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Social Media

KEY IDEAS

People face a lot of decisions in sharing their creativity with the world. It takes effort and creativity to reach a large audience. Marketing and distribution are now the responsibility of the digital author. Shifting from personal use of social media to professional use can be challenging, as it requires re-orientating to the strategic goals of a communicator and understanding the economics of the Internet and mass media. Social data analytics provides digital authors with powerful evidence of effectiveness, and concepts like virality, tagging, and privacy help you use social media both for career development and social activism.

When Elan Morgan tried an unusual social experiment, she was surprised to see how it changed her life. On August 1, 2014, she decided to stop "liking" things on Facebook. It was hard, at first. "As I scrolled through updates," she wrote, "my finger instinctively gravitated towards the Like button on hundreds of posts and comments." She felt the pull of an automatic behavior as she tried to resist the instinct to hit the "Like" button. "I saw updates I liked or wanted others to know I liked, and I found myself almost unconsciously clicking my approval."

Within just a few days, she noticed that the content on her Facebook News Feed had changed. When she stopped liking pictures of animals, she got fewer pictures of animals. Since the algorithm that is used to display and sequence posts is based on what you "like," she no longer saw images of animal torture or "the influx of über-cuteness that liking kitten posters can bring on." To compensate for not "liking," she found herself commenting more, offering compliments and verbal support to her network of friends, colleagues, and family.[1] After the experiment was over, she never went back to "liking" because she had learned to prefer commenting instead.

Matt Honan tried the opposite experiment: he "liked" virtually everything that he saw on Facebook for 48 hours – literally everything – even those *sponsored content* ads, the ones that look like news, and are generally located at the bottom of the page.

What happened was fascinating: within hours, Matt's Facebook News Feed was 100 percent products and web sites. There were no human beings, no posts from his friends. When he "liked" a pro-Israel post about Gaza, the next day his Facebook account included more anti-immigrant, anti-gun control content. As he continued his "liking" experiment, the content delivered seemed to become more and more stupid. Soon he began seeing posts that asked, "Which Titanic Character Are You?" Other content explained, "Katy Perry's Backup Dancer is the Man Candy You Deserve."[2] Such is the power of "liking" as a key part of the economics of the Internet.

Who can be surprised that, as part of Matt's experiment in liking everything, his Facebook News Feed became inundated with advertising? After all, the economics of social media is built upon the practice of liking and sharing. It may be a surprise to you, but for every six minutes that people are on the Internet, they are using Facebook for one of those minutes. With 1.3 billion users, Facebook advertising enables companies to communicate with people who are interested in their products. In general, you'll see a Facebook ad once in every 20 items on your News Feed, but this will increase if you like or click on ads. Generally, these ads are for products or services that are associated with your online behavior. If you've used a dating service, you'll see Facebook ads for dating services, for example.

Social media like Facebook have distinctive qualities: *persistence* refers to the availability of content from anywhere on any device. Even when deleted, online content may have been spread and may be stored in a variety of digital locations maintained by other users. Online content is *scalable* in the sense that the audiences for it can expand far beyond a particular local interaction. Online content is *searchable*, making it available to anyone when the content matches with key terms typed in by another user.[3]

Facebook advertising works to sell products, there's no doubt about it. In analyzing an eight-week ad campaign on Facebook for fish oil which emphasized the emotional value of having a good heart, 18 million people saw the ads and the company sold more fish oil, earning twice as much money as was spent on the ad campaign itself, proving that the social marketing campaign was effective.[4] In considering the largest social networks, we understand that each one has a distinctive target audience and appeal and all depend upon sponsored content advertising as a primary revenue stream. Figure 15.1 shows six of the most popular social media networks.

