

MILITARY LEADERS' SOCIAL MEDIA USE IMPACT ON THEIR SOLDIERS LIVES

Investigating How the Use of Social Media by Senior Leaders in the United States Army Has  
Made a Significant Impact on the Lives of Soldiers Within Their Formations.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT.....	1
CHAPTER 1 .....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	2
Background of the Problem of Practice .....	2
Statement of the Problem of Practice .....	9
Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project.....	12
Research Questions .....	12
General Research Question .....	12
Specific Research Questions .....	13
Delimitations.....	13
Significance of the Applied Culminating Project.....	14
Definitions of Terms.....	15
Organization of the Applied Culminating Project .....	15
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	17
Introduction .....	17
Theoretical Framework.....	17
Civil-Military Relations .....	18
Security and Safety Concerns.....	20
Discipline and Good Order .....	22
Psychological and Mental Health Concerns.....	23
Behavior of Service Members.....	25
Communication and Social Connections .....	27
Research Gaps.....	28
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY .....	30
Introduction .....	30
Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project.....	30
Research Questions .....	31

General Research Question .....	31
Specific Research Questions .....	31
Type of Research.....	32
Population and Sample .....	32
Measures and Instrumentation .....	33
Measures.....	34
Instrumentation .....	34
Validation .....	36
Data Collection Procedures.....	37
Preparation .....	37
Data Collection.....	38
Follow-Up Phase .....	39
Statistical Treatment of the Data.....	39
Limitations.....	39
Summary .....	40
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS .....	41
Introduction .....	41
Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project.....	42
Research Questions .....	42
General Research Question .....	42
Specific Research Questions .....	42
Survey Data .....	43
Interview Responses .....	46
Summary of Findings.....	49
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	51
Introduction .....	51
Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project.....	51
Research Questions .....	51
Specific Research Questions: .....	52

Summary of Significant Findings ..... 52

Implications for Innovative Design of Practice ..... 55

Leadership Plan of Action ..... 56

Conclusions ..... 59

Recommendations for Further Study ..... 60

Summary of the Study ..... 61

References ..... 62

## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined the impact of senior Army leaders' social media use on Soldiers' lives within their formations. While social media has enhanced communication, accessibility, and leader–Soldier engagement, concerns persist regarding its effects on operational security, unit cohesion, discipline, and mental well-being. The study sought to understand how leaders' digital presence influences Soldiers' perceptions, morale, and trust, and to identify measures to mitigate associated risks while strengthening professional communication.

Data were collected through surveys administered to 120 Soldiers and focus group discussions with 5–8 participants per session, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights. Findings revealed a critical disconnect between the increasing reliance on social media in modern leadership and the Army's existing framework for regulating its use. Participants acknowledged the benefits of improved communication and transparency but also highlighted significant risks, including security vulnerabilities, erosion of professionalism, and negative impacts on mental health and unit cohesion.

The study concludes that leaders' social media presence is no longer solely personal but a professional extension of leadership that directly influences organizational climate. Recommendations include strengthening policy enforcement, enhancing leader education on responsible social media use, and integrating digital leadership practices into professional military development. These findings contribute to improving leadership effectiveness and safeguarding Soldiers in an increasingly digital operational environment.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background of the Problem of Practice**

Social media is now a major part of society and the military, changing how people communicate, share information, and interact across ranks, ensuring accessibility about military operations (Singer & Brooking, 2018; Spencer, 2022). Hinton (2023) noted that when senior Army personnel use platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, these platforms can help or harm military operations and affect soldiers' lives. As cyberattacks and security incidents increase, poor management of social media during communication raises security risks for Army soldiers (Bélanger & Lagacé-Roy, 2016; Silvestri, 2015). For instance, posting troop photos on Facebook without hiding details can let enemies find out locations, troop numbers, and weapon types. Enemies can then use geotags and other data from posts to plan ambushes, resulting in heavy losses.

Social media has improved communication and strengthened social relations between Army leaders and subordinates within their formations, but has increased the threat to their lives. For a long time, traditional communication tools such as satellite telephones, tactical radios, and email were widely used by senior Army leaders to give orders, share military operational files, and communicate with soldiers in their units (Black, 2015; Singer & Brooking, 2018). These traditional tools and channels have indeed facilitated communication, but have had little impact on the social relations between the senior officers and service members within their formations. However, the social media revolution and integration into the military sector

have significantly enhanced communication and strengthened the social bonds between senior Army leaders and service officers (Spencer, 2022; Warren, 2020). For instance, WhatsApp Messenger offers advanced features such as emojis and graphic interface format (GIF), allowing senior and junior Army officers to add humor or emphasize a message. Whether the conversation is formal or informal, these features enhance communication among Army personnel, improving outcomes and strengthening their overall relationship.

The U.S. military, like many others, uses social media to reach large audiences quickly and at a low cost. Social media platforms make it easy for military leaders to share information with service members anywhere in the world (Giroux, 2021; Spencer, 2022). Most commands, installations, and senior leaders have public accounts on Facebook, X, Instagram, or WhatsApp. Leaders also use these accounts to connect with community partners and the public, especially for recruitment (Spencer, 2022; Taylor, 2009; Urban, 2021). By engaging with the public online, military leaders help build trust and strong relationships, which are important for good relations between the military and society.

Social media has enhanced privacy in the military by allowing various units and subgroups to share information within their private groups. According to Giroux (2021), military leaders and various subsets within the force create private Facebook groups where information is shared among specific members with access to the group. This enhances the privacy of the information and prevents it from reaching unintended unit members. Today, at least 90 percent of military leaders and members use social media daily to communicate, connect with friends, or access information (Giroux, 2021; Hasselbladh & Ydén, 2020). With many serving military members actively using social media daily, it is clear that these platforms enable military

leaders to collaborate and share best practices with service members in their formations. Additionally, leaders and service members use social media to access real-time information about their respective units and learn from one another's experiences. According to Giroux, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) embraced social media to enable service members to share accurate information with colleagues and leaders, rather than fall victim to false rumors and gossip. Interestingly, this goal has been achieved as social media has become a trusted platform for accessing primary information in real-time.

Besides communication, social media has proven an effective recruitment tool for the DoD, particularly for recruiting Generation Z (Gen Z) in the U.S. and globally. Social media is the primary method of communication preferred by the young generation globally (Giroux, 2021; Hasselbladh & Ydén, 2020). This implies that DoD can easily reach the younger generation through its social media recruitment messages to sustain the all-volunteer force (AVF) locally and abroad. Considering that Gen Z spends most of their time on social media, it is easier to target and reach a large audience with military news, including recruitment, community empowerment, and planned non-combat operational activities (Hasselbladh & Ydén, 2020). Therefore, social media promotes civil-military relations by bridging the communication and social gap between service members and civilian communities.

However, the growing use of social media in sharing critical information, including combat operational plans, poses serious security, misperception, and misinformation risks that threaten the lives of service members, military leaders, and civilians. The poor security on most social media platforms poses a significant threat to soldiers when their formation leaders share sensitive information. Hacking an Army leader's Facebook account, tapping WhatsApp videos or

voice calls, or leaking sensitive military information sent to soldiers is not surprising news (Patrikarakos, 2017). According to Hinton (2023), the recent missile strikes in Ukraine, state secret leaks in the U.S., assassinations in Russia, arrests, and increased incarcerations in the U.K. were all linked to social media. In the military, sharing critical information, such as attack operations, via social media poses extreme risks to soldiers' lives when the information is perceived as a potential threat.

When soldiers fail to handle sensitive information shared by their formation leaders via social media, it can result in leaks or enemy access, eroding unit cohesion, or leading to severe disciplinary issues (*18 U.S.C. § 798*, 2026). In their studies, Mackintosh (2011) and Black (2014) clarified that soldiers are human and can make mistakes. However, mistakes in the military often have grave consequences for the entire unit or the individual officer. The military is strongly guided by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which leaves no room for error, regardless of an officer's rank (Burroughs & Ruth, 2022; Patrikarakos, 2017). However, using social media in communication is associated with numerous errors, including mistaken identities that result in sharing sensitive information with online impersonators who are enemies. For instance, enemies can use fake social media accounts to share misleading content with junior officers or to send divisive messages that contain ethnic-sensitive information, causing tension among members of the same formation. Sharing personal information about unit members via social media groups can damage the relationship between Army leaders and service members in their formations.

Posting military business or sharing sensitive military operations has long been a threat to security, and it is discouraged among Army leaders. Despite this, several military leaders

have been in the spotlight for posting or sharing sensitive military operations on social media, thereby risking their troops' lives (Spencer, 2022). From a security perspective, sharing locations and force dispositions with enemies via social media constitutes a severe breach of operational security and a threat to soldiers' lives (Cohen, 2019; Hinton, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022). For example, sharing content and location via social media led to mass casualties in the Russia-Ukraine conflict in August 2022 (Hinton, 2023). The enemy used the Telegram posts, messaging, and broadcasting applications of soldiers to track their location, then conducted a missile strike that badly hit a building used as headquarters in the city of Popasna. In 2018, soldiers from Western forces in Afghanistan and Syria made a grave mistake by posting their physical training data on the Strava fitness social media application. Such data was used to identify the precise locations of all their military bases in the region, exposing the soldiers' lives to extreme risk. Recently, a Russian submarine commander's social media post led to his assassination. The commander shared his regular route to Strava, which was used to trace his location during a morning run, and he was eventually assassinated. These cases suggest that Army leaders exposed soldiers' lives within their formations by posting content and sharing sensitive data openly via social media platforms.

