

Course Synthesis Essay

One of the most interesting things we did in the course, in my opinion, is redefine social media. Prior to our discussions in this class, I never thought of social media as anything beyond casual interactions and keeping up with loved ones and acquaintances with traditional networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, after the introductory lectures and assigned readings, I began to realize how many things actually count as forms of social media. For example, when we first started talking about Wikipedia, I was skeptical about its classification as a type of social media; yet, once we dove into the affordances of social media, I realized any sites or platforms which allow for public participation (including everything from communal editing, such as on Wikipedia, to commenting on primary posting, such as on YouTube) count as social media. One of the TEDx talks we watched—[“Lessons from Ancient Social Media”](#) by Tom Standage—defines any “media from other people exchanged socially creating distributed discussion or community” as *social* media. According to this definition, sites such as Wikipedia and YouTube, and even sights such as EBay and Amazon (which allow for interpersonal interactions and communication via reviewing and commenting) count as social media platforms.

The connection between social media and rhetoric occurs at the intersection between the denotation for the word “rhetoric,” and the affordances which social media platforms provide. Allison Hitt writes about Kenneth Burke’s ideas about rhetoric, in her blog piece [“Accessing Rhetoric.”](#) Ultimately, Hitt emphasizes the importance of opposition and argument for something to be categorized as “rhetoric.” The nature of social media sites promotes expression of ideals and theologies and, naturally, creates an open opportunity for disagreement. Social media tends to create rhetoric through the ease it provides its users in expressing their own ideas and either supporting or opposing the ideas of others. Perhaps one of the most important reasons for studying the rhetoric of social media is to become more aware of its effect on individual social identity and corresponding public behavior, as well as of its ability to create community. According to an entry on *Baymard Institute* titled [“Social Media: Analyze Affordances, not Features,”](#) by Jamie Appleseed, the affordances of social media should be the primary focus of study when it comes to how social media influences and impacts us, as she explains these aspects of the platforms are “designed to trigger” specific “types of social behavior” such as performance (of false identities and/or exaggerated realities) and conformance.

Social media both creates a space for freedom of expression and, therefore, allows users to represent themselves in whatever ways they wish, but it also has the power to bring individuals together, based on support for, or mutual opposition of, certain ideals or causes. One of the greatest features of social media sites, as discussed in multiple articles we read this semester, is its creation of opportunity for identification, and tendency to create community through interaction and discourse. Social media has the potential to affect society on a large scale, as it can affect important aspects of a culture, such as (in the case of the United States) its politics and government. Much of the rhetoric of social media gets its strength from the persuasion of constructed identities; one of the most unique and, perhaps, most appealing (and potentially dangerous) aspects of social media is its lack of structure or authority/rule when it comes to falsifying identity. Opposition and argument—as I previously explained social media creates opportunity for—necessitate or (at least) encourage application of persuasion techniques. One of the greatest values of the rhetoric of social media is its incorporation of interactions with persuasion in daily life. Social media rhetoric—partially due to the current popularity of social media usage in our society—strengthens persuasion skills and familiarity with persuasive tactics; social

media sites always seem to provide an opportunity to advertise and sell something, whether it be an identity, a cause/campaign, a product, or something else. Much of the power and influence of the rhetoric comes from another one of the affordances of social media: the vulnerability and relatability present due to the allowance of unfiltered content. Some of the credibility of the arguments and success of the campaigns ran through social media relates, directly, to censorship (or, rather, lack thereof). Jonathan Russo of *Observer*, in his article [“In This Election Cycle, the Medium Is the Message,”](#) provides a great example of a successful rhetor (and salesman/persuader) on social media—President-elect Donald Trump—who used very unorthodox methods (i.e., unfiltered Tweeting) to run in and, ultimately, win an election. (Of course, other things contributed to Trump’s winning, but Russo makes a great point about Trump’s employing social media as a medium by which to greatly affect and, arguably, even create a certain public identity.)