Sharing as Relational Expression

Today, we share more information from more sources with more people, quickly and easily using the Internet and social media. Most people say that they get more value from information that has been shared by friends and
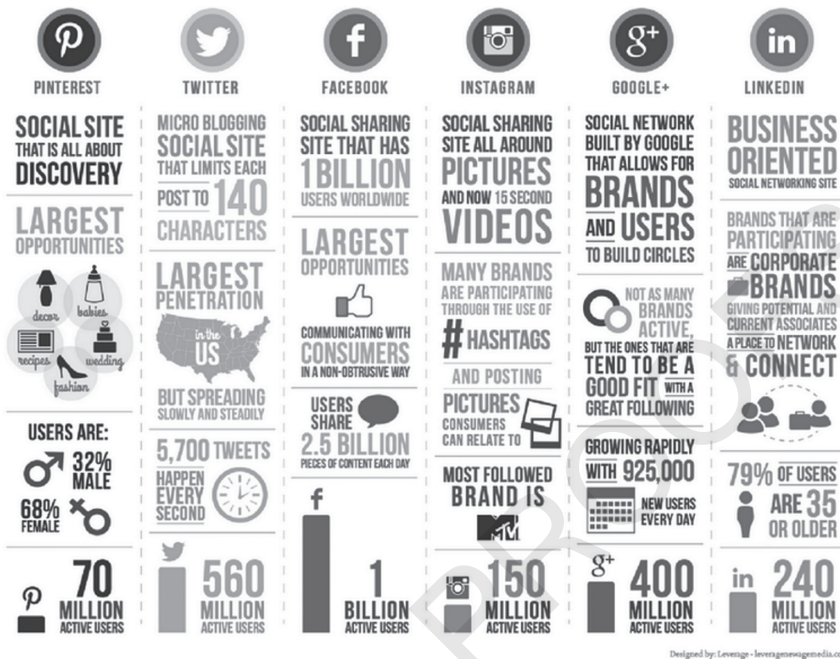
Figure 15.1 Some top social media networks.

family than from other sources. Moreover, people process information more deeply if they anticipate the possibility of sharing it with the people in their social networks. One of the most important reasons why we share information and entertainment using social media is to *define our identity* in relation to our peers. By sharing, you give others a sense of who you are and what you value. Online sharing also provides a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Social media has also created new structures of social interaction by creating *networked publics*, where people construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system. We see a list of other users with whom we share a connection, and interact with others within the system.[5]

So decisions about sharing information and entertainment online are essentially decisions about your identity and your social relationships. You construct an online identity by deciding what to share and what not to share with others. These decisions are not truly independent because your identity has been influenced by the network of relationships you have with your family, peers, acquaintance and others.

The meaning of the word "sharing" is shifting as a result of social media's growing cultural importance. Of course, people have been sharing information, goods, and services throughout history: it's actually been key to our

survival as a species. Today, the rise of the sharing economy has created eBay, where people recycle products; Craigslist, where people share job opportunities; and Uber, where people share car rides. If you're an inveterate traveler, you might like to use Airbnb, where people offer spare bedrooms or make whole houses available to strangers.

One of the reasons why these services have flourished is the rise of *crowd-sourced evaluations*. When you explore the fascinating content and conversations on Reddit, you benefit from seeing the most popular posts at the top of the screen. Through crowdsourcing, digital media support the development of *weak social ties* among a group of individuals, where we establish trust not through personal face-to-face experience but through participation in informational and product exchanges stemming from these relationships. Weak social ties are surprisingly important if you're a change agent, because this network of relationships can help you spread new ideas or motivate people to take action.[6]

When I decide to let someone into my house for a summer weekend rental, I review their reputation as evaluated by others who inform about their previous experiences with this individual. An online *reputation system of evaluation* helps increase my confidence that this particular person is a responsible member of the network. In a way, the information shared on the platform helps build my sense of trust and makes it easier for me to share my house with people I don't know.

The Facebook Emotional Contagion Study

How does Facebook affect your emotional life? In 2014, Facebook researchers worked with Cornell University scholars to experimentally modify the Facebook News Feed algorithm for 689,003 people. An *algorithm* is simply a set of computer instructions. To decide which posts to display, computer scientists at Facebook wrote an algorithm. When they adjusted it so that users see more negative posts on their News Feed, users' own posts tend to be more negative than when users see emotionally positive posts on their News Feed. This research showed that people experience *emotional contagion* when they use social media.[7] Developed by Professor Elaine Hatfield, the term conveys the idea that we can "catch" emotions from people we spend time with. If your roommate is depressed, you are more likely to become depressed yourself, for example. If everyone on your News Feed is having a bad (or a good) day, you may have one too.

