Exploring Adolescent Social Media Use in a High School: Tweeting Teens in a Bell Schedule World

STACEY A. RUTLEDGE
Florida State University

VANESSA P. DENNEN
Florida State University

LAUREN M. BAGDY
Florida State University

This multilevel exploratory case study examined the intersection of adolescent social media use and administrators’ and teachers’ work in one Florida high school. Through a survey and activities with 48 high school students and interviews with 37 students and 18 administrators and teachers in a Florida high school, we explored the different ways that students and adults used social media both outside and in school. We found that students and adults engaged in active and intentional community building and informal learning across social media sites, however, these activities were largely separate from the formal activities in schools. We discuss the implications of this separation and its potential to energize high schools.

This study addresses the role that social media, often accessed via smartphones, plays in the high school setting, intersecting with the daily learning activities of teenagers and their teachers and school administrators. When Apple released the iPhone in the fall of 2007, the concept of the smartphone was redefined, and smartphone ownership spread fast and widely. Still, little was known about how this new technology would be accepted and used by adults and children alike. Fast forward to 2018: The Pew Research Center estimates that 95% of Americans own a smartphone, including teenagers who were young children when smartphones emerged and now accept this technology as a taken-for-granted feature of daily life (Pew Research Center, 2018). A Pew Research Center study on teens and social media found that in 2018, 95% of teens had access to a smartphone, with 45% reporting being always on their device, and 88% having access to a computer (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Through the
social media applications on these devices, adolescents have around-the-clock access to friends, family, and local and global communities.

Social media is a broad term, referring to information and communication technologies that facilitate network-based communication and information sharing (Dennen, 2018). The term typically conjures thoughts of the most popular social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. These SNS facilitate the development of personal networks by providing individual users with profiles and allowing them to both make connections to other users and search through their networks for additional users with whom they might like to connect (boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, social media consists not only of peoples’ networks and the Internet-based tools that support them, but also of the user-generated content that is hosted on these tools and shared among the networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). With this broader definition in mind, social media use does not always result in direct social interactions (Hall, 2018) and is not limited to interactions and content hosted on proprietary corporate platforms (Baym, 2015).

Much of the research on social media has focused on its hazards for adolescents. Journalists have worried that smartphones and the related apps are leading to severe depression in teens (Twenge, 2017) and that they are being bullied “constantly” (Lorenz, 2018). Researchers have similarly focused on alarming behaviors related to social media use, including cyberbullying (Baldry, Farrington, & Sorrentino, 2017; Meter & Bauman, 2015; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2017), depression and self-harm (Bányai et al., 2017; Meter & Bauman, 2015), and addiction (Griffiths & Kuss, 2017). While these behaviors, such as bullying and addiction, are certainly concerning and worthy of attention, researchers increasingly note that they are reported by a minority of teens (Griffiths & Kuss, 2017; Uhls, Ellison, & Subrahmanyan, 2017).

As social media has developed a ubiquitous presence in contemporary life, researchers have also explored its more constructive social functions in the lives of teens. boyd (2014), in a study of how teens interacted online in the age of MySpace and early Facebook, found that these platforms served as important sites where identity development could occur separate from adults. Similarly, Uhis et al. (2017) observed that adolescents “use social media in the service of critical adolescent developmental tasks, such as identity development, aspirational development, and peer engagement” (p. 68). Surveys show that 13- to 18-year-olds have now incorporated social media into friend development and communication (Lenhart, 2015), with a recent Pew study finding that online habits do not inhibit face-to-face interactions (Jiang, 2018). Indeed, the majority of teens surveyed reported that the effect of social media on
their lives is either mostly positive (31%) or neither positive nor negative (45%; Jiang, 2018).

Recently, a group of European scholars conducted an extensive eight-country study on teens and their transmedia literacy skills, with a specific interest in the role of social media and related technologies in this process (Scolari, 2018; Scolari, Mananet, Guerrero-Pico, & Establés, 2018). They identified six different ways that teens engage in informal learning strategies online: learning by doing, problem solving, imitating/simulating, playing, evaluating, and teaching. In their study, they found that students develop a wide range of transmedia skills, although these differ by gender and by individual. They also found that students are aware that they need “risk prevention skills” to help them navigate privacy and security concerns, manage relationships, and assess information quality. Much like our study here, this study provides insight into the complex and sophisticated ways that teens are using social media tools.

While a broader picture is coming into focus into how social media has shaped the lives of adolescents, few researchers have explored how teens’ social media activity and communities interact with a dominant institution in their lives: the high school. Adolescent life has been transformed by social media and online networks, but social media activities remain largely separate from schooling. Students use technology as part of their classroom education, but district and school administrators and teachers have gravitated toward technologies that are highly constrained and aimed at furthering formal learning goals and educational accountability (Halverson & Collins, 2009). Districts and schools have invested in student information systems to track student outcomes, assessment technologies to document student learning, and instructional technologies that scaffold traditional curricular and instructional practices through online textbooks, instructional videos, and PowerPoint presentations (Halverson & Shapiro, 2013).

In schools, social media often is cast as a distraction from the expectations of the high school experience—an experience where students’ progression through their courses looks very similar to the way it has for the last century. Largely reliant on an organizational approach dating to the late 19th century, the American high school has a familiar and uniform structure that has endured for decades and is based on a factory model: bureaucratic and resistant to reform. In most American high schools, students share a common routine, moving from class to class, with a subject matter teacher overseeing a typically 50-minute period, as students gain the requisite credits to graduate (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Teachers are constrained by curricular standards established by states, the College Board for Advanced Placement courses, and disciplinary professional
organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics that identify the body of knowledge that should be covered in classes. High school teachers have integrated computing technologies with traditional teaching methods such as lecture and desk work, reinforcing long-standing pedagogical approaches of rote learning, standardized testing, and memorization; however, they have avoided communicative and collaborative technologies such as social media (Halverson & Shapiro, 2013). Adults frequently use social media to support self-directed learning related to personal interests, professional development, and hobbies (Dennen & Myers, 2012). Indeed, authors in this yearbook document how social media is shaping understandings of teacher professionalism among teacher candidates (Torry & Drake, 2019, this yearbook) and resource use among school leaders (Daly et al., 2019, this yearbook) and teachers (Hashim & Carpenter, 2019, this yearbook). Yet, only recently has research focused on this type of self-directed learning within the teen population (Scolari et al., 2018). The school context has yet to acknowledge or capitalize on these technologies and activities; although schools have shifted to using electronic smartboards and tablets instead of traditional chalkboards and paper, school adults rarely lead the way in using social media as an instructional or learning tool (Halverson & Shapiro, 2013).

