacrificed their free time to post social media. Although they felt this was a worthwhile venture, these findings imply that some teachers may be overworked over the course of the school day. Since they are already expected to consult with parents and lead extracurricular activities, teachers must fit a lot into one day. As a result, even though they may want to explore newer pedagogies, these findings suggest that this is difficult to do without taking more work home and disrupting their work-life balance.

5.2.2 Narrow: My professional identity and practice. This study also has implications on my own personal identity as a teacher-researcher. Since my participants used social media to improve student-teacher communication, I realized that I must have an “open door policy” in my classroom. This means that just like my participants did with social media, I have to make sure I am available to help my students both inside and outside class. As a result, the study made me realize that a teacher’s role in the classroom is not just content delivery but involves being a supportive and trusting figure in a student’s life. Even though I may choose to use social media as my pedagogical tool of choice, I have to ensure I use the medium to create an environment where my students feel valued and respected.

This study also taught me that if I want to be a successful teacher, I have to build positive relationships with my colleagues. In the interviews, participants mentioned that they often had informal professional development sessions where they talked about the platforms they were using. This helped me realize that since I do not have a wealth of teaching experience, the best way for me to learn about what is effective is by talking to those in the field. Not only will this help me learn more effective teaching strategies, but it will create a positive work environment and sense of community that is more conducive to my growth as a teacher.
This study also made me realize that teachers should show their students how to use technology in a meaningful way. As my participants discussed, although students use social media regularly, their experiences are often limited to basic social interactions. This made me realize that it is my job as a teacher to show students how social media can enact change. Whether this means creating assignments where students use Twitter to contact social justice organizations or having lessons dedicated to proper online behaviour, I have to help students go beyond a basic understanding of the medium. However, the school board must ensure that each teacher has the necessary technology to do so or students will miss out on these authentic learning experiences.

5.3 Recommendations

Upon completion of this study, there are numerous recommendations I would make to the educational community. First, I believe that educational policymakers should re-examine their policies with regards to social media. While restricting access to certain sites may have been a good idea when they were unexplored, my participants expressed frustration as they felt they prevented teachers from using new teaching strategies that benefitted student learning. As a result, I would recommend that each Toronto school board send out a survey to all teachers and ask them if they believe certain websites (i.e., Facebook) had educational potential. If the majority of teachers respond positively, boards should open up access immediately as it would allow teachers to try new pedagogies more relevant to the modern classroom.

I would also recommend that informal mentorships programs be created for new teachers who want to adopt social media into their classrooms. As participants revealed, starting a social media account is a huge time commitment that requires the creation of new materials and increased student-teacher communication. As a result, although a new teacher might want to use
this pedagogy, the time commitment may scare them away. In response, I would recommend that if a teacher is interested in using social media, their department head could put them in contact with another staff member who is using the pedagogy. The teachers could then arrange meetings, exchange numbers or just talk about how to run the account and what to focus on. Having this mentor who they could ask questions to not only would increase the likelihood they adopt the medium in the future, but it would help both teachers reflect on their practice. In addition, keeping things informal means that neither teacher is forced to add another time commitment to their schedules.

Finally, I would recommend that teacher education programs require teacher candidates to complete one online course as a part of their degree. This is because if teachers want to use social media, they should have experience using threads and posting materials before asking students to do so. As a result, I would suggest that institutions immediately take one existing course that is required to graduate and move it to an online platform of their choice. This slight change would not alter the essence of teacher education programs as some programs already offer online courses or use an online system. In addition, teacher candidates would be able to experiment and learn about the features of an online class as a part of their training and then apply these skills to their future practice or social media use.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

The findings of this study revealed many areas of further research. According to my participants, some students in their classes disliked using the same social media platform for educational and recreational purposes. As a result, I believe researchers should examine why students feel this way as it would help teachers learn how to use social media properly. For example, if students do not like using commercial platforms like Facebook, teachers could look
to platforms like Edmodo so students engage with the medium. Conducting interviews with students about this topic would also provide insight into why they make certain choices in the classroom, which could help teachers with their overall lesson planning.

This study also revealed that using social media may have an impact on teachers’ work-home balance as increased prep-work and constant communication with students often resulted in a lack of free time. As a result, the demand of such a pedagogy suggests that exploring social media’s impact on teacher burnout may be an avenue for further research. If teachers are using the medium yet finding they cannot keep up with the demands, having research that gives them strategies they could employ may encourage more teachers to adopt the practice. Researching “social media burnout” could also indicate if teacher education programs are doing enough to prepare teacher candidates for the stresses of teaching both on and offline.

Participant discussions about social media policy also left me wondering about the origins of social media restrictions and why they have not been changed. This is because even though some studies have shown that websites like Facebook have educational potential, boards appeared to have banned them without consideration of these benefits. As a researcher, I believe conducting interviews with policymakers about the website restrictions in Toronto school boards may help teachers better understand policymakers thinking and open up a dialogue between the two parties about the potential of the medium in the 21st century.

