



# Chapter 11

## Going Viral: Using Social Media to Build Relationships in Online Courses

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### ABSTRACT

*The number of students wanting an online education is on the rise, thus the need for higher education faculty to ensure they are meeting the needs of their students in a way that is familiar to them. One way to do this is through the use of social media. Research is limited on the impact of social media in the remote classroom. However, the use of social media may support and enhance relationship-building in the online classroom, as well as students' perceptions of social presence in learning. This chapter provides faculty with an overview of the current research on relationship building in learning and social media for educational purposes, as well as offers practical examples of how faculty might use social media in their online coursework.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online learning is becoming increasingly more popular with 75% of undergraduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) and 71% of graduate students (Best Colleges, 2022) taking at least one course online. With the rise of online instruction, faculty must ensure that student needs are met in the virtual classroom. Previous research indicates that students have a higher likelihood of staying enrolled in the course and the university (Jacobs & Archie, 2008), increased engagement in their own learning (Pike et al., 2011) and a reduction in their self-reported levels of stress related to the coursework

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(Benson & Whitson, 2022) when they build relationships in their classes. Additionally, some learners are intentionally seeking out these relationships with classmates and professors (Berry, 2019).

One emerging solution for supporting relationship building in the virtual classroom is the use of social media. Due to the interactive nature of social media platforms, they are often an ideal tool for supporting the sharing of knowledge and collaboration between online learners (Arnold & Paulus, 2010). Almost three-fourths of Americans use social media on a regular basis, with the 18-29 demographic using it the most frequently (Pew Research Center, 2021). According to the Pew Research Center (2021), the ten most popular social media platforms are: (a) Facebook, (b) Pinterest, (c) Instagram, (d) LinkedIn, (e) X, (f) Snapchat, (g) YouTube, (h) WhatsApp, (i) Reddit, and (j) TikTok. Not all of these platforms are ideal for instructional purposes, but several of them offer unique opportunities for university faculty to support student learning.

As noted previously, young adults use social media more frequently than do other adults. In fact, about 60% of college students report checking their social media accounts multiple times per day (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). College students use social media for a variety of reasons, including building relationships and engaging socially (Kim & Kim, 2017; Liu, 2010). In addition, students taking online courses spend more time using social media to support their learning than do their peers taking traditional face-to-face courses (Abraham et al., 2019).

Research is limited on the impact of social media in the remote classroom, but both university faculty and students report that its use increases learning (Alalwan, 2022; Rigamonti et al., 2020; Stathopoulou et al., 2019), engagement in the course (Alalwan, 2022; Stathopoulou et al., 2019), and collaboration between students (Stathopoulou et al., 2019). In addition, the use of social media may support and enhance relationship-building in the online classroom (Ha & Shin, 2014), as well as students' perceptions of social presence in learning (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018).

This book chapter will provide university faculty with an overview of the current research on relationship building in learning and social media for educational purposes. In addition, the authors will offer practical suggestions for how faculty might use social media in their coursework, with a specific focus on how its use can increase relationships between students, relationships between students and faculty, and relationships between students and the broader community in their field.

## **BACKGROUND**

Humans were created with a desire for connection (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). Not surprisingly, online learners are more successful when they feel a sense of connection to the course, the university, and their classmates and instructor. Previous research (Canty et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019) indicates that student attrition rates are decreased by a sense of community. In addition, student stress levels are reduced (Benson & Whitson, 2022) and students are more engaged in their own learning (Pike et al., 2011) when they feel a sense of community in the online classroom.

The term "social media" refers to a variety of online tools that include (a) networking platforms, (b) blogs, (c) virtual communities, (d) websites for sharing photographs, (e) online product review websites, and (f) countless other online platforms (Aichner et al., 2021). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2023, paragraph 1) defines the term "social media" as "forms of electronic communication...through which users create online communities" based on this definition, we posit that social media is specifically designed to support the development and maintenance of relationships. In fact, the use of social media has

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