High schools also play an important social role in the lives of teens (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne, & Powell, 1990; Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, & Roberts, 2015). School adults support students through adolescent development as students navigate the complex social dynamics of their peers, both within and outside their classes, and learn to interact with adults outside their families. High schools not only constitute a community, but also contain numerous subgroups—both formally, through classrooms, extracurricular activities, and athletics, and informally, through peer groups (Convertino, 2015). Effective high schools have been found to have strong communities, with cultures that bridge the academic and social-emotional aspects of students’ lives (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Dolejs, 2006; Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993). Increasingly, social media has become a tool to build community, potentially shifting the nature of the social landscape in high schools. Adults, however, tread lightly in their online interactions with students, given legitimate privacy and legal concerns. As Halverson and Shapiro (2013) wrote, “The institutional discomfort (legal, moral, and practical) about integrating students’ social lives into the classroom has thwarted efforts to bridge the divide between networks and schools” (p. 172).

The stark difference between highly networked teens and the traditional brick-and-mortar educational context of high schools raises multiple
questions about social media use. Researchers have focused on social media’s dangers, its role in adolescent development, its effect on teens’ social lives, and, increasingly, how it is used to support informal learning; however, there is very little research on how social media intersects with students’ educational and social experiences in school, despite calls for its potential to broaden access, increase student motivation to learn, and provide new means for student communication (Halverson & Shapiro, 2013; Krutka & Carpenter, 2016). It is possible that teens’ online social media use exists as a parallel experience to the formal activities in school, with few intersections and little role for administrators and teachers. It is also possible that there are important and serious tensions between students’ use and schooling, with the two competing for the attention of teens. Finally, it is possible that social media makes the high school experience stronger, strengthening academic interests and reinforcing school community, with implications for the work of administrators and teachers.

An increasing number of studies provide insight into elements of this intersection. These studies reveal challenges when adults in schools try to use social media to build a participatory culture and suggest that when students take the initiative, it is more successful. Manca and Grion (2017) studied students at an Italian secondary school that used a Facebook group to cultivate student voice and to promote democratic feedback to improve school practices. They found that the majority of students were hesitant to participate, saying that they felt a general mistrust of school policies and did not believe in the authenticity of the assignment; overall, only about a fourth of students actually posted to the group. Their work suggests that for social media to be used in a school context, there must be a culture of trust already established. They also highlight important power dynamics, suggesting that the hierarchies of authority already present in schools are replicated on social media. Aaen and Dalsgaard (2016), in contrast, surveyed Danish secondary students about how they used Facebook for schoolwork. Eight-five percent of students said they used Facebook to communicate with teachers and students. Largely students used Facebook to communicate with each other about school-related activities, social events, academic content, and other school-related matters. Taken together, these studies suggest that school-regulated spaces feel less authentic to students than ones that they build on their own. Ophir, Rosenberg, Asterhan, and Schwarz (2016) looked at the role of social media communications during wartime between Israeli teachers and students through WhatsApp and Facebook. They found that 55% of students reported communicating with their teachers informally, mainly for emotional support. Students found these communications helpful, suggesting that in times of crisis, teachers had an important role to play in assisting
students, particularly if the students were available for this kind of support. Taken together, these studies suggest that authentic communication either with teachers or about school has the potential to make students’ academic and social lives richer; however, if formally structured by the school, communication can be problematic.

To understand the broad nature of the social media experience in high schools, we conducted a multilevel exploratory case study of administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, and 10th- and 12th-grade students in one high school in Florida. We focused on 10th graders because they are still in the first half of the high school experience but have had a year and a half to acculturate to high school. We focused on 12th graders because they were completing their high school experience and moving on to their postsecondary plans. We felt that it was important to also interview administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers to understand how they used social media in their own lives and in their work with their students. Specifically, we asked: (1) How do high school students describe their social media use both in and outside their school context? (2) How do their teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators describe their own use and their understandings of students’ use of social media both in and outside the classroom? (3) Given these findings, what are the implications on the work of administrators and teachers? Here, we define social media broadly. We examine how teenagers and school adults are using popular social networking services—such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat—as well as gaming platforms and other sites that allow users to interact with others, gain information, and communicate within the sites. We also consider the broader ways in which they use the Internet and mobile phones to network, create, and share information.

METHODS, DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, AND LIMITATIONS

To understand the social media use of students, administrators, and other adults in high schools and the intersection with formal schooling, we used a multilevel exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2003). An exploratory approach allowed us to identify the broad features of our study—understanding students’ social media use and how it worked within the formal school context—and to build our design and employ different methods as findings emerged.

We conducted this study in one high school in Florida, visiting the school in the spring terms of 2016 and 2017. The student body at the school was approximately 50% White, 30% African American, and 20% Hispanic, and 10% of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. In the spring of 2016, 24 students from a 10th-grade English class and 24 students from
a 12th-grade economics class participated in three consecutive classes led by the researchers about social media generally, and their social media use specifically (Dennen & Rutledge, 2018). During the classes, the students were in their usual classroom, and their classroom teacher was present. The researchers created and facilitated three 50-minute lessons. Each lesson began with a lecture and a group discussion. Across the three days, students were surveyed about their social media use and participated in individual and small-group activities. The lessons focused on social media tools and students’ networks. The lessons were audio-recorded, and a researcher took observational field notes. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the closed survey items. The content of the open-ended items was analyzed for themes. Using the activity worksheets, the students were classified by network type and size.

