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# Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

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Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

By Kayla Swan

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College at Brockport, State University  
of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Literacy

May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores both teacher and student perspectives of social media's impact on adolescent literacy development. In addition, it also investigates perspectives concerning if and how social media could be integrated into a classroom to improve student literacy skills.

Research remains in dispute regarding the impact of social media use on literacy skills, as there are studies that claim social media both positively and negatively impacts students' skills.

Surveys of both teachers and students as well as semi-structured interviews of students were given and analyzed to gain insight concerning both the impact of social media on literacy skills, as well as if and how social media could be used in the classroom.

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## Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

### Introduction

I stand at the front of the room as the bell is seconds from ringing and class is about to begin. As I gaze around the room, I notice something—every single student's face is being lit by a glowing, hand-held screen. A few students in the back of the room are looking at each other's phones, giggling at whatever content they have found. "What are you all doing right now?" I ask. "What do you mean?" A student replies. "What are you all looking at on your phones?" I reiterate. "Oh...looking at Facebook," one student says. "Reading Twitter" exclaims another. "I'm on Instagram," "I'm going through my Snapchat stories" "And I am talking to my friend on What's App."

All of the students are on social media; it has become an integral force in adolescents' lives. I think this must be having an effect on adolescent literacy development. I also wonder how many other teachers ask themselves the same thing. It makes me curious as to what teachers' perspectives are surrounding social media both in and out of the classroom, and how it affects adolescent literacy development. In addition, I question what students' perspectives are surrounding social media, and if they feel it is helping or hurting their reading, writing and communication skills over all.

Social media, among other technologies, now comprises the majority of an average adolescent's day, as a recent survey reports, "U.S. teenagers are spending an average of nine hours a day media multitasking" (Alvermann & Harrison, 2016, p. 221). This means that more time is spent on media than on academics, in and out of the school building. With this large presence in their day-to-day lives, students' literacy skills must be impacted; whether this impact is positive or negative, is widely disputed.

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### **Topic and Research Problem**

With the employment market and college now becoming more and more competitive, literacy skills must be stronger than ever for adolescent students exiting high school. Literacy skills now also include much more than simply reading and writing, or speaking and listening. According to the International Reading Association, “The Internet and other forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are redefining the nature of reading, writing, and communication. These ICTs will continue to change in the years ahead, requiring continuously new literacies to successfully exploit their potentials” (2009, p. 1). Due to the increase of multimodal text (audio, video, symbols and web-texts), students must now develop skills in *all* areas of literacy, both new and old. At the same time, students are engaged with these new literacy practices more than ever through their personal use of social media—just not academically. As Alvermann & Harrison suggest, on average, students are now spending more time immersed in media than any other thing while awake (2016). With the students’ wide swept interest in social media, I seek to find perspectives of the overall impact this is having on students’ literacy development, as well as if and how this interest in social media can be used to promote and increase adolescent literacy development.

### **Rationale**

With social media in our students’ pockets and at the touch of their fingertips at any given time, observing and understanding the impact it has on literacy development could not be more imperative. It was noted by the National Council for Teachers of English in the past two decades, adolescent literacy skills have been steadily declining (Adolescent Literacy, 2007). With this decreasing performance, along with the elevation of our literacy standards as part of

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the Common Core, finding a way to increase adolescents' literacy skills has moved to the top of the list for teachers all over the country (International Reading Association, 2009).

While many teachers view social media as the bane of literacy development, many others look at it as a tool to be used both in and out of the classroom to get students engaged and improve their literacy skills. A large group of teachers I have previously spoken with complained about social media promoting and increasing the use of incorrect grammar and spelling. One study of adolescents on Twitter found that:

Of the roughly 1200 Tweets collected from these 5 participants, the over-whelming majority demonstrated a concern for writing clarity and functional grammar. Two participants described a 'perfectionistic' attention to composing tweets, which included behaviors like deleting tweets with grammatical errors. Participants noted they paid attention to 'correct' grammatical forms, including spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (Gleason, 2016, p. 43).

These findings show that many students try their best to use correct grammar and spelling on social media. If students are already using social media with correct mechanics on their own, it could show potential for use in the classroom to help with literacy skills. On the other hand, there are still issues with using social media in an academic setting, such as blocking inappropriate content, and helping students who may already struggle to read on a digital platform; reading with millions of resources could be very overwhelming for the reader (Alvermann & Harrison, 2016). With such diverse views on social media use in the classroom and its impact on adolescent literacy development, I feel gaining perspective on the topic would be beneficial in



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helping future students and teachers.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my study is to see what students' and teachers' ideas are surrounding social media and its effect on adolescent students' literacy skill development. With students increased use of social media, and a decline in adolescent literacy skills, it is important to analyze both teacher and student perspectives on the relationship between the two, if there is one. My study also seeks to find if, and how, social media can be used in the classroom to better help students' literacy skills. Social media could be the root to many literacy skill issues seen among adolescents, but it could also be a tool to increase their development in literacy. The findings of my study will not only enlighten my own teaching, but can better help teachers of adolescents everywhere.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are students' and teachers' perspectives on social media's impact on adolescent literacy development?
2. Do teachers and students believe that social media can be used to facilitate literacy skills in the classroom? If so how?