In the latest Signal chat group leak of March 2025 that included senior US Military officials, these leaders put the lives of the soldiers at extreme danger by sharing classified planned military attacks on Yemen through a group chat where a journalist from The Atlantic was a member (Beaumont, 2025). According to the Atlantic report, the Signal chat group contained the US most senior security officials including: National Security Advisor Michael Waltz, Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of Defense Pete

Hegseth, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard ("TG"), US Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent ("Scott B"), presumed Deputy White House Chief of Staff Stephen Miller ("S M"), White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles, and United States Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkof (Beaumont, 2025). Although Pete Hegseth angrily denied that any war plans or classified material were shared in the group chat, a screenshot clearly showed the planned bomb strikes using F-18s and MQ-9 military drones as annotated:

**Figure 1**

*Leaked war planning details*

**Pete Hegseth**

TEAM UPDATE:

TIME NOW (1144et): Weather is FAVORABLE. Just CONFIRMED w/ CENTCOM we are a GO for mission launch.

1215et: F-18s LAUNCH (1st strike package)

1345: "Trigger Based" F-18 1st Strike Window Starts (Target Terrorist is @ his Known Location so SHOULD BE ON TIME) - also, Strike Drones Launch (MQ-9s)

1410: More F-18s LAUNCH (2nd strike package)

1415: Strike Drones on Target (THIS IS WHEN THE FIRST BOMBS WILL DEFINITELY DROP, pending earlier "Trigger Based" targets)

1536: F-18 2nd Strike Starts - also, first sea-based Tomahawks launched.

*Source: The Guardian by Peter Beaumont*

Despite Hegseth objecting to the claims, the Signal group chat indeed contained war-planning details, shared on an insecure social media platform before the actual attack on March 15, 2025 (Oelofse, 2025). Sharing the specific attack timings, targeted Houthi areas, and military equipment to be used puts the lives of the service personnel at extreme danger if the target enemy acquires the information and plans effectively to counter them. The negligence of senior security personnel in classifying such sensitive information has raised significant concerns about the measures taken to ensure the safety of service personnel during combat and when off-duty. Communication platforms with more robust security must be used when handling such sensitive information. Military leaders must not share classified military information, as this puts the lives of the soldiers at extreme risk.

Besides the severe security threats, social media has also been associated with adverse effects on soldiers' internal discipline. This factor can be very costly to the outcome of a military operation on the battlefield. The social misbehavior of Army leaders and service officers can compromise military operational outcomes by undermining unit trust and cohesion (Burroughs & Ruth, 2022; Johnson et al., 2022). For instance, trolling or bullying service members on Facebook or X can damage the trust between them and their formation leaders. Some senior military officers have been put on the spot for taking to social media to air their political

perspectives in countries with polarized political settings. Engaging in political activities violates the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Barberá et al., 2024; Hinton, 2023). It constitutes misconduct and must be dealt with in accordance with military law. Even though service members can be members of political parties, they must strictly refrain from publicly airing political opinions on social media as it can also be used on a strategic level as part of the digital battlefield, feeding into surveillance and decision-making systems that affect both military operations and humanitarian protection (Lahmann, 2022). However, most senior and junior military officers have continuously violated this essential professional principle. Therefore, when sharing political views via social media, these leaders violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice, encouraging the junior officers to do the same and causing disciplinary issues.

Military leaders' increased use of social media in service and personal activities has made it difficult to manage and police, increasing the risk impacts on the service members in their formations (Merrin & Hoskins, 2020; Singer & Brooking, 2018). Based on the uses and gratifications theory, social media has helped military leaders improve communication and relationships with service members (Johnson et al., 2022; Miller, 2018). However, the associated extreme security concerns and increased disciplinary issues are significant issues that adversely affect soldiers' lives. This mixed-methods study aimed to investigate whether the use of social media platforms by military leaders in service has significantly impacted the lives of soldiers within their units.

### **Statement of the Problem of Practice**

This study aimed to investigate how social media use by Army leaders has impacted the lives of soldiers within their formations, with particular attention to the benefits of communication, security risks, and effects on unit cohesion and well-being. The regular use of social media by military leaders has significantly improved communication and strengthened positive relationships with soldiers within their formations. Additionally, chatting and sharing multimedia content via Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram, among other social media platforms, have enhanced soldiers' morale and fostered trust in their unit leaders (Johnson et al., 2022). However, the inappropriate use of social media by serving Army leaders has led to security implications and lethal targeting by enemies (Hinton, 2023). Evident from the early periods of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict, the assassination of the Russian submarine commander, and the Afghan war, military leaders pose life-threatening impacts on the lives of the soldiers within their formations, especially by sharing critical content that provides clues about the soldiers' location or operational moves.

For instance, posting photos of deployed troops on Facebook can reveal to the enemy the estimated number of soldiers to expect and the types of weapons they will use. In addition, the enemies can analyze the social media shared images or videos to determine the precise location of the soldiers on the battlefield, thereby ambushing and killing almost all of them, as witnessed in the Russia-Ukraine war (Barberá et al., 2024; Lahmann, 2022). As senior-ranking officers, controlling and policing how Army leaders use social media may be challenging, but the impact on soldiers' lives is significant (Merrin & Hoskins, 2020). However, these senior officers expose soldiers' identities within their units to potential enemies by sharing unvetted information via social media. Reports of soldiers' families getting attacked by terrorists are all

over the internet, with unanswered questions of how the enemies obtained their home addresses, considering that only senior permitted leaders have access to such data.

The growing concern that Army leaders' use of social media is slowly eroding and damaging military units' cohesion, and that this is leading to increased disciplinary cases, is a matter that requires an intensive approach. Sharing soldiers' sensitive information between military leaders via unprotected social media networks has led to the leakage of personal information, including family affairs, health records, and personal preferences (Francois & Lin, 2021; Singer & Brooking, 2018). Some service members have taken advantage to troll or bully their colleagues using such sensitive information, a matter that has significantly impacted the mental and emotional health and well-being of soldiers (Alvinus et al., 2019; Spencer, 2022). This has led to increased suicidal cases of soldiers, with the liable Army leaders getting away with their acts unpunished. In addition, some senior Army personnel have undermined the Uniform Code of Military Justice by publicly airing their political views and taking sides. The high degree of impunity that has encouraged many senior Army officers to publicize their political views and declare their allegiances has significantly affected the professionalism of junior service members in their units. This has created a culture of indiscipline, raised ethnic tensions among the soldiers, and threatened their overall safety.

Past studies have extensively examined the effects of social media on military operational effectiveness, as well as its broader impact on the lives of Soldiers and their families (Singer & Brooking, 2018). More recent scholarship has drawn on evidence from the Russian–Ukrainian conflict to analyze how social media use affects the safety, social welfare, and professional lives of military officers across different levels of authority (Barberá et al., 2024;

Lahmann, 2022). However, there is a knowledge gap regarding whether the Army's serving leaders' use of social media has impacted the lives of soldiers serving within their units.

Therefore, this mixed-methods study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by investigating how Army leaders use social media and whether such use has significantly impacted soldiers' lives within their formations.

### **Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to investigate how serving Army leaders use social media, determine whether such uses have significantly impacted the soldiers' lives within their formations, and recommend a set of practical measures that military leaders and junior officers can consider to prevent, mitigate, and address the risk factors and make social media platforms valuable tools in the lives of military officers. With the consent of the relevant ethical and regulatory agencies and in compliance with military legal provisions, primary data were gathered from selected participants to support its arguments on the subject matter. It aimed to improve knowledge by bridging gaps, promoting awareness, and reviewing the credibility and reliability of studies conducted in specific areas to enhance generalizability. Upon completion, the findings would answer the question, "Has the use of social media by leaders in the Army made a significant impact on the lives of soldiers within their formations?" The findings would also inform military leaders about the impacts of their social media use on junior officers' lives, thereby promoting professionalism and ethical leadership.

### **Research Questions**

#### ***General Research Question***

Has the use of social media by leaders in the Army made a significant impact on the lives of soldiers within their formations?

### ***Specific Research Questions***

- *RQ1: How does the diffusion of social media by senior military officers' impact soldiers' lives, including security implications, disciplinary issues, and overall leadership influence within military units?*
- *RQ2: What strategies and measures can be implemented to effectively regulate military leaders' social media use while balancing risk mitigation and positive impacts on soldiers' lives?*

### **Delimitations**

The study focused on the U.S. military, with its scope limited to the U.S. Army. In the study, only military leaders serving or recently retired from similar positions were targeted, with enlisted officers from any U.S. Army organization also included. Limiting the study to the U.S. military was intended to optimize the study's focus, but the fact that social media use by military leaders, officers, and civilians is common globally would make the findings generalizable. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 10 senior leaders (E-8 to O-10) from different organizations and 51 enlisted soldiers (E-1 to E-7) to participate in the study. This sampling technique was preferred as it was most suitable for selecting samples most beneficial to the study. The large number of participants enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the findings in addressing the research questions.

The study was limited to military leaders serving in different divisions across Texas, with those on Fort Hood given priority to minimize costs. It did not go deep into the content of the materials shared on social media to prevent potential violations of the military's legal and ethical provisions. A thematic approach was used to analyze qualitative data by identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. The flexibility of this data analysis method made it useful for analyzing qualitative data from interviews, surveys, and observations, justifying its preference. Because participants shared common training pipelines, occupational expectations, and organizational values associated with Army service, their responses may reflect overlapping perspectives formed by collective experiences and doctrinal influence. This consensus of viewpoints is acknowledged as an inherent feature of studying a single institutional population and represents a deliberate delimitation of the research rather than a methodological weakness. Accordingly, while the findings provide meaningful knowledge of social media use and leadership influence within the U.S. Army, their applicability beyond comparable military contexts should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

### **Significance of the Applied Culminating Project**

The impacts of social media on the lives of children, youths, adults, older people, and the public have been adequately described in past and recent literature. However, very little is known about social media use by military personnel because of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and legal provisions that limit ordinary researchers from extending their studies into military settings or advanced topics. Upon completion, this study's findings were expected to bridge the knowledge gap and inform military leaders that their social media use indeed impacted the lives of soldiers within their units. In addition, the military leadership consultants

would use these results to identify the most concerning consequences and develop the most effective recommendations to prevent, mitigate, address, and promote certain social media use behaviors. Overall, the study would be a crucial reference material for learners and researchers in diverse academic and professional contexts.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Social media*: digital platforms, including websites and applications, enabling users to create and share different forms of content, participate in social networking, and access digital information using supported devices.

