Review of the methodological landscape of literacy and social media research

by Esteban Morales

Abstract

Social media affects and is affected by our literacies — the way we make, share, and produce a sense of what is happening in these digital spaces. The purpose of this paper is to explore the methodological landscape of literacy research on social media. To achieve this, 161 papers that have explored social media and literacies were systematically reviewed. Results show that most of the research studies reviewed relied on qualitative methods as the dominant mode of obtaining information, although many integrated several data sources. Additionally, findings show that most studies do not use social media data and instead rely on traditional data sources, such as surveys. Overall, this study highlights opportunities for researchers to explore the connection between social media and literacies in innovative ways.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Literature review: Social media, literacy, and an evolving methodological landscape
3. Methodology: Systematic literature review
4. Findings: Methodologies and methods to research social media and literacy
5. Discussion and conclusion

1. Introduction

For a long time, the proliferation of technology has been linked to the promotion of a participatory culture that encourages us to be more connected than ever, where we actively use, produce, and share knowledge across different media (Jenkins, et al., 2006). Within this participatory culture, social media platforms have surfaced as a widely popular phenomenon that plays a crucial role in our networked lives (boyd, 2014; Kemp, 2020). Moreover, as social media platforms are increasingly intertwined with our identities, practices, and communities (Burnett and Merchant, 2011), it is now imperative to examine how social media affects our meaning-making processes and practices — to research literacy in connection to social media. Certainly, as social media platforms are closely connected to participatory culture, they have come to represent an approach to literacy research that emphasizes communities’ role in our meaning-making processes.

Indeed, the complex relation between literacy on social media can be framed with a multitude of theories and concepts that allow us to better explore and understand these meaning-making practices and events.
One of such theoretical frameworks is new literacy studies (NLS) (Gee, 2015; Street, 1997), focused on the idea that literacy is neither a technical nor a neutral skill, but rather a social practice “always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” [1]. Indeed, NLS scholars see literacy as something people did in the world and society (Gee, 2015), thus emphasizing literacy as contextual, multimodal, and multifaceted (Coiro, et al., 2008). The NLS framework positions literacy as dependent on multiple purposes, tools, skills, and contexts that are present throughout the meaning-making processes (Kellner and Share, 2019). This is better summarized by Lankshear and Knobel (2007):

If we see literacy as “simply reading and writing” — whether in the sense of encoding and decoding print, as a tool, a set of skills, or a technology, or as some kind of psychological process — we cannot make sense of our literacy experience. Reading (or writing) is always reading something in particular with understanding. Different kinds of texts require “somewhat different backgrounds and somewhat different skills” if they are to be read (i.e., read meaningfully). Moreover, particular texts can be read in different ways, contingent upon different people’s experiences of practices in which these texts occur. [2]

Therefore, under NLS, social media — as networks of varied representations and interactions — foster multiple literacies. Consequently, it is crucial to study the multiple meaning-making practices that occur in and around social media, not only because we more regularly use these digital platforms (Kemp, 2020), but also because they are an ideal space in which to examine our literacy practices — as social media encodes social interactions that further allow researchers to explore issues of representation and socialization (Livingstone, 2014; Pangrazio, 2020).

Even if it is clear that we ought to better understand the relationship between social media and our literacy practices, the way they are to be studied is uncertain. More than a decade ago, Coiro, et al. (2008) asked whether literacy scholars required new methodological approaches to respond to the challenges posed by the ongoing and incremental technological development. Similarly, Livingstone, et al. (2008) questioned how methods could and should be combined and elaborated to respond to the NLS field’s emergent needs. Moreover, Stornaiuolo, et al. (2013) asked: “[T]o what extent do new times, new tools, and new practices require us to reconceptualize the role of literacy researchers and reinvent our methods? How might we add new entries to the methodological catalogue, thereby gaining fresh purchase on literacy practices without relying on the assumed ‘newness’ of networked literacies?” [3] Nevertheless, the way researchers address these issues nowadays on social media is not clear and should be explored to provide potential clues that allow researchers to better respond to the field’s emergent needs and questions.

