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'Splintered selves': teachers' online fragmented identities navigating the personal, political and professional

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ABSTRACT

Much research into teachers' use of social media has focused upon framing it as a professional learning tool and exploring the challenges and benefits of interacting online. Less research has been undertaken in the way these interactions present and also shape the identity of the participating teachers, especially across multiple social media sites. This paper examines precisely this issue, analysing the way that teachers have navigated various sites and online communities using social media as a means to shape their personal, political and professional identity, in ways that are sometimes empowering.

Highlights

- Teacher identities as personal, professional and political as split across multiple platforms
- Split identities are common across platforms and user profiles
- 'Teacher' as a contested term and identity
- Teacher and researcher as separate and not connected

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Teacher identity; social media; Twitter; social network analysis; teachers' work

1. Introduction

This study sought to explore the ways that teachers shape and reshape their identities online via the use of multiple social media platforms. Teachers' use of social media is an area of ongoing and important research (J. P. Carpenter et al., 2019; Shelton et al., 2022). As more teachers make use of online tools to ask questions, find information and network with like-minded individuals, they are required to make decisions about what and how they might share on these platforms. In many cases, these decisions are mediated by the platforms themselves, teachers' existing networks, and also the influence of sensationalist media and employer policies and requirements. A great deal of previous research has explored Twitter[1] exclusively (Boyd, 2014; J. Carpenter et al., 2020; Daly et al., 2019), predominantly within the United States and Canada (Greenhalgh, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2020; Macià & García, 2016). This study differs in that it draws from a largely Australian sample with some international representation. Furthermore, this

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paper seeks to explore the ways that individual teachers express different aspects of their personality in these different social media spaces. For example, this paper examines whether teachers felt they were different 'online' or face to face. Or whether they shared different ideas and stories on Flip compared to Twitter. The motivation behind these decisions is examined. This paper continues the work of J. P. Carpenter et al. (2019) whose large-scale qualitative study found a tendency to express a less clear political or religious identity by teachers on Twitter as compared to their face-to-face interactions. In order to resolve these questions, #edureading (a loose socially networked community of educators in Australia and overseas who read educational research articles together and share their thoughts) was chosen as the research site. The fifteen most active contributors were identified through network analysis, and then interviewed by the authors in order to generate qualitative insights cross-referenced with social network data.

This research found that teachers 'split' or splinter their identities across platforms and even across multiple user accounts on the same platform. As researchers and activists, we were compelled to explore the ways that this was influenced by platform and employer policies, and neoliberal, technical expectations of teachers as instrumental rather than political actors (Mockler, 2011). Indeed, the culmination of this 'acceptable and expected' face of teaching led to a discussion with participants about whether they felt they were cultivating a 'brand', with all of the mercantile and fame-based associations that this brings with it.

2. Literature review

Teaching, both as a practice and as a profession, remains largely occluded from public view. This might seem odd, considering the vast majority of the public have some experience with schooling (Barnes & English, 2022)—but this is as a student, and the practice of teaching is different to the experience of being a student. Despite a greater than ever focus on teaching from those external to it, and a special focus on teacher accountability, much of the work of teachers is done behind closed doors, even to a teacher's colleagues. There have been recent calls for more collaboration amongst teachers, but these calls have failed to address the ongoing workload crisis, and especially the fact that only a very small fraction of Australian teachers' time per day is available for genuine collaboration. Many teachers seek out additional input, beyond their work environments, into their teaching, looking to share their own strategies and approaches, and connect with the wider educational world (Rodesiler & Pace, 2015). For modern teachers this often takes the form of interactions on social media sites which necessitates developing personal and professional profiles. The creation of multiple online identities and the maintenance of them through posting, interactions and even 'lurking' behaviour (Goodyear et al., 2019) can be conceived of as 'identity work' (Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Reeves, 2018). The notion of identity has been central to previous studies of social media use. Earlier research identified concerns around 'context collapse' (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) where the lack of contextual information might impact upon how individuals are perceived online—or by whom they are perceived. Other studies have also examined what it means to be 'the good teacher' online (Zembylas, 2018). It is this rich site where our participants are

located. The manner in which they navigate this space is of great interest for those exploring the modern landscape of teaching, as well as those looking to support teachers' identity development. Below, we briefly survey the existing literature, organised into three main domains that have relevance for this study: firstly, we look at current and historical studies of teachers' social media use. We then explore how social media policies in different jurisdictions impact upon that social media use—and how teachers seek to work around these limitations. Finally, we review the literature regarding teacher identity, especially as it pertains to their use of social media.