### **Literature Review**

The following is a review of the literature concerning social media and adolescent literacy. Current research (International Reading Association, 2009; National Council for Teachers of English; Wendt, 2013) suggests that adolescent literacy development is on the decline, yet the standards we hold adolescents to are getting higher (CCSSO, 2010). While some research suggests social media has a negative impact on literacy development in teens (Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2016; Selwyn & Stirling, 2016), other research indicates that

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social media actually helps to improve students' literacy development (Alvermann & Harris, 2016; Gleason, 2016; Aaen and Dalsgaard, 2016; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). In addition, several studies convey how using social media in the classroom academically can increase engagement and literacy development among students (Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2016).

### **Adolescent Literacy Development Today**

The literacy development of our adolescent students has always been a priority among teachers across all grade levels. However, the primary focus on adolescent literacy development (ALD) in the past has been among elementary teachers and ELA teachers. These are the very teachers that many blame for students' lack of skills in the area. I have heard numerous teachers and parents complain about students' reading levels and exclaim, "What are those English teachers doing lately" or "those elementary teachers aren't preparing our kids for high school." Yet with the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards, all teachers across the range of contents and grade levels are being held accountable for ALD. For example, the homepage for the ELA Common Core Standards website states:

The standards establish guidelines for English language arts (ELA) as well as for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Because students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, the standards promote the literacy skills and concepts required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines (2010).

This increased standard for all teachers of adolescents is now making literacy a part of every content teacher's instruction, whether it be ELA, math or science. The CCSS now holds all teachers accountable for ALD, and this shift is coming just in time.

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In recent decades, ALD has been on the decline. A research policy brief by the National Council of Teachers of English report, “Less than half of the 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates demonstrated readiness for college-level reading, and the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores for 12th graders showed a decrease from 80 percent at the proficient level in 1992 to 73 percent in 2005” (Adolescent Literacy, p. 1). Wendt (2013) asserts, “Content area mastery cannot be achieved without basic literacy. Therefore, the current method of focusing on academic learning is not effective when students are unable to comprehend and apply new knowledge due to lack of reading and literacy skills” (p. 41). The decrease in students’ literacy skills is also leading to a decrease in their ability to learn and comprehend content. Educators must shift their instruction to first address ALD, in order to set the foundations for students to comprehend the content. One way to do this is to “take a backward approach; focus on literacy at the secondary level, ensuring that even secondary students gain and maintain basic literacy skills in order to be successful at all stages of learning” (Wendt, 2013, p. 41).

Many teachers are already shifting to this approach because of the Common Core State Standards, which address literacy throughout content areas (CCSSO, 2010). One aspect many teachers are running into is that literacy now encompasses much more than just reading, writing, speaking and listening (Wendt, 2013). With the addition of digital media via the Internet, literacy has now come to encompass computer, digital, and media literacy as well. Bulut, Ulu, and Kan suggest, “The changes in the perception of literacy with developing technology have changed the structure of the process of interpretation of texts. Multimodal literacy refers to meaning-making that occurs through the reading, watching, understanding, interpreting, reacting, and interacting with digital texts and multimedia” (2015, p. 46). Teachers now need to find a way to encompass

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*all* types of text and literacy development into their instruction to better help prepare our students for college and the work force.

### **Social Media & Teens**

We live in a society where by middle school, 83% of students own their own cell phone, and 91% of them use it to text message and go on the Internet (Englander, 2011). This number only increases among high school students. Of these phones, 73% of them are smartphones, meaning they can be used to access the Internet or social media apps at the press of a button (Lenhart, 2015). Our students have more access than ever before to the Internet and are on it every chance they get, spending on average 9 hours a day immersed in Internet media (Alvermann & Harris, 2016). Specifically, social media has become an integral part of adolescent lives, with 71% of adolescents ages 13-17 using more than one form of social media (Lenhart, 2015).

A large complaint of teenage social media use has been the negative impact it has had on students' spelling and grammar use. However, research has proven this is not precisely the case. Studies have found:

Evidence that using abbreviations had a positive impact on spelling, and a positive correlation was found between the amount of texting and overall language skill. The data suggests that children need to think about spelling to select abbreviations, which enhances phonological skills, and that they need to spell reasonably accurately to make use of the predictive spelling tools on their phones (Alvermann & Harris, 2016, p. 221).

This complements the research by Gleason on teens' use of Twitter previously mentioned, where students illustrated a strong concern for being grammatically correct and clear. It seems that research contradicts many teachers' notions of attributing poor spelling and grammar to students'

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use of social media.

As previously mentioned, many argue social media impacts teens in adverse ways. One literature review on adolescents' use of social media states many sociological studies have found, "social media use is riven with inequalities and injustices, entwined with issues of identity formation and social relations, and is 'hyper-layered' in nature and effects" (Selwyn & Stirling, 2016, p. 4). Additionally, studies have found adolescents' use of social media has led to issues of personal identity, narcissism and low self esteem, as teens now often base their self worth on how many "likes" they can obtain on social media (Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2016). Despite these negative impacts, could there be a way to bring the positives of social media, such as online communication, and high adolescent interest into the classroom?

### **Social Media and Literacy Instruction**

Bringing social media into the classroom is controversial among researchers, although there is increasing support in recent research. A study concerning the perspectives of using technology and social media for literacy instruction by Jia, Snow, and White found that the view among urban adolescents is, "teens, including many language minority students with diverse literacy skills, are true believers in technology and play an active role in contributing to the mainstream teen culture fueled with technology influence" (2015). The study also confirms the rate at which teens learn to use and embrace social media and technology is much faster than adults. It seems students are very open to using technology in the classroom for literacy, and already have the basic skills to do so, even among low socioeconomic students in urban settings. Similarly, social media has been proven to increase the literacy skills of adolescent English Language Learners, even without structured use in the classroom. Social media promotes communication in both their home language (which better develops their base skills) along with

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English Language Learners' reading, writing and communication skills in English as well (Stewart, 2014).

