

How do Bridge Officers Understand and Experience the Use of Social Media at Sea?

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ABSTRACT: Recently, the use of social media at sea has increased. However, the research body that concerns seafarers' use of social media is still sparse. This study aims to contribute to fill this gap, through an exploration of how maritime bridge officers understand and experience the use of social media at sea. A thematic analysis is applied to six in-depth semi structured interviews with seafarers sailing along the Norwegian coastline. Two global themes were identified: Social media use impacts interpersonal relationships, and Use of social media at work. Findings suggest that social media influences relationships with family and friends ashore, as well as interactions among crew members on board. While informants raised concerns about social media's potential to distract bridge officers and impair concentration, it is used to counter boredom while at sea. It is also described that social media can be used as both as an informal work tool, and communication channel amongst crew. Despite many shipping companies having restrictions regarding cellphone use on the bridge, our results indicate these are not necessarily known or followed by the crew. The implications of this research are discussed.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the popularization of Facebook at the beginning of the millennium, the use of social media has exploded worldwide (Abraham, 2023). In 2024, approximately five billion people used social media, and the number is expected to exceed six billion by 2028 (Statista, 2024). According to Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), social media is "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking." Using social media can involve sharing and consuming user generated content such as images, videos, or text. It offers a plethora of opportunities to interact with other people in forums etc. Further, several social media platforms also offer opportunities to connect directly and privately with each other through direct messages and chat. Some platforms also offer features that allow audio and/or video calls. Social media is easy to use and is often available to use

free of cost, as long as the user has access to the internet. The development of devices such as smartphones enables easy access to social media content anywhere, anytime (Li et al., 2014). It is fair to say that social media has become an integrated part of many peoples' lives, providing entertainment and social connection readily available at the users' fingertips. This has contributed to changing the way individuals, communities, and organizations communicate (Defede et al. 2021).

For Norwegian seafarers, it used to be a cumbersome process to contact family and friends on shore. For most of the time, being out at sea meant that sailors lived in relative isolation on board the vessel, unaware of what was happening on land, and those on land were unaware of shipboard activities. However, recently, the proliferation of internet services like Starlink™ offers an increasingly more stable internet

connection available in many previously unreachable places. With better access to internet comes more opportunity to use social media at sea. However, while use of social media at sea increases, the research body that relates to seafarers' use of social media is still sparse (Tang 2024).

People use social media for various reasons. For instance, social media is used to relax, for entertainment purposes and to share values, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences. Further, social media is widely used to communicate and connect with others (Sood et al. 2020) and studies have found that social media can bolster the feeling of being "in touch" with people and receiving support from others (Quinn, 2018). For seafarers, the aspect of staying in touch with family and friends is considered important by most (Vassiliadou & Yakinthos, 2020). However, research has indicated that use of social media on ships has both positive and negative implications for seafarers well-being (Gheorghe, 2019). For instance, studies have linked excessive use of social media to a sense of social isolation (Primack et al., 2017), and other negative outcomes such as susceptibility to depression and anxiety disorders (Zamora et al. 2021).

When it comes to safety, it has been indicated that an increased use of social media at sea may impact the seafarer's ability to perform well at work: cell phone use at the bridge may affect concentration, attention and situational awareness negatively (US Coast Guard 2010). As excessive phone usage proves to be a distracting factor for workers at sea, several maritime actors recommends that shipping companies and shipmasters establish restrictions regarding phone usage on the bridge (International Chamber of Shipping, 2022; US Coast Guard, 2010).

As we have seen in the above sections, there is no doubt that the use of social media at sea is an important area of research and reflection, closely tied to both well-being and safety. However, as mentioned, the research in this area is still sparse (Tang, 2024). We have not encountered any peer reviewed studies that explore how bridge officers themselves understand the use of social media on board. Developing knowledge on this topic may increase our academical understanding of social media use at sea, including the specific benefits and drawbacks of social media use among bridge officers. It may also be informative for the practice field, such as shipping companies' recommendations and regulations and bridge officers' training.