Accordingly, this paper aims to explore the methodological landscape of literacy research on social media. To achieve this, I first discuss how literacy and social media have been usually approached from a methodological standpoint. Then, I present this study’s methodological design — a systematic literature review — followed by the findings, which are organized in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method designs. Finally, I conclude this paper by expanding on the findings’ implications, which could guide future research focused on literacy and social media’s intertwined nature.

2. Literature review: Social media, literacy, and an evolving methodological landscape

The complicated relationship between social media and literacy have been widely discussed over the last couple of decades. While some studies have focused on specific conceptualizations of social media literacy (e.g., Livingstone, 2014; Rheingold, 2008), some have explored how social media changes the ways literacy is understood, practiced, and taught (e.g., McCosker, 2017), and others have emphasized how
literacy is essential to promote effective and ethical use of social media (e.g., Lu, et al., 2019). Regarding methodological designs, several studies have discussed social media and literacy challenges and opportunities to conduct research. More relevantly, Stornaiuolo, Higgs and Glynda (2013) conducted a literature review on methods used to research literacy and social media and found that only a few of the reviewed articles used mixed-method approaches, while a majority of them “featured standard qualitative approaches to capture and analyze the authoring activities represented across [...] social media” [4]. Nonetheless, as there has not been a recent systematic review focused on how social media and literacy are examined, we do not have a clear idea of how methodological approaches have evolved to the new procedural opportunities and challenges offered by social media and our meaning-making practices.

Accordingly, this section will further explore how each of these two concepts — literacy and social media — have been methodologically approached in the past, thus providing a background to a discussion on research designs and methods used to explore these issues. More specifically, this section outlines and summarizes ongoing methodological discussions within social media and literacy studies, seeking to highlight challenges and opportunities that researchers exploring these areas face in their studies. Accordingly, an overview of these tensions provides important elements to analyze methodological designs of studies focused on social media and literacy.

### 2.1. Methodologies for social media research

Social media is now a key area of research across many disciplines and academic fields, an important toolkit for scholars who wish to engage in digital social research (Veltri, 2020). Certainly, social media enable researchers to take advantage of the increasing scale and scope of data available on these platforms (Quan-Haase and Sloan, 2017), thus becoming a driver of methodological innovation. This push towards methodological innovations has been most notorious in quantitative research due to the increasing availability of social media big data: “The emergence of big data from social media has had impacts in the study of human behavior similar to the introduction of the microscope or the telescope in the fields of biology and astronomy: it has produced a qualitative shift in the scale, scope and depth of possible analysis” [5]. This almost-ubiquitous availability of social media data is in no small measure possible due to the proliferation of digital methods of data collection, better exemplified by applications programming interfaces (APIs) (Batrinca and Treleaven, 2014) that enable researchers to obtain and analyze both a large amount of social media content and its related metadata, such as user location and the devices that were used to access the platforms (Gerber and Lynch, 2017). Quantitative research on social media most commonly features methodologies such as quantitative content analysis, where social media content is acquired, archived, prepared, and analyzed by either automatic or manual coding, hoping to predict or better understand specific phenomena (Skalski, et al., 2017; Kim, et al., 2018). Another common research method is social network analysis, which explores users’ interactions around specific platforms (e.g., YouTube), spaces (e.g., Facebook pages), topics (e.g., trends), users (e.g., mentions), or posted content (e.g., hashtags) (Himelboim, 2017).