During Year 2, we interviewed a different set of eighteen 10th graders and nineteen 12th graders in the same school about their social media use, the different social media tools they used, their informal learning online, and teachers’ and the school’s use of social media. We also interviewed 17 faculty members and administrators, asking similar questions. It is important to note that these questions were largely exploratory; while we asked students about how they used social media, they were the ones who explained how they used it. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Researchers took field notes during the interviews and wrote reflection memos afterward. Interviews lasted between a half hour and 50 minutes. In this analysis, we draw largely from these interviews.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we conducted a two-step process of identifying codes. We first identified a priori codes from the extant literature and codes from our field notes and fieldwork memos. We first coded two student and two adult interviews individually using NVivo 10. We then met as a group to discuss our coding patterns, redefine definitions, and identify conflicts and overlaps between codes. Through this process, we built a consensus around the meaning and purpose of each code. We also identified new codes that better captured what we were observing in the data. Once coding was complete, we wrote memos for each of the 54 participants and across themes such as informal learning, social media tools, and negative experiences such as addition and bullying. These two sets of memos—on each participant and across themes—provided rich data to compare as we sought to understand broad themes and how they were being enacted on an individual level. We met biweekly to discuss the findings and to come to common understandings of what we were observing.

Taken together, we conducted a qualitative study with a sample of 10th- and 12th-grade students and their teachers and administrators at one high school in Florida. Although our design had strengths, it was not without its
limitations. Without a larger sample of students and adults across multiple types of schools, it is difficult to know the generalizability of our findings to different kinds of students and schools. Although all 10th- and 12th-grade students were invited to participate in Year 2, it is possible that students with an interest in social media elected to participate, thus skewing our Year 2 sample toward students who were more engaged in social media use. In our discussion of findings and analysis, we try to provide clear descriptions and situate our findings in the context of other research to illustrate transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or identify areas where our findings either are different from those of other researchers or new to the field. Our study, therefore, must be understood to have these limitations.

YEAR 1 FINDINGS

STUDENT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

In Year 1, with little known or assumed about the high school students’ social media habits, we engaged students in activities that asked students questions about their social media use. We found that 98%, or all but one of the twenty-four 10th graders and twenty-four 12th-graders in our sample, were regular social media users. While students were active on social media—with 79% (38) and 63% (32) of students, respectively, reporting daily use of Snapchat and Instagram, and most going on YouTube regularly—there were points of divergence. For example, some students reported participating in online gaming regularly while others did not, and other subsets of students participated in online communities centered on a theme such as Reddit or VSCO. Tenth graders tended to use their apps for communicating with peers and reported more “drama” than the 12th graders, who described broadening their social pool to include adults and potential employers. There were also differences between the ways the girls used social media as compared with the boys. Girls described more use of image-based media such as Instagram, Snapchat, and VSCO, whereas boys described participating in online gaming and communities around interests such as Reddit. These findings are similar to what other researchers are finding. Anderson and Jiang (2018) found that girls tend to be more “constant” users than boys and that although boys and girls are both participating in online gaming, 9 in 10 boys report playing online video games. Gaspard and Horst (2018) also found differences between social media use among girls and boys, with girls gravitating toward photo editing and boys more toward technology—although his seems to even out as the students get older.

The students shared unique and intentional combinations of social media use to meet their different interests and participate in their
communities, such as church, sports leagues, and performing arts groups. In this way, they made it clear that they used each app for a different purpose and to be with a different community. These findings contrasted with an early qualitative study of adolescent social media use that found teens were using MySpace and Facebook as a tool for adolescent–adult differentiation (boyd, 2014). Instead, we found that the students in our study were being instrumental in the ways in which they employed the different social media tools, with each serving different interests, communities, and needs. Students in this study were not seeking adolescent–adult differentiation by using popular social networking sites; rather, they were ascribing different purposes to, and building different networks across, the various social networking sites that they used.

SCHOOL SOCIAL MEDIA USE

In terms of social media activities and school, students described clearly bounded social media activities. The school had official social media accounts on Instagram and Twitter that it used to post about school events and accomplishments. Some students followed these accounts, but none interacted with them. Sports teams and the Student Government Association also had Instagram accounts that were used to relay information such as upcoming games, meetings, and scores; again, not all students followed these accounts. Students also formed groups on a variety of mobile apps to facilitate communication about formal school activities. Some teachers used Remind to send texts about upcoming homework and tests. Students also used GroupMe for formal planning of school-sponsored events such as homecoming, prom, and graduation.

YEAR 2 FINDINGS

Building on our Year 1 findings, we revisited the school a year later to conduct one-on-one interviews that focused in more depth on the ways students and educators were using social media. Students in Year 1 were active users who were making choices about their particular social media constellation. We wanted both to see if this held true for another sample of students from the same school, and to know more about what they were doing online. Whereas the Year 1 data showed us general trends, it did not yield specific stories. We could see evidence of self-directed learning, multiple and robust communities, and instrumental use, with little overlap with the school, but we were not clear on how students were understanding their own use. It was also clear that without the adult perspective, we would not have a comprehensive understanding of how social media fits into the context of high school.
During Year 2, we interviewed eighteen 10th graders and nineteen 12th graders, as well as 18 adults. Based on our interview data, we classified each of our Year 2 participants based on his or her level and degree of social media use (see Table 1). Average users were people who used an array of social media tools and checked at least one of them on a daily or weekly basis. Heavy users reported almost continuous use of their social networking sites, checking them multiple times per day with a specific intent or purpose and frequently producing content on those sites. Low users had accounts on popular social networking sites but checked them infrequently. We found that the majority of participants in our study fell into either the category of heavy or average user.

Table 1. Frequency of Social Media Tools Use by Students and Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Heavy User</th>
<th>Average User</th>
<th>Low User</th>
<th>Nonuser</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th Grade</td>
<td>5 (27.8%)</td>
<td>11 (61.1%)</td>
<td>2 (11.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th Grade</td>
<td>11 (57.9%)</td>
<td>5 (26.3%)</td>
<td>3 (15.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>3 (20.0%)</td>
<td>9 (60.0%)</td>
<td>3 (20.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (33.3%)</td>
<td>2 (66.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also found that the students and adults in our study were using multiple social media tools. In Table 2, we identify the top five social media tools as used by students and adults in our study. For the teens, we find that this is comparable to Pew Research Center findings (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Table 2 reflects current use at the time of the interview. In some instances, individuals indicated that they had dormant or deleted accounts. In addition to these five social networking sites, adults and students identified 18 other tools, including Pinterest, Reddit, and VSCO.