2.1. Teacher social media use

The literature on teachers' use of social media has predominantly taken the form of exploring and confirming the role that it plays in professional development and noting its utility for this purpose (for example, see Greenhow et al., 2018). The existing research literature on teaching social media findings are drawn from either Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (Iredale et al., 2020; März & Kelchtermans, 2020) or other university settings (Greenhow et al., 2020; Kolber et al., 2021; Macià & García, 2016). There is limited exploration of practising teachers' ongoing or continuing professional learning (CPD) via social media. Partly this is because of the significant administrative and legal challenges teachers face in using social media (J. P. Carpenter & Harvey, 2019; J. P. Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Fox & Bird, 2017; Iredale et al., 2020; Lemon & O'Brien, 2019). This study examines the ways that teachers find agency and action within these fora to support their personal identity development whilst also overcoming these challenges.

Other existing research has focused on the effects of social media on student learning and engagement (Fox & Bird, 2017; Haşiloğlu et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2019) but this study foregrounds the nature of teachers' identity without reference to students or the more technical aspects of teaching. Rather, the focus is on teachers' online learning and identity as worthy of consideration for their own purposes. This has seen less research. In one recent example, West (2022) outlined teacher communities on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook noting the manner in which interactions between professionals there can be toxic and problematic. The study described in this paper investigates Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Flip, as these were the platforms referenced by the group.

We assume that most readers will be familiar with Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, but we will introduce Flip. Formerly called FlipGrid, Flip is a sharing platform where groups of learners share short video responses to posed questions. This platform is used by the #edureading group as a means to simulate a 'face-to-face' like element for its monthly academic discussions. Flip is a social learning community, noted for producing deeper, more critical responses than blog-based written responses (Stoszkowski et al., 2020) and its use in a social media-like manner within the #edureading group has garnered some critical attention (Heggart, 2022; Kolber et al., 2021; Lilley, 2022; Mercieca & McDonald, 2021, 2021b). The participants primarily met and connected via Twitter however, so although not the only focus of the paper, it will be a major factor in the discussion, as well as being the site of the network analysis.

2.2. Social media policies and politics within Australia

One thing that differentiates this study from previous studies is its exploration of primarily Australian teachers. To situate the study within this context, we need to outline the manner in which social media policies are employed and the broader expectations of teachers as shown by the zeitgeist surrounding them. Mockler (2022) explains the way that the neoliberal cascade has led to teacher professional learning being narrowed to development and rendering teachers as auditees rather than agential within their own learning practices. Gomez and Journell (2017) have noted how some teachers appear to use Twitter with a sole focus on collection of instructional resources, which they consider potentially beneficial but also representing a restricted notion of professionalism. This is but one of the narrowings of teacher identity, both online and within the broader world (Starmer & Smith, 2022). The conception of teachers online is one of high expectations and wide-reaching limitations, as J. P. Carpenter et al. (2019, p. 4) note: 'Education policies regarding social media also impact educators' boundary work. Parents. communities and school leadership may consider teachers to be public figures and moral role models, and some schools have been quick to enact policies that address how social media should *not* be used.' The expectation of teachers as public figures and moral role models shows the ethico-political framing that we are pursuing here (Miller et al., 2017). It might seem rather unreasonable for teachers to be considered public figures, but our participants showed an awareness of this fact, and this in part, explains their shattering of their personal, professional and public identities across multiple platforms.

J. P. Carpenter et al. (2019) noted, 'Educational and professional opportunities incentivise teachers to use Twitter, but various compliance factors can influence and constrain that use' (P.5). Within Australia these compliance factors can be both explicit, such as: Code of Conduct specifications and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011; Mockler, 2022) and implicit: public expectations of teachers (Zembylas, 2018) and media representation (Shine, 2018, 2020). Crucially, education is 'not a profession taking a proactive and strategic view to the value of social media for educational purposes' (Fox & Bird, 2017, p. 671) and scholars have suggested that social media use for professional learning and identity development should be valued more within policy and among school leadership (Barnes, 2021; Kolber & Salazar, 2024), as it can often be used as a medium to practise applying leadership skills (J. P. Carpenter et al., 2019). Rodesiler (2017) found through an analysis of US social media policies that they tended to delineate between 'personal' and 'educational' uses. Whilst he notes that delineating between these two uses in fast-moving and ever-changing online spaces was difficult, he suggested teacher input into policies of this kind would be beneficial.

Political neutrality is the assumed normal position for teachers online (J. P. Carpenter et al., 2019); and the internet and social media's primary purpose is conceived of as one of restricted professionalism and a site of professional development (Gomez & Journell, 2017). Yet, scholars have asserted that teaching is inevitably political in nature (Giroux & Kincheloe, 1992). This has led to teachers' Twitter activities being disconnected from important aspects of their work if they seek to remove politics from their online professional identities (J. P. Carpenter et al., 2019, p. 9). Through this research, we seek to explore whether teachers are suppressing facets of their personal or professional

identities, and what platform infrastructures make this especially important. As J. P. Carpenter et al. (2019), p. 8) notes, 'Teachers may either subconsciously learn that minimising these aspects of their personas could potentially complicate or detract from their online teacher identities'. It is these very complications that we seek to explore further within this study.