This study aimed to contribute to fill this gap, and explore the research question: *How do bridge officers understand and experience the use of social media at sea?*

2 METHODS

2.1 Research approach

To address the research question, we opted for a qualitative approach, using six in-depth semi structured interviews with seafarers sailing along the Norwegian coastline. This is a geographical area where stable internet connection has been introduced and is now widely available (Starlink, n.d.). This research approach is well-suited for delving into nuanced

perspectives, allowing for unexpected and contextual insights.

2.2 Informants

Our target population were Norwegian bridge officers operating in or around the Norwegian coast. Officers engaged in international voyages were excluded due to potentially limited internet access during such journeys. An availability sampling method was applied. We recruited six informants in total. Five of them were previous acquaintances of the researchers, while one participant was previously unknown to the researchers. The informants held positions as first officers, chief officers and captains in six different Norwegian shipping companies. Their work areas spanned the North Sea (offshore platform supply vessels), coastal routes on the Norwegian west coast (passenger vessels), and cargo routes throughout the country (cargo ships). Among the informants, there were five men and one woman, with an age range of 22 to 50 years. Three of the officers included in the study were on a four-four rotation, meaning that they alternate four weeks work at sea, with four weeks at home. Two officers had shorter rotations such as two weeks work –two weeks at home, and one week work – two weeks home. One informant did not have a set rotation, but would have a varied sailing schedule.

2.3 Planning and performing the interviews.

The interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview guide in the form of a list of open questions and themes. We allowed the informants to guide the sequence of topics as much as possible. We also welcomed new themes which emerged during the interviews. Before the research interviews were conducted, we performed a pilot study. The pilot study allowed us to test out the interview guide and provided us with valuable feedback that was used to refine the themes and questions in the guide.

Five interviews were conducted face to face, at a calm and neutral meeting room. One interview was conducted via video conference call at the communication platform Teams™. Each interview lasted for appx 45 minutes. Great care was taken to assure that there would be no distractions during the interviews. Audio from the interviews were recorded using Sony ICD-PX370 digital voice recorder™. All informants had Norwegian as their native language, and the interviews were performed in Norwegian.

2.4 Transcriptions and analysis of data

The data was transcribed in verbatim. Data was anonymized during transcription, so that no individual or shipping company could be recognized. To further ensure informant anonymity, the voice recordings were deleted immediately after transcription. To analyze the data, we employed a Thematic Analysis following the framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006; 2014). According to Braun et al. (2014), thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible approach that effectively identifies and analyzes themes and patterns within qualitative data. The researchers familiarized ourselves closely with the data, before basic themes were identified in the text.

Then, basic themes were grouped together in organizing themes, before basic and organizing themes were sorted into global themes. In line with the recommendations of Braun & Clarke (2006), the analysis was performed in a recursive manner, where researchers moved back and forth between raw data and the different levels of themes throughout the process.

Three researchers were involved in the analysis work. In the case of any dispute, agreement was reached through discussion. Use of several coders and analyzers, can be seen as an advantage in qualitative research, as it can provide different perspectives and enables in-depth discussions and exploration of findings (i.e. Church et al. 2019; Frost et al. 2016). For the presentation of results in the paper, we selected and translated (and re-translated when necessary), exemplary quotes. In this process, great care was taken to ensure that no meaning was lost from the text.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Approval for this research was obtained from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). SIKT is a privacy service that ensures lawful use of personal data in accordance with privacy regulations. In accordance with the SIKT agreement, we have anonymized the informants, ensuring that individuals and/or workplaces cannot be recognized in transcriptions or the final report. Informed consent is a crucial research ethics principle. Prior to data collection, all potential informants were duly and thoroughly informed about the project and their right to withdraw at any time. All informants signed informed consent forms.