Table 2. Top Five Social Media Tools Used by Students and Adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Snapchat</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>YouTube</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th Graders</td>
<td>9 (50.0%)</td>
<td>15 (83.3%)</td>
<td>16 (88.9%)</td>
<td>3 (16.7%)</td>
<td>14 (77.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th Graders</td>
<td>14 (73.7%)</td>
<td>14 (73.7%)</td>
<td>15 (78.9%)</td>
<td>6 (31.6%)</td>
<td>8 (42.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>13 (86.7%)</td>
<td>8 (53.3%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>10 (66.7%)</td>
<td>10 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>3 (100%)</td>
<td>2 (66.7%)</td>
<td>1 (33.3%)</td>
<td>2 (66.7%)</td>
<td>1 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We divide our Year 2 findings by students and adults to show the similarities and differences in the ways the two groups used social media. In the first section, we discuss student personal use and their use in school. In the second section, we discuss adult personal use and their use in school. We close with adults’ perceptions of students’ social media use.
STUDENT PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA USE

In Year 2, students again described intentional and varied use of social media tools, completely separate from school, using the different platforms for different purposes. Students toggled between multiple apps, with students explaining how they used different apps for different purposes. Confirming our Year 1 findings, we again found that the teenagers were strategic and aware of why they were using different apps and what opportunities, information, and connections each app afforded them. Largely, we found that the students in our study described using social media for two main purposes: to interact with their friends, family, and community, and in self-regulated learning.

Social Media Use to Interact With Friends, Family, and Community

All the students interviewed during Year 2 used social media to interact with close friends, other friends, family, and members of their community. All students had their own unique combination of social media sites that they used to support different relationships and with different levels of intensity. Students described Instagram as the platform where they documented the main events of their lives, with some users describing having two accounts: a “main” account where they described portraying a curated version of their lives, and a “spam” account where they were more their authentic selves, “ranting” and sharing personal experiences and thoughts. Snapchat users described using the app to have streaks with their friends, to document their lives through their stories, and to maintain other friendships—or, as a 10th-grade boy who was an active Snapchat user explained, “just to maintain contact with somebody.” Students repeatedly said, “Facebook is for family” and described different ways that they kept in touch with local and out-of-town relatives, in the United States and internationally.

Students recognized the complex relationships they had with these social-based apps, and the intertwined norms and personal rules that they developed to navigate the teenage social media landscape. A 12th-grade girl expressed her thoughts on Instagram in this way:

> With Instagram you can upload pictures of places you’ve been that other people can see, which is fine. Or like upload pictures of you or your family and that’s fine. But when it comes to making fun of others is just where they’re using it, like, a whole different way.
This girl is referring to the potential for “drama” on Instagram when teenagers post unflattering things about each other, and trying to distance herself from that practice. A 10th-grade boy with 1,000 social media followers explained that he only used Snapchat “for special occasions” and explained that the past Sunday, he had posted for his sister’s birthday. Students also described changing their social media habits as they matured, deleting certain people and accounts and adding others. Taken together, students came across as thoughtful about the ways in which they built their social media networks and could articulate the reasons behind their choices and actions.

**Self-Regulated Learning**

Although we had expected students in our study to discuss the social networks they had developed through relationship-based apps, we were surprised to hear the extent to which students were using social media for informal and self-regulated purposes to further their own interests, goals, and future plans. We found that 26 students, or 70% of the students in our study, used social media tools for active and, in some cases, extensive self-directed learning activities that were entirely separate from the formal schooling they were receiving at their school. Here, we identify six different ways that students engaged in this kind informal learning: to explore college and career planning, to build their knowledge on interests, to network with communities, to learn more about hobbies, for entrepreneurial enterprises, and for general interest and curiosity. They provided examples of using social media tools to understand different cultures, learn new skills, explore interests, and build knowledge about topics. Our research found that these students’ social media use extended far beyond social networking activities.

**Knowledge building and hobbies.** Twenty students talked about the knowledge-building activities and hobbies that they engaged in on seven different social media tools. Students described interests in news and politics, arts and crafts, fashion and appearance, and home décor, as well as personal interests that were more singular. Most of the girls talked about going online for tutorials or information on hairstyles, makeup, and fashion, or some combination thereof. Two 12th-grade girls said they followed the news. As one explained, “I’ll follow like the different I guess you could say critics of each side and I’ll follow and like took at stuff and at different articles that are linked on there.” Two 10th-grade boys talked about watching gaming videos for learning tricks for their video games and identifying the best players.
Other students talked about teaching themselves different skills, frequently seeking online tutorials for assistance. A sophomore boy, for example, said he watched YouTube videos for how to sharpen farm equipment and fix things around his family’s farm. Another 10th-grade boy reported that he learned how to clean his hunting rifle online. A sophomore girl watched YouTube videos to learn how to use video editing software to create anime that she then posted on Instagram, and a 10th-grade boy used YouTube for guitar tutorials. Across different topical interests and learning goals, students seemed adept at using different tools to explore interests, again, figuring out the sites and resources that pertained to their personal learning needs.

**College planning.** Six students in our study—three seniors and three sophomores—described using social media in support of college and career planning. They used a variety of social networking sites—including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube—for this purpose. All six said that they sought to both learn more about potential colleges and connect with students at those colleges, but they shared different strategies for gaining information. Three followed the formal Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts of the colleges. A 10th-grade girl figured out that she could go to the “Class of 2020” Facebook pages from local universities to learn more about the students. She explained that she would also message students at that college, “and be like, hey, how’s the school, they be like, it’s really good, and I ask them about certain classes that pertain to my major and see if I could—like, if I go to that school, what would it benefit me—like, what teachers to take.” Another 10th-grade girl explained that she followed students who attend the universities she is interested in. A 12th-grade boy who planned to attend college in another state told us that he followed the school’s Instagram and Twitter accounts, actively reading the comment sections of posts. He saw some racially insensitive posts that gave him pause, but ultimately, he explained, “I get to form my own opinion based on what I see on those articles, so that’s kind of helped me out as far as college decisions go.” No matter the platform or approach, these students all found ways to tailor their use of the sites to answer their questions.