For teachers who combat the idea of using social media due to students' inability to use it in strictly academic ways, a large study in Denmark found students were successfully able to use the social media site Facebook without management by a teacher both in and out of the classroom. The study by Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016) finds that "students blend the personal, social life with academic schoolwork in one space within the Facebook groups. This conclusion challenges the conception from current research on Facebook that students have a discomfort with the blending of social life and schoolwork" (p. 172). They also discover that over 50% of the posts in the student-led Facebook groups were directly related to schoolwork (with many others simply being school related posts about events in the school, etc.), showing that students can independently lead a Facebook group with peers, and effectively use it for academic work. Similarly, a study by Greenhow and Lewin concludes that using social media academically "helped to shape the learning activities; thus, aspects were self-determined and also socially determined as they predominantly worked in groups" (2016, p. 17). Students are taking responsibility of their own learning, and helping to create the work they completed, creating a strong sense of agency.

Yet the support of using social media for academic purposes remains controversial. One literature review on the topic states that "recent studies have pointed to how teachers' and institutional use of social media platforms such as Facebook can contribute to 'context collapse' where previously clear hierarchies and modes of interaction between teachers and students are challenged and some- times re-formulated" (Selwyn & Stirling, 2016, p. 4). The boundaries of teacher to student relationships can be made unclear to students when interacting so closely on

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social media. Additionally, research has also found that the wealth of information and communication social media and the Internet bring can actually push struggling readers farther behind, as they lack the literacy skills to effectively participate on digital platforms (Alvermann & Harris, 2016). It seems that the research and perspectives on the use of social media for academic purposes with students remains widely disputed.

### **Summary**

Since current research reflects both positives and negatives surrounding the use of social media and its impact on adolescent literacy development, I seek to find perspectives on how both students and teachers feel on the matter. One aspect that researchers mutually agree upon is the need for an increase in students' literacy skills, including new and multimodal literacy practices (Jia et al, 2015; Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2016; Bulut et al, 2015; Wendt, 2013). Educators must find a way to bring literacy instruction into their content area due to the Common Core. These lessons must also target their "new literacy" development. With social media being such a prevalent force in adolescent lives, my study aims to see how both students and teachers feel about social media, its impacts on ALD, as well as if they feel it could be used in an academic way to help improve adolescent literacy skills across the board. In addition, while there are studies on urban teens (such as Jia et al, 2015), little research has been done surrounding rural/suburban adolescents' perspectives surrounding social media and literacy.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study focuses on surveys and interviews conducted with students and teachers to determine their perspectives on social media and its impact on adolescent literacy development. Data was collected over a period of 3-5 weeks, with the interviews following the surveys. Interviews were video/audio recorded and transcribed.

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### **Participants**

The participants of this study were selected because they are students of the teacher I am interning with for the 2016-2017 school year, or teachers that work in the High School in which I intern.

### **Students**

The students are Academic Intervention Service (AIS) students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They receive AIS services because they are struggling or below grade level in reading and/or writing. There are 33 boys and 3 girls. The students are mostly Caucasian, with 4 African American students, and 3 Latino students. English is all of the students' first language. About half of the students in the class receive free or reduced lunch.

### **Teachers**

All of the teachers participating are high school teachers ranging in content areas. The teachers range in age between 25 and 65, and are roughly equal numbers of each gender. The teachers are also mainly Caucasian, however there are 3% African American, 2% Latino and 1% Asian in the teacher population.

### **Setting**

The setting of this study is an 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade AIS English Language Arts classroom in a rural-suburban High school in upstate New York. The environment of the school is welcoming, as there are many posters and colorful murals around the school halls and walk ways. The environment of the classroom is inviting and engaging, with a couch, one large table instead of desks, shelves of books, and walls filled with words, definitions of words, and students' work. There are also "ball" chairs where the students sit on an exercise ball mounted to a chair rather than a traditional chair to help with the urge to move or fidget.



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### **Positionality**

The person I am could potentially affect my role as a researcher in this school and classroom. I used my gender, class, educational background, where I grew up and my personal beliefs as a critical lens on my research. I am a woman in her 20's who is in a serious relationship but not yet married, with no children. I currently live in a small, rural town in upstate New York, just ten minutes from where I grew up. I grew up in a lower-middle/working class household, where neither of my parents finished college. My mother has been a waitress/manager at a local diner since before I was born, and my father works for the Highway Department of the town I grew up in (where he has worked for 13 years).

I am the first person on either side of my family to attend and finish college. I graduated Magna Cum Laude from The College at Brockport with a Bachelor's in English Literature. I also received my certification in Adolescent English Inclusive Generalist Education, in grades 5-12, and certification with Students with Disabilities, grades 7-12. I am currently doing a graduate practicum internship in a rural-suburban district, which is the same school I attended growing up.

I personally use various types of social media. I have used social media for various reasons: to keep up with friends and family both near and far away, to keep up on current events, for fun, for college projects, to stay on top of what is going on around my college campus, as well as in a characterization lesson in student teaching. I have had social media in my life since I was a teen, but also remember the time before it existed; I grew up with and without it.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

As the researcher, I wanted to collect data that illustrated teacher and student perspectives regarding social media's impact on adolescent literacy development, as well as if they believe it

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can be used to increase literacy skills in the classroom, and how this can be done. I collected this data in the form of surveys and interviews of both students and teachers.