*Military*: anything relating to armed forces or soldiers.

*Uses and gratifications theory*: refers to Blumler and Katz's theory, which focuses on understanding why individuals use particular types of media, what specific prompting needs they have, and the pleasure or satisfaction they achieve.

*Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ)*: The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ, 64 Stat. 109, 10 U.S.C. Chapter 47) is the foundation of military law in the United States. The UCMJ applies to all members of the Armed and Uniformed Services of the United States: The Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Navy, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Corps, and Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

*DoD Directives (DoDD)*: policies that govern or regulate operations of the DoD required by law, the Executive branch, or the Secretary of Defense.

### **Organization of the Applied Culminating Project**

As an investigative mixed-methods research study, this study adhered to all the qualitative and quantitative research requirements from start to finish. The proposal was divided into three chapters, each subdivided into subheadings, following the standard research plan for mixed-methods studies.

The introductory chapter introduced the research topic and provided detailed background information for readers familiar with the topic and aim. The statement of the problem revealed the specific research problem or gap that the study aimed to address. The purpose clarifies the reason for conducting the study, while the research questions guide readers on the specific inquiries addressed by the findings. Delimitations clarified the specific limitations of the study, making it more focused. The definition of terms section provided readers with standard definitions of critical terms used in the research to improve understanding.

The literature review examined the impact of military leaders' engagement with social media on soldiers' lives. This analysis delved into the multifaceted benefits and risks associated with such practices. Notable advantages included facilitating communication and connection between leaders and their subordinates, enhancing civil-military relations, and providing real-time access to information. The chapter outlined critical risks, such as potential security breaches, privacy concerns, and disciplinary complexities. By employing theoretical frameworks, including media effects theory, the discussion contextualized these elements and addressed implications for communication efficiency, safety, discipline, and the psychological well-being of military personnel. The research gaps regarding how these dynamics influenced U.S. military members were also highlighted.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Maintaining a social media presence is common among today's soldiers; therefore, it is essential that Army leaders follow established policies to maximize the benefits while preventing and mitigating potential negative impacts of their online activities (Miller, 2018). Despite established policies governing social media use, some Army leaders put soldiers' lives at risk by sharing critical or classified military intelligence and operational data via Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, and X (Shields, 2020). Illegal access to such classified information has led to ambush attacks on military camps, as witnessed during the Afghan War and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, resulting in the death of many soldiers, according to Hasselbladh and Ydén (2020). Active Army leaders violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice and damage the integrity and reputation of the unit as a whole by posting discriminatory content, sharing inflammatory comments, and engaging in online fraternization (Shields, 2020). This reduces the civil leadership and public trust in the military, damaging the civil-military relationship. Therefore, this chapter explores the literature to provide background on how social media use by active military leaders affects soldiers within their formations. Exploring the literature identifies the existing knowledge on the topic, research gaps, and the theoretical framework guiding this research, and connects them to the objectives of this study.

### Theoretical Framework

Bayer et al. (2020) defined *social media* as the "computer-mediated communication channels that allow users to engage in social interaction with broad and narrow audiences in

real-time or asynchronously." (p. 472). It involves active or passive posting of digital content to target private or public users on Facebook, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat, TikTok, and Snapchat, synchronously or asynchronously. Social media use by Army leaders can have deliberate or non-deliberate positive or negative impacts on soldiers' lives (Singer & Brooking, 2018). The media effects theory is applied to guide this study by providing a theoretical framework for understanding how active military leaders' social media use affects soldiers within their service units. According to Valkenburg (2022), the (social) media effects theory attempts to explain social media use and its effects on individuals, groups, or societies. The selectivity, transactionality, and conditionality paradigms of (social) media effects theory are most relevant for guiding this study.

The selectivity paradigm is grounded in Katz and Blumler's uses and gratifications theory, which focuses on understanding why individuals use certain media types, the driving needs that motivate their use, and the pleasure they derive from them (Valkenburg, 2022). In this study, the selectivity paradigm was vital for explaining why Army leaders prefer certain social media channels, the reasons for their use, and the gratifications associated with them. Transactionality is an extension of selectivity. Understanding how Army leaders are the starting point of the chain of events that lead to positive or negative impacts on soldiers within their formations is vital. The conditionality paradigm posits that only the content that people select in response to their internal-specific precursors can influence them (Valkenburg, 2022). Applying this paradigm to the current study is crucial for understanding how Army leaders' social media use influences the lives of service members in their units.

### **Civil-Military Relations**

Social media connects societies and military personnel, exposing them to general and classified information. As part of society, military leaders and service officers are not immune to using social media to access and share information with colleagues, families, friends, and the general public (Giroux, 2021; Miller, 2018). Over 90 percent of both military and civilian users use at least one social media platform per day (Valkenburg, 2022). According to Giroux (2021), the growing online presence of civilians and military personnel has created a favorable environment for engaging the general public in matters related to civil-military coexistence. For example, military leaders use their public Facebook accounts to share their achievements and post recruitment ads to mobilize the public to participate in planned military recruitment. Through continuous online engagement and sharing of general information, the military and the civilians promote transparency, build mutual trust, and foster a working relationship. This promotes peaceful coexistence between the military and the civilians.

Responsible social media use by military leaders and service people promotes civil-military relations by bridging the operational, communication, and social interaction gaps (Bayer et al., 2020). Considering that Gen Z uses social media as their preferred communication and information-sharing tool, it is easier to target them with military recruitment ads (Giroux, 2021). The U.S. DoD primarily uses its public Facebook page, X account, and LinkedIn social media accounts to target a large Gen Z audience with military recruitment information (Valkenburg, 2022; Warren, 2020). Interestingly, social media has effectively replenished the all-volunteer force (AVF). In terms of communication and social interaction, the military actively engages the public on matters relating to civil-military relations to ensure that public views are considered when making some military decisions (Valkenburg, 2022). Military leaders use social

media to share the objectives, scope, benefits, and implications of such projects with the public, allowing them to contribute their opinions. Through public engagement and continuous interaction, positive social relationships and mutual trust are fostered between the civil-military communities. Mutual trust and strong civil-military relations promote peaceful coexistence between military officers and the public.

Despite the strict Uniform Code of Military Justice governing how military personnel use online platforms, social media still poses severe risks to civil-military relations. By sharing partisan content and posting politically aligned social media comments, military leaders undermine the Army's integrity, leading the general public and civilian leadership to lose trust in the involved leaders and service officers within their units (Giroux, 2021; Shields, 2020). The Uniform Code of Military Justice requires all military leaders and service officers to maintain apolitical conduct and speech (Sweeney et al., 2022). Engaging in politically affiliated activity or sharing related content publicly communicates the Army leader's political stance, violates the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and damages their reputation.

### **Security and Safety Concerns**

Appropriate social media use promotes officers' safety and security by enabling timely access to security updates from public members, tactical experts, and soldiers on the ground. Typically, social media platforms like Facebook allow near-real-time sharing of emerging issues through live streaming and video posting (Hinton, 2023). Sharing information about emerging issues in near real-time enables the military to assess and monitor the country's security status and respond quickly to disasters, thereby promoting public safety (Zeebaree et al., 2020). For

example, social media proved crucial for the United Nations peacekeeping troops in the Gaza Strip for communication and strategic planning. Buheji and Buheji (2024) reported that these troops used social media posts to identify areas affected by the attacks, respond quickly, and provide emergency services to enhance safety.

The U.S. Army often uses social media to inform the public about approaching natural disasters and geopolitical tensions, thereby enhancing public awareness, safety, and security. Proper use of social media by military leaders enhances the security and safety of service members and the general public (Hinton, 2023). However, inappropriate social media use by military leaders poses serious security threats and can result in the lethal targeting of soldiers during combat operations (Jain et al., 2021). soldiers breach the operational security provisions by posting information on social media during operations. According to Hinton (2023), posting photos and sharing information via social media reveals troop locations and exposes their combat formations, posing an adversary threat of ambushes and massive casualties.

During the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it was apparent that social media posts by military leaders and soldiers gave away troop locations to enemies who used them for locating the troops and conducting ambush attacks (Jain et al., 2021). For example, photographs posted and the sharing of information via Telegram exposed the location of Wagner Group troops to Ukrainian forces, who used the location to launch a precise missile strike on the refugee building used by this group. The attack resulted in a loss of unconfirmed casualties, leaving the building destroyed. The exposure of the Western forces based in Afghanistan and Syria to enemies in 2018, and the assassination of a Russian submarine

commander, share a commonality. In both scenarios, the enemies used social media posts to track locations, resulting in attacks and casualties.