**Building knowledge on future careers.** Five students explained that they used social media to either learn about future careers or learn skills related to their career interests. A 10th-grade boy said that he may want to pursue a career in coding, so he used YouTube to teach himself how to code. A 10th-grade girl explained that she wants to have a career in a medical field, so she followed various doctors on Instagram to learn about different specialties. “I follow a lot of medical pages, like doctors and stuff, like, there is a plastic surgeon named Dr. Miami that I follow . . . and a
dermatologist that, like, their Instagram name is Dr. Pimple Popper and she’s awesome.” A 10th-grade boy used Instagram to research different types of engineering and engineering programs. A senior girl, entering the military after high school, used Pinterest to get information about basic training. Another 12th-grade girl, interested in cosmetology, explained that she went online to watch makeup videos to see how women in different cultures do their make-up, or different ways they do it, or brushes they use, or cosmetics they have . . . Muslim women . . . they only do this part, because they have to cover . . . and then in China or Asia, they kind of do their eyes differently, the way they put on their eyeshadow, they kind of tell how it’s different from us in different places.

These students demonstrated intrinsic motivation to independently explore career interests.

Entrepreneurship. Three students described using social media to build businesses for themselves. A senior boy explained that he bought and resold popular a popular skateboard clothing brand. He described using both Snapchat and Reddit to display the clothes and complete the transactions. A senior girl who worked at a local dog daycare described how she set up a separate Instagram account for her own dog, tagging the dog daycare to promote the business and attract more clients. A 10th-grade boy who had access to the school’s 3-D printers searched online forums to learn how to make fidget spinners, proudly reporting, “I just sold them too, for $10 each.”

Networking with communities. Although all the students we interviewed were networking with friends, family, and others through their various social media accounts, seven of the students we interviewed described seeing the value in the networking opportunities through the apps. These students were explicit about the ways that social media allowed them to connect intentionally with people. They described using Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Reddit, and VSCO for these purposes. One girl described sharing her poetry and short stories on the social media tool VSCO with friends in different U.S. states. Another boy described communicating with people in Germany around common interests in videos.

Drama

Not all the social media experiences shared by students in this study were positive ones. Across our interviews, we heard a few tales of the dark side of the Internet, including an incident that involved the sharing of
inappropriate photographs, and one teenager who had an online encounter with a predator. Most of the students whom we interviewed did not have direct involvement with such serious negative experiences, but almost everyone we spoke to discussed drama as a negative consequence of online life.

Drama, often equated with gossip, disrupts relationships and causes hurt feelings. One teacher described it as an unhealthy form of online conflict, juxtaposing it with political or issue-driven debate. Teenagers did not equate drama with bullying, indicating that drama is not as purposeful and targeted. Additionally, some examples were shared in which teens were the target of their own drama-laden postings, seeking attention from others. Drama was presented as something to be expected as a regular part of not only online life, but also teenage life in general, and also to be avoided by not interacting or associating with people who regularly perpetuate drama. Only one of the students we interviewed admitted to instigating drama, and when drama was discussed in interviews, students most often mentioned they were wary of the potential for conflict, not that they were actually experiencing drama-related conflict on a regular basis.

**Social Media Use in School**

Although the students reported active and robust social media lives outside of school, their school-level social media activities, as also found during Year 1, were highly constrained. Students interacted selectively with school-sponsored sites. Although students could follow a number of school-, team-, or club-sponsored sites, they did not uniformly follow them. A senior, for example, said that she followed the school’s Facebook page for weather and event updates. Some students reported following the school’s Instagram and Twitter accounts. A couple of students also said they followed Instagram accounts of different school sports teams such as football and soccer, although one student stated that he suspects that only players follow those accounts. A 10th-grade girl said that she was connected to GroupMe for soccer, the student government association, the school’s dance marathon, and the sophomore class. The use of these sites was reported to be largely informational, with few students engaging with them. A review of the school’s primary social media sites confirmed that these sites were being used to broadcast school information and not to promote interactions.

Students described using social media to support their academic work, doing so as a self-initiated activity. Examples included taking photos of homework and the smartboard for their own notes and to send to friends. Students also discussed how they worked on homework problems together,
and used Snapchat to seek assistance with math problems and online videos to help answer questions about chemistry and math. These activities supplemented regular school activities and were not sponsored by teachers or the school. At least one teacher actively discouraged this type of activity, citing concerns such as copying and plagiarism.

Technology was heavily present in the classroom, with Chromebooks widely available for use. Students reported using tools such as the G Suite for Education, subscribed to by the school, for Internet searching and classroom group projects, but also shared that teachers rarely created a class social media site or asked them about their social media use. While students would use the Google Groups pages offered by the school if required, when left to their own devices, students gravitated to tools of their own choosing. Students described teachers relying on highly bounded apps, such as Quizlet to help students prepare for tests and quizzes, or GroupMe and Remind to send students reminders about upcoming assignments. Only one teacher used social media in any way, and this was a biology teacher who used Twitter to teach her students about cell organelles, assigning students to different organelles and then having them use Twitter to argue about which was the best. This was the only innovative use of social media that was reported to us. Mostly the school and teachers relied on technologies that were either highly circumscribed, such as Quizlet, GroupMe, or Remind, or officially sanctioned by the school, such as the Google educational resources.

ADULT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Adult Personal Social Media Use

We interviewed 18 adults at the school: three administrators; 14 teachers across different departments, including English, math, social studies, science, foreign languages, and band; and a media specialist. As in our student interviews, we began by asking the adults about their social media use. Surprisingly, the administrators and teachers at the school often described themselves as low to medium users of social media; however, when probed, they were often surprised that they used it more than they had originally understood. Of the 18 adults we interviewed, almost all initially reported themselves to be low or average users; however, by our coding, 80% of teachers were either heavy or average users. Over the course of the interviews, many shared rather extensive use of social media tools, suggesting little self-awareness of their own use (see Table 1).