### **Surveys**

Protocol A (see appendix A) was used as the survey for students, and Protocol B was used as the survey for teachers. Students were asked about their thoughts concerning social media, and also their personal use of social media. This shed light on how the students use social media in their own lives and gave me background as to where their ideas may be stemming from. The teachers were also be asked about their personal use of social media, as I feel it is a key concept in determining personal ideas surrounding the topic, as well as if/how they feel it can (or cannot) be used in the classroom.

### **Interviews**

Protocol C served as semi-structured interview questions that were used on students. Not only did it ask participants to define social media, but it also asked them to define literacy. I wanted to get a sense of teacher and student perspectives on what literacy is today, and whether or not they include digital and new literacies as a part of their definition. I feel this also helped clarify their ideas on more specific questions related to my research, such as “How do you think social media affects adolescent literacy skills and development?” and “Do you think social media could be used in the classroom? If so, how?”

### **Procedures**

During the month of March 2017, I began collecting both student and teacher surveys. The surveys were given to students in class, but they were instructed to take the survey and complete it on their own, non-instructional time (such as in advisement time or after/outside of school). Teachers who agreed to participate in my study were sent their surveys via email. The

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teachers then completed the survey on their own non-instructional time, and returned the completed survey to me via email.

Interviewees were randomly selected out of the participants who have agreed to participate in the interview. Interviews took place in the school building during advisement time or after school.

### **Trustworthiness**

I collected multiple sources of data across two populations: teachers and students. This data was triangulated to increase the reliability and validity of my study (Clark and Creswell, 2015). In addition, a peer as well as my advisor reviewed my study to ensure there was no personal bias present in my research.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study I used the constant comparative method to code my data and to find emerging themes throughout all three of my data sources (Shagoury and Power, 2012). I began with the teacher surveys, and started by reading through and sorting the surveys by common themes, which became my codes. I then applied this method to the student surveys and interviews by cross checking across all three data sources for the common themes and codes. Through this triangulated analysis, I found three common themes connected to my research questions: 1. Teachers and students feel social media affects adolescents' spelling and grammar; 2. There is dispute among both teachers and students on whether or not social media could be used effectively in a classroom; 3. Teachers and students feel that social media may negatively influence adolescents' speaking and listening skills.

### **Finding 1: Teachers and Students Feel Social Media Impacts Adolescents' Spelling and Grammar**

In every source of data I collected, both students and teachers noted the biggest issue with social media is how it impacts literacy skills like spelling and grammar. Nearly every participant noted that students now write and talk the way they would text or tweet, using abbreviations, lack of punctuation, and sentence fragments. One ELA teacher, Mrs. Grant, stated, "I had students do formal written critiques of their performances, I was surprised at how many misspellings and shorthands were used in their papers ("u", "nite," "@") and how conversational their writing was ("Well, I thought...", "This was totally awesome" "Soo...", emojis, etc.). They also struggled greatly with run-on sentences and comma splices across the board. I do believe that this is a result of growing up with messaging and texting." Another teacher mentions, "They

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use poor spelling and grammar and made up spelling so the words are short (u=you, ur=your/you're, etc.).”

In addition to teachers, students were also aware of how social media seems to be impacting their spelling and grammar. An 11<sup>th</sup> grade student named Ella noted in an interview, “It hurts (literacy) skills because they (students) put abbreviations in their writing in school instead of doing it the right way.” Another student in a survey stated “It’s not good, a lot of kids don’t capitalize or use punctuation and they use abbreviations instead of the real word even in school.” Another student actually used shorthand while answering the survey without even noticing (see figure 1 below). The teachers’ and students’ views of social media negatively impacting literacy is in contrast to the studies completed by Gleason (2016) and Alvermann and Harris (2016), which suggests social media improves students’ spelling, grammar and overall language use, as students were more conscious of what they were posting on social media.