2.6 Limitations

While great care was taken to ensure that the research interviews were in-depth, gathering as thick descriptions as possible, one potential limitation with our study, is that the sample size of informants was small. Small sample sizes in qualitative research can pose several limitations. For instance, there are challenges with drawing inferences from small samples (Bock & Sergeant, 2002). Further, it can be challenging to achieve informational redundancy and data saturation through a limited number of interview objects (Sandelowski, 1995). Data saturation is often considered a sign that enough data has been gathered in qualitative research. According to Fusch & Ness (2015), data saturation is the point at which no new information is obtained from additional interviews. Achieving some degree of saturation is crucial for the quality and validity of qualitative research. There is no consensus on the exact number required for saturation, but it has been claimed that it is in fact possible to achieve saturation in small samples (i.e. Hennink & Kaiser 2022). Further, it has been claimed that the decision of whether saturation has been achieved is dependent on aspects such as research paradigm (Boddy 2016) and the judgment and experience of the researchers involved (Aguboshim, 2021). With only six informants, it is difficult to determine whether complete saturation was actually achieved. However, the researchers experienced signs that data saturation

was achieved. By the last interviews, the content and themes from the informants became repetitive (as described and recommended by Hennik & Kaiser, 2022).

Another potential limitation of the study is related to the relationships between researchers and informants. During recruitment, availability sampling method was used. The interviewers were already acquainted with five of six of the individuals that were approached and recruited to participate in the study. Such recruitment approach has both advantages and disadvantages: prior knowledge of informants can lead to richer, more personal accounts; However, it may also influence data content – and it is important to note that interviewing acquaintances could make critical reflection more challenging under certain circumstances (Chew - Graham et al., 2002). In our experience, the familiarity with the informants established a foundation of trust between the research team and informants even before the interviews began. To avoid any role related unclarity we took great care to inform the participants about the interview setting, and our role as researchers.

3 RESULTS

In this section, the results from the in-depth interviews are presented. The informants described that they use a variety of social media platforms while at sea: For instance, they use Snapchat and Messenger to stay in touch with family, friends, and colleagues. Facebook™, Instagram™, and TikTok™ are also frequently used for entertainment purposes, such as viewing videos and pictures. Additionally, informants described that they use various social media to stay informed about news and other personal interests.

Table 1 provides an overview of organizing themes and global themes identified, as well as a brief description of theme content.

3.1 Social media use and interpersonal relationships

3.1.1 Relationship with family and friends ashore

Our informants considered it positive to be able to maintain contact with family and friends while at sea. One informant explained: *I would say it [using social media] affects me really positively. Because then you can stay in touch with those at home, and they can see that I'm alive, and I can see that they're alive... but it's simply to stay connected.*

This quote exemplified that social media affect the informant positively, as it allows them to stay in touch with their families and friends. The informant indicates that it feels meaningful to be able to both send and receive “signs of life” while at sea. However, some informants mentioned that maintaining such close and frequent contact may have a downside. One informant described: *(...) when you constantly have to shift focus to something else [happening at home] and have to deal with everything at home in addition to onboard responsibilities, it can become overwhelming. Time can pass slowly, and stress levels can rise.*

Table 1. An overview of the results

Global themes	Organizing themes	Brief description of theme content
Social media use and interpersonal relationship	Relationship with family and friends ashore	Social media allows closer contact with friends and family while at sea. This aspect is highly appreciated. At the same time, close contact and continuous updates from home can be stressful, as it forces the seafarer to focus on both work- and home at the same time.
	Relationship between crew on board	Use of social media impacts the relationship between crew members. When bridge officers are off duty at home, social media is used to stay in touch with coworkers. This is considered positive for the work environment. On the other hand, when seafarers use social media while on board, this can lead to less interaction and socialization amongst the crew. The informants describe that this can affect relationships negatively and could potentially lead to loneliness.
Use of social media at work	Using social media as a communication channel on board	The informants describe that social media can be used as an informal work tool by the crew. For instance, they use social media chat function to relay important information. Both seafarers that are on duty, and crew members that are at home follow this chat.
	Using social media while on duty on the bridge can have a negative impact	While social media is in use at the bridge occasionally, it is considered dangerous as it may impair concentration, attention and situation awareness etc.
	Restrictions on social media use at work	Our informants recognize that while many shipping companies have restrictions regarding cellphone use on the bridge, these are not necessarily known or followed by the crew. Informants describe that captains' attitudes and informal norms are important influencers of cell phone use on the bridge. However, cell phones and social media are often used covertly on the bridge, despite regulations and recommendations.