Like the students, teachers used multiple social media tools for different purposes. The adults reported using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter,
Snapchat, YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit, LinkedIn, and participating in net-worked gaming and blogging. They used it to connect with friends and family; follow celebrities, news, and sports; explore interests; and build their professional knowledge. They largely viewed their professional-orien-ted social media use as separate from their work at the school or as a means of gaining resources for school.

**Personal Use**

All administrators and teachers described extensive personal use of social media tools. Like the students, they described toggling back and forth between different tools, with some describing themselves as active users, blogging and participating on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, while others said they were more consumers, checking in on friends and family but rarely posting. The adults expressed clear reasons for participating or not participating in using each particular tool. For example, an English teacher described using Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family, but not using Instagram because she felt that it was redundant with Facebook. She said that she used Twitter to follow political posts and memes but did not post herself. She avoided Snapchat because of concerns about the lack of photo evidence and worried that it could lead to misunderstandings. A social studies teacher, who originally described herself as a low user, described spending weekends playing video games with her college friends, using another tool to find out who was already online. Most talked about keeping their social media lives entirely separate from students, only connecting with them online after the students had graduated.

**Professional Growth and Instructional Planning**

Four of the teachers we interviewed expressed using social media tools for professional growth and instructional planning. They described using social media for classroom organization, curriculum planning, and project ideas. These teachers used Pinterest, Facebook, and various forums to access these resources. For example, one teacher explained, “I also have a board where I like to go for project ideas and curriculum ideas. I just got an idea for an edible brain project from Pinterest this year where they had to make a brain and label all these parts.” Another teacher discussed following the blog and Twitter account of an author who posts about teacher training. Another teacher we interviewed used Facebook to find articles about teaching. Not all the teachers we interviewed used social media for these purposes, suggesting that they relied on more traditional resources.
Classroom-Level Social Media

Classroom-level social media use varied across the adults we interviewed. Six adults described using social media tools in their classrooms, but most did so in a consumption mode. For example, some teachers used YouTube to show videos that supported their lessons. When they wanted to bring in virtual guest speakers, teachers turned to tools like Skype that would enable private video sessions between the speaker and their class.

The low level of social media use in the classroom at this school was not accidental. Some of the teachers stated that they purposefully avoided using social media in their classrooms, and they worried that such interactions may be inappropriate or unprofessional. They also worried that integrating social media into the classroom would encourage students to be off-task. Administrators and teachers thus drew boundaries around social media use, voicing concerns about adolescent and adult interactions online, privacy, and legal issues. Instead of seeing the potential of social media to engage students, they largely viewed it as a distraction and threat to their instructional focus. In sum, high school students’ use of social media existed as a parallel activity to their daily participation in curricular and instructional practices with adults in high school.

Adult Perception of Student Use

During interviews, we asked the adults about their perceptions of student social media use. Overwhelmingly, the first thing teachers and administrators expressed was that the students were constantly using social media. One administrator stated, “I would venture to say that over half of them are looking at their phone right now. . . . So, sixth through 12th grade, I would bet that 50% of the have their phone in their hand and are looking at [social media] right this second.” While the teachers and administrators agreed that students spent a lot of time on their phones, adults’ opinions about how the students used social media varied. Three of the adults complained that students used social media for personal leisure rather than learning. Most saw it as negative and demonstrated little understanding of how their students were using social media. One teacher, for example, explained, “[Social media] is not used for research, exploration, learning. I don’t see any of them using that for that purpose. It is totally for entertainment, it is totally for enjoyment.” Another reflected,

Something that I’ve noticed is that they don’t understand the amount of information they have at their fingertips. If they don’t know how to do something or they don’t know how to find something, they don’t look it up. I’ve had students, you know, just
talking about, you know, going off to college or when they start driving and one of the questions I ask them is do you know how to change a flat tire. And hardly any of them do. So I always say, what would you do? And none of them say look up a YouTube video. So I’m not sure anyone’s really teaching them that they could be using it to learn.

Still another complained,

They’re using it to send silly photos and talk and have that constant communication between them at all times. I really don’t ever see any of my students say, hey, I saw this news article or did you know that the hurricane made a shift? So it seems very different. Very much more just a chat source and a social networking source for them.

These adults tended to dismiss students’ social media, rather than actively trying to understand how students were using it. At the very least, these findings suggest that adults had very little understanding of the nature and extent of students’ use.

It was not clear from our study how adults had come to their viewpoints. However, for many, it was a source of stress and disrupted instruction. One complained, “It’s distracting from an educational standpoint. . . . I feel like they should know what’s right and wrong about putting the stuff on social media, but some things they put on there are downright mean.” Another reflected, “Bullying nowadays is not so much shoving people against lockers, it’s all cyberbullying.” These adults expressed concern that students were not responsible and that their actions were negative and hurtful toward their peers.

It makes sense that the adults we interviewed would have these perceptions of students’ social media use. School policy did not permit them to engage with the students on social media, and social media use was not supposed to occur in the classroom. Therefore, they had mere snapshots of how the students were using these tools. Unfortunately, many of their experiences with students and social media were derived from negative incidents (e.g., cyberbullying, drama) that occurred at or spilled over into school and required disciplinary action. They did not observe the positive activities, and evidently the students did not readily share those positive social media experiences with school adults.
SCHOOL AND TEACHER RULES

To address potential distractions and disruptions, the schools took two main actions to constrain student social media activities during class time. First, the school restricted Wi-Fi access to popular social networking services. As a result, only students who had mobile phones with wireless data plans were able to access these sites from school grounds. Second, the school had a rule that prohibited mobile phone use in the classroom, stating this explicitly in the student code of conduct. In practice, however, this rule was not always enforced, and teachers indicated that it existed mostly to support teachers who wished to ban use during their classes. The teachers who did not ban the phones described different approaches, with a range of options for enforcing the policy (e.g., phones sit on a table in the front of the room, or phones must be out of sight). A potential consequence of violating the policy would be having a phone confiscated for the remainder of the school day. Other teachers incorporated phone use into class activities, allowing students to look up information online or use phones in lieu of the school’s Chromebooks for completing coursework. These teachers said they relied on students to self-regulate their phone and social media activities in the classroom, pointing to the importance of self-regulation as a necessary skill. During our classroom observations in Year 1, we saw students discreetly sending Snapchat messages to each other, messaging their friends, and looking at photos on Instagram, suggesting that students actively found a way around school rules.