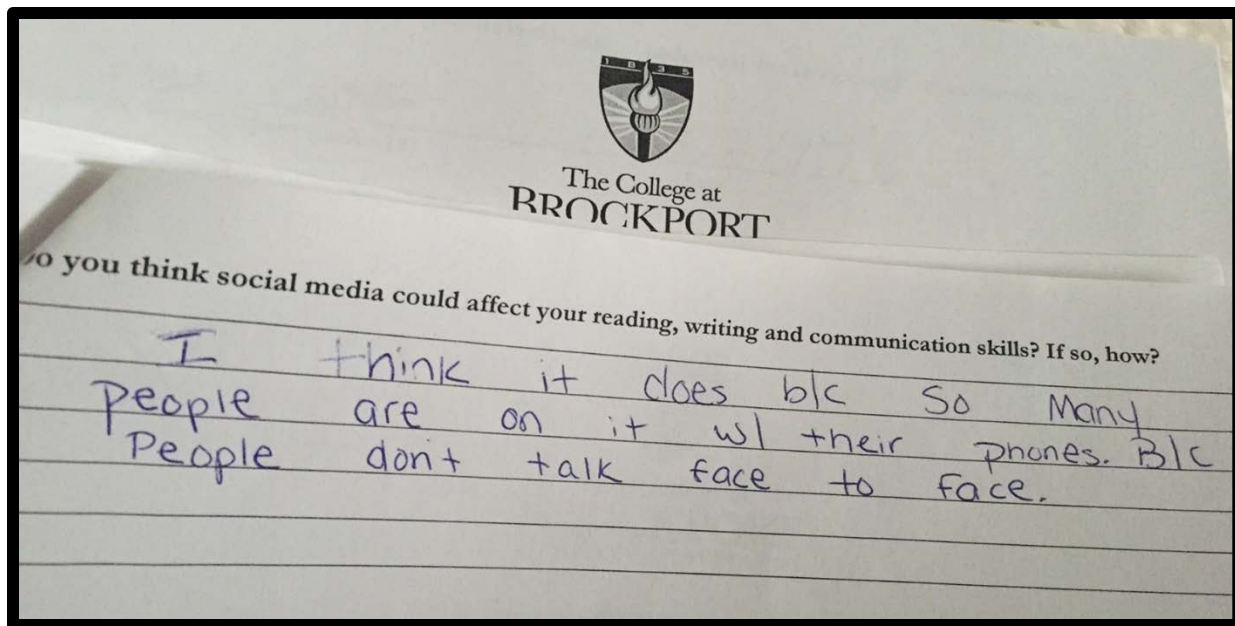


Figure 1: Student use of abbreviations on the survey.

**Finding 2: Dispute on Whether or Not Social Media Could be Used Effectively in a Classroom**

Students and teachers both had a group of participants strongly against using social media in a classroom; however, the students had a much larger group. Prior to completing the data collection for my study, I had a hypothesis that given students' current interests in social media, they would be interested in using it in their classrooms. The data suggests that both students and teachers had differing ideas on whether or not social media has a place in a classroom lesson, with 25% of teachers against its use in a classroom, and 56% of students against its use (see figures 2 and 3 below). My participants' background using social media varied. When I asked my participants the question, "How often do you use social media?", 86% of teacher participants stated they have used or currently use social media, and 100% of student participants stated they currently use social media, with 90% of students citing that they used social media every day.

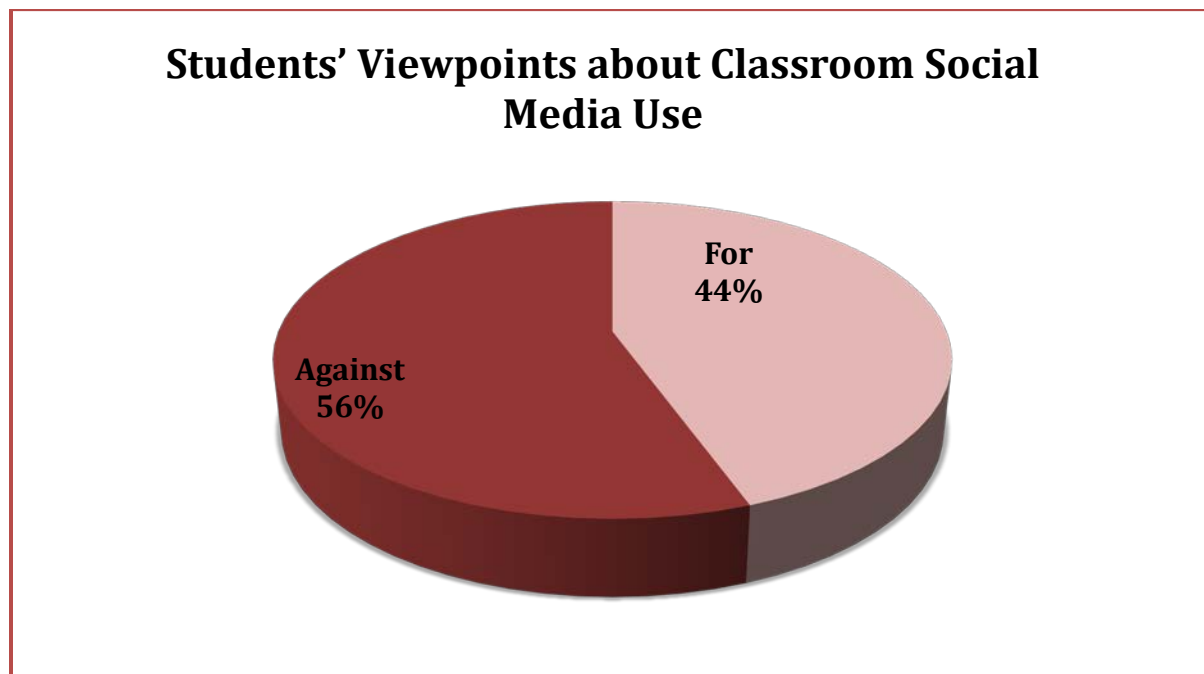
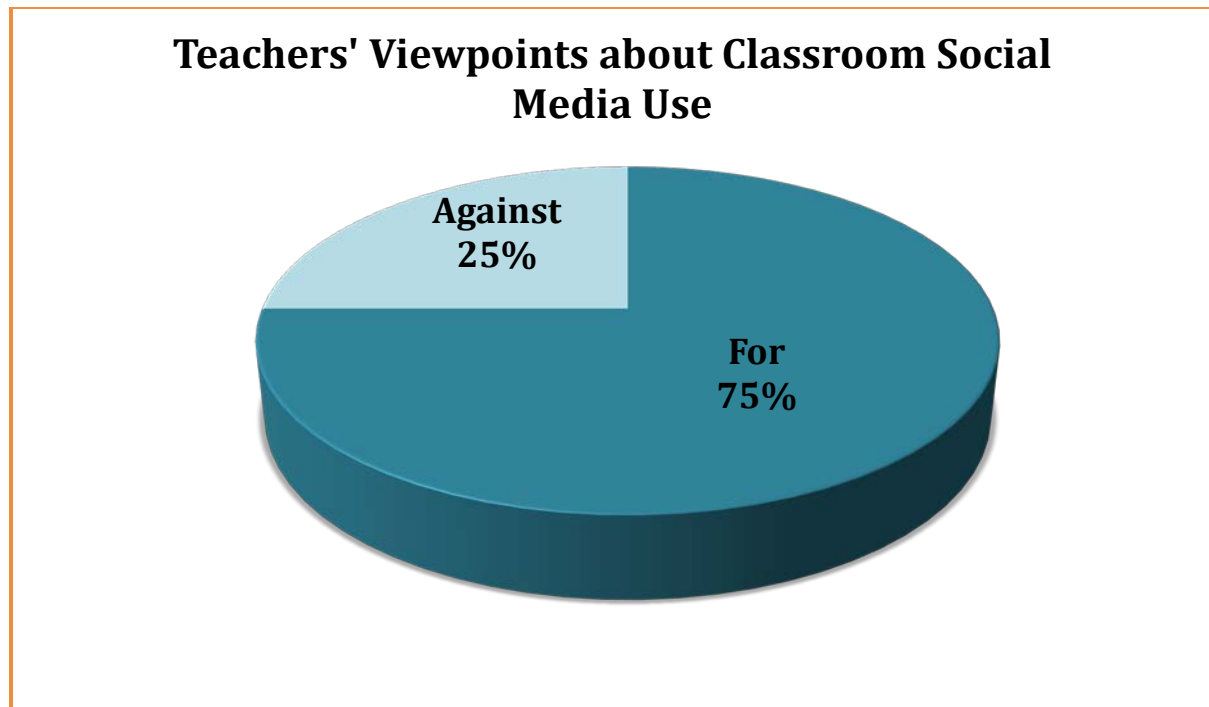