While it feels good to be able to communicate with friends and loved ones - the informants pointed to a duality of getting frequent updates from home. The above quote indicates that closer and more frequent contact with loved ones also can be stressful and taxing, as it could create an expectation of being able to actively participate in both arenas at the same time.

3.1.2 Social media use and relations between the crew on board

Our study clearly indicated that social media has started to change the way the crew interacts with one another in several ways. For instance, the informants described that they use social media to stay in touch with colleagues – especially when at home: *Yes, we have quite a bit of contact through social media while we're off-duty. (...) you can send a message if something's up, and you know what they're up to... yes.*

The quote exemplified how social media is used to interact with colleagues from the vessel, even during their off-duty period. As one informant exemplified, there is a link between the quality of the relationship between crew members, and their contact on social media: *...there's a very friendly relationship among... yes... everyone, so there's a bit of meme-sharing back and forth (...). That's how it is..*

Keeping in touch with colleagues outside of work context can indicate friendly relationships and positive connections. The above quotes indicate that use of social media influences crew dynamics positively when they're not on duty.

However, our informants also described that use of social media on board can affect relationships between colleagues in a more negative manner too. One informant described how some may prioritize using social media, over socializing with other crew members in their free time onboard: *What we see now is that after a shift, after work, one goes to the cabin and (...) sits in front of a PC or phone, completely isolating themselves from other social events on board. (...) The danger with this is that one actually becomes lonelier on board. Even though there's plenty of contact through the screen, it can feel incredibly lonely. It's not the same as being social together in real life.*

The informant is concerned that this shift can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation for crew

members. Another informant supplements that such withdrawing behavior may affect the crew relationships too: *I think many people would have had an "eureka" experience if they had lost it (internet). How much more united the crew onboard would have been, and that the time actually would have passed more easily.*

This quote also illustrates that the informant suspected that crew members themselves may not be aware of the consequences of prioritizing social media use over socializing with other crew members in their free time on board. Another informant highlights the importance of knowing the other crew members: *There are some things we do [during operations] that can be potentially dangerous, and it really helps to know the people you work with. (...) Understand how they think - and be able to anticipate in advance how they will react to situations.. and what they will think. So, it's a significant advantage to know your colleagues well. However, with social media, not everyone feels compelled to socialize in the same way, so you might not get to know each other as well now.*

The informant expresses concern that less socialization between crew members may hinder high-quality relationships to form between crew members – and that this may ultimately affect safety on board negatively.

The results of this study highlights that use of social media affects interaction and relationships between crew members in both positive and negative manners. On the one hand, social media is used to form and maintain relationships between crew members, as it allows them to stay in touch with each other in their time away from the vessel. At the same time, there is a concern that using social media may steal away from the same relationship – as social media use while on board limits face to face contact and relationship building with crew members on board.

3.2 Using social media at work

3.2.1 Social media is used as a communication channel on board

The informants share that social media can also be used as a work tool. Amongst our informants, it's commonly described that they have a full-crew chat group, where information and updates from the crew and vessel is posted. This allows information to reach

everyone (both on and off duty). Thus, crew members are already updated on ongoing activities and plans even before they come on board: *It really [very good] because they get running updates about [everything] instead of having only a quick run through of everything that happened over the last... well maybe 8 weeks when you come on board.*

The informant sees advantages with using social media as an across-shift-communication channel, that supplements the formal handover between shifts. According to the informants, such communication channels are also used to give more immediate messages within the active crew. One informant explains: *For instance, If we've been on a charter trip and are waiting overnight, communication between the skipper about when we're going (...) then he just sends a message like, 'Be ready at two o'clock.*

The above quotes show that social media is also used for practical aspects such as keeping the crew informed. The informants were clear that this was not a solution that is organized from the shipping company – but rather a communication channel that emerges locally on each ship. We take this as an example of social media can change both work practices, and the manner in which crew communicate with one another.