When this research was published, people reacted strongly. Some were concerned that the nearly 700,000 people whose News Feeds were manipulated did not give consent to participate in this study. Others noted that the Facebook Terms of Service specifies that such algorithmic manipulations can and do occur as part of the continuous improvement of software services.

Human Behavior Adjusts to Technologies

Today, you probably experience most of your media on your smartphone. Each day, you interact with software on your mobile phone that packages and arranges data and relationships. For example, Waze helps you be aware of traffic problems. Yelp helps you decide where to have lunch when you are out of town. When you are waiting at the dentist office, you can play Scrabble with your online friends. These apps represent your geographical location as well as your visual and sonic experience. You might upload an image, text a friend, play a game, or look up a miscellaneous fact. Just using your phone involves you using, selecting, creating and sharing images, words and sounds with friends, acquaintances and strangers.

More than 185 million smartphone users check their cell phones an average of 47 times per day, with 18–24 year olds checking their phones an average of 74 times per day.[8] When we are using the tools on our smartphones, we are acting in concert with the software objects, adjusting ourselves to the requirements of the software. For example, if you are like me, you may have adjusted your life in relation to your Twitter community, checking in to see what people that you follow are talking about or sharing a 140-character post about what you are reading, viewing, watching or doing. Much of what we do involves manipulating and collecting digital objects, and fragments of data.

When Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian media philosopher, said, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us," he wasn't referring to the smartphone. But he was acknowledging *the power of communication tools to shape our behavior patterns.* He had observed how the newspaper, the radio, the telephone, and the television had influenced the lifestyles and values of people living in the twentieth century. When McLuhan died in 1980, a new generation of *media ecologists* arose to examine the new media that have emerged since then. They consider how media have changed the role of *place and space* as cellphones and the Internet enable us engage in social relationships from anywhere.[9] Metaphorically, you are in two places at the same time when you are conducting a business call at home. The GPS apps change your relationship with your encounters with new places, reducing your anxiety but also potentially decreasing your alertness to the objects in the physical environment. Joshua Meyrowitz, author of *No Sense of Place*, notes that unlike previous generations, who experienced a dependence on physical locations for certain kinds of social relationships, "our culture is becoming essentially placeless."[10]

To Share or Not to Share: Understanding Virality

The term *virality* is used to refer to the likelihood that a particular social media will be spread or shared. We share content online for many different reasons, but especially content that activates strong positive emotions. People also tend to share content that is funny, intense, or surprising. Jonah Berger and Katherine

Milkman say it's the power of awe that really distinguishes viral content from nonviral content. Awe is distinct from surprise in the sense that, "It involves the opening and broadening of the mind." In fact, content that inspires wonder is far more likely to be shared than other content.[11]

To discover the characteristics that are associated with online sharing, Jonah Berger and his colleagues analyzed 7,000 *New York Times* articles to identify which ones were most frequently shared. They found that, in addition to valuable information, the emotional tone of a news story matters: subjects that activate anxiety and anger are also important, as people seek to entertain others with surprising and interesting content. As the researchers note, "Such content does not clearly produce immediate economic value in the traditional sense or even necessarily reflect favorably on the self. This suggests that social transmission may be less about motivation and more about the transmitter's internal states."[12]

One of the easiest ways to create viral content is to exploit the rhetorical technique of *incongruency*, where a combination of unexpected and irrelevant content requires users, readers, or viewers to resolve the unexpected juxtaposition to find meaning. For example, a before-and-after image showing a Dalmatian dog with and without spots is incongruous until we understand it as an ad for Clearasil, an acne medication.