We are especially interested in this positionality and expected neutrality, because we conceive of teachers as democratic workers (Heggart, 2022), and having a stance, political or otherwise, is important for a thriving and empowered citizenry and society. Indeed, Hess (2008) has argued an alternative to neutrality is '*committed partiality*, which is characterised by teachers openly disclosing their personal views on controversial issues in ways that model appropriate civic dispositions' (Quoted in J. P. Carpenter et al., 2019, p. 9). These civic dispositions are things we hold to be an essential and important element of teachers, and indeed all citizens lives within a functioning and flourishing society.

Fox and Bird (2017) found that some teachers inhabited social media in both personal and professional ways, whilst Buchanan (2015) and Lasky (2005) conceive of these spaces as places where dominant narratives might be challenged. Whilst we find value in teacher identity exploration regardless of what narratives are being enacted, explored or countered to, it's notable that these areas have been explored through research previously. We seek to add a multi-platform logic to this line of thinking as a means to complicate and add further richness.

Zembylas (2018) and J. P. Carpenter et al. (2019) both established a distancing of the personal and the professional within Twitter profiles, suggesting a shying away from controversial topics. We are exploring the manner in which this distancing can occur across a siloing of versions of identity across platforms and between expected infrastructures between them.

2.3. Teacher identity

Teacher identity is usually described as comprising both personal and professional elements (Reeves, 2018; Richardson & Alsup, 2015), and is 'dynamic, multifaceted, negotiated and co-constructed' (Edwards & Burns, 2016, p. 735). Mockler describes it as the way that teachers, 'both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers' (2011, p. 519) although we would be quick to note it is also a function of how society views teachers. It is also something that is often classed as a journey, developing over time (Edwards & Edwards, 2016). This is something with which Mockler (2011) concurs; she notes that teacher professional identity can be formed and reformed over the course of a career, and this is something that hasn't been studied in detail. At present there have been many studies of teacher identity formation within universities (for example, see J. P. Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Van Lankveld et al., 2017) and pre-service teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Nicoll, 2022; Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). Fewer studies (with the exception of Huberman (1993) have examined teacher identity formation over the course of their careers. In this research, the identities of a group of highly committed, late-stage career teachers are examined (Bressman et al., 2018). At this stage 'they consider the world of education beyond their classroom and view their students' learning within the

context of their community, and larger social issues' (Bressman et al., 2018, p. 164; Mitchell, 2008). As such their dual roles as experienced teachers and social media 'power users' coalesce in interesting ways.

Previous studies have conceived of teacher identity as distinct between 'personal' and 'professional' (Beijaard et al., 2004). It is generally acknowledged that teachers have both personal and professional lives—yet these are hardly separate—or singular. Zembylas and Chubbuck (2018) suggests that the professional/personal distinctions blur when viewed through the political lens adopted in this study. In this way, they are building on the work of Mockler (2011) and others who indicated that the political nature of teaching—and being a teacher—is sometimes overlooked. In Mockler's (2011) framework, she notes that being a teacher is related and founded on personal experience, professional contexts and the political environment. Together, these give rise to personal development, professional learning and teacher activism. All three of these contribute to the idea of 'being a teacher' (Mockler, 2011, p. 522).

Other research has explored the importance of teacher's subject-specific identities, as most teachers are not simply 'teachers' but rather 'science, English, history, mathematics teachers' (Brooks, 2020; Cross Francis et al., 2018; Day et al., 2006). Indeed, these divisions cause concerns and friction between teachers from different groups (West, 2022) and those teaching 'out-of-area' are a further consideration emerging within the research field of identity (Hobbs, 2013). Within this study, the subject specific nature of teacher identity did not emerge, as, perhaps due to social media's influence, the participants were more adept at outlining their identities beyond this typically primary label for teachers (Day et al., 2006).

Reeves (2018) comments on a perceived 'value schizophrenia' (p.8) or 'ethical dilemma' (p.10) where teachers are pulled between expectations of teaching and their own values and reasons for teaching. Whilst Fox and Bird (2017) outlined 'tensions' and 'synergies' (p.11) between personal and professional identities, by adding the political element our model moves beyond tensions and synergies to look at which forms of identity are enacted in which locations—and how. The age-old question of whether teaching is a political act continues to divide teachers and academics, and this is in part a question we seek to explore within this study.

Another factor, and one that has been under-examined in studies of teacher professional identity, is the environment in which teachers enact their identity. In this case, we're particularly interested in how online environments shape or alter this identity. Fox and Bird (2017) found that English teachers split their personal and professional lives when online, and this paper suggests that the political environment and teachers' enactment of their politics add an additional layer of 'splitting'.