Finally, more research needs to be done on the use of social media in Canadian high school classrooms. As discussed in Chapter 2, almost all of the studies I examined looked at social media in a U.S or international context. Although this research does have value, more studies need to be conducted with both teachers and students that examine how the medium is being used in Toronto, Ontario and Canada as a whole.
5.5 Concluding Comments

Upon beginning my research, I was skeptical about social media use at the high school level. From my own poor experiences in university, I did not feel the medium would prove to be valuable as I feared student disinterest and legal barriers would be impossible for teachers to navigate. However, this study shows that while teachers may encounter challenges along the way, using social media could positively impact the student learning experience. Whether the medium helps them improve their communication skills or build stronger friendships, social media can be a powerful teaching tool if used properly. As a result, I hope that teachers draw inspiration from my participants and think about the medium’s potential benefits when deciding whether or not to use it in their classroom. I also hope that this study changes the mindset of teachers who are skeptical of social media’s educational potential as although they do not have to adopt it themselves, being more accepting of the pedagogy will make it easier for others. In fact, if more teachers accept social media’s education value, it may convince boards to change their policies entirely. In any case, it is my wish that teachers stop looking at social media in the school as a negative. While it may seem as if the medium is only beneficial for talking to friends, using dog filters and posting pictures of food, it can have value within the classroom. Since, as Kevin stated in his interview, “the kids sure as hell aren’t putting their phones down,” teachers must look to engage their students using any medium they can.
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69


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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date:

Dear _______________________________,

My name is Patrick Mannone and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on Toronto high school teachers’ experiences using social media in their classroom. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have used social media as a pedagogical tool in a significant capacity and on a consistent basis. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one roughly 60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper and informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded.

The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific questions during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Patrick Mannone
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Patrick Mannone and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ___________________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________

Date: _______________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about teachers’ use of social media in Toronto high school classrooms for the purposes of my Masters of Teaching Research Project. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions about your experiences using social media in the classroom. This interview will be divided into four different sections discussing your background, your use of social media in the classroom, various benefits and challenges and next steps. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A: Background Information
1. How many years have you been teaching?
   a) How long have you been teaching at your current school?

2. What subjects and grades do you teach? Which have you previously taught?

3. Can you describe the school community you currently work in (i.e. neighbourhood, student composition, culture)?

4. Can you describe the technology available in your classroom?

5. Do you use social media in your personal life?
   a) (If yes) Which platforms do you use and why?
   b) (If no) Why have you chosen not to use social media?

Section B: Social Media Platforms and Teacher Experiences
6. How long have you been using social media in your classroom?
7. What prompted you to start using social media for educational purposes?
   a) Did colleagues contribute to this decision? Students? Personal interest?
8. Can you explain the different social media platforms that you use in the classroom?
   a) What purpose do they serve?
   b) What kind of prep time/resources are required?
   c) What is the role of the teachers in this process?

9. In what ways do your students utilize social media platforms?
   a) Do you have regular access to them in the school?

10. Can you describe the types of interactions you have had with students on social media?
    a) When do these interactions typically occur?
    b) What is the nature of these interactions?

11. Which social media platforms do you find the most effective?
    a) What specifically about _____ makes it effective?
    b) What about commercial websites like YouTube? Facebook? Twitter? Instagram?
    c) What about platforms like Wikis? Blogs? Online Gaming?

Section C: Benefits and Challenges of Using Social Media

12. In what ways do you think using social media in your classroom has benefitted your students?
    a) Can you describe an experience where this impact was made evident?
    b) Has the use of social media impacted your students’ level of engagement, organizational or collaborative skills? If so, can you describe how you know this?

13. In what ways do you think using social media in the classroom has helped you as a teacher?
    a) Has it effected your communication with students? Improved methods of instruction or assessment? If so, how did you come to this realization?

14. As a teacher who uses social media as an educational tool, what challenges have you encountered?
    a) How has the technology available in your school impacted you?
a) How have colleagues, administration and students responded to your methods?

15. What impact has your school or school board’s social media policy had on your teaching?

16. When using social media in the classroom, how do you monitor student behaviour?
   a) Have you encountered problems? If so, can you describe one of these situations?

17. How does your school give teachers who want to use social media in their classrooms support?
   a) Have there been professional development opportunities? If so, have you ever attended and what were they like?

Section E: Alternatives, Next Step, Recommendations

18. As an educator, can you describe what you hope to accomplish by using social media as an educational tool?

20. What recommendations would you have for teachers who wanted to implement social media into their classrooms?

Thank you for your time and responses. If you have any additional questions about the interview or my project in general please feel free to contact me. I will send a copy of my transcripts for you to review later on in the research process. Once again, thank you for your time.