Interactive media is highly viral, which is one reason why social media users seem to love online quizzes, as Figure 15.2 shows. Buzzfeed's quiz, "Which City Should You Actually Live In?" attracted more than 20 million users in 2014. Buzzfeed identifies four different types of quizzes: *trivia* quizzes test your knowledge; *personality* quizzes offer you insight on your character by how you respond
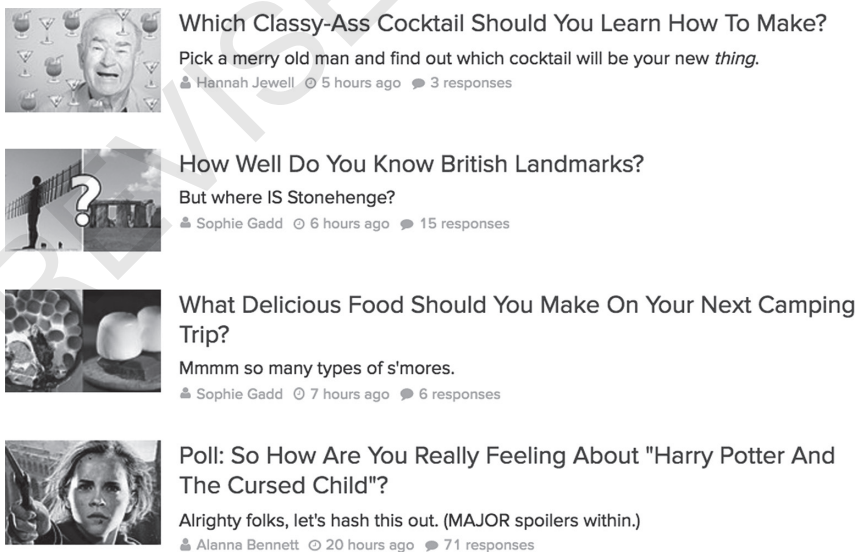
Which Classy-Ass Cocktail Should You Learn How To Make?
Pick a merry old man and find out which cocktail will be your new *thing*.
👤 Hannah Jewell 🕓 5 hours ago 💬 3 responses

How Well Do You Know British Landmarks?
But where IS Stonehenge?
👤 Sophie Gadd 🕓 6 hours ago 💬 15 responses

What Delicious Food Should You Make On Your Next Camping Trip?
Mmmm so many types of s'mores.
👤 Sophie Gadd 🕓 7 hours ago 💬 6 responses

Poll: So How Are You Really Feeling About "Harry Potter And The Cursed Child"?
Alrighty folks, let's hash this out. (MAJOR spoilers within.)
👤 Alanna Bennett 🕓 20 hours ago 💬 71 responses

Figure 15.2 Buzzfeed quizzes go viral.

to questions; *polls* quizzes ask you to share an opinion; and *checklist* quizzes offer you statements and provide a response based on the number of items you check off. People seem to love quizzes because it's a light diversion from work or life and it provides an opportunity to reflect on personal identity. When you take a BuzzFeed quiz and received your results, you will see links on the right-hand side of the page to various topics, many of which will be Buzzfeed's sponsored content, which is a blend of information and persuasion. Marketers love quizzes because they are cheap to create and permit blatant references to their products: Disney, Time Warner, and Universal all create quizzes timed with their new movie releases.

Digital Learning Horoscope

As a way to increase people's digital and media literacy, the Media Education Lab created an online quiz for teachers to help them determine their Digital Learning Horoscope. After answering questions, teachers receive a customized profile that tells them about their values. Perhaps your teacher is a Demystifier, who likes helping students ask "how" and "why" questions about media, culture, and society. Or perhaps your teacher is a "Taste-maker," someone who widens your horizons by introducing you to ideas that you've not yet encountered.

YOU ARE A

TASTE-MAKER

You want students to be discriminating in their appreciation of a wide range of media messages, including those that address history, art, the sciences, culture and society.

read more >>

YOU ARE ALSO A

DEMYSTIFIER

You want your students to develop transferable critical thinking skills by pulling back the curtain on how all media messages are constructed.