But not all research on social media is about numbers and metrics. Qualitative research has also evolved along with the proliferation of social media platforms, as its methods adjust to the new settings and opportunities offered by the Internet (Baym and Markham, 2009). Indeed, on social media platforms old dichotomies between quantitative and qualitative — between big data and small data — blur and often disappear (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017). In this scenario, qualitative approaches to research on social media embed not only traditional qualitative techniques (e.g., interviews and observation) but also involve innovative techniques that seek to deal with the increasingly multimodal qualitative data that can be exported from social media platforms (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017). Such innovative qualitative methodological approaches often have to respond to fast-changing notions of research sites (e.g., Reich, 2015), representation (e.g., Warfield, 2016), participants (e.g., Käihkö, 2020), and communities (e.g., Levy, 2015). An example of a methodological approach that seeks to respond to these emergent social media settings is social media ethnography, where researchers share and explore social media data, thus emphasizing an understanding of “the Internet as a messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and off-line worlds, and is connected and constituted through the ethnographer’s narrative” [6].
However, research conducted on social media faces several limitations and challenges. Following McCay-Peet and Quan-Hasse (2017), these challenges can be summarized in three areas. First, there are issues of methods, where researchers are tasked to constantly innovate in their approaches to data due to the relentlessly evolving digital landscape. Second, there are issues of ethics, where researchers must deal with matters such as privacy, accuracy, and accountability (see also Markham, et al., 2018). Finally, there are issues of scale, where researchers ought to address the varied context and sizes of the samples that prevail on social media. Moreover, one of the main challenges around social media research methods — and especially concerning its preference towards big data — is that it often leads to a vision that is “removed from human experience, so only gross summarizations of the outcomes of analyses can be comprehended, making the implications of findings on big data rather abstract and not always directly applicable to human experience” [7]. As argued by Tufekci (2014), these challenges urge researchers to recognize that the “meaning of social media imprints, context of human communications, and nature of socio-cultural interactions are multi-faceted and complex” [8]. Certainly, these challenges commend researchers to place social media research on firmer methodological, ethical, and conceptual bases (Tufekci, 2014; Luka and Millette, 2018), further describing, contextualizing, and signifying analyzed data (Latzko-Toth, et al., 2017).

2.2. Methodologies of literacy research in the digital age

As literacy scholarship has evolved over the last century, so has the need to develop more complex, fluid, and contextualized methodologies that appropriately respond to the field’s research questions and aims. This evolving methodological landscape is visible from the foundational works that first expanded notions of printed literacy and pushed for a more situated, social, and multimodal understanding of literacy (e.g., Heath, 1983; Ong, 1982; Street, 1984); until most current studies that seek to address the digital ecosystem and its implications around definitions on text, authorship, and materiality of our current meaning-making practices (e.g., Burnett and Merchant, 2020; Coiro, 2021). Indeed, as literacy scholarship has continued to adapt methodologies from fields such as linguistics and cognitive psychology (Coiro, et al., 2008), it has developed an extensive repertoire of methods, strategies, and tools (Albers, et al., 2014). This adaptability of literacy scholarship is evident in the inclusion of methodological approaches such as ethnography (Heath, 1988) and arts-based research methods (Glenn, 2013).

The Internet, then, brought an unprecedented change in how literacy is practiced, taught and — more relevant for this paper — researched, as it challenged the semiotic systems, speed, and scale in which literacy operates (Holbrook, et al., 2014; Kovač and van der Weel, 2018). These changes in the nature and character of literacy caused a digital turn in the field (Mills, 2010) that transformed how literacy is studied. Certainly, it is worth noting that this digital turn did not reduce the value of traditional methods to understand literacy in the digital era. Instead, it highlights the increasing existence of phenomena that are “virtually invisible, inaccessible, or unanalyzable using traditional research methods” [2]. These changing and challenging conditions have resulted in innovative research methodological approaches such as video ethnographies (Santiago de Roock, 2020), sonic cartographies (Brownell and Wargo, 2017), transmediation of data (Peña and James, 2020), and network analyses (Singh and Singh, 2018); methods that have embraced a media-specific analysis to recognize, expand and challenge the materiality of our literacy practices (Hayles, 2004) and respond to the increasing multimodality of digital environments.