### **Discipline and Good Order**

In addition to security and safety concerns, military leaders' social media use can affect soldiers' internal discipline, potentially adversely affecting their conduct during operations and putting the lives of the entire force at risk. According to Shields (2020), every military, including the United Kingdom, Russia, and the U.S., has its specific code that guides the conduct of soldiers and their leaders to ensure absolute discipline at all times. The general actions of Army personnel, including on social media platforms, are used to judge their operational effectiveness and rate their overall discipline on and off duty (Hinton, 2023). The misconduct of military leaders on social media platforms is a poor example for soldiers and may negatively influence service members' behavior. Miller (2018) stated that misbehavior, such as online bullying, discrimination, and trolling of junior officers, can undermine the operational effectiveness of Army leaders, creating a culture of indiscipline and disrespect toward others.

Unprofessional social media use by Army leaders threatens the country's political stability, potentially putting soldiers' lives at risk during periods of political polarization. Political polarization has led some soldiers to engage in partisan politics by using social media to air their views, violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Ford & Hoskins, 2022). In the U.S. and most democracies, Army leaders are prohibited from engaging in partisan political activities, including sharing related content or making public opinions via social media (Sweeney et al., 2022). However, the service members can be members of political parties but must completely

desist from making or sharing politically affiliated views on online platforms (Brooks, 2020). By learning from the bad examples of unprofessional leaders, soldiers' discipline is compromised, leading to increased public airing of political views. In the U.S., several senior and junior soldiers from all military divisions have faced disciplinary action for being tactless in their public political stance.

The social media posts on political affairs by military leaders and junior officers have increased the risk of the military losing its long-held non-partisan position and total abstinence from national politics as provided by the Constitution. In the U.S., the military's involvement in politics undermines the American belief that civilians control the military (Brooks, 2020). Indeed, nearly all members of the military use one or more social media platforms, where they like, share, or promote political content posted by their online friends (Hinton, 2023). Military leaders often view their online activities, including liking, promoting, or following some political figures on social media, as acceptable conduct and informal permission. However, non-military social media friends and general users may perceive such social media behaviors, such as partisan posts, and generalize them as reflecting the political position of the entire military division or the Department of Defense (Brooks, 2020). This sends civilians a misleading perception of the shift in the military's loyalty as provided by the Constitution. It can damage civilian-military mutual trust and cohesion, creating a hostile environment between soldiers and the public.

### **Psychological and Mental Health Concerns**

By facilitating unlimited social interaction between the soldiers and their friends, families, and support groups, social media promotes the psychological and mental health of the soldiers. Typically, connecting with friends and family through social media chats, image sharing, and video calls helps soldiers relieve stress (Williamson et al., 2021). Since stress is a major mental issue affecting most soldiers, relieving it is a vital strategy for promoting the mental well-being of military personnel (Bélanger & Lagacé-Roy, 2016; Walsh, 2020). Many soldiers use their Facebook accounts to chat and interact with online friends, exchanging materials such as memes and digital comics that promote their happiness, enabling them to mitigate the potential adverse mental health concerns associated with stress disorders. Stress disorder is associated with mental health concerns. Stress leads to mental health problems, which are classified into different stress disorders.

Social media allows soldiers to access support groups that provide the help they need to overcome stressful moments. Numerous mental health support groups provide mental health promotion assistance to soldiers in need (Bélanger & Lagacé-Roy, 2016; Walsh, 2020; Williamson et al., 2021). For example, a soldier in the U.S. Army successfully received mental health support after he posted something that seemed like a suicide note on Facebook. According to Walsh (2020), one of the soldier's friends immediately contacted the chain of command, which quickly located the soldier and offered him the mental support he needed. In this case, social media helped prevent a potential suicide, which was highly associated with stress or depression. Veterans also use social media to communicate with psychotherapists and attend online group or individual counseling therapies (Bélanger & Lagacé-Roy, 2016). This saves the time and money soldiers would have spent physically attending the therapy sessions.

Therefore, social media promotes the mental health and well-being of the soldiers by promoting their social connection with friends and families, access to mental healthcare support, and access to counseling therapy remotely.

However, uncontrolled social media postings by military leaders during attacks may have adverse psychological or mental health problems for the soldiers. Posting the casualty images of dead soldiers on social media during attacks when the troops go on overseas missions can affect the emotional and mental health of the soldiers (Williamson et al., 2021). Seeing the sensitive images of dead remains of friends and family members from an attack may hit the soldiers emotionally, adversely impacting their mental health and increasing the risk of developing stress and anxiety disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder. On some occasions, the soldiers may be affected by the incidents, causing them to engage in dangerous acts like self-harm and suicide. The inadvertent sharing of casualty information on social media and informal access to such information by the family may adversely impact their emotional and psychological health, potentially resulting in a more damaging outcome on the lives of the soldiers' families. In instances where the information is incorrect, the soldiers may undergo mental torture and suffer emotional distress (Williamson et al., 2021).

### **Behavior of Service Members**

Army leaders' partisan social media activities adversely affect the military profession, culture, and behavior by setting a poor example for service members and painting a negative picture of Army officers as unprofessional. According to Urban (2021), military leaders must commit themselves professionally to strengthen the culture of nonpartisanship among the

service members. Leaders must lead by example to guide service members in their formations to uphold professional conduct at all times (Taylor, 2009). However, posting partisan content on social media promotes a negative and unprofessional culture among service members, encouraging them to also post or make politically aligned comments on public social media platforms (Sweeney et al., 2022; Taylor, 2009). In the U.S., the impact on soldiers' behaviors has been evident in several instances of service members posting TikTok videos, commenting on Facebook, and sharing partisan posts on X and Instagram.

For example, two deployed National Guard soldiers from the Michigan Service Department were under investigation in October 2020 for posting a recorded TikTok video of themselves making politically affiliated content. According to Urban (2021), the two officers were investigated for making a profanity-filled tirade that openly targeted the Democrats and liberals, terming them as "As active service members, sharing such partisan digital content paints the Army with a bad public image and questions the professionalism of the service members, as Burk et al. (2019) explained. Additionally, the targeted civil leaders and people lose confidence in the respective Army units, potentially damaging the civil-military relationship.

In 2021, a U.S. Air Force Airman posted partisan content in an Army-themed Facebook group. This Airman made a political statement, declaring that he opposed the Biden administration by publicly swearing that Biden would not be his President until the regime ended. The Airman further stated in the post that the memorandum issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to all service members on January 12, 2021, condemning the insurrection about a week earlier, would not hinder or change his stance (Giroux, 2021; Hinton, 2023; Urban, 2021).

Taking political sides raises alarms, with public members questioning the integrity, competence, and professionalism of Army leaders and their subordinates (Hinton, 2023). The two incidents manifest unprofessional behavior among service members, putting Army leaders to the test in their role in ensuring professionalism within their teams. Additionally, it violates Department of Defense Directive (DoDD) 1344.10, which strongly prohibits active-duty service members from engaging in any public partisan activity, including on social media.

### **Communication and Social Connections**

Embracing social media has enhanced communication effectiveness and efficiency between U.S. military leaders and soldiers in their formations. In addition, it has improved communication between the military and the general public by enabling them to reach large local and global audiences (Christensen & Khalil, 2024). Typically, every military installation, senior leader, and command has an account on Facebook, Instagram, X, or WhatsApp, where they connect and share information with online followers, families, and community partners. In addition, military units, such as battalions and squadrons, have private Facebook groups where they share information among themselves and receive guidance from their team leaders on general matters related to training and meetings (Walsh, 2020). Giroux (2021) reported that at least 71 percent of U.S. military officers had multiple social media accounts, with 87 percent having active Facebook accounts as of 2016. With social media, military leaders have enhanced communication with their service members and optimized their ability to report and respond to events as they occur. This has fostered a positive relationship and enhanced mutual trust between the military leaders and the soldiers, resulting in efficient performance.

Alongside social experience, social media has enhanced the general sharing of digital content among military officers and civilians. Social media platforms like Messenger and WhatsApp allow military leaders to share general information files within private groups or with individual soldiers, thereby enhancing the unit's privacy (Walsh, 2020). For example, military leaders use secure social media platforms like Telegram with end-to-end encryption to send large non-operational files to their teams to prepare them for training sessions. Interestingly, the video conferencing features of social media platforms have made it easy for military leaders to interact remotely with their teams in near real-time during training or general briefing sessions (Christensen & Khalil, 2024). Therefore, data immediacy and real-time access to information promote communication between military leaders and their soldiers, resulting in smooth and efficient operations.

As an integral part of contemporary society, social media offers military leaders and soldiers an opportunity to collaborate, share experiences and best practices, learn from others, and stay updated on topics relevant to their units in near real time. The DoD implemented a code of conduct to ensure service members and their leaders use social media to share accurate, verified information with the relevant parties rather than spread gossip or unconfirmed information (Brooks, 2020). The military can effectively reach young Americans with recruitment ads, allowing them to apply for positions (Giroux, 2021). Similarly, leaders can share opportunities in the military with their teams and encourage them to submit their applications via designated channels. When the serving soldiers secure such opportunities, they stand a better chance of improving their income.

### **Research Gaps**

The existing literature has covered the benefits of social media in promoting communication and performance experience among military officers and between the military and civilians. A few studies have also examined how social media platforms affect the relationship between military officers and their leaders. However, most of them needed to be more specific and made into a study. They failed to capture the specific impacts of U.S. military leaders' social media use on soldiers serving in their formations, creating a research gap this study addresses. The findings allow readers to determine how leaders' social media use in the Army has impacted soldiers within their formations. Further, it recommends specific strategies and measures to effectively control military leaders' social media use, preventing, mitigating, and addressing associated adverse impacts while promoting positive impacts on soldiers' lives.