3.2.2 Using social media on the bridge

According to our informants – using social media on the bridge is considered dangerous as it may divert attention from important navigation tasks. One informant described: *I think it's really dangerous, a bit like texting on your phone while driving. Of course... you have more time on the bridge than on the road. But it's incredible how quickly you can find yourself in a dangerous situation if you're not vigilant all the time.*

However, while the informants express concerns about the dangers of using social media while on duty – they also describe that such use happens frequently. One informant shares: *...I'll be honest, if you're in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and it's 48 hours until you change course... well, it's easy to pick up your phone and start browsing.*

The above quote describes how it is particularly tempting to use social media on the job in periods with less activity. In this sense, social media is used to alleviate boredom for the bridge officer on watch. Another informant supplied that they evaluate the situation, and whether it is safe to use social media in a certain situation: *...if everything around you is blue, and you don't have anything on the radar screen, then of course, you can check the news. But yes, it all depends on the situation.*

This informant suggested that the use of phones and social media depends on the situation at hand. In the above quote, the informant indicates that it is safer to use social media in a quiet situation. However, others had a different perspective: *I think there's a greater risk when nothing is happening, and people take out their phones, missing things in their peripheral vision... things they might have noticed if they didn't have their phones.*

This informant suggested that there could be dangers to using the phone even at quiet moments. Unexpected events can occur, and escalate quickly, so

picking up the phone could cause crew members to miss important details.

3.2.3 Restrictions regarding the use of social media on the bridge

Many Norwegian shipping companies have restrictions regarding use of cellphones and social media onboard. Our informants were aware of this. However, not all informants were fully familiar with their company's official policy: *It's said that private phones shouldn't be in the wheelhouse. Well, at least that was the case for a while, but I wonder if that's changed. I'm not entirely sure about the current policy. (...)*

According to our informants, there are significant differences between various vessels – and between different bridge leaders. One informant explains: *It varies, depending on how strict the captain is. (...) On the first boat I worked, the captain was on the phone all the time. Whether leaving port, arriving at port, or in the middle of the fjord. On the next boat [in the same shipping company], there was a large sign saying 'mobile phones not allowed.*

It is the informant's understanding that the regulations regarding cell phone and social media use varies to a large degree, and that it largely depends on the individual captain's attitude and preferences. Further, our informants also admitted that while restrictions and regulations may be in place, they were not necessarily followed. One informant openly shares: *Well, the shipping company's guidelines state that phones shouldn't be used during watch. But well.. it's not followed.*

Another informant officer supplies this notion through a story of how officers may choose to use their phones covertly, despite regulations and recommendations: *The officers on the vessel use their phones. Then we quickly put them back in our pockets when we hear someone coming up the stairs (to the bridge).*

While the officers know that they are not allowed to use social media at work, they choose to continue to use social media covertly. These quotes may indicate that while company regulations may not be followed, aspects such as captains' preferences, and informal norms may play an important role in regulating bridge officers' use of social media.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Social media use and interpersonal relationships

4.1.1 Relationships with family and friends

In recent years, the use of social media at sea has become more common due to better internet access. This means that seafarers have gained better opportunities to use social media to stay in touch with family and friends while they are away. Our informants expressed that they are happy with this development. Sending and receiving updates reduces the perceived distance between seafarers at sea and their loved ones back home. This experience is reflected in research. For instance, Quinn (2018) claims that social media can contribute to a sense of connection and support from others. Further, in a study conducted on cadets at sea, 70% considered social media highly positive for maintaining contact and communicate with those at home (Vassiliadou & Yakinthos, 2020).

On the other hand, this study indicates that there is a duality to this. More, and closer contact also comes with an expectation of participation in both arenas: job and home. Our informants clearly state that this dynamic can be stressful – as it requires them to divide their focus. While social media allows frequent interaction between the seafarer and the family at home - the interaction still remains long distance. In a sense, while bridge officers are well informed about homelife - they are still left as spectators - without being able to contribute as a fully present member of the family or friend group. This finding is reflected in previous research. For instance, Rotariu & Șerbu (2015) highlighted that technological advancements social media, may blur the boundary between private life and work life. Potential negative consequences for the individual are stress, frustration, irritability, uncertainty, and vulnerability - resulting in lower productivity and, in extreme cases, absenteeism. To our knowledge, no other study has identified or explored bridge officers' experiences with this dual dynamic of using social media to stay in touch with loved ones. We suggest that future research could look closer at this aspect.