WATCHDOG

You're passionate about helping students appreciate the economic and political contexts of media and technology as complex systems that shape our everyday lives.

Figure 15.3 Digital Learning Horoscope results.

Measuring Impact

Social media platforms now enable people to measure the reach of their messages using *social data analytics*. While once this type of information was available only to a select few, today everyone can access data analytics associated with the social media accounts they control.

The ability to gather relevant information from social data is giving rise to new types of job opportunities. For example, as US retailers geared up for Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, they also monitored social media platforms, looking for evidence of public opinion about the upcoming sales holiday. Using a data analytics dashboard, retailers could see how people were using the term "Black Friday" on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms. They could even see the use of related phrases like "boycott" and "staying home" to discover that some people consciously avoid buying things on this day.

Data visualizations show the rise in the topic over time and the positive and negative sentiment associated with people's posts. Dashboards even show geographical differences in the regions of the country. You can measure your influence on Facebook using the Insights data to see how many people saw your posts, and Facebook will inform you of their age, gender, and social class. They even provide information about their buying behavior, including the likelihood that they will buy a car in the next six months!

Privacy

There is plenty of joy in sharing pictures through social media, so much so that the average parent will post 1,000 pictures of their child online between birth and age five. Catherine Steiner-Adair, author of *The Big Disconnect*, explains that as children grow older, they come to have opinions and preferences about how they are represented online.[13] Sometimes our friends and family will post images of ourselves that just look terrible. On Snapchat, you decide on how long the receiver can view an image you send. But people can save or recover Snapchat images using data recovery software. On Facebook, you can untag a photo of yourself, of course, but the photo is still visible. If anyone has ever posted a photo of you that you dislike, you know how awkward it can be in asking them to remove it.

You have probably learned from experience how to manage your privacy online. Most teens and young adults learn from experience by disclosing information and then evaluating the consequences. Clearly, there are both benefits and risks to disclosing private information online. Researchers refer to this as the *privacy paradox.* While some may worry about the possibility that their Internet searches can be tracked, others may value the ability to gain access to sensitive material "without facing another human, without asking permission, and without being judged by the people around us."[14]

No two people will have the exact same concerns about privacy when it comes to the Internet and social media: privacy is a highly personal value. Some people will fear government surveillance while others will fear how corporations use information about our online behavior. We also consider privacy in relation to the people we work with or go to school with or live with every day. In general, people feel more concern about protecting their privacy from their immediate social circle than from more abstract privacy risks linked to corporations and government. This is why many forms of *digital citizenship* education fail so drastically: children and teens can easily parrot the "right" answer when asked about whether they should share information with strangers, for example. But research shows that most children begin withholding information about their online media use by age 10.[15]

Many people, both young and old, query search engines with questions about medical conditions that they might not want to reveal to their family physician. They buy products online because they prefer the privacy of online purchasing to the prospect of visiting a neighborhood store.

One especially sensitive privacy topic is, of course, sexuality. Library researchers have discovered that when public libraries install self-checkout devices, people check out more books on topics including LGBTQ issues.[16] Researchers have found that there is proportionally more use of online gay pornography in states which are less LGBTQ-friendly (generally in the southern United States), suggesting that "perhaps closeted individuals living in Bible Belt states are more concerned for their privacy from people in their immediate communities … than they are about protecting their privacy from remote online entities."[17]

Social Media for Civic Activism

One in three American adults claimed that they were active in supporting a social issue or cause in the past 12 months. Researchers who have examined the attitudes of Americans towards activism find that people's general stance can be triggered by personal experience, reading something in the news, having a family member affected by an issue, or even hearing about the issue from a religious leader.[18]

For these reasons, a powerful story can inspire others to take action on behalf of a cause or issue. Take, for example, the case of Carla Dauden, a 23-year-old Brazilian filmmaker who made a film in the summer of 2013 about the World Cup and Summer Olympics. Frustrated by public expenditures of $30 billion to build stadium for these glossy global sporting events, Dauden reflected on Brazil's stunning problems of illiteracy, sanitation, housing, unemployment, and crime in a country of more than 200 million people.