It should also be noted that, while not all teachers use social media for their professional identities or professional learning (Fox & Bird, 2017; Kolber et al., 2021; Kolber & Heggart, 2022; Malik et al., 2019), it remains a ripe site for explorations of teacher identity. As stated earlier, online activity of this nature often takes place beyond teachers' 'normal' work (whatever that means!). In this respect, not only is the creation and maintenance of multiple online identities 'identity work' (Calabrese Barton et al., 2013; Reeves, 2018), but also 'aspirational labor' (Duffy, 2017; Shelton et al., 2022; Yallop, 2021). In this respect, it is similar to child-rearing or care-giving, and other tasks that are often not considered to be

work or of value in the neoliberal economy. Aspirational in this sense means exploring community building and leadership style practices without being paid or recognised for this work within one's own setting (Barnes, 2021).

In this study we use teachers' self-proclaimed titles as 'identity anchors' (Mockler, 2008, 2011). Teachers use these labels as metaphors for their role within the broader educational ecosystem. So, whilst broadly defined as 'teachers' across the study, significant differences emerge among the participants. By challenging and questioning teacher identity formation and labels, we also engage with the idea of 'future selves' (Dugas, 2021) and participants' responses may indeed be indicating the extent to which these identities inform their intentions regarding leaving the profession. Alternatively, a reification of the 'teacher' label suggests a commitment to remaining within teaching.

The question of anonymity and 'faceless' accounts is important here, as 'Teachers do however. have options to maintain social media accounts that are not linked to their real names, and or their schools' (J. P. Carpenter et al., 2019, p. 4). As will be explored within the results section, whether teachers are seeking to present or develop an 'authentic' version of themselves is an intriguing question. In this use, an authentic version of their identity means to contain the multitudes of themselves, which within the frame provided above means their personal, political and professional aspects. The challenge to authenticity is performativity, and as Robson notes, 'Contained within existing materials were performative expressions of identity which held embedded ideals. By internalising these ideals teachers' understandings of themselves and what it means to be a teacher were shaped' (Robson, 2018, p. 17), which shows some positive elements of performativity within online representation. Whilst it could be passed off as simple vapid conformity to expected positions, it could also be positioned as a reifying or exploration of identity forms. He notes that, 'Drawing on Goffman's (1959) ideas of performativity, it was possible to see the online social spaces acting as front regions in which identity could be agentically performed enabling users to manage the impressions of their peers and present themselves in idealised forms' (Robson, 2018, p. 19). This seems of great importance considering the low political and societal placement of teachers within the social milieu, where teachers are metaphorically bashed (Dunning, 2022; Kolber & Enticott, 2023). A depiction of oneself in a positive, albeit performative manner seems to hold great power—and great appeal for teachers.

3. Research questions

Based on the above summary of extant research, the following research questions were identified.

(1) How does the use of social media contribute to the shaping and presentation of teacher identity?
(2) How do teachers make use of different platforms to either consciously or unconsciously shape their identity as teachers?
(3) How do teachers engage with the idea of a personal social media 'brand' online?

4. Methodology

4.1. Conceptual framework

The literature reviewed above indicates that teacher identity, as an example of professional identity, is a complex and multi-faceted topic. Not only are there elements that align with the personal, political and professional aspects of identity, there is a temporal aspect of teacher identity that needs to be considered in any kind of analysis. If anything, the introduction of social media platforms and teachers' use of them makes this task even more challenging. Furthermore, there is a necessity to consider the way that teachers are constrained in their use of social media—often by policy decisions of their employers. This adds a further, political element to the way teachers enact their identities on social media. Nevertheless, the intersection of teachers' personal, political and professional identities, and the way these are expressed through and upon social media, provide the framing for the study in this paper. We begin by outlining the research site, before discussing the selection of participants, the interviews that were undertaken and the way the data was analysed.

4.2. Research site: #edureading

The site of this research was one with which the authors are very familiar. The #edureading social media group was formulated by Steven Kolber in 2018 to explore the interactions between teachers and educational research. Over the course of the next four years, participants read more than 35 journal articles and shared their reflections and thoughts across a number of different mediums. The focus of the research questions above is related to how teachers engage with both social media and research, so this was an ideal site for this study.

In #edureading, articles are selected through a consensus process. Suggestions are made by participants, and one is selected each month. During each month, participants read the article, and then share their thoughts via Twitter, or post their reflections via a video journal using Flip. Originally, users made use of the #edureading hashtag and posted their comments on Twitter in public. However, increasingly, members are making use of private groups within Twitter to have conversations. #edureading as a whole is still advertised publicly. At the end of each month, there is a Sunday evening Twitter chat that makes use of the #edureading hashtag; this is conducted publicly. As such this study features both public and private elements of a loose social media collective, allowing network analysis upon those public elements, and insight into the private spaces, which are typically difficult to access, and as such, are under-researched (Iredale et al., 2020).