4.1.2 *Relationships with crew onboard*

This study indicates that social media affects relationships between colleagues both positively and negatively. For one, the bridge officers described that they use social media to keep in contact with each other when they are at home. This is considered positive for the crew cohesion and relationships. These results are mirrored by Bartels et al. (2019) which concluded that having contact with colleagues on social media, can lead to positive outcomes such as an improved work environment. However, our study also indicated that extensive use of social media may steal time away from crew socialization on board, and cause individuals to withdraw from social interactions with colleagues. This was considered very negative by our informants. From other studies it has been found that loneliness is a significant factor affecting life satisfaction among seafarers (Sekhon & Srivasta, 2021). In the present study, our informants were concerned that use of social media may increase loneliness, rather than mitigating it. In particular, while social media can facilitate contact with friends and family at home, it does not provide the same sense of social connection as physical interactions. This is mirrored in research from other domains, where it has been found that people with a high social media consumption may experience a stronger sense of social isolation compared to those with a lower consumption (Bonsaksen et al. 2023; Primack et al 2017). Further, the informants expressed concern that less interaction between crew members can lead to a lower level of trust – and that safety may be impaired as a result of this. This perspective aligns with studies such as Gausdal & Makarova (2017), who emphasized that trust significantly influences safety-related aspects on ships.

As presented in the above paragraphs, our study supports the notion that social media affects the relationships between crew in fundamental ways – impacting seafarers emotional wellbeing, the psychosocial work environment - and potentially safety on board. Based on our results, we recommend that more research is needed to explore the particulars

of how social media use affects the well-being of seafarers, psychosocial environment and trust between crew members, and ultimately safety at sea. Increased insight into these aspects could be of great interest to different domain actors, such as shipping companies, seeking to improve these aspects.

4.2 *Using social media at work*

4.2.1 *Using social media as a communication channel between the crew*

Our informants described that social media is sometimes used as an informal work tool; chat groups are used to share and receive continuous updates on ship activities and is used to exert leadership, and organize and coordinate team effort. While it's essential to note that this solution may not be common across all shipping companies, we take it as an indication that social media not only changes the way in which people interact socially – it may also impact how work is performed in the field. It is known from other domains that the use of social media within existing teams may entice information sharing, and improve performance (Cui et al., 2020). Research has also indicated that the use of enterprise social media may improve team creativity and task performance in dispersed teams (Suh & Bock, 2015). However, while none of our informants explored the potential drawbacks of such practices, there could be some cons to the use of personal social media in the professional work setting. For instance, such practices may exclude crew members without social media presence. Being excluded from online communities could take the individual “out of the loop” (Pennington, 2020), and lead to negative outcomes such as low self-esteem and a sense of not belonging (Schneider et al., 2017). To our knowledge, no studies have previously identified or explored how social media is used as a work tool at sea. Further research could aim to increase understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of such use.

4.2.2 *Using social media on the bridge*

Maintaining a proper lookout is one of the most important tasks on the ship bridge (International Maritime Organization, 1975). Most seafarers are well aware of this. Several of our informants expressed concern that use of social media on the bridge may be dangerous, as it has a negative impact on concentration and lookout. These concerns are mirrored by research and recommendations. For instance, United States Coast Guard (2010), recommends that mobile phones and other irrelevant electronics should be avoided at the bridge as they can cause distractions and lapses in attention.

However, despite relatively clear recommendations and concerns about the dangers, the informants describe that social media use happens frequently on the job on the bridge. It is well known that social media is commonly used for entertainment, relaxation, and passing time (Sood et al. 2020). This seems to be the case at the ships' bridge too: social media is used as a means to alleviate boredom during periods of low activity. Some informants suggests that use of social media depends on the situation and may be safe during quiet moments. They describe how they evaluate the situation before picking up the phone. On the other

hand, other informants highlight that unexpected events can occur and escalate quickly, and argue that there may be an even greater risk associated with using the phone during quiet periods. Despite recommendations and concerns about the dangers, the informants describe that social media use happens frequently on the job on the bridge. It is well known that social media is commonly used for entertainment, relaxation, and passing time (Sood et al. 2020). This seems to be the case at the ships' bridge too: social media is used as a means to alleviate boredom during periods of low activity.