Figure 2: Chart representing student percentages in support of and against using social media in classroom lessons.



*Figure 3: Chart representing teacher percentages in support of and against using social media in classroom lessons.*

I was surprised to see less support of using social media in a class from students than teachers when so many students are immersed in social media. When students were asked why they felt social media would or would not work in a classroom lesson, most stated that they, “did not like mixing school and their life” or that it would “be too distracting” and cause “drama.” Other students stated that they were unsure how social media could be used, or how it could be effective in helping to better literacy skills.

Students who supported using social media in a classroom suggested using it mostly for homework purposes, to keep students reminded of what the homework was, or for students who were absent to get their work. As one student put, “You could use it for homework and to keep kids updated.” A few even mentioned Edmodo, a site used by teachers to post homework, classwork and communicate with parents and students outside of class. One student noted the interest that so many have in social media could spark more interest in their schoolwork, “You

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can use the interest of their phone to spark interest in what they're learning. Then they can be on their phone and learning rather than it just being a distraction." This student had personally used social media like services in a classroom before, where they could make and share flash cards to study with.

Teachers who supported the idea of using social media in classroom instruction gave a wide range of ideas on how to use it. When asked the question, "*How could social media be used in a classroom to promote adolescent literacy skill development?*", teachers' ideas included: using social media to communicate with teachers and students around the world, using it to post homework assignments/give students work who were absent, and using social media to create character profiles, blog, and share resources. Ms. Ellis, an 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher claimed, "I think there are many good sources that can be used on Social Media and that it can promote a sense of a global community. In terms of skill development there are many news outlets that offer their articles online and in social media formats. I think that it can provide relevance to the content being read and worked with, and does not have to be limited to "a word limit or less" and can teach the literacy skills of 21st century learners." In contrast, when asked the question above, teachers who were against using social media for instruction stated the following:

- *I wish we would spend more time reinforcing literacy development instead of social media.*
- *I really have no idea. I dislike it in general and it would have to be a real winner of a lesson to get me to learn about it enough to teach it!*
- *I don't think it belongs in the classroom truthfully. There are many better options available.*

Teachers who were against the idea of using social media in the classroom also used social media less themselves, with the exception of one participant who used it daily.



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Just as the literature debated the thought of using social media in a classroom, the teachers and students were in debate as well. Many researchers (Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2016; Selwyn & Stirling, 2016) were against the notion of using social media in the classroom, as it could cause negative impacts such as blurring the lines between what is appropriate for school and teacher-student relationships, but many also cited positive impacts on literacy skills as well (Alvermann & Harris, 2016; Gleason, 2016; Aaen and Dalsgaard, 2016; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

### **Finding 3: Teachers and Students Feel that Social Media May Negatively Influence Adolescents' Speaking and Listening Skills**

Many teachers have noted that students' communication skills in face-to-face situations have been on the decline, especially since social media has become more widely used among adolescents. Speaking and listening skills are often the forgotten literacy dexterities, with more focus placed on reading and writing; however, adolescents will struggle to be successful both in school, work and their personal relationships without them. Mr. Hope, a high school history teacher mentions the following when asked the question: *Do you think social media impacts adolescent literacy skills or development? If so, how?* "It seems as if students are more and more unfamiliar with how to have a face to face conversation with someone else." Mrs. Johnson, an 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading teacher states, "Because it [social media] limits interactions and can be checked whenever you feel like checking it, students struggle to communicate with each other face to face and to listen to each other and have an actual conversation. I have found that it is a real challenge for students to listen to what a peer has to say and to respond appropriately to it."