The following chapter delineates the methodological framework for investigating the impact of military leaders' social media use on soldiers' lives. This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, using semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to collect data from 61 participants, including military leaders and soldiers across various ranks and divisions. The research incorporates triangulation, audit trails, and reflexivity to uphold data validity. Data collection procedures include developing interview guides, obtaining informed consent, and conducting sessions in person or via virtual platforms. Thematic analysis and narrative interpretation are employed to evaluate the data, with Microsoft Copilot generating descriptive statistics. Ethical considerations and study limitations are duly acknowledged, with the study focusing mainly on the U.S. Army and relying on non-probability sampling techniques.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

With the rapid technological advancement and global adoption of digital technologies, social media has become the face of contemporary society and a part of today's military. It has transformed how military leaders communicate, share information, and interact with service officers within their formations (Spencer, 2022). Singer and Brooking (2018) added that social media facilitates the democratization of information about military operations. The U.S. and other global military units use social media as the most effective communication channel for reaching large audiences faster and at low cost (Giroux, 2021; Spencer, 2022). Presently, at least 90% of military leaders and members actively use social media daily to communicate, connect with friends, or access information (Hasselbladh & Ydén, 2020). Social media has enhanced privacy in the military by allowing various units and subset groups to share information within their private groups. Besides the positive impacts of social media on military officers, there are adverse impacts, including security risks, privacy concerns, loss of lives, and compromised military operations. This methodology section describes the research purpose and reiterates the research questions to emphasize the study's focus. It also describes the research type, population, and sampling techniques, measures and instrumentation, validation, data collection procedures, statistical treatment of the data, and study limitations

### Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine how serving Army leaders used social media, determine whether their online activity had a meaningful impact on soldiers'

lives within their formations, and identify practical steps that leaders and junior officers could take to reduce risks while strengthening the positive use of social media in military environments. With approval from the Army Human Research Protection Office, 13th Armored Corps Sustainment Command, and other regulatory authorities, and in accordance with military policies, the study collected primary data from selected participants to support its analysis. The study sought to expand understanding of the topic, address gaps in existing literature, and evaluate the credibility and applicability of related studies. Ultimately, the results were intended to answer the central question: "Has the use of social media by leaders in the Army made a significant impact on the lives of soldiers within their formations?" The findings were also intended to help military leaders understand how their online behavior affected junior personnel and to reinforce professional and ethical leadership online.

## **Research Questions**

### ***General Research Question***

Has the use of social media by leaders in the Army made a significant impact on the lives of soldiers within their formations?

### ***Specific Research Questions***

- *RQ1: How does the diffusion of social media by senior military officers' impact soldiers' lives, including security implications, disciplinary issues, and overall leadership influence within military units?*

- *RQ2: What strategies and measures can be implemented to effectively regulate military leaders' social media use while balancing risk mitigation and positive impacts on soldiers' lives?*

### **Type of Research**

This study used a mixed methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a fuller understanding of how leaders' use of social media influenced soldiers within their formations. Mixed methods research draws on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches—qualitative methods allow for detailed exploration of lived experiences, while quantitative data support broader interpretation and generalizability (Gamage, 2025). This design was appropriate because the topic involved both individual experiences and larger organizational patterns, consistent with recommendations in the literature for studying complex phenomena (Dawadi et al., 2021). Qualitative data were collected through open-ended interviews to capture nuanced perspectives, and quantitative data were gathered through structured surveys to identify trends and correlations. Integrating both types of data strengthened the study through triangulation, which improves reliability and validity by cross-checking findings across methods (Guetterman et al., 2021).

### **Population and Sample**

The study originally targeted 150 serving or recently retired soldiers and leaders from various branches of the U.S. Army. This included approximately 30 senior leaders, ranging from E-8 to O-10, and approximately 120 enlisted soldiers, ranging from E-1 to E-7. Because of accessibility and cost considerations, the sampling focused primarily on units located in Texas,

including Fort Hood. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with relevant experience, consistent with the guidance of Bhattacharya (2017) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015). This method enabled the study to focus on individuals knowledgeable about the topic and able to provide meaningful insights. Purposive sampling helped identify information-rich cases and ensured that respondents had firsthand experience with the issues being examined (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). While the targeted sample size was expected to support data saturation (Lim, 2024), the number of individuals who ultimately participated was smaller than planned—an inherent limitation of the approach.

*Inclusion criteria:* The military leaders must (1) serve or have recently served as First Sergeant, Sergeant Major, Captain, Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, or General in the U.S. active component, reserve component, or National Guard. The military leaders and officers must (3) have been in the service within the last decade and (4) have an active social media account. Lastly, the participants must (5) be willing to participate in the 30 to 60-minute interview.

*Exclusion criteria:* The study excludes military leaders and soldiers who were dishonorably discharged. In addition, Air National Guard service members are excluded from the interview and survey.

### **Measures and Instrumentation**

For this mixed-methods research study examining the impact of leaders' social media use on Soldiers' lives within their formations, the measures and instrumentation were intentionally designed to provide an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the

phenomenon. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative instruments to capture measurable trends as well as lived experiences related to communication, morale, security, and unit cohesion. This integrated approach allowed for triangulation of data sources, strengthening the validity of the findings and offering a more nuanced interpretation of how social media use by Army leaders affects Soldiers across different contexts.

### ***Measures***

The primary measure for this study was the depth and relevance of soldiers' experiences and perceptions regarding their military formation leaders' social media use, using 11 Likert-scale survey questions to quantify subjective responses and 10 open-ended interview questions to prevent interviewees from being confined to specific answers. The study assessed how social media use by military leaders impacted the communication, engagement, morale, privacy, and safety of soldiers in various military formations. Some key themes measured include leaders' accessibility, transparency, and their impact on unit cohesion and soldier well-being. The study focused on understanding the positive and negative impacts on the soldiers' lives and captured diverse perspectives from various military formations.

### ***Instrumentation***

Semi-structured interviews (online and face-to-face) and surveys were the primary instruments used for collecting qualitative data to address the research questions. Prior scholarship on social media has shown that online platforms shape how individuals interpret authority, professionalism, and interpersonal influence, particularly through visibility, affordances, and sustained exposure (Bayer et al., 2020; Singer & Brooking, 2018). Within

military contexts, researchers have emphasized that technological change places new demands on professional identity, leadership behavior, and institutional norms, requiring adaptation by both leaders and organizations (Burk et al., 2019; Hinton, 2023). Additional literature examining social media and conflict communication highlights how digital behavior can carry ethical, perceptual, and second-order consequences that extend beyond the immediate intent of a post, especially in security-sensitive environments (Christensen & Khalil, 2024). Drawing on this body of work, the survey items were developed to examine perceptions of senior Army leaders' social media use and its perceived influence on morale, trust, professionalism, communication, and good order and discipline. The interview questions were designed to allow participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences and interpretations of leader behavior in digital spaces, including potential ethical tension and psychological strain associated with leadership communication online (Williamson et al., 2021). Collectively, the instruments were vetted by the doctoral committee and structured to align with the study's conceptual framework while capturing participants' diverse, experience-based perspectives within Army formations.

*Semi-structured interview:* In-depth online or face-to-face interviews were conducted with the selected soldiers and military personnel from various ranks and units within the U.S. Army. The interview protocol included open-ended questions. This allowed the respondents to share their personal experiences and opinions on how social media use by military formation leaders affects their communication, morale, privacy, safety, physical wellness, and social well-being. In addition, the open-ended questions allowed the soldiers to explain how the social media use by the formation leaders impacts their overall sense of connection within the formation. The

flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions to explore specific areas in depth.

*Survey:* To gather a broad range of perspectives on the impact of Army leaders' social media use, a structured survey was developed and distributed to Soldiers across multiple units. The survey included items assessing perceptions related to communication, morale, security, and unit cohesion, allowing participants to quantitatively report their experiences and observations. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was ensured to promote honest and unbiased responses, thereby strengthening the reliability of the data. The survey findings provided a quantitative foundation that complemented the qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups, supporting triangulation and enhancing the overall rigor of the mixed-methods design while maintaining compliance with military policies and ethical research standards.

### **Validation**

Strategies were employed to optimize the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings, ensuring the credibility and validity of the collected data. This study validated data through triangulation, peer debriefing, an audit trail, and reflexivity.

Triangulation was used to cross-verify data gathered from interviews and focus groups as Santos et al. (2020, p. 655-64) explain. By comparing the findings, the inconsistencies and discrepancies were identified, thus enhancing the robustness of the conclusions. Therefore, triangulation enhanced the validity of the findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic from diverse perspectives.

Audit trail of the research processes, including data collection methods, coding procedures, and analytical decisions, was maintained to enhance transparency and allow other researchers to follow the study and assess its dependability (Nassaji, 2020). The audit trail ensured that the research process was systematic and justifiable.

Reflexivity was utilized, including acknowledging personal biases and assessing their potential impact on data collection and analysis. Maintaining the reflexive journal throughout the study allowed the researcher to continuously reflect on their work and influence, thereby minimizing bias and ensuring the neutrality of the results (Nassaji, 2020). Combining these three validation strategies will help ensure that the research findings are credible, dependable, transferable, and verifiable. As a result, they minimize the potential bias and leverage the neutrality of the findings.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection was conducted systematically to ensure comprehensive and meaningful insights. It was performed in three main phases: preparation, data collection, and follow-up.

#### ***Preparation***

*Participant selection and recruitment:* Purposive sampling was used to select 150 participants (leaders and soldiers) with relevant experience and viewpoints to participate in the interviews and focus groups. However, only 61 leaders and soldiers were able to participate. The soldiers and leaders of various ranks from different Army units were invited to participate in the study. Additional effort was made to include soldiers and Leaders from different organizations in the

survey and interviews, as appropriate, to provide diverse voices and enable comprehensively data collection to better understand the study topic.