Some informants suggest that use of social media depends on the situation and may be safe during quiet moments. They describe how they evaluate the situation before picking up the phone. However, other informants highlight that unexpected events can occur and escalate quickly, and argue that there is an even greater risk associated with using the phone during quiet periods.

These findings point to a complex balance between the perceived dangers of distraction and the temptation to use social media to manage boredom. Further research may be needed to develop guidelines that help bridge officers navigate this balance safely.

4.2.3 *Restrictions of the use of social media on the bridge*

Even though there still is limited research on the topic, the use of private cellphones and social media onboard vessels has been discussed in the maritime industry. For instance, actors such as United States Coast Guard (2010), and the International Chamber of Shipping (2022, p. 37) has recommended that vessel operators and owners should develop and implement clear guidelines and restrictions regarding mobile phone usage at sea. In most countries it is up to each shipping company to introduce and enforce guidelines with regards to cellphone use and social media at the bridge. Our informants recognized that their shipping companies have such guidelines. However, some indicated that they were uncertain about the specifics – and where to find this information. This could indicate that the companies' official guidelines regarding cellphone use are not as emphasized among workers as the published guidelines recommends. Rather, our informants give the impression that the allowance of social media use at the bridge is largely dependent on the individual captain's preferences. Interestingly, our results indicate that crew members continue to use their phones covertly, even if there is an expressed phone ban in place, which can indicate that informal norms set by the crew themselves are also of great importance. In the light of this, previous research explains that banning or prohibiting use of cell phones can provoke covert phone usage rather than being an efficient measure against it (Maritime Mutual Insurance Association, 2018).

In the light of these results, it could be claimed that potential implications of the above discussion could be that shipping companies should ensure that all crew members are familiar with their existing regulations. Further, all crew members should receive proper training regarding the dangers of cell phone use during the watch (i.e. during BRM training). However, our results indicate that many of the informants already consider social media use on the bridge to be

dangerous – and that they are well aware of the risks. Yet, they explain that given regulations are not always followed. While this duality seems to contain some dissonance between attitude and behavior, previous research has also shown that people often find it challenging to regulate their social media use, even when faced with negative outcomes of such use (Hofmann et al., 2016; Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). Frequent social media users experience strong and spontaneous positive reactions to social media, making it difficult to resist the urge to use it (Van Koningsbruggen et al., 2017). When introducing and enforcing regulations and guidelines regarding social media use on the bridge, shipping companies should be aware of such urges. Further studies are also needed to explore how difficulties of putting the phone away may affect aspects such as risk perception and safety related behavior on the bridge.

5 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study explored how bridge officers understand and experience social media use at sea. The informants describe how use of social media has a complex and multifaceted impact on life at sea; containing both benefits and drawbacks. Social media is used for different reasons: it is used as a work tool, as a way of maintaining social relationships, and as entertainment during times of boredom. While it is clear that social media provides a much appreciated opportunity to contact loved ones more easily, drawbacks of social media use related to relationships are also highlighted.

While many shipping companies have guidelines to regulate cellphone and social media use on the bridge, our informants indicated that enforcement of these guidelines depends on individual captains' preferences. Further, it was indicated that covert phone use persists despite formal bans, highlighting the influence of informal norms among crew members.

Our informants expressed concern that social media use on the bridge may decrease concentration and attention, however it is clear that it may be difficult to resist the urge to use their phones - even when aware of the potential negative outcomes.

This study has highlighted several implications for research, training and practice. However, while this study provides valuable insights, it merely scratches the surface of the topic and the complexity of social media use at sea. More research is needed to fully understand these aspects, and we recommend that future investigations should focus on how social media use impacts safety and work environment at sea, as well as seafarers' well-being.

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