Over the course of the four years, more than 1000 people have tweeted using the #edureading hashtag. The majority of these have come from Australia, but there have been participants from other areas, especially New Zealand, the United Kingdom, North America and France. Participants are, for the most part, transient; not all have stayed for all the articles. Rather, people are more likely to 'dip in and dip out' for those articles that interest them. The Twitter chat is much more popular than the Flip video journaling. Having said that, there is a core group of members that have participated regularly over the last four years. It was these members that the authors of the paper were particularly interested in researching.

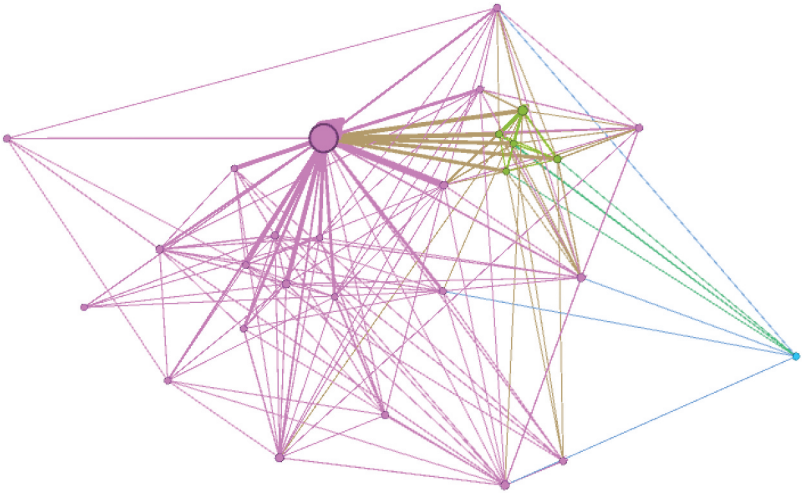

Figure 1. Network diagram of #edureading tweets. Nodes represent users. The size of the node is the number of tweets with the hashtag #edureading, and the thickness of the line between the nodes indicate the number of tweets between those nodes. Colours indicate different communities within #edureading, as determined by the Louvain method.

4.3. Selection of participants via network analysis

These participants are adept social media users. Indeed, their very engagement with one another and the online professional learning process itself suggests this. To identify those participants who were the most engaged online and with one another, a network analysis of the users associated with the #edureading hashtag was undertaken. This was done using the academic access to the Twitter API and was approved by the UTS Human Resources Ethics Committee (as were the following interviews with informed consent).

In order to undertake the network analysis, all tweets using the hashtag #edureading were scraped from Twitter. These tweets were then analysed to determine the following data:

(a) The number of tweets per user over the time period using the hashtag. This indicated their activity within the #edureading group.
(b) The number of tweets between different users over the time period using the hashtag. This was done by cataloguing how often people '@'-ed each other in a tweet using the hashtag. This was intended to determine the connectivity between different pairs within the group.

This information was then used to generate a diagram (Figure 1) which was analysed to determine the key nodes using the Louvain method (Blondel et al., 2008).

This analysis produced a list of people who could be considered 'power users' (Shelton et al., 2022) within this hashtag and the reading group, whom we sought to interview. They are presented in Table 1 (the authors of this article would have been considered

Table 1. Power users in the #edureading community sorted by number of tweets.

User Name (Pseudonym)	Number of tweets during time period
Janice	2565
Mario	2476
Luke	1876
Nathan	1849
Pable	1379
Irene	1274
Clarissa	1130
Scott	962
Matt	782
Tom	563
Sarah	341
Renata	331
Allende	237

'power users' too, but they were removed from the list of possibly interviewees as they were undertaking the research).

4.4. Interviews

The identified power-users were approached by the research team in order to seek their informed consent to be interviewed. The initial approach was made via Twitter direct message, and the interviews themselves were conducted online using Zoom. Of the 15 power users identified, 13 agreed to and were able to be interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and carried out via Zoom, refer to Appendix 1 for interview questions, before being professionally transcribed and checked by both researchers.

4.5. Analysis

These transcripts were open-coded by both researchers individually within NVivo 15. The researchers then compared codes in order to develop consistent themes to each research question. As these themes were developed, key quotations and statements were located that best represented each theme, many of which appear below, and informed the findings of this study.

5. Findings

In this section, we discuss some of the key themes that emerged from the research.