*Informed consent:* Respondents were provided with detailed information about the study topic, purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations. Subsequently, their informed consent was obtained to ensure the respondents understood their rights in the study. For example, participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, the respondents had the right to participate in the study voluntarily. The participants were assured of privacy and anonymity during and after the study.

*Development of instruments:* Semi-structured interview guides and survey question prompts were developed in line with the research questions. The research instruments included open-ended questions to gather descriptive data that sufficiently addressed the research questions.

### ***Data Collection***

The selected soldiers and military leaders were interviewed individually, face-to-face, or online. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes in a private, comfortable setting. The decision to conduct face-to-face or online (secure virtual platform) interviews was based on the respondents' preferences and availability. The interviews were audio-recorded (with the respondents' consent) to ensure accuracy and verifiability during transcription and analysis.

The survey was administered to a sample of 51 participants to collect diverse perspectives on the impact of Army leaders' social media use. It used a combination of closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights. The survey was distributed electronically to ensure accessibility and convenience, and

participation was voluntary and anonymous to encourage honest and unbiased responses. Data collection adhered to all military ethical guidelines, providing a broad and reliable foundation for analyzing soldiers' experiences and perceptions related to the study topic.

### ***Follow-Up Phase***

*Transcription and preliminary analysis:* The interview and focus group audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher systematically reviewed the transcripts to ensure accuracy and marked the start of preliminary coding to establish the themes.

*Data storage and confidentiality:* All gathered data, including audio recordings, documents, and transcripts, have been stored securely in encrypted digital formats to enhance the participants' privacy and confidentiality.

### **Statistical Treatment of the Data**

The statistical treatment focused on descriptive data analysis approaches. The qualitative data were coded thematically and fed into the Microsoft Copilot to generate the descriptive statistics. Measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode) were used to summarize the findings. Visual graphs, charts, and/or tables were used to present results for generating valuable insights. Frequencies and distributions of themes were generated to show the prevalence of particular experiences of soldiers (Bhattacharya, 2017). The qualitative data were interpreted using a narrative approach, with data patterns, relationships, and insights emphasized to generate crucial insights.

### **Limitations**

The study aimed for 150 participants but received responses from only 61, which may have reduced the statistical power and representativeness of the results. Using self-reported data could have led to response bias influenced by professional norms. Also, since most participants were from Army units in Texas, especially at Fort Hood, the findings may not apply to other locations or organizations.

### **Summary**

This mixed-methods study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather primary data from 61 soldiers and military leaders. The data were analyzed using a narrative approach, with a thematic analysis of the audio-recorded qualitative data. Microsoft Copilot was used to generate better descriptive statistics to understand the variables' patterns and relationships.

## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the mixed-methods analysis examining how senior Army leaders' use of social media influences soldiers within their formations. The results are organized in two major sections. The first section reports the quantitative and qualitative findings from the 51 completed surveys, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations for all Likert-scale items. The second section presents the qualitative findings from a thematic analysis of interview responses. The chapter concludes with a summary that integrates both data sources and prepares the foundation for Chapter 5.

Data were collected in two phases. First, a web-based survey via SurveyMonkey was distributed to enlisted soldiers in grades E1-E6. The survey included 11 Likert-scale questions designed to measure perceptions of leadership influence, morale, discipline, OPSEC concerns, communication, policy clarity, and expectations for leader guidance or mentorship. Fifty-one soldiers completed the survey, providing a broad view of how junior- and mid-grade enlisted personnel experience senior leaders' social media activity in their daily military environment.

To deepen and contextualize the survey results, ten participants—primarily senior leaders ranging from E9 to O6—participated in follow-up interviews. All interviews were conducted in person. Interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants were reminded of confidentiality protections and informed that they could skip any question or stop the interview at any point. These interviews allowed for richer insight into how leaders interpret their own practices, responsibilities, and challenges

when communicating through social media. The remainder of this chapter presents the quantitative findings, the themes that emerged from the qualitative data, and a summary of the major results.

### **Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine how senior Army leaders use social media and to determine whether their online presence affects Soldiers within their formations. Additionally, the study sought to explore measures that may reduce potential risks associated with social media use while strengthening professional communication and leadership effectiveness in the digital environment. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the benefits and challenges of leaders' social media engagement within the Army context.

### **Research Questions**

#### **General Research Question**

Has the use of social media by leaders in the Army made a significant impact on the lives of soldiers within their formations?

#### **Specific Research Questions**

**RQ1.** How does the diffusion of social media by senior military officers' impact soldiers' lives, including security implications, disciplinary issues, and leadership influence within military units?

**RQ2.** What strategies or measures can help regulate military leaders' social media use while balancing risk mitigation and positive effects on soldiers' lives?

### Survey Data

Table 1 provides the rank distribution for the 51 soldiers who completed the survey. This table summarizes the composition of the quantitative sample by showing how many participants represented each enlisted grade from E1 to E6.

**Table 1**

*Description of the Survey Participants by Rank*

Grade	Rank	Frequency	Percentage
E1	Private	1	2%
E2	Private 2	5	9.8%
E3	Private First Class	7	13.7%
E4	Specialist	17	33.3%
E5	Sergeant	12	23.6%
E6	Staff Sergeant	9	17.6%
Total		51	100%

**\*Note.** All respondents were Active-Duty soldiers. No officer grades were represented in the dataset

Table 1 shows the distribution of ranks among the 51 soldiers who participated in the survey. The table indicates that the sample was composed entirely of enlisted personnel, ranging from E1 to E6, with no representation from senior enlisted grades (E7–E9), or commissioned officers. The largest group of respondents was E4 (33.3%), followed by E5 (23.5%) and E6 (17.6%), showing that most participants were junior and mid-grade enlisted soldiers. This distribution provides important context for interpreting the remaining results, as the findings reflect the perceptions and experiences of soldiers at the lower and middle enlisted

levels rather than those of senior non-commissioned officers or officers. Most participants fell within the E4-E6 range, indicating that the survey data reflect responses from soldiers serving at junior and mid-level enlisted ranks. This distribution identifies the portion of the force represented in the quantitative dataset and clarifies that the results describe perceptions reported by enlisted soldiers at the tactical level.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all 11 survey items, including the mean and standard deviation for each item. The table is ordered from the lowest to the highest mean to show overall response patterns across the sample.

**Table 2**

*Responses to the Survey Items (N = 51)*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Survey Question (Condensed)</b>	<b>Mean (M)</b>	<b>SD</b>
Q3	I have changed behavior based on leader posts	2.90	0.32
Q8	Training prepares soldiers for responsible SM use	3.06	0.52
Q4	Leader social media has caused disciplinary issues	3.00	0.54
Q5	I have observed OPSEC/security concerns	3.29	0.66
Q2	Leader posts contribute positively to morale	3.33	0.55
Q7	Army policies guiding leader SM use are clear	3.35	0.80
Q1	Leader posts influence perception of leadership	3.43	0.55
Q6	Leader social media strengthens communication	3.49	0.67
Q9	Need stricter enforcement of guidelines	3.56	0.62
Q10	Leaders need more SM guidance/mentorship	3.80	0.88
Q11	Junior soldier input should guide SM policy	4.04	0.88

The results in Table 2 show how soldiers rated each aspect of senior leader social media use and provide a numerical picture of the trends in their responses. The standard deviations reveal whether soldiers responded similarly or differently to each item, helping identify which topics generated consistent views and which produced more varied reactions. The lowest mean score was associated with the item asking whether soldiers change their behavior based on

leader posts (Q3), indicating that responses to this question tended to fall on the lower end of the scale. The standard deviation for this item was also the smallest among all questions, indicating that respondents answered it in a relatively consistent manner.

Several items clustered around the midpoint of the scale. These included perceptions of disciplinary issues linked to leader social media use (Q4), the adequacy of current social media training (Q8), and observed OPSEC or security concerns (Q5). Items related to morale (Q2) and policy clarity (Q7) also fell near this middle range. These questions showed moderate means and standard deviations, reflecting a wider spread of responses across the sample.

Items with higher mean scores included statements about the benefits of communication (Q6), the need for stricter enforcement of social media guidelines (Q9), and the need for additional leader guidance or mentorship (Q10). The highest mean score was associated with the statement about including junior soldiers in shaping social media policy (Q11). These items also had some of the higher standard deviations in the table, indicating greater variation in responses.

Overall, the table shows a fairly narrow distribution of means across the survey items and varying levels of response consistency, as reflected in the range of standard deviations. These descriptive patterns outline how soldiers in the sample rated each aspect of senior leader social media use across the set of survey questions.

The open-ended question in the survey allowed respondents to elaborate on their experiences with senior leaders' social media use in their own words. The themes that emerged from these narrative responses are summarized in Table 3. These findings reflect the most

frequently mentioned ideas across all open-ended entries and present the key areas that soldiers chose to highlight beyond the structured Likert-scale items.

**Table 3**

*Themes Identified from Open-Ended Survey Responses*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Representative Participant Statement</b>
Professionalism of Senior Leaders Online	Respondents frequently commented on the importance of senior leaders maintaining professionalism in their social media posts.	"Leaders should think before posting because their social media reflects on the unit."
OPSEC and Security Concerns	Several respondents noted that social media activity has the potential to reveal sensitive information or create OPSEC concerns.	"Some posts reveal more than intended, even if they seem harmless."
Impact on Morale and Unit Climate	Comments highlighted how leader social media activity can influence morale, motivation, or trust within the unit.	"What leaders post can either motivate soldiers or cause confusion."
Policy Clarity and Enforcement	Respondents mentioned uncertainty about the boundaries of Army social media policy and inconsistent enforcement across units.	"Policies are there, but it feels like every unit enforces them differently."
Need for Additional Training and Guidance	Many soldiers stated that more training on appropriate social media use would be helpful for both leaders and junior personnel.	"More training is needed so everyone knows what is okay to post."

