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Robert E. Miller

Central Michigan University, mille5re@cmich.edu

James Melton

Central Michigan University, melto1jh@cmich.edu

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# A Typology of Student Social Media Users: A Posting Behavior Perspective

**Robert E. Miller**

Central Michigan University  
mille5re@cmich.edu

**James Melton**

Central Michigan University  
melto1jh@cmich.edu

## ABSTRACT

This paper develops a typology of student social media users based on their posting behavior. Specifically, the typology categorizes students using a matrix with two dimensions: content appropriateness and privacy concern. Existing research has shown that students often post content that is not appropriate for all audiences. Given that employers are increasingly using social media to vet job candidates, students with inappropriate content are at risk. This is especially true for those students who make their content available to everyone, even when they know the risks they are taking. Clearly this paradoxical behavior deserves further study. The development of this typology represents a step in that direction. The ultimate goal is to develop an instrument to help students understand where they fall on the matrix and, as a result, learn to better manage their social media behavior.

## Keywords

Social media, posting behavior, typology.

## INTRODUCTION

The impact of social media on modern life is hard to ignore. Hundreds of millions of people visit social media sites daily. In fact, social media has quickly become one of the most popular Internet activities (Purcell, Brenner, and Rainie, 2012). While people of all ages use social media, college students were some of the first adopters and remain some of the most fervent users. Any professor who has tried to give a lecture in a room filled with computers knows exactly how addicted many students appear to be to their social media sites. While student use of social media during a lecture may be an annoyance for the professor, unchecked use of social media can pose a far greater threat to the student. This is especially true when the student posts content on social media sites that is not appropriate for all potential audiences.

Research has shown that students often post inappropriate material on social media sites (Peluchette and Karl, 2010). If they posted this material in ignorance then their behavior could possibly be explained away as the “folly of youth”. Unfortunately, many students appear to know that what they are posting could cause them to be viewed in a negative light. Making matters worse, the material is often posted without restriction – allowing anyone to view it, including potential employers. This behavior, dubbed the “posting paradox” by researchers can have a serious negative effect on future employability (Miller, Parsons, and Lifer, 2010). As such, it deserves to be investigated so that proper interventions can be developed to address it. This paper contributes to the existing posting paradox research by developing a typology of social media users based on their posting behavior.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POSTING PARADOX

According to a recent Pew Center survey, social media use is growing across all social demographics. While many age groups have embraced social media, college-age adults continue to be the largest single group of social media users. In fact, Perrin (2015) reported that 90% of college-age adults use social media. Clearly social media is having a significant impact on society and college student, in particular.

Although the growth of social media has received a great deal of attention, how social media is being used is a far more interesting topic – especially as it relates to college students and what they post. The posting behavior of college students has been examined by a variety of researchers, investigating topics such as information disclosure (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais, 2009), inappropriate content (Peluchette and Karl, 2010), and audience concern (Miller, et al., 2010). These researchers have reported that students often use social media to post content that is not appropriate for all audiences,

especially potential employers. Considering the increased use of social media by companies vetting job candidates, inappropriate posting behavior can have a significant and negative effect on a student's employment prospects.

Students are apparently all too aware that employers may be viewing their social media content (Root and McKay, 2014). They also appear to know when their content is inappropriate (Miller, et al., 2010). Surprisingly, these two facts do not seem to change their behavior. Miller, et al. (2010) found that students continued to post content that they, themselves, considered inappropriate for employers while knowing it could potentially be viewed by those same employers. The researchers dubbed this behavior the "posting paradox." The paradox has been noted in a number of follow-up studies involving students in different countries (Melton, Miller, and Salmons, 2012) and using different social media platforms (Miller and Melton, 2015). Since the paradox is pervasive, the question becomes, what can be done to address it? The first step is to better understand the phenomenon by examining how its two main factors relate, namely content appropriateness and privacy concern.

### **Content Appropriateness**

Content appropriateness relates to how well a potential employer views a candidate based on the material posted on the candidate's social media sites. Since 93% of recruiters will review a job candidate's social media presence before making a hiring decision (Jobvite, 2014), content appropriateness has become a significant issue. Unfortunately, reviewers often uncover content that doesn't reflect well on the candidate. Reviewers reported damaging content ranging from poor spelling and grammar to posts about sex, drugs, and alcohol. These observations are supported by researchers such as Peluchette and Karl (2010) who found students commonly posted photographs of themselves with alcohol or in sexually provocative poses. They also found profiles that contained comments about alcohol/drug use, sexual activity, and profanity. This inappropriate content is more than just a commentary on today's youth. It can have direct, negative, consequences when students enter the job market. In fact, inappropriate social media content has caused 55% of recruiters to actually reconsider a candidate – of those reconsiderations 61% were negative. (Jobvite, 2014). Clearly, all students don't post content that is inappropriate for potential employers. The fact that many do, however, makes content appropriateness an important dimension of student posting behavior.