In documenting the promises made by Brazil in its bid for the Olympics, Dauden reveals the many social inequalities in Rio de Janeiro that are best characterized by the lives of the people living in the *favelas*, the informal

settlement or slums surrounding the city. Despite the promises made by developers, over 75 percent of residents have toilets that are not connected to treated sewage systems, resulting in human waste from about 7.5 million people flowing untreated into the ocean. To promote her cause, she grew her Instagram account to more than 2,000 people and 4,000 followers on Twitter. Thanks to

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Before I Die

Public art can be understood as a form of social media. When Candy Chang created an interactive wall on an abandoned building in her neighborhood in New Orleans, she wasn't sure what to expect. Using chalkboard paint, she stenciled the phrase, "Before I die I want to…" Passers-by could write their own endings to the sentences, sharing their hopes and dreams in a public space. When she shared the photos of the poignant messages left by people on the interactive wall, the concept went viral. More than 1,000 walls have been created in 70 countries, including Haiti, China, and Ukraine.[19]
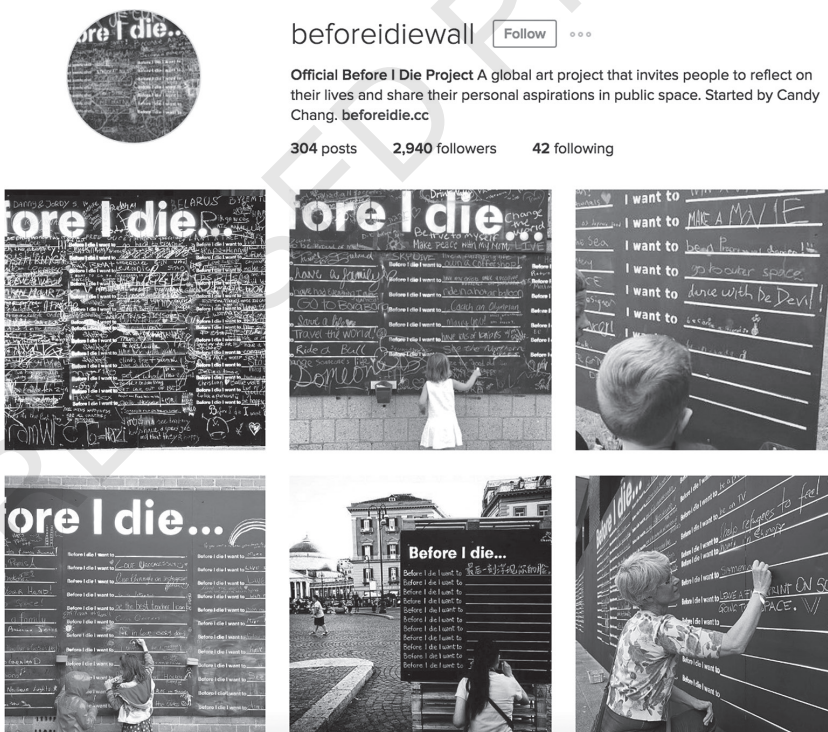

beforeidiewall Follow ∘∘∘

Official Before I Die Project A global art project that invites people to reflect on their lives and share their personal aspirations in public space. Started by Candy Chang. **beforeidie.cc**

304 posts   **2,940** followers   **42** following

Figure 15.4 Public art goes viral.

retweeting by some famous Brazilian football players, her YouTube video went viral, attracting 2.2 million viewers in just a few days.[20]

## Managing Social Media: Personal and Professional Life

There's no one right way to handle social media as part of your personal and professional life. Researchers are finding that business leaders use a variety of different strategies to manage social media as part of daily life. Some people keep all their social networks open to both their personal friends and their professional colleagues and acquaintances. Others try to segment their social networks into distinct audiences, for example, by using LinkedIn for professional colleagues and Facebook for personal friendships.