Nevertheless, literacy research faces many methodological obstacles and challenges that remain to be addressed in the current digital landscape. In this sense, Hagerman, et al. (2020) describe at least three challenges that current literacy digital research methods face: 1) methods must respond to the complexities of our current literacy practices, as some traditional approaches do not fully align with the way meaning is created, read, and shared nowadays; 2) methods must embrace — instead of trying to control — the messiness of the Internet, properly responding to the multiple contexts in which literacy practices might take place; and, 3) methods must be authentic and ethical, appropriately reflecting participants’ practices, identities, and contexts. The need to respond to these challenges is greater now than ever before, as our classrooms, workplaces, social lives, and identities (to name a few) are increasingly intertwined with digital technology.
3. Methodology: Systematic literature review

Looking to explore how social media and literacy are researched, I conducted a systematic review of the literature. The literature search strategy focused on two academic databases: Education Source EBSCO and ERIC. As the emphasis of this systematic literature review is to examine recent methodological approaches to social media and literacy, the search was focused between January 2015 and the date of the search (December 2020). The database query included articles that contained the terms “Social Media” AND “Literacy OR Literacies OR Literate” on their abstracts. This search resulted in a total of 266 papers. After this initial selection of papers, a series of inclusion criteria were followed to screen the available literature. Of the 266 papers that were downloaded and organized, several were discarded of the sample due to different factors: nine papers were not in English, 13 were unavailable to download, and 12 were duplicates. This process resulted in 232 articles that could be included in the final sample of this research. After reviewing all the papers in the preliminary sample of 232 papers, 69 percent \((n=161)\) collected and analyzed data. Since this article’s objective is to study the methodology and methods used to research literacies in relation to social media, only this sample of 164 papers will be discussed later in this paper.

After screening the selected literature, each article was reviewed, coded, and analyzed. The coding and synthesis of the literature were focused on the methodological approaches of the studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods), the research methods they featured (such as content analysis or survey research), and the data that they used (such as social media content or interview data). Additionally, it is worth noting that some studies in the sample are not explicit in their methodological approach and design. Because of this challenge — and to avoid making assumptions about the studies’ methodological frameworks — this article only reports on the range of research methodologies found in the sample and does not attempt to categorize studies that did not explicitly name their methodological approach. Because of this limitation, the total distribution of specific methods within each methodological approach \((i.e.,\) qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods\) will not be reported in this study.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that this literature review’s scope is limited to two databases: ERIC and EBSCO Education Source. These two catalogues, which are among the most frequently used databases among English-speakers education researchers, will likely fail to capture all methodological designs used to study social media and literacy. Likewise, it is essential to acknowledge that research on literacy and social media often takes place outside the field of education and are thus not in the selected databases. For example, research on health literacy in social media has been commonly undertaken in the past years, but it is often published in academic medical journals \((e.g.,\) Holmberg, et al., 2019\). Indeed, future studies could address these two limitations by expanding the scope of the search.

4. Findings: Methodologies and methods to research social media and literacy

The following section presents the methodologies and methods that were identified in the 130 studies in the sample. As shown in Figure 1, of the selected studies, 56 percent \((n=90)\) used qualitative methodologies, 34 percent \((n=55)\) used a quantitative research design, and 10 percent \((n=16)\) used a mixed-method approach. Each of these three approaches will be further explored in the subsequent sections.
Furthermore, Table 1 summarizes the key quantitative findings of this study. As noted here, the most commonly used methods vary between each methodological approach, from case studies and ethnographies on qualitative studies to surveys, experiments, and content analysis on quantitative and mixed methods approaches. Additionally, it is worth noting that most studies rely on non-digital data (e.g., interviews and observations). Surprisingly, those who rely on digital data the most within the sample of this study are qualitative researchers, as they frequently use social media posts as data sources. The following sections will now proceed to explore these findings in detail, presenting different method and data sources used with examples of different studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Most used</th>
<th>Second most used</th>
<th>Digital</th>
<th>Non-digital</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Case study (21.1%)</td>
<td>Etnography (10.0%)</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td></td>
<td>Survey (78.2%)</td>
<td>Experiments (9.1%)</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed methods</td>
<td></td>
<td>Survey (50.0%)</td>
<td>Content analysis (25.0%)</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1. Qualitative studies