The students in my study also cited social issues that they felt arose from social media, but not as often as teachers; 68% of teachers noted speaking and listening/social skills being

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negatively impacted by social media while 40% of students mentioned this. When asked the question “*Do you think social media could affect your reading, writing and communication skills? If so, how?*”, one student, Collin, mentioned he felt it impacted communication skills “because people don’t talk face to face.” A student, Andrea, notes how social media may “limit your ability to have intimate relationships.” Another 12<sup>th</sup> grade student, Leah, stated, “[Social media] affects communication skills because you can say anything behind a screen and people become afraid of talking in person.” Overall, students are aware of the negative impact this is having on their literacy skills. Students in this study discuss how social media affects their personal relationships, but they do not mention how social media may impact them in school or in the work place. Lucci, Abrams and Gerber (2016), focus on layering student literacies in order to develop all literacy skills simultaneously, including speaking and listening. Rather than focusing on social media, their study focuses on video games, particularly Minecraft, a game in which one builds their own world. While this seems far from facilitating speaking and listening skills, the researchers focus on collaboratively creating worlds in class groups. Lucci et al state:

These world-building activities honor the layering of students’ out-of-school literacy practices, which include their gaming practices and their identities as gamers, learners, and adolescents. Such autonomous educational experiences typically have been acceptable beyond school hours or during students’ down time. However, the layering of literacies in the classroom can help students develop a critical and personal understanding of the text because they recreated it in the *Minecraft* world (2016, pg. 75).

By layering in school literacies with students’ personal literacies, we may be able to motivate them to interact and collaborate, developing all areas of literacy skills including communication skills.

### Discussion

The purpose of my study was to see what students' and teachers' ideas were surrounding social media and its effect on adolescent students' literacy skill development. My study also explored if and how social media can be used in the classroom to enhance students' literacy skills. My two primary research questions were:

1. What are students' and teachers' perspectives on social media's impact on adolescent literacy development?
2. Do teachers and students believe that social media can be used to facilitate literacy skills in the classroom? If so how?

There were three main themes that emerged from my data analysis. First, teachers and students both felt social media was negatively impacting students' spelling and grammar. Students are constantly looking for ways to get their thoughts across in as little words as possible, increasing brevity and abbreviations. This way of writing is done so often that teachers and students feel it seems to be transferring over to academic writing, which is in opposition of what research found. Gleason (2016) and Thurairaj, Hoon, Roy and Fong (2015) found that students' use of abbreviations and short hands did not transfer over to academic writing, and grammar use remained correct, even on social media. Second, my analysis of data indicated that teachers are more supportive of social media use within a lesson than students. However, students also did not know a great deal about how to use social media in a class lesson other than for reminders for homework, which is not truly integrated into a lesson. Lastly, students and teachers also noted that social media was negatively impacting speaking, listening and social communication skills, in that students struggled to have face to face conversations with adults and peers. They also have anxiety when presenting to the class, or any other form of speaking.

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These skills are fundamental, and a large part of the Common Core State Standards of which students and teachers are required to meet (CCSO, 2010). Even with the negative impacts noted, most teachers in my study were open to using social media in their classroom, and feel it could positively impact students' skills.

### **Conclusions**

After considering my findings, this study brought me to two conclusions: 1. Students and teachers feel social media is negatively impacting many areas of adolescent literacy development; 2. Students are largely unaware of how social media could be used in a classroom to improve literacy skills. These conclusions were reached after considering the combination of the findings and the raw data.

### **Students and Teachers Feel Social Media is Negatively Impacting Many Areas of Adolescent Literacy Development**

Two of my findings related directly to the participants' shared perspective of how social media was impacting adolescent literacy development. The main areas of literacy that were commonly mentioned in both the surveys and interviews were spelling, grammar, speaking, and listening. This is contradictory of research that suggests that social media has little to no negative impact on a student's spelling and grammar use, particularly in academic writing which was the concern of my participants. One study concerning students' social media use and its impact on academic writing concluded: "the frequent use of short messaging had not majorly affected the English language proficiency of the participants. In academic writing there was a conscious effort to stay clear of SNSs language," meaning that the abbreviations and short hand language used in social media was not transferring over to academic writing in this study (Thurairaj, Hoon, Roy and Fong, 2015, p. 63). Gleason's 2016 study also concluded that although students

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used abbreviations in tweets, spelling and grammar remained correct, and the usage did not transfer to academic writing. However, research does support that there are negative impacts on face-to-face communication skills (speaking and listening) due to social media use. A study by Ramirez and Zhang (2007) considered whether or not relationships were impacted if they switched from an online modality, or computer mediated communication or CMC (such as social media), to an offline modality (Face to face communication, or FtF). The study found that the longer participants communicated on a CMC modality, the harder it was for the relationship to transition to FtF communication. This could mean that the longer students are immersed in social media, the harder it will be for them to develop face-to-face communication skills.

### **Students are Largely Unaware of How Social Media Could be Used in a Classroom to Improve Literacy Skills**

Due to the answers I gathered from students in both in the interviews and the surveys, students in my study knew very little when asked the question: *Do you think social media could be used in the classroom? If so, how?* Most students replied with answers such as “I don’t know how you’d do that” or “I’m unsure how that would work.” It seemed that overall, students’ only perception of how to use social media in a classroom was with Edmodo, or a similar website, for homework and communication with the teacher outside of school. This may also correlate to why students were largely against using social media in a classroom lesson, as if they were unsure how to it could be used, they may not support the use of it. This connects to Kitchakarn’s (2016) study concerning students’ perceptions of using social media for classroom instruction, which found that “Students’ perceived usefulness of Facebook was also correlated with their attitude toward doing the activities in Facebook” (pg. 59). If students did not see Facebook as being useful for the task, their attitudes towards the task were not as supportive, and vice-versa.