5.1. Teachers splinter their identities along personal, professional and political lines

The previous conception by Mockler (2011) of the political, professional and personal elements of teacher identity is a useful way of framing how teachers splintered their identities. Indeed, some teachers explicitly referred to these ideas: 'Professional Clarissa will share a lot more, and personal Clarissa lurks a lot more. And personal Courtney lurks

for the sake of learning about issues that I don't have a stake in the game. So, it's usually political stuff, and that's who I'm following. I'm following journalists or I'm following people with opinions that, sadly, as a departmental employee, I am not really allowed to click like on, if I was doing that from my professional account.'(Clarissa)

Respondents suggested that using social media allowed them to explore different aspects of their identity, often ones that were not available to them within their existing work contexts: their school, classroom or staffroom. In some cases, this becomes an extension of their professional identity—one that is even more professional than their school-based one:

> Edureading is like my nerdy staffroom. My staffroom where I can find people who are also interested in that where I can actually talk about my interest. So it's like my second staffroom. (Irene)

Indeed, it seemed that having established the value in this identity development, many had begun to explore multiple versions of themselves across a range of platforms in different ways. Part of this exploration incorporated making critical and pragmatic choices about their purposes for being online, and what they sought to achieve—and this shaped their decisions about how best to present themselves (and what part of their identity they presented, too). Renata provides a good example of this when she notes that:

> Twitter primarily is my platform, and although I'm on Facebook, I tend to separate it. There are some bits that I'm on Facebook for professionally, but by and large I tend to use that from a personal point of view. So, the stuff that comes through on Facebook tends to be things like private groups. (Renata)

Clarissa noted something very similar:

> I can switch between accounts and go, no one seems to care on edu Twitter what's happening in the real world today, because they're in their own head about whatever. And vice versa. No one in the real world cares about phonics, and sometimes I'll see the word phonics in my real life Twitter and go, who's retweeting that? Which account am I on? So, sometimes it is a very separate arena from the real world, for better or for worse. (Clarissa)

In the two examples above, the participants have made a conscious decision to separate the personal from the professional, either through multiple accounts on the same platform (such as Clarissa) or by using entirely different platforms, such as Renata describes.

A number of interviewees also noted that by splintering their identity in this way, they might be minimising potentially negative outcomes that can arise on social media. Interviewees were concerned about their professional standing, about committing too much time to social media (at the expense of other things), and about losing control over their privacy. Tom explains:

> I try to make my social media presence more about just putting stuff out there rather than engaging so much in it to such a deep extent. I guess I want to keep, maybe, just a foot of distance, because I know how deeply I could just, maybe, fall into it. And maybe there's a bit of hesitancy that I understand the limitations of social media in developing relationships that I don't maybe want to give too much of myself away and just allow people to actually

> read my work to know who I am and speak to me to know who I am. Rather than form an image of me through any social media activity that can be simplistically interpreted. (Tom)

This is an important insight from Tom, because there's an element of self-censorship taking place. Such self-censorship is common in most social settings, including social media, but the added element of the various rules and requirements for teachers in the use of social media (about what they can and can't say on platforms) means that Tom's decisions are political ones, too. Tom is referencing those examples of individuals on social media whose posts have been taken out of context or used in ways to support viewpoints that the original posters might not have agreed with—and he's made the conscious decision to limit what he says so that doesn't happen to him.

5.2. Twitter is used for professional learning and political actions - but rarely together

Twitter was seen to provide both professional learning opportunities and engagement with politics and political action, although these two things were only rarely combined in the same account, suggesting that teachers did not strongly connect their political persona with their teacher persona—or did not wish to be seen to be doing so. Much like the quote from Tom, discussed in the previous section, some teachers might well have chosen to splinter those parts of their identity out of concern for how they would be perceived. Professional collegiality and learning was provided mostly by Twitter, and for the participants of this group it was their main site, as Clarissa noted:

> Twitter is my big thing (Clarissa)

Whilst this is not entirely surprising considering the way that the group is located largely on this platform, most participants also noted that they work across multiple platforms, as outlined previously. The idea of the 'second staffroom' already outlined can be illustrated by Clarissa who notes:

> I've taught cell structure seven billion times. I know all my standard gear things that I do, and I'm about to go and teach it again and I'm like, I'm boring myself. I don't want to do it again. So, the first thing I did was open Twitter and just type in cell membrane and click on people that I know. (Clarissa)

This shows how Twitter can serve as a means to maintain interest in the act and art of teaching, through providing alternative approaches and methods.

Political components were also provided by Twitter, but these spaces were often accessed obliquely or not engaged with directly. As Clarissa noted:

> So, it's usually political stuff, and that's who I'm following. I'm following journalists or I'm following people with opinions that, sadly, as a departmental employee, I am not really allowed to click like on, if I was doing that from my professional account. (Clarissa)

This is a clear exploration of tentativeness around sharing personal or political views as a teacher online, which is consistent with previous research.

5.3. Facebook is more personal

For personal communication Facebook was the clear leader among our respondents.

Commenting on his own learning about social media platforms and whether he used Facebook for professional learning, Luke notes:

So I don't really use Facebook now, it's more of a personal thing. (Luke)

Facebook groups (as opposed to the general Facebook personal account) were mentioned in passing, as a brief alternative to Twitter, but there wasn't much enthusiasm from our interviewees:

> There are times when I will ask Twitter or even a Facebook group, not very often, maybe five, six times a year or something, a question like what resource would you recommend for this or how do you deal with this problem or what do you think of this? And people respond, and that helps me with the work that I'm doing. (Allende)

This suggests that Facebook groups are a secondary option compared to Twitter, but that professional learning and support can be sourced from anywhere where teachers congregate online.