Of the studies that relied on qualitative data (56 percent, \(n=90\)), the most common methodological approach was case study \((n=19)\). For example, Schmier’s (2019) study focuses on a Bangladeshi-American girl to explore the possibilities of integrating digital technologies such as social media in the literacy curriculum at an American school. Furthermore, data collection in qualitative case studies mostly involved interviews \((e.g., \text{Probst}, 2017)\), social media content analysis \((e.g., \text{Lalonde, et al.}, 2016)\), and observation \((e.g., \text{Ajayi}, 2015)\). It is worth noting that most case studies in the qualitative sample combined two or more methods of collection, such as Kovalik and Curwood (2019), who relied on participant observation, interviews, surveys, and recollection of artifacts to explore the use of poetry on Instagram to promote language learning.

Another common qualitative methodological approach to study literacy on social media is ethnography \((n=9)\). Such is the case in Nordmark’s (2017) study, which explores the use of the Writing Roles model — focused on the challenges that arise from the formulation phase of textual production — in digital writing, situated in Swedish secondary schools and following an ethnographic approach to “obtain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the everyday teaching” [10]. Researchers who used an ethnographic approach relied mostly on a combination of participant observation and either interviews or surveys for data collection \((e.g., \text{Daniel}, 2018; \text{Vea}, 2019; \text{Warner}, 2016)\), while some of them also included an analysis of artifacts \((e.g., \text{Shin}, 2018)\). A third common methodological approach is narrative inquiry \((n=5)\). For example, Ladson-Billings (2016) used narrative inquiry to reflect on her personal and family history, discussing African-American literacy practices and the relationship between social media and social movements such as Black Lives Matter in the United States. Another example is the article authored by Gadsden, et al. (2019), which examines the narratives of four urban high school youths of colour in the United States to explore their multiple literacies by drawing on data collected in interviews and focus groups. Additionally, some studies in the sample relied on participatory action research (PAR) methodologies \((n=5)\). An example of a study that features PAR methodologies is Fantozzi, et al.’s (2018) research, which explored with students from a preschool in the United States emergent literacies and storytelling using iPads. In keeping with PAR principles, most studies used a collaborative and participatory approach to data collection and analysis \((e.g., \text{Chamberlain}, 2017; \text{Elmore and Coleman}, 2019)\).

Other qualitative methodological approaches found in the sample included phenomenology \((e.g., \text{Şimşek and Ünal}, 2020)\), design-based research \((e.g., \text{Laakkonen}, 2015)\), grounded theory \((e.g., \text{Dharamshi}, 2018)\), critical discourse analysis \((e.g., \text{Pang and Hill}, 2018)\), autoethnography \((e.g., \text{Johnson}, 2018)\), and arts-based research \((e.g., \text{Wewiora}, 2019)\). Additionally, it is worth highlighting that some studies in the sample mixed several of these methodological approaches. For example, Charbonneau-Gowdy, et al. (2016) combined ethnography, PAR, and case study to research technology-supported teaching processes in Chile. Another example is an ethnographic case study focused on undergraduate female students’ use of social media in Saudi Arabia (Dahmash, 2019).

Regarding the data used in the qualitative studies, results show that most papers in the sample \((n=58)\) relied on non-digital data to respond to their research questions. For example, Du and Haines (2017) combined narrative interviews, questionnaires, and observational fieldnotes to study indigenous Australians’ information behaviours. Additionally, 12 studies in the sample relied on digital data to respond to their research questions, such as the research conducted by Pang and Hill (2018) where they examine how Chinese bodies are gendered and racialized in social media sites by analyzing articles from popular blogs and news sites online. Finally, 19 studies used a mix of digital and non-digital data. Such is the case of the study conducted by Gleason (2018), who combined interviews, informal communication, and Twitter posts to examine the relationship between new literacies practices in this social media platform and feminist identity development.
4.2. Quantitative studies

Of the quantitative studies in the sample (34 percent, \(n=55\)), a vast majority relied on surveys to collect data (\(n=43\)). Studies using this approach primarily focused on participants’ perceptions of technology (e.g., Al-Aufi, et al., 2017), technology access, use, and practices (e.g., Buzzetto-Hollywood and Alade, 2018), participants’ self-assessment of technology-related skills (e.g., Baro, et al., 2019), or evaluation of certain literacy skills (e.g., Güner and Ekmekci, 2019). An example of a paper that used a quantitative survey methodology is Li, Snow, and White’s (2015) study of 531 students in grades six to eight in urban schools in the United States, which focused on participants’ access and use of technology (such as computers, social media platforms, and smartphones), and how they perceived its affordances for language and literacy learning. Another example is a study conducted by Meiki (2015) in Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates, where 2,744 high school and university students were surveyed to explore youths’ use of media technology.