DISCUSSION

We initiated this study in an effort to understand the nature of high school students’ social media use and its intersection with their formal high school experience. Consistent with prior research on school technology use, we found that students had active and engaged social media lives in which they actively connected with friends, acquaintances, family, members of their community, and people they had met online who shared similar interests and skills. The students in our study were highly networked. They described themselves as responsible and aware of their use. Both 10th- and 12th-grade students had complex social media lives in which they instrumentally toggled from one app to another in an effort to maintain relationships, express themselves, and teach themselves about their interests, hobbies, and college and career goals. They described changing their social media patterns as they got older, having learned from prior mistakes and experiences, and developing new needs and interests as they continued to mature and develop.
boyd’s (2014) early study on adolescent social media use suggests that students were using MySpace and Facebook as vehicles for adolescent development and individuality, separate from adults. More than five years after her data were collected, we find that teens still use social media for self-exploration, self-expression, and individuation, and to forge and establish relationships. However, in contrast to boyd’s findings, they are not excluding adults from all connections. While students largely interact with peers, they are also happily interacting with their family and community on Facebook or learning from adults on other social media sites such as Twitter and Reddit.

Like the recent study on adolescents in Europe (Scolari, 2018; Scolari et al., 2018), our study finds that students are using social media to engage in a wide range of self-regulated and internally driven activities. Scolari and colleagues (2018) identified a number of competencies that teens are exhibiting including, “problem solving in video games to content production and sharing in web platforms and social media” (p. 8). The students in our study were using social media to learn how to play the guitar, clean farm equipment, code, design anime, resell clothes, make fidget spinners, and market a dog daycare, among others. They were turning to social media for fashion and hair advice, for better techniques for their video games, and to understand the political world. They also explored if they wanted to be a dermatologist or a surgeon, a chemical or a mechanical engineer. The students’ use of social media to support self-directed learning tended to take them outside their peer networks and connect them to online people and resources in ways that were not necessarily known to their friends or teachers.

The adults in their school did not understand students’ social media use. The students’ actual use of social media greatly exceeded their teachers’ characterization of it, which focused mostly on students sending photos to each other. Moreover, we found that the adults in our study did not really have a clear understanding of their own use, with most underestimating the extent and degree of their use. With adults not aware of the nature of their own social media activity, it is not surprising that they had such a poor understanding of their students’ use.

It might be tempting to suggest that there is a divide of some type between adult and student use of social media. We could have invoked typologies Prensky’s (2001) Digital Natives and Immigrants, which is often referred to but lacks empirical support (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017). Alternatively, we could reference White and Le Cornu’s (2011) Digital Residents and Visitors to describe their differences. We purposefully resisted using any such typologies to frame our study, wanting to enter the research environment with open minds. As we examined our data, it
became clear that these metaphors do not neatly apply to the students and teachers as groups. Across both populations, we encountered individuals who were highly networked and able to use social media in sophisticated ways, and individuals who were poorly networked and who had limited use of social media. More striking, although not surprising, was how evident it was that teachers could not have the same types of social media interactions as students in the school setting, and how purposefully teachers distanced themselves from students and student use of social media. This was an issue of professionalism that required them to avoid direct interaction in student networks. None of the teachers, no matter how close in age to the students, expressed an interest in better understanding or being able to connect to student networks, and the younger teachers were not necessarily the most sophisticated social media users. More useful frameworks for considering student and teacher social media activities are participatory culture (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009) or type of self-regulated activity (Scolari, 2018; Scolari et al., 2018). Students and teachers alike may fit anywhere within these frameworks, although they are unlikely to be interacting with each other as they engage in participatory culture or self-regulated social media activities. In other words, it is the combination of individual pursuits and the constraints that govern roles as student or teacher that best describe social media use in school settings.

As found in prior studies on technology and formal education (Collins & Halverson, 2018; Halverson & Shapiro, 2013), there was a wide gap between the way social media was used by administrators, teachers, and students for schooling purposes, and the way it was used for social purposes. The high school relied on a set of technologies that were circumscribed and controlled through the Google Educational Suite and apps such as Quizlet and Remind. Although helpful, these programs were not tapping into the vast intrinsic motivation of students to explore online tools and their affordances for learning. Additionally, popular social networking sites were blocked by the school’s network; a teacher would need to be highly motivated to request access for their students. Students frequently sought online assistance with their schoolwork via social media, connecting to both classmates and others, but this activity occurred independently and often without the encouragement or approval of their teachers. This finding confirms the idea that actual teaching with social media is an infrequent activity, but students will independently use social media to support their own learning processes (Greenhow & Askari, 2017).

We found little evidence that the school was using social media resources either as a pedagogical tool to further curricular or instructional goals or as a tool for building community, beyond formal Instagram pages.
and Twitter accounts. For the students and adults in our study, the high school remained highly traditional, with social media largely separated from school life. Various barriers to greater integration of social media in the classroom illuminated by the participants in this study echoed those referenced by Manca and Ranieri (2017), such as cultural beliefs about both education and social media, administrative support, pedagogical and technological knowledge, and privacy concerns.

**IMPLICATIONS**

High school students are spending hours of their lives on social media tools; however, this activity remains largely separate from the formal organization of high schools. Researchers on social media have focused on adolescent identity development (boyd, 2014), and cyberbullying and cyber safety (Agosto & Abbas, 2015; Meter & Bauman, 2015), with little focus on ways in which this extensive social media activity should be addressed and used by schools. Scholars who have engaged in this question have tended to call for greater engagement (Collins & Halverson, 2018; Krutka & Carpenter, 2016), but have not explored this empirically. However they raise important points. High school, with its traditional curricular and instructional focus, stands in stark contrast to the active engagement and informal learning occurring online by adults and students alike.