The themes shown in Table 3 represent the primary patterns expressed across all open-ended responses. Participants emphasized issues related to leader professionalism, OPSEC considerations, morale, policy clarity, and training needs. These patterns offer additional context to the quantitative findings by showing the specific areas soldiers chose to address when given the freedom to respond without predetermined categories.

### **Interview Responses**

Table 4 shows the rank distribution for the ten participants who completed the qualitative interviews. This table identifies the senior enlisted and commissioned officer ranks represented in the qualitative portion of the study.

**Table 4**

*Description of the Interview Respondents by Rank*

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
E9	Sergeant Major	1	10%
O3	Captain	3	30%
O4	Major	1	10%
O5	Lieutenant Colonel	2	20%
O6	Colonel	3	30%
Total		10	100%

Table 4 presents the rank distribution of the 10 participants who completed the qualitative interviews. The table shows that the sample included one senior enlisted soldier (E9) and nine commissioned officers ranging from O3 to O6. The largest groups were O3 and O6, each representing 30% of the sample. This distribution indicates that the qualitative portion of the study reflects perspectives from individuals serving in senior leadership, supervisory, or command positions rather than from junior enlisted soldiers. Because the qualitative sample is made up mostly of senior leaders, the interview findings reflect the perspectives of those who set expectations and enforce professional standards within their units. Their responses show how they view the responsibilities and challenges of social media use from a leadership perspective. This differs from the survey sample, which consisted entirely of junior- and mid-grade enlisted soldiers, and provides the study with viewpoints from both ends of the rank structure. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data provide a fuller picture of how social media use is understood and experienced across different levels of Army leadership.

To better understand how senior leaders interpret their responsibilities and challenges in the digital environment, participants were asked a series of open-ended interview questions focused on their experiences with social media use in Army formations. These questions explored how leaders perceive the influence of their online presence, the extent to which social media affects communication and morale, and any observed impacts on professionalism, discipline, or OPSEC. Leaders were also asked about the guidance they received regarding appropriate online conduct, how they navigate personal and professional boundaries, and what improvements they believe are needed in current policies or training. Collectively, these questions were designed to elicit candid reflections on leader behavior, expectations, and decision-making in digital spaces. Table 5 presents the integrated themes that emerged from these responses, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence across senior leader perspectives. Each theme is accompanied by a brief description and representative statements that illustrate how leaders understand their role in shaping perceptions, maintaining professionalism, and managing risk in the online environment.

**Table 5**

*Qualitative themes From Interview Analysis*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description (Findings Only)</b>	<b>Representative Response</b>
1. Need for Stronger Digital Professionalism	soldiers observed that some senior leader posts were unclear, poorly phrased, or vulnerable to misinterpretation, leading to confusion or mixed messages within formations.	“Even if the intent is good, the message can come across wrong depending on how it’s worded.”
2. OPSEC and Information Security Concerns	Participants reported that leader posts occasionally bordered on sensitive information or attracted unnecessary attention, raising OPSEC concerns.	“A single careless post can turn into something bigger, especially if it gets shared out of context.”

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description (Findings Only)</b>	<b>Representative Response</b>
3. Inconsistent Enforcement of Standards	soldiers said leaders were not always held to the same social media standards as junior soldiers, creating a perception of uneven accountability.	"If a junior soldier posted the same thing, they'd get corrected. But when leaders do it, nothing happens."
4. Communication Benefits When Leaders Post Responsibly	Many soldiers appreciated when leaders used social media to share positive messages, clarify intent, or increase transparency—especially in large or dispersed units.	"When done right, it helps us understand what's going on beyond our company or platoon."
5. Desire for soldier Input in Policy Development	soldiers consistently expressed that junior enlisted and non-commissioned officers should have a voice in shaping or reviewing leader social media policies.	"We see the impacts firsthand. Our input would help make the policies more practical."
6. Mentorship and Support Through Online Presence	Interview participants highlighted how leaders use social media to mentor, support, or uplift soldiers.	"Leaders can use social media to encourage and guide the formation."
7. Managing Perception and Public Image	Senior leaders discussed the importance of controlling how their posts may be perceived inside and outside the unit.	"What we post shapes how the formation and community see us."
8. Leadership Accountability Online	Participants indicated that leaders should be held accountable for their social media activity and adhere to the same expectations set for soldiers.	"Leaders don't always follow the rules they expect from us."

These themes reflect the areas participants discussed most frequently, including leader professionalism online, OPSEC awareness, the influence of leader posts on morale and communication, expectations for appropriate online conduct, and the need for policy clarity and training. Each of these themes surfaced across multiple participants or different ranks, indicating that they were not isolated observations but recurring patterns in the dataset.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings from this mixed-methods study show several consistent points regarding social media use in U.S Army formations. Across both survey responses and qualitative interviews, participants frequently raised concerns about Operational Security (OPSEC) risks and the potential for a leader's tone or intent to be misinterpreted online.

In interviews, senior leaders described a desire for clearer guidance and more structured mentorship about digital conduct. They also expressed a need for better alignment between what they post on their personal accounts and the Army's professional standards. In a similar vein, soldiers reported uneven enforcement of existing policies, leading to unclear expectations regarding their online behavior. These soldiers expressed a desire for training that better reflects the realities of modern digital engagement.

Survey data from soldiers showed that they pay close attention to the content their leaders share online. Soldiers reported using these posts to form opinions about a leader's judgment, values, and credibility. While the data did not suggest that a leader's posts directly cause a change in a soldier's actions, soldiers reported that the posts influenced their perceptions of the unit's professional climate and their level of trust in leadership.

Finally, participants from both groups noted that social media can be a valuable tool for enhancing a leader's visibility and fostering a sense of connection, especially within large or geographically dispersed units. Both leaders and soldiers also stated that junior soldiers' perspectives should be considered when refining social media policies.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations derived from the mixed-methods examination of how senior Army leaders' social media use affects soldiers within their formations. The chapter integrates the major findings, discusses their implications for practice, outlines a leadership action plan, and provides directions for future research. The goal is to translate the study's results into meaningful insights that can strengthen digital leadership across the U.S. Army.

### **Purpose of the Applied Culminating Project**

The purpose of this project was to explore the influence of senior Army leaders' social media activity on Soldiers' perceptions, morale, discipline, communication, and sense of professionalism within their units. In addition to examining these impacts, the study aimed to identify practical measures the Army can implement to reduce risk, strengthen online leader accountability, and enhance overall digital leadership practices. Through this focused inquiry, the project sought to contribute actionable insights that support responsible social media engagement and reinforce professionalism within Army formations.

### **Research Questions**

General Research Question:

Has the use of social media by leaders in the Army made a significant impact on the lives of soldiers within their formations?

***Specific Research Questions:***

1. How does the diffusion of social media by senior military officers impact soldiers' lives, including security implications, disciplinary issues, and leadership influence within units?
2. What strategies and measures can be implemented to effectively regulate military leaders' social media use while balancing risk mitigation with positive impacts on soldiers' lives?

**Summary of Significant Findings**

Based on interviews with senior leaders and data from soldiers' surveys, a critical disconnect has emerged between the necessity of social media in modern military leadership and the Army's current framework for managing it. There is clear, shared recognition across all ranks that a leader's digital footprint is no longer a personal matter but a direct extension of their professional duties, profoundly influencing unit climate, trust, and perceptions.

Senior leaders are caught in a difficult position. They understand that engaging on social media is now an unavoidable and essential aspect of leadership, necessary for communication and connection within their formations. However, they are operating in a high-risk environment with limited guidance. Leaders are aware that every post, no matter how good-natured, is scrutinized and carries significant weight. They grapple with the persistent dangers of misinterpretation, inconsistent tone, and critical Operational Security (OPSEC) vulnerabilities that can arise from a single careless click. The core of their frustration lies in a systemic failure: while policies and regulations exist on paper, they are not effectively translated into practical, actionable guidance at the unit level. This results in uneven enforcement and a notable absence

of structured digital mentorship, leaving leaders uncertain of the boundaries and best practices for their online conduct.

This uncertainty at the leadership level cascades down, creating a confusing and inconsistent environment for junior and mid-grade soldiers. They witness an inconsistency of standards where online behavior tolerated in one unit is grounds for correction in another. This inconsistency erodes trust and clarity, blurring their understanding of what constitutes professional digital conduct. Soldiers look to their leaders for a model of professionalism, but without a clear, universally applied standard, that model becomes fragmented and unreliable.

The data from both leaders and soldiers converges on several undeniable points. First, professional conduct online is not merely about appearances; it is fundamentally tied to unit perception and the bedrock of trust between a leader and their soldiers. Second, OPSEC risks are not theoretical threats but constant, tangible vulnerabilities exacerbated by the informal, rapid-fire nature of social media.

Ultimately, there is a calling for deliberate, decisive action. This is not a matter of creating more regulations, but of providing better leader-specific training that addresses the distinction of digital engagement. It requires standardizing enforcement procedures to eliminate inconsistency and ensuring that every soldier, from the newest private to the most senior general, understands the boundaries of responsible and effective digital leadership. The findings are not a suggestion but an imperative to bridge the gap between policy and practice, equipping leaders with the tools and training they need to navigate the digital domain with confidence and integrity.