5.4. LinkedIn is for professional opportunities

Our respondents noted aspects of professional 'moonlighting' (seeking other or additional work) were provided by LinkedIn, and to a lesser extent Twitter:

> And I do a bit of, because I do a bit of consulting and professional learning in the English curriculum, I suppose I advertise, or I market that on LinkedIn, blog posts that kind of thing. (Luke)

The question that emerges here is the nature in which these 'moonlighting' activities seem to run closely aligned with the nature of 'branding' and the individual becoming a brand. Companies purchasing the services of teachers of this calibre and prestige are purchasing both their intellectual property, but also their gravitas and personal brand. Regarding branding, as will be explored further below, it was also noted by Luke that:

> I guess the issue with LinkedIn is it can get quite spammy, you get a lot of people sending through connection requests or just messaging and they're really just sort of selling themselves on there which is, okay it's a platform that's partially for that so. (Luke)

The idea of 'spammy' LinkedIn and people 'selling themselves' goes some of the way to capturing the discomfort and unease of our respondents with the branding idea especially.

LinkedIn was also mentioned as a sight of professional learning, mostly within fields slightly adjacent to classroom practice. As Janice noted:

'Twitter, LinkedIn, just whatever comes across my horizon.' (Janice)

This underlines this group of power users' flexibility across platforms, in a manner that is consistent with the idea of having and maintaining a consistent 'online profile', as part of an online brand development.

5.5. Flip is rewarding

Among respondents, Flip was noted as valuable in the process of engaging with the group, but also time consuming, and often appearing to be a rather one-sided reflective process.

Luke stated:

> I've used the flip grid on the last three readings or so, which is about when I joined the mailing list. I find that's quite useful having the specific article to respond to, having a limited window of opportunity to respond to it and being able to see other peoples' video response. Also the asynchronous thing works for me. (Luke)

The practice of viewing others' responses seems to lift the activity beyond mere reflection towards a meaningful learning activity.

5.6. Discomfort with 'brand'

Being branded a 'social media influencer' (Nicoll, 2022; Shelton et al., 2022) was something rankled our participants due to its associations of youth and mercantile connections. We believe this is a result of the expectation that teachers remain neutral online and avoid sensitive topics, but also a relatively weak connection that teachers make between their professional identity and pursuing financial gain Whilst we categorised this group of teachers as 'power users' they were not comfortable establishing themselves as a 'brand', though many admitted to having a specific element of their identity present online (which to us sounds similar to a brand). The idea of a 'brand' with its mercantile overtones was widely found to be distasteful by our participants. A cohesive 'brand' suggests a consistent look, brand strategy and approach, which despite the neoliberal overtones does not match with the splintered nature of our participants' teacher identities. Alternatively, it could be suggested that maintaining a presence on multiple platforms is an important means of developing a strong brand.

6. Discussion

Our findings provided insights that allowed us to answer the research questions that shaped our study.

RQ1: How does the use of social media contribute to the shaping and presentation of teacher identity?

The teachers in this study are well practised and thoughtful users of social media, and they do so in calculated and careful ways. They make use of the ability to access multiple sites, and to create multiple identities on many of those sites, in order to **splinter their identity into different aspects**. This allows them to express different points of view, on different topics, to different audiences, as well as making use of the anonymity granted by having a handle that is not immediately linked to their name. This is a deliberate and pragmatic decision. In doing so, teachers are able to shape and express different aspects of their own identity: on one Twitter account, for example, they might be the professional teacher, providing guidance to colleagues about lessons and resources. Yet on another

Twitter account, they might critique governmental policy across a range of issues, thus expressing the political side of their lives. And they might retain a personal Facebook account to stay in touch with families—and crucially, these accounts can operate independently of each other (and thus, if a teacher says something controversial on their political Twitter account, it may not necessarily be connected with their professional Twitter account). This alleviates some of the teachers' concerns about their careers and the risks inherent in posting as themselves on social media. That is, having these splintered identities is an exercise both in *constraining* their identity, but also *expressing* that identity.

RQ2: How do teachers make use of different platforms to either consciously or unconsciously shape their identity as teachers and practitioners?

One very clear outcome of this study was the variety of uses for the different social media platforms. Keeping in mind that we were working with confident users of social media, the following divisions appeared in most cases. **Twitter** was used for networking, professional learning and engaging in political matters. Many of the teachers in the study made use of pseudonyms so that they could freely express their opinions about issues such as school funding, political parties, or even the policies and practices of their own school. Twitter accounts were also far more likely to engage in educational debates—although that is at least likely to be related to the way Twitter chats have formed.