Our study suggests that the kids are doing just fine. Adults’ perspectives on teenagers’ social media use might be more balanced if they knew that students are doing more than just taking selfies and sharing memes. Additionally, they might be respectful of the extensive social media resource use by many students and understand that students could be helpful as a resource for supporting peer and teacher learning. Having a greater respect for the social media lives of their students would go a long way in helping teachers have stronger relationships with their students—not relationships based on a traditional teacher–student hierarchy, but one based on greater respect.

One direction would be for high schools to incorporate more social media into their pedagogical practices or to think about how to use social media to help to build the school community. Krutka and Carpenter (2016) made the case that educators can enhance students’ learning experiences by engaging in the “affordances” possible through social media. These include broadening the school community beyond the classroom, pushing the norms of when and where learning is occurring, and tapping into students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to tailor learning to their own interests and to perform for peers. Scolari and colleagues (2018) contended that more active social media use in classrooms has the potential not
only to help students become more engaged in the traditional curriculum but also to lead to greater emotional engagement by students to improve social emotional competencies. They provide a “Teachers’ Kit” to help teachers provide more quality content, user-centered design, and better interactions with students, with lessons including *Teaching With YouTube* and *Analyzing the Image World*. In this approach, schools take an active role in folding social media into instructional practices. Greenhow and Lewin (2016) noted that social media can be used in the classroom in a manner that unites formal and informal purposes, which also aligns with this approach to social media integration in the school context. All these bear greater experimentation and exploration.

There is an argument to be made, however, that adolescents should have a space to explore their interests and build their skills independently, away from the formal pressures of schooling, as noted by boyd (2014). Our study suggests that students are learning valuable skills and knowledge online without the support of teachers and that they intentionally avoid context collapse between their peer social networks and family and adult members of their networks (Dennen et al., 2017). If supporting these adolescent-only spaces is valued, schools can nonetheless play a role in students’ having greater understanding about how social media works, its perils and dangers—from cyberstalking to fake news to social isolation—and its potential for self-expression, growth, and community building. Indeed, our study suggests that the adults too could benefit from this kind of education so they can better understand their own social media activity, make well-informed decisions when using social media, and better advise students in this area.

At the very least, K–12 educators need to engage in a discussion about the role of social media in the school context. Should social media continue to be marginalized as an instructional tool? What would it look like if it was included? If it is included, what are the larger implications of the platforms (Krutka et al., 2019, this yearbook)? Most critically, adults and students in school alike have little education about the power and impact of social media on their lives. As social media matures, it is imperative that users have a greater understanding of the tool that they are using and how it is shaping their lives. Social media tools have been implicated in changing a number of societal patterns and norms. These range from adolescents delaying behaviors such as driving, relationships, and sex, to major social media tools involved in skewing elections, circulating untruthful information, and selling personal data. Adolescent users are new to the medium, and they should be educated regarding the positives and the dangers of social media. Further, adults need to have a greater awareness of their own patterns of use. To date, parents have been charged with providing
their children with knowledge about how to navigate social media, but it might make sense for schools to assume more of this responsibility, much as they have in the case of sex education. Social media is a powerful new medium, and, at the very least, educators need to engage in a discussion on their role.

Finally, researchers have a role to play in understanding how social media is shaping students’ lives. However, major gaps in the research on social media in the high school context remain (Greenhow & Askari, 2017). Scolari and colleagues (2018) found that there are important gender differences and potential socioeconomic differences evident in the ways that students are using social media. In our own research, we see age differences, which reflect development and shifting into different life stages, as well as gender differences, which mirror those noted by a Pew Research Center survey (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). We do not know of any study that has taken this on as its primary focus. Studies also tend to see students as homogeneous, however, more needs to be understood across age groups as students mature. Also, it will be increasingly important to understand students’ use across socioeconomic status, gender, race, and ethnicity to understand equity across groups.

There is also more to understand at the intersection of school and student social media use, both formally and informally. Although there have been studies on social media policies in higher education institutions (Pomerantz, Hank, & Sugimoto, 2015), the same research does not exist for high schools. Research that looks beyond specific pedagogical approaches and teacher professional development and that focuses directly on the student experience will help teachers, administrators, and policy makers better understand, guide, and, as appropriate, support social media use both within schools specifically, and among adolescents more generally. Social media use pushes new boundaries between the relationships with adults and students. If social media is to be harnessed as a viable educational strategy and tool, school leaders and teachers will need to navigate how to make it authentic, whether it be to strengthen the school community (Manca & Grion, 2017) or to build adult and student relationships (Ophir et al., 2016). Finally, to date, much of the research on adolescent social media and learning use has occurred outside the United States. It will be interesting going forward to identify universal approaches to social media use and those that are culturally and socially particular to specific geographic locations.
CONCLUSION

As they have for more than a century, high schools remain highly traditional and formal institutions. Social media is becoming institutionalized in contemporary society, but formal educational institutions have been slow to embrace it and capitalize on its potential. Consequently, the K–12 approach to social media tends to be reactive and often disciplinary oriented where students are concerned; focused solely on professional development where teachers are concerned; and limited to information broadcasting and marking from the administrative perspective. Missing from this approach is the opportunity to leverage social media tools in support of providing rich learning experiences and building school community. Although there are some legitimate privacy and legal reasons impeding use, there are also opportunities here. It is incumbent on the field to start to examine these in a more comprehensive and thoughtful way.

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VANESSA P. DENNEN is a professor of instructional systems and learning technologies in the College of Education at Florida State University. Her research focuses on emerging technologies for formal and informal learning, and the development of identity and community in online environments. Recent publications can be found at http://vanessadennen.com.

LAUREN M. BAGDY is a doctoral candidate in the Instructional Systems and Learning Technologies program at Florida State University. Her research interests include informal learning, social media platforms as learning tools, and identity/community development in online social networks. Before starting her doctoral studies at Florida State, she worked in K–12 for eight years in the Washington, DC area. She received a B.A. from Elon University in psychology and an M.A. in education and human development in educational technology leadership from The George Washington University. Her most recent publication is “Teens and social media: A case study of high school students’ informal learning practices and trajectories” in the Proceedings of the 2018 International Conference on Social Media and Society.