**Table 6***Qualitative themes From Interview Analysis*

<b>Overarching Theme</b>	<b>Quantitative Findings (Summary)</b>	<b>Qualitative Findings (Summary)</b>	<b>Conclusion &amp; Leadership Implication</b>
1. Digital Professionalism & Leader Example	Soldiers slightly agreed leaders' posts shape perceptions of leadership (Q1).	Leaders and soldiers emphasized professionalism, tone, and modeling standards.	Leader online behavior directly affects trust and perceived competence. Leaders require clearer expectations and digital professionalism standards.
2. OPSEC & Information Discipline	Very slight concern over OPSEC violations was reflected (Q5).	Strong repeated theme: small details online can create security exposure.	Digital spaces increase OPSEC vulnerability; leaders must adopt stricter information discipline practices.
3. Communication & Leader Visibility	Soldiers agreed social media can strengthen communication (Q6).	Interviews noted increased leader presence and accessibility through postings.	Social media offers supplemental communication benefits, but must complement—not replace—formal channels.
4. Policy Clarity, Training, & Enforcement	Mixed responses about training effectiveness (Q8) and policy clarity (Q7).	Soldiers and leaders reported inconsistent enforcement and unclear guidance.	Policies exist but are unevenly communicated; standardized training and enforcement are necessary.
5. Soldier Voice & Participatory Expectations	Highest agreement was seen for including junior soldier input in policy (Q11).	Soldiers expressed desire for involvement; leaders acknowledged value in feedback.	Soldiers expect participatory leadership in digital environments; feedback loops should be formalized.

Table 6 clarifies how the major issues raised in both datasets converge into a set of broader conclusions about senior leader social media use in Army formations. The alignment between quantitative and qualitative findings strengthens the credibility of the results, particularly in areas where both soldiers and leaders identified similar concerns. For instance, both groups acknowledged the importance of professionalism in leadership posts and

recognized the potential OPSEC risks associated with careless online activity. Likewise, both soldiers and leaders noted that social media can enhance communication and leader presence when used responsibly. These areas of agreement indicate that certain themes—such as communication, public image, professionalism, and OPSEC—are not limited to one group's perspective but represent shared experiences across ranks.

At the same time, the findings also reveal gaps that require attention. Soldiers consistently expressed the desire for clearer standards, stronger enforcement, and more comprehensive training, while senior leaders tended to emphasize perception management and the need to model appropriate behavior. These differences suggest that soldiers are more aware of inconsistencies and uncertainty in daily enforcement, whereas leaders are more aware of the external implications of their digital presence. Presenting these differences side by side demonstrates the value of integrating both perspectives in a mixed-methods design.

Overall, the findings reinforce the need for a unified approach to leader social media use—one that combines professional expectations, consistent policy enforcement, improved training, and open communication across ranks. The conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 5 draw directly from these shared patterns and differences, translating the empirical findings into actionable steps for improving digital leadership within the Army.

### **Implications for Innovative Design of Practice**

The study's findings underscore the need for a more deliberate approach to digital leadership development across the Army. Senior leaders demonstrated awareness of the risks and responsibilities associated with online engagement but lacked consistent frameworks to

guide their practice. This inconsistency suggests that the Army's current guidance does not fully address the realities of today's digital environment.

Innovative practice should focus on:

- Strengthening digital professionalism standards and embedding them into all levels of PME.
- Enhancing OPSEC-centered digital literacy training tailored specifically to leader responsibilities.
- Creating consistent processes for reviewing, mentoring, and correcting leader social media conduct.
- Establishing structured avenues for soldiers—especially junior soldiers—to provide feedback on leader communication practices.
- Incorporating real-world case examples and scenario-based learning into training modules.

By addressing these gaps, the Army can modernize leadership development and ensure that digital presence aligns with organizational values and mission requirements.

### **Leadership Plan of Action**

The findings from this study make clear that strengthening digital leadership across Army formations requires a structured, deliberate approach that addresses both the opportunities and risks associated with senior leader social media use. Drawing on the themes identified in the qualitative analysis, the Leadership Plan of Action in **Table 7** outlines practical steps that commanders and senior leaders can implement to enhance professionalism, reduce

OPSEC vulnerabilities, clarify policies, and establish consistent expectations across ranks. The plan is designed to translate the study's conclusions into actionable measures that support leader development while ensuring that digital engagement aligns with Army Values and operational responsibilities. A leadership-focused plan of action informed by the findings includes the following elements:

**Table 7**

*Leadership Plan of Action for Strengthening Digital Conduct in Army Formations*

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Action Area</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Implementation Steps</b>
Phase 1 6 Months	Digital Professionalism Integration	Ensure leaders understand expectations for online conduct aligned with Army Values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed leader-specific digital professionalism modules into all PME levels.</li> <li>• Incorporate tone, perception, and ethics-based scenarios into classroom instruction.</li> <li>• Reinforce standards during counseling and leader development sessions.</li> <li>• Develop recurring, scenario-driven OPSEC training addressing leader-specific risks.</li> </ul>
Phase 2 Month 7 - 18	Structured OPSEC Reinforcement	Reduce OPSEC vulnerabilities created by leader online activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use real-world examples of social media–related OPSEC breaches.</li> <li>• Require annual verification of digital OPSEC awareness for all leaders.</li> <li>• Pair emerging leaders with senior mentors trained in digital communication standards.</li> </ul>
Phase 3 Month 19-36	Mentorship and Peer Review	Provide leaders with guidance and accountability regarding online presence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct periodic peer reviews of official leader accounts.</li> <li>• Integrate digital conduct</li> </ul>

Timeline	Action Area	Objective	Implementation Steps
Phase 4 Month 37 and beyond	Standardized Enforcement Procedures	Promote uniform accountability across formations regarding social media violations.	mentorship into existing leader development programs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish clear, force-wide enforcement guidelines aligned with AR 530-1 and AR 600-20.</li> <li>• Train command teams on consistent application of corrective measures.</li> <li>• Document violations using standardized reporting tools to ensure transparency.</li> <li>• Create advisory boards or working groups with representation from junior ranks.</li> </ul>
Through all phases	Feedback Channels for soldiers	Incorporate junior soldier perspectives into digital leadership policy refinement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct periodic surveys or focus groups on leader digital communication.</li> <li>• Use collected feedback to inform updates to social media policies and training programs.</li> </ul>

Taken together, the actions outlined in the plan provide a comprehensive framework for improving how leaders navigate the digital environment and model appropriate conduct for their formations. By integrating digital professionalism into PME, reinforcing OPSEC awareness, establishing mentorship and oversight mechanisms, standardizing enforcement, and incorporating junior soldier feedback, the Army can create a more coherent and accountable approach to social media use among its leaders. Implementing these steps would not only address the gaps identified in the study but also foster a climate of trust, consistency, and responsible digital engagement across the force. This plan of action promotes responsible digital leadership rooted in Army Values, clarity, consistency, and collaboration across ranks.

## Conclusions

From the findings, I conclude that senior Army leaders' social media activity does impact soldiers within their formations, primarily through shaping perceptions of leadership, professionalism, and unit climate. While leader posts do not substantially change individual soldier behavior, they significantly influence how soldiers evaluate leader credibility, judgment, and adherence to standards. Senior leaders recognize both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of online engagement but often lack practical guidance to navigate these responsibilities effectively. OPSEC concerns, inconsistent enforcement, and unclear expectations emerged as recurring issues that require institutional attention. Soldiers and leaders alike expressed the need for improved training, clearer standards, and structured mentorship.

Overall, the findings are largely consistent with and build on the existing literature on the influence of digital platforms on professional environments. Foundational research by authors such as Bayer et al. (2020) and Valkenburg (2022) establishes the powerful role social media ecologies play in shaping perceptions, social norms, and interpersonal judgments. The study's conclusion that leader posts influence soldiers' evaluations of credibility and professionalism, even without directly altering their behavior, clearly demonstrates the applicability of these theoretical frameworks in a military context. This alignment is further reinforced by the strategic concerns outlined by Singer and Brooking (2018), who detail the weaponization of social media. The recurring OPSEC concerns identified in this study are not merely theoretical but reflect the tangible risks described in Singer and Brooking's "LikeWar," where every post can become part of a larger information battlefield. Moreover, the study's results speak directly to the specific challenges the modern military faces in an era of

"connectivity saturation," as described by Hinton (2023). The call from both soldiers and leaders for clearer guidance and training addresses the core tension that Giroux (2021) identifies in balancing the connective benefits of social media with its inherent risks to civil-military relations and internal cohesion. While the broader literature, such as Burk et al. (2019), discusses the necessity for armed forces to adapt to a turbulent world, this study provides specific empirical data on a critical aspect of that adaptation. The gap between existing policy and practical, unit-level implementation highlights a specific point of friction in the military's ongoing evolution, confirming that effective digital leadership is no longer an elective skill but a core requirement for maintaining trust and discipline in modern formations.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Future research should:

- Explore perception differences across rank groups using stratified sampling to capture more diverse perspectives.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine how leader social media influence evolves over time.
- Investigate adversarial exploitation risks, especially as emerging technologies expand information warfare capabilities.
- Compare digital leadership practices across joint and allied forces to identify shared challenges and best practices.
- Examine how generational differences within the force affect expectations for online leader behavior.

**Summary of the Study**

This mixed-methods study explored how senior Army leaders' social media use affects soldiers within their formations. Interviews and survey data revealed that leadership behavior online contributes to soldiers' perceptions of professionalism, communication effectiveness, and trust in leadership. Senior leaders acknowledged the importance of modeling appropriate conduct and recognized the inherent risks associated with online platforms. The study demonstrated that while policies exist, they require clearer communication, stronger enforcement, and more practical application. The conclusions and recommendations offer a path toward improving digital leadership by integrating training, mentorship, standards, and feedback mechanisms. Collectively, the results underscore the need for a modernized approach to leadership that aligns social media engagement with Army Values and operational responsibilities.

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