Though social media rhetoric does benefit society by creating community and providing opportunity for identification (for individuals to relate to one another), it does, also, create problems within a culture as well; unfortunately, the persuasive power of social media on the masses often amounts to creation of a certain bandwagon effect. Users of social media tend to follow the expectations created, either, by the platforms or the most popular users of those platforms, in order to maintain societal norms and, simultaneously, climb the ladder of hierarchy on social networking sites. One piece, in particular, from this semester’s reading assignments highlights the danger of social media’s potential to create this effect: the podcast [“Yik Yak Returns”](#) discusses the nature of social media sights allowing high quantities of severely explicit and offensive content to stir community revolutions consisting of virtual protests, debates, and attacks, (as well as support groups, as responses). Another of the pieces, one of the TEDx talks we watched, Jon Ronson’s [“When Online Shaming Spirals out of Control,”](#) discusses group participation in harmful activities as well, such as social media shaming. Ronson writes an article for the NewStatesman, titled [“The Dangers of Public Shaming, Mob Justice and Scolding on the Internet,”](#) in which he relates the bandwagoning (common in social media shaming) to mob justice, or enforcement of punishment for cultural faux pas or societal violations by members of a self-entitled group (who band together, in this case, behind the safety of computer screens).

Beyond studying social media as it already exists, we studied much about the creation of social media content. These portions of the course were some of my favorite, as I found very interesting the process behind, and intentionality in, composing pieces for social media—the attention to detail in working with social media was also quite interesting to me. Focusing on aspects of design, appeals, tone, etc. throughout the semester has raised my awareness of these features of the social media I am exposed to every day. This semester, I came to recognize the relationship between social media and marketing/advertising and sales, or persuasion, as well as the power of the rhetoric on naïve users of the sites and consumers of the content. This recognition developed, primarily, in my research of obtaining success on social media sites. (By “success,” I mean achieved persuasion of people believe in, support, or do something.) Specifically, the final project helped me realize the strategy behind composing for social media, as did the assignments leading up to the project. I really enjoyed studying the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge and its success as an awareness and fundraising campaign, as I have always wondered how a movement so seemingly irrelevant to the actual cause could provoke such an engaged reaction from the public. The infographic on [Solution Reach](#) really helped me rationalize the reactions to the campaign, as it nicely broke down the components of the campaign and explained why they were successful. Similarly, Colby Itkowitz’s article on Washington Post, [“Why ‘Chewbacca Mom’ is the Viral](#)

[Video We Didn't Know We Needed](#)," helped me understand the power of pathos in rhetoric, especially on social media, as it attributed the popularity of the "Chewbacca Lady" (almost solely) to emotion. Earlier in the semester, as well, we touched on the reasons for success (or lack thereof) of various movements on social media, such as the *Serial* podcast, for example. Emily Konrad, in [her blog post](#) on Drury University's site for Social Media Strategy, about the importance of storytelling, as she explains how the podcast "built a following" through incorporation of captivating elements like cliffhangers and (natural) progressions in plot.

Overall, this course taught me about the artistry behind composition for social media. The preparation assignments and projects exposed me to the craft behind social media personas and campaigns/causes, as well as raised my awareness of the influence social media rhetoric has on culture. Now, I am also aware of the power of social media rhetoric to create conversations about serious issues, as well as to build communities (both harmful and beneficial to society, as a whole) of individuals with similar views on those issues. I had never thought of social media as a form of writing, but now I understand it to be one of the best (and most relevant) examples of rhetorical text in modern culture. Though the rhetoric of social media has both positive and negative impacts on the structure of society and interactions between individuals within it, its success as a medium of persuasion cannot be ignored and, therefore, must be given more attention and used carefully and strategically. Because social media campaigns so often disguise persuasion with stylistic techniques and appeals to the masses, they could, easily, become either some of the most dangerous weapons, or most advantageous tools, in the future of our society. Though social media rhetoric has already greatly affected aspects of our society—such as social interactions and portrayals of personal identities—I believe it will, eventually, become equally as, (if not more), valuable to marketing as traditional mediums of advertisement and persuasion.