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Perhaps if students had more knowledge of and experiences with how social media could be used in a classroom, they would be more supportive of using it in class.

### **Implications**

#### **Teacher Unification Through Professional Development**

If social media is to be implemented in a school, there is a need for professional development for the district, as well as district guidelines on how to safely and usefully implement social media into a classroom. Many teachers in my study were against the use of social media, and some that were in support of it still had limited knowledge of how to implement it. If professional development workshops were given by the district, it would help to unify teachers, and also give them a common base to start from. Therefore, it would help to keep skills more transferrable from class to class for students, as there would be similarities in the social media platforms used as well as how it could be used. In addition, setting district guidelines and rules would ensure that teachers are implementing the use of social media as safely as possible due to the many online dangers such as cyber bullying, online predators, etc. This would not only help to ensure our students' safety, but increase their enjoyment in using social media as well, as it seems overall, the use of social media increases students' happiness and overall well-being (Doğan, 2016).

#### **Use Social Media to Improve Students' Skills**

Both teachers and students cited negative impacts on students spelling, grammar and face-to-face communication skills due to social media use. Perhaps there is a way to turn a negative into a positive by using social media to focus on developing these skills in the classroom. One way to target improvement in spelling and grammar would be proofreading, and instead of supplementing proofreading exercises out of a workbook, tweets, Facebook posts or

## Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

blogs could be used. Students could proofread their own social media posts, or that of celebrities. Not only would this increase engagement and motivation, but it would improve students' skills while using authentic texts from their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, the use of social media could also increase students' speaking and listening skills. For example, by implementing a collaborative group in-class project based on a social media platform, students would need to work together, communicating both online and face-to-face to complete the task. A presentation could also be implemented to assess the collaboration and speaking and listening skills used throughout the project. Kitchakarn states that, "selected activities or tasks should be beneficial and helpful to improve learners' language proficiency. This will certainly motivate them to learn....In this regard, students can increase other skills such as cooperative working skills and interpersonal skills. For teachers, it is very easy to design any tasks which require learner contributions in groups" (2016, p. 59). Using social media in the classroom not only motivates students to learn, but can also aid in developing their literacy skills as well.

### **Limitations**

There were two main limitations to my study. First, there was a limited sample size, as this study had only 11 students and 16 teachers participate in one rural-suburban high school in upstate New York. This means that my findings may not be generalized to all teachers or all adolescent students. Secondly, my research was only conducted over the course of five weeks, making my study relatively brief.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Since both my study and much of the research remains in dispute concerning social media and adolescent literacy development, there is much more research to be done. Due to the

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limitations of my study, I was not able to conduct a pre and post survey. In the future, research could follow student and teacher perceptions of social media's impact on adolescent literacy development before and after completing a unit or set of lessons using social media in the classroom. It would be interesting to see if participants' perceptions of social media use in the classroom changed, and also if the social media-based instructional unit had a positive or negative effect on students' literacy development.

Another area for further research would be gathering perceptions of younger students and teachers of younger students, such as a study done in a middle school. With 83% of middle schoolers now owning a cellular phone, and 91% of those students using the device to access the Internet and social media (Englander, 2012), research in this area may illuminate some interesting perspectives when considering younger students. In addition, it would be interesting to see middle school students' perspectives on using social media, as they are more recently gaining access to it than high school students. Similarly, research could seek to find if social media has the same effect on spelling and grammar (use of short-hands/slang in academic writing), as they have not been using it for as long of a time period.

### **Overall Significance**

This study's significance pertains to the large influence social media now has on adolescent lives, as well as their literacy skills. The conclusions of this study stress how students' literacy skills are declining, and many connect this back to social media use. It is imperative that we combat the students' declining literacy skills before the gap is too large to overcome. With little known about how to use social media in the classroom, it could help to turn what has seemingly negatively impacted adolescents' literacy into a tool to positively impact their learning of these fundamental skills. With or without the help of social media, teachers need to come



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together across content areas to help provide students with the literacy skills needed for success in and beyond high school.

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**Appendix A:**

**Protocol A: Student Survey, researcher created:**

**What does the term “social media” mean to you? Please describe and give examples.**

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**What kinds of social media do you use? How do you use it?**

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**How often do you use social media?**

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**Have you ever used social media in a class? If so, how? (Please describe in detail)**

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Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

**Do you think social media could affect your reading, writing and communication skills? If so, how?**

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**If a teacher wanted to use social media for a reading/writing assignment, how would you feel about it? Would you be more or less engaged/apt to do it? Would you write more or less?**

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**Appendix B:**

**Protocol B: Teacher Survey, researcher created:**

**What does the term “social media” mean to you? Please describe and give examples.**

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**What kinds of social media do you use? How do you use it?**

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**How often do you use social media?**

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**Have you ever used social media in a classroom with students? If so, how? (please describe in detail)**

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Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

**Do you think social media affects adolescent literacy skills or development? If so, how?**

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**How could social media be used in a classroom to promote adolescent literacy skill development?**

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## Gaining Perspective: Social Media's Impact on Adolescent Literacy Development

### **Appendix C:**

**Protocol C: Semi-Structured Student Interview Questions, researcher created:**

**What is the best part of social media? Why do you like it? What don't you like about it?**

**Define the term "literacy." What are your experiences with literacy? Did you read and write/were read to at all or often as a child?**

**How do you think social media affects adolescent literacy skills and development?**

**Do you think social media could be used in the classroom? If so, how?**

**Do you think it could positively affect adolescent literacy skills if used in the classroom? If so, how?**