Alternatively, **Facebook** was much less utilised by the teachers in question, and it was almost entirely used exclusively for personal reasons. This was surprising, considering there is no shortage of teacher-targeted or teacher-led groups on Facebook. The reason for this perhaps lies in the answer to the first research question; that is, teachers had consciously made the decision to split their identities, and thus Facebook became their personal social media site, and Twitter became a more professional one.

Most of the participants did not speak in any great detail about **LinkedIn**. This suggests that it has little role in teachers' identities. Those that did commented that it had some validity in terms of professional opportunities or building a network but were concerned about being marketed to. Alternatively, **Flip** was something that many of the participants did comment on: they recognised that it required significant effort to plan, record and upload the videos, but most participants also noted that they felt that this was rewarding compared to other platforms.

RQ3: How do teachers engage with the idea of a personal social media 'brand' online?

The term brand was almost unanimously rejected by the teachers. The reason for this was many teachers were uncomfortable with the notion of their identity being solely a commercial one. While many participants recognised that there were teachers who did use social media in this way, and indeed, even generated income, our participants did not see their use of social media in the same light. Instead, there was a focus on professional engagement and discussion (especially on Twitter and through Flip). However, the fact that teachers didn't present a 'brand' didn't necessarily mean that they were representing themselves in their entirety (that is, presenting their personal, professional and political identities

together). Instead, teachers mediated what they shared, even in the relatively safe space of #edureading, aware of the possibility of it being taken out of context. Thus, the answer to this research question is not that teachers were either a brand or entirely themselves; rather, they were a **carefully curated version of themselves**. Importantly this version of themselves was moderated by self-censorship and concerns about breaching rules and policies established by their employer, as well as worries about being taken out of context.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented new findings in the ways that teachers engage online via social media, by adding additional platforms for consideration, we have expanded the scope of this research area. Within this small, but powerful sample, we have outlined the means that teachers use to both safeguard their positions as teachers, as well as express themselves around different elements of their identity. Further steps for research will consider other emergent tools: Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok (Kolber, 2024) and so forth, and consider if these spaces allow a less splintered professional identity. As this study did not explore teachers' expression within more private, group settings explicitly, this requires further investigation also. We propose that greater recognition of teachers' patterns of engagement are useful considerations of policies affecting teachers' use of social media, including codes of ethics and professional standards, and could even be extended into professional learning. This study shows that previous scholarship has focused tightly on singular platforms, and singular accounts within those platforms, with Twitter being the most often studied, by doing so, the field may well have been overlooking a range of features of teacher identity. The nature of teachers presenting different versions depending upon the platform requires future research approaches to consider multiple platforms, rather than simply scraping or drawing from only one. With the dramatic decline in Twitter's user base (Kolber & Enticott, 2023), the current time feels like an especially important hinge point to consider multiple platforms and what each expects from their user base. It is crucial that scholars, policymakers and leaders do not conflate teachers' presentation and self-depiction online via social media as a full or complete vision of them. This could lead to assumptions that teachers lack political awareness or concerns, due to their relative silence over these matters online. In seeking to address this, we support Barnes (2021) suggestion that greater in-school recognition of online professional development and identity forming is important, as well as adding the ways that the personal, professional and political (Mockler, 2011) coalesce and splinter in interesting ways. We propose that teachers engaging in this identity work are participating in a new form of leadership (Kolber & Salazar, 2024), leading and providing an example for peers to follow, and as such, further exploration of this work, and its interaction with traditional leadership practices is a must.

Note

1. Twitter is now called X. However, the term Twitter is still in common use, and was the term used by the participants themselves, so we have chosen to use that term in this paper.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Q1. Thinking back over the last year, what types of professional learning or development have you undertaken face-to-face?

Q2. Thinking back over the last year, what types of professional learning or development have you undertaken online?

(Elaboration:Tell us about a really good professional learning session. What made it good?)

(Elaboration:Tell us about a really bad professional learning session. What made it bad?)

Q3. What features would you define as necessary for effective, or useful professional learning development for you?

Q4. What is your professional learning or information diet in regards to your social media use? On what platforms do you access this information?

(Elaboration: Is there anyone you think is worth following on Twitter? Who are they? What makes them worth following?)

Q5. Do you use social media as a tool for professional learning or development? In what way? How have you found social media as a tool for professional learning?

Q6. What is your online identity, or 'brand'?

(Elaboration: What kinds of things do you share, or tweet, or retweet?)

Q7. Is this identity or 'brand' different to your professional identity? If so, how so?

Q8. How would you classify your engagement with research?

Q9. How do you align yourself between being a researcher, or consumer of research and being a teacher, or practitioner?

Q10. Are you familiar with the term 'pracademic'; do you think it fits, or applies to you?

Q11. What are your primary means of engaging with the #edureading group?

Q12. What is a memorable learning or experience you've had engaging with #edureading?

Q13. What was an unsuccessful experience with #edureading?