### **Privacy Concern**

Privacy concern relates to a student's desire to restrict access to their posted content. Since social media sites allow users to manage their privacy settings, students have to decide whether to limit access to specific groups (e.g., friends, friends of friends, etc.) or allow unlimited public access. As such, privacy concern can be viewed as a continuum anchored by private (high concern) and public (low concern). Students with a high privacy concern would limit access to their friends only, while students with a low privacy concern would have no access restrictions. Interestingly, research has shown that privacy concern, as viewed through privacy settings, does indeed cover the spectrum. According to Madden (2012), while 58% of social media users set their profiles to private, 19% allow limited access and 20% are completely public. Clearly, all students don't share the same concern for privacy. The variability in privacy concern can have a significant impact on a student's social media presence, especially when considered with the content being posted.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA USER TYPOLOGY**

As described above, content appropriateness and privacy concern are both significant issues in the management of a student's social media presence. Neither issue, however, should be viewed in a vacuum. In fact, the way the two issues relate determines a great deal about the student's online image and, ultimately, may affect future employability. Building on this important relationship, a typology of student social media users is presented in Figure 1.

Content Appropriateness	Low	Inappropriate Private	Inappropriate Public
	High	Appropriate Private	Appropriate Public
		High	Low

**Figure 1. Typology of Social Media Users**

**Inappropriate Private**

Students in the upper left quadrant post content that they acknowledge is not appropriate for potential employers. They are, however, highly concerned about privacy. This means that their social media profiles are either private or restricted to friends only. Essentially, these students post whatever they like but they limit access to their posted content. Students in this group want the freedom to express themselves but they realize that all audiences might not be as receptive to their content. They attempt to manage their online image – not through policing content but by restricting access. While this may make it more difficult for recruiters to see their content, restricting access also makes it harder for these students to build their social networks. At the same time, recruiters may view students with restricted profiles as having something to hide. In the case of students in this group, the recruiters would probably be correct.

**Appropriate Private**

Students in the lower left quadrant post content that they believe is appropriate for potential employers. They are also highly concerned about privacy. This means that their social media profiles are either private or restricted to friends only. These students manage their online image by policing their content and restricting access. While students in this group might be viewed as playing it safe, their lack of openness might cause some recruiters to view them suspiciously. Essentially, if the student has a restricted profile then there must be something to hide. Although this view may not be correct for this group of students, recruiters would have nothing else to go on. Students in this group might want to consider opening access so as to benefit from sharing the content in their profiles.

**Inappropriate Public**

Students in the upper right quadrant post content that they acknowledge is not appropriate for potential employers. At the same time, they are also not concerned about privacy. This means that their social media profiles are either public or open to a large network of potential viewers (e.g., friends of friends). Given the nature of their content and the lack of viewer restrictions, these students are the most likely to experience negative employment results. As such, students in this group should consider policing the content they are posting, or at least restrict access by changing their privacy settings.

**Appropriate Public**

Students in the lower right quadrant post content that they believe is appropriate for potential employers. They are also not concerned about privacy. This means that their social media profiles are either public or open to a large network of potential viewers (e.g., friends of friends). From the prospective of a student entering the job market, this group is the ideal. The posted content shows the student in the best possible light while being easily available to potential recruiters. Students in this group are getting the maximum return from their image-management efforts. The one downside for students in this group is that they may believe they have to censor themselves to maintain a positive image in such a public forum. These censorship efforts may detract from the overall enjoyment of their social media experience.

**Non-participants**

There is another group of students who do not fit into the typology but still deserve to be mentioned - those students who do not maintain a social media presence. For these students, the issues of content appropriateness and privacy concern are irrelevant. Since these students don't have to worry about what is posted, or who can see it, this strategy may appear to be the safest choice for students entering the job market. Unfortunately, the pervasive use of social media may make students in

this group appear less than desirable to potential employers. If a student has no social media presence, potential employers might decide that the student lacks social skills or is a non-conformist. Although non-conformity might be a desirable trait in some positions, the ability to work and communicate with others is essential for most jobs.

### DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Having developed a typology of student social media users, the next step is to operationalize it. This will require the development of survey instruments to measure both content appropriateness and privacy concern. For content appropriateness, it is important that the instrument does not bias student responses by asking “loaded” questions about their social media content. Since the goal of the typology is to get students to realize where they are on the matrix, it is important that students answer the content appropriateness questions honestly, from their own perspectives. Only when students have been honest about what they are posting will they be willing to change their behavior. For privacy concern, the measure should be much more straightforward - asking only what the privacy setting is for each social media profile.

Once the measurement instruments are developed they will need to be validated. Such validated instruments could then be employed in a number of potential research studies. The ultimate goal would be to use the typology and measures to develop an intervention to modify student posting behavior. Students could complete the measures before and after the intervention to validate its effectiveness. Assuming the intervention worked, the measures would show before and after movement in the quadrants of the matrix.

### CONCLUSION

Social media use by college students is a significant and growing phenomenon. Through social media, students share a great deal about themselves and what they believe. Unfortunately, some of what they share could negatively impact their future employability. Getting students to understand that what they post, and who they share it with, matters, has been the underlying theme of this paper. The typology presented herein is a first step in the development of measures and interventions to help student change their posting behavior.

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