Additionally, other studies from the sample relied on experimental designs to answer their research questions (\(n=5\)). For example, the pilot study led by Mingoia, et al. (2019) focuses on the promotion of social media literacy skills among 84 young women, where researchers implemented pre- and post-tests within a control and an intervention group. Another example is the study by Greene, et al. (2018), who also implemented a pre- and post-test correlational research design, measuring how 53 college students’ digital literacy skills were related to their understandings of science. Finally, Guizzo, et al. (2017) studied how media exposure could promote engagement in collective action to reduce women’s objectification in northern Italy. This study was done by randomly assigning participants to one of three groups (one control group and two intervention groups) and measuring their reactions to different television content. Another article (Choi and Behm-Morawitz, 2017) used a content analysis approach (by analyzing 102 YouTube videos) and an experimental design (exploring how these videos could promote digital literacy among viewers) and thus highlighting the possibility of integrating different quantitative methods into research designs that explore social media and literacy.

Moreover, consistent with the previously described reliance of quantitative studies on surveys, most papers in the sample focused on non-digital data (\(n=51\)). For example, the study conducted by Downes and colleagues (2020) surveyed over 70 parents in Canada about their beliefs around their children’s technology use. Accordingly, only four studies in the sample used digital data to address their research questions, such as the study conducted by Hilte, et al. (2020), who analyzed a corpus of 434,537 social media posts written by 1,384 teenagers to examine the lexical patterns in informal online writing.

4.3. Mixed methods studies

Researchers who used mixed methods research (10 percent, \(n=16\)) combined some of the methodological tools previously described, as this approach intentionally seeks to integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches (Ponce and Pagán-Maldonado, 2015). In this case, and consistent with previous findings, the most frequently used method of data collection were surveys (\(n=8\)), combining qualitative (with open-ended questions) and quantitative (with closed-ended questions) data. Such is the case, for example, of a study conducted by Omoera, et al. (2018) in Nigeria, where they examined the relationship between social media and English writing abilities by surveying 110 students.

Another frequently used method used by researchers who relied on mixed methods research was content analysis (\(n=4\)). An example of this approach is the study led by Mercea (2015), who analyzed Facebook and Twitter posts to examine “the networked communication foreshadowing coordinated street demonstrations” [11]. Another study that is worth mentioning is one authored by Nygren, et al. (2019), where 2,748 upper secondary students in Sweden co-analyzed the news content in their social media feeds to explore what news they were seeing and how they critically assessed its credibility. Furthermore, content analysis was often mixed with surveys to deepen the reach of the collected data (e.g., Al-Qallaf and Al-Mutairi, 2016).

Additionally, some studies (e.g., Cherner and Curry, 2019) reported using case study as a methodological
approach to conduct mixed-methods studies \((n=4)\). An example of such a study was developed by Lido, et al. (2019), who used interviews, surveys, GPS trails, and social media data to explore lifelong literacies and adult informal learning in Glasgow. Finally, it is worth highlight the study led by Solmaz (2017), which combined online surveys and interviews with an analysis of social media data using computer-mediated discourse analysis, an approach that “allows diverse theories about discourse and computer-mediated communication to be entertained and tested” [12].