One of the biggest shifts that many young people experience in college is the move from using social media as a form of entertainment to the use of social media as a form of career advancement and professional development. For example, media literacy educator Julie Smith explains the power of using Twitter as a form of personal and professional development. She explains that Facebook is for the people she knows, while Twitter is for the people she wishes she knew.[21] By following thought leaders and other writers, journalists, activists and artists whose work she admires, Twitter becomes a very personal tool for learning. By using social media to create a *personal learning network*, informal learning is activated through the strategic selection of people to follow. Figure 15.5 shows an infographic created by LinkedIn to depict some of the differences between personal and professional use of social networking.

Context Collapse

To participate in social media, we manage invisible audiences and the blurring of private and public life. For most of human history, we have shared meaning within particular relational contexts, adjusting our speech and behavior to the particular audience and situation we find ourselves in. But mass media and social media have altered how we experience *situation and context* as part of the communicative process.

In 1980, George Trow wrote a lyrical essay that tried to capture how television was shaping the texture of American life by reshaping the context of people's lived experience. Television was simultaneously speaking to millions but with a "grid of intimacy."[22] Today the concept of *context collapse* captures the idea that to speak online is to be aware that you are speaking to someone and everyone (and no one), all at the same time. As Michael Wesch puts it, when you're participating in social media, there are "an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another."[23] Your online words, images, and actions can be
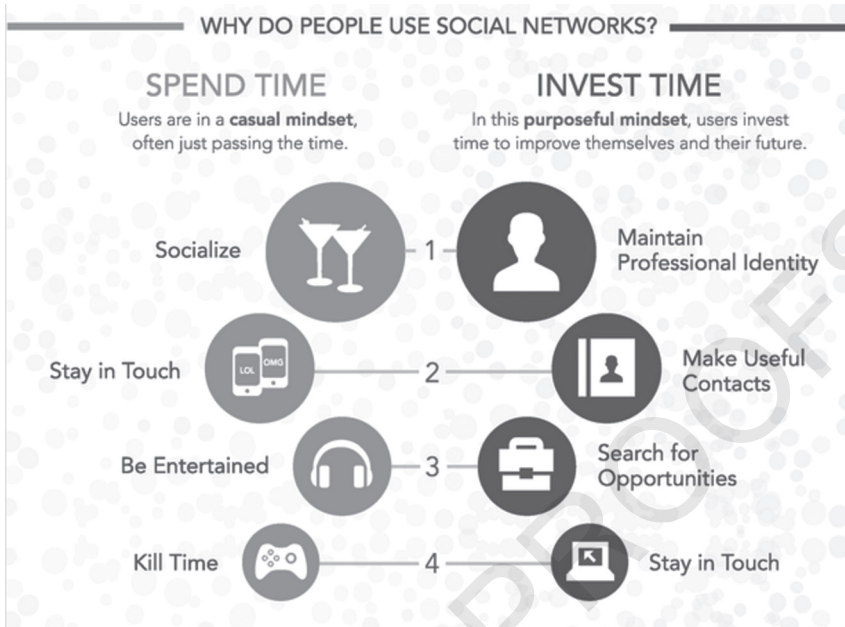
Figure 15.5 Infographic: Personal vs. professional use of social networks. *Source*: LinkedIn.

interpreted differently by your mother, your girlfriend, or your boss. Ultimately, you can never know how your images and language will be interpreted. As you participate in social media, you may experience intense social pressure, the need to fulfill others' expectations, or even a genuine freedom from social constraints where, as Jan Fernback notes, you have "convenient togetherness without real responsibility."[24] For these reasons, social media offers a fascinating set of paradoxes for the professional communicator.

Activity: Develop a Social Media Campaign

Select a social media platform and using your Scope of Work, develop at least 15 messages designed to reach your target audiences. Be sure your social media includes entertaining, persuasive and informative content, a relevant hashtag, an image, and a reference to an influential person. After you launch your campaign, review the social data analytics to examine which of the 15 messages was most influential. Based on this evidence, compose an essay to reflect on your strategy and consider how you might modify your campaign in the future.