Finally, and consistent with the findings in both qualitative and quantitative studies, most mixed-methods papers relied on non-digital data \((n=10)\). For example, Vu, et al. (2019) combined observation, interviews, and surveys to explore the use of digital storytelling to engage and promote academic literacy. Of the studies that relied on a mixed-methods approach, only the previously described study by Mercea (2015) use exclusively digital data. Additionally, five studies in the mixed-methods sample combined both digital and non-digital data in their research, such as Al-Qallaf and Al-Mutairi (2016), who used blog content, observations, surveys, and focus groups to examine the role of blogs when teaching English as a foreign language.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Methodologies and methods — understood to be the procedures and tools that frame the research process — are essential to researchers as they enable and constrain the questions they can respond to on their work (Creswell, 2013). As social media complexifies notions of data, identities, positionality, ethics, and study contexts (to name a few), researchers who aim to appropriately respond to the current digital landscape must adjust their approaches to accurately address the challenges and opportunities posed by them (Baym and Markham, 2009). Correspondingly, this paper aimed to explore the methodological approaches used to study literacy and its relation to social media.

Findings of this study show that more than half of the analyzed papers relied on qualitative methodologies, which is consistent with Stornaiuolo, et al.’s (2013) findings. Furthermore, results highlight that research on literacy and social media frequently relies on multiple methods and data sources, including the integration of several different quantitative methods, qualitative methodologies, or a mixed approach between them. This finding does seem to suggest that — as highlighted by Livingstone, et al. (2008) — multiple literacies studies have led to a methodological convergence that seeks to “overcome, or compensate for, the disadvantages of certain methods over others” [13].

Moreover, this study’s findings highlight important opportunities for future research projects to explore literacies on social media. These opportunities are better exemplified by the frequent use of surveys to collect data in this study’s sample, thus showing that researchers seldom followed methodological approaches that take advantage of the digital environments in which social media operates. Additionally, this gap in previous research can be seen in the minimal presence of quantitative approaches to social media data, such as social network analysis. This method could enable researchers to recognize users’ position in specific networks to examine the diversity of the relationships formed with other users, providing valuable insights on their capacity to form connections, share resources, and contextualize their practices (Dawson and Siemens, 2014) — aspects which could be valuable to understand literacy practices on social media. Social network analysis is just one of many other methods that could prove helpful for future explorations of social media and literacies.

Certainly, this study’s results do not suggest that the methodologies and methods reviewed here are not significant to better comprehend literacy practices and events in the context of social media. Nevertheless, results do suggest a gap and an opportunity for future researchers to explore the complicated relationship between social media and literacy in possibly ground-breaking ways: a call for future studies to benefit from the digital turn of literacy studies and conduct more research that features social media data.
Accordingly, studies that respond to this gap must take into account the challenges presented by the persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability of social media data (boyd and Marwick, 2011; Stornaiuolo, et al., 2013), as well as issues of methods, contextualization, and ethics that prevail on research around literacy practices on digital environments (Hagerman, et al., 2020). In this sense, studying literacy practices on social media by following emergent or transformed methodological approaches could enrich the field, which is much in need of novel understandings of how social media affects and is affected by our ever-changing meaning-making processes.

About the author

Esteban Morales is a Ph.D. candidate in the Language and Literacy Education program at the University of British Columbia. He obtained a M.A. in educational technology and learning design from Simon Fraser University and a second M.A. in transmedia communication from EAFIT University in Medellin, Colombia. His research interests include social media, educational technology, peace education, data studies, and media literacies.

E-mail: esteban [dot] morales [at] ubc [dot] ca

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Dr. Leah Macfadyen, Dr. Teresa Dobson and Dr. Mark Turin for their comments and suggestions. I also want to thank the reviewers and editor of First Monday who improved this manuscript with their clear and valuable feedback.

Notes

References


Michelle Hagerman, Pamela Beach, Megan Cotnam-kappel, and Cristyne Hébert, 2020. “Multiple


Review of the methodological landscape of literacy and social media research


Review of the methodological landscape of literacy and social media research


---

**Editorial history**

Received 13 May 2021; revised 9 October 2021; 31 July 2022.

---

This paper is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Review of the methodological landscape of literacy and social media research by Esteban Morales. *First Monday*, volume 27, number 8 (August 2022). doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i8.11696