Stress, Self-Care, and Social Media: Are Pre-Service Teachers Reducing Stress or Simply Scrolling?

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Abstract

Strong evidence supports the overwhelming stress of pre-service teachers and the need for self-care to positively handle the stress. This study examines pre-service teachers' self-care practices and their use of social media in an effort to better understand how and if pre-service teachers are using social media to support their self-care. With billions of users, social media is a ubiquitous source of information, and has the potential to provide a positive mental health experience for individuals seeking self-care information. In a survey of 26 pre-service teachers, participants were asked about their social media usage, whether they followed accounts connected to various aspects of mindful self-care (e.g., supportive relationships, being physically active, etc.), how frequently they practice self-care, and the elements of self-care they find most important. Findings indicate up to 54% of pre-service teachers use social media, but not intentionally for self-care. Additionally, the few social media accounts that are followed for the purpose of self-care are not run by mental health professionals. This study highlights a need for educator preparation programs to better educate pre-service teachers on comprehensive self-care practices and the importance of evaluating social media accounts connected to self-care.

Keywords: *pre-service teachers, teacher education, self-care, social media*

Introduction

Teaching is stressful. Educators of all ages are responsible for the emotional, social, and instructional well-being of 15-30 children who each bring a variety of needs and desires to the classroom (Marcus & Munger, 2022). While individual teachers may be a part of a grade-level team or curricular team, when the door closes, everything rests on the shoulders of the person at the front of the room. As if that were not enough, rarely is the one, 45-minute daily planning period enough to plan, prepare, provide feedback on work, and communicate with families. These factors could be why teachers report 40% more frequent job-related stress and anxiety symptoms than other working adults (Kush et al., 2022; Steiner et al., 2022). The stress of teaching not only impacts teachers but also the students in the classrooms of stressed teachers (Peck, 2024). When teachers have exhausted their professional and personal ways to address this stress, the result is burnout (Walker, 2021). Unfortunately, the stress of teaching starts during the educator preparation process when undergraduates are considered pre-service teachers. One resource for appropriately dealing with

stress is practicing self-care, which is an acknowledged, beneficial way of reducing stress and improving mental health. Self-care is also a term that has become prevalent across multiple social media platforms. With 4.76 billion global users, social media has also recently been shown to have positive and helpful self-care content (Lekgothoane & Kaminer, 2023; Mullis et al., 2021). Knowing that the stress of teaching begins at the pre-service level, acknowledging that self-care can help alleviate the impact of stress, and understanding that there are potential benefits to using social media, we wonder: How do pre-service teachers (PSTs) define self-care, what practices do they implement as self-care, and how do social media sites play a role in their understanding and practices?

Multiple studies have shown evidence of the connection between self-care and well-being in relation to positive academic progress, classroom dynamics, career success, and job resilience (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Çimen & Özgan, 2018; Kerns et al., 2014; Lemon, 2021; Turner & Theilking, 2019). This has led researchers to acknowledge the need for education systems (i.e., teacher education programs and school systems) to make self-care and well-being a priority for pre-service teachers (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Lemon, 2021). Students in teacher preparation programs not only need a deep understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become transformative educators, but also a strong foundation based on how to effectively take care of themselves and manage their stress. However, little research has been conducted on the self-care perceptions and practices of pre-service teachers.

Preliminary research is being conducted on self-care and social media (Lekgothoane & Kaminer, 2023), but this research is not focused specifically on pre-service teachers, their specific levels of stress, and their means of addressing that stress. This means that there is a gap between what we think pre-service teachers need, how they are addressing those needs, and the research that currently exists. The present study responds to this gap in the research by asking a sample of pre-service teachers (N =26) to define self-care, what practices they implement as self-care, and how social media sites might play a role in their understanding and practices.

Literature Review

Stress in the Lives of Pre-Service Teachers

University students are expected to juggle a variety of experiences, including but not limited to classes, extracurricular activities, friendships, romantic and family relationships, and employment, all of which are compounded by the stress that comes with each of these experiences. This stress often manifests in mental health care struggles that are becoming more prevalent. Oswalt et al. (2020) found that college students' mental health diagnoses and treatment increased between 2009 and 2015. Additionally, Deng et al. (2021) and Hamza et al. (2021) found that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted college students' mental health and well-being. However, when post-secondary students experience mental health issues, they also experience barriers to seeking the appropriate help (Dunley & Papadopoulos, 2019). Barriers range from institutional to personal. For example, non-white students are more likely to seek help from their personal social network, while others may not realize they need professional help or have time to seek it (Dunley & Papadopoulos, 2019). Further, treatment has been strongly connected to health insurance, which is not universally available to all students. Based on this information, college students are struggling with their mental health while also struggling to seek and get help for their mental health

needs. This means pre-service teachers (PSTs), college students enrolled in an educator preparation program, are also likely experiencing increased negative mental health and barriers to improving it.

In addition to increasing poor mental health and barriers to seeking help, pre-service teachers carry the additional burden of their profession. As mentioned earlier, teachers experience a significant amount of stress (Chaplain, 2008; Kush et al., 2022; Marcus & Munger, 2022; Schonfeld et al., 2017; Steiner et al., 2022; Travers & Cooper, 1996). As PSTs embark on clinical experiences, they begin to more fully experience the stress connected to teaching (Hand et al., 1996; Lemon, 2021). These clinical experiences are a time of shock and awe, as PSTs realize the classroom is different on the other side of the looking glass. Suddenly, they are no longer in the role of pupil but educator, and the theories and practices honed during their teacher training do not fit seamlessly into the reality of modern schooling (Bain & Moje, 2012; Caires et al., 2010). Further, PSTs are awakened to the fact that they will not be able to control all aspects of their classroom and instruction. First, students are not passive receptacles waiting to be filled with knowledge. They are active, unique, individual humans who on any given day may or may not want to participate in the learning process. Then, there is the physical classroom itself, which comes with a variety of variables including technology, HVAC systems, noise from other rooms, size, and furniture, none of which a pre-service teacher can control. Finally, there are local and state mandates about what content to teach, what materials to use, and more recently, what material not to use. All of these issues wrestle elements of control from the hands of PSTs, which can leave them feeling both unsettled and stressed.

Lemon (2021) found PSTs reported multiple stressors during their placements that included what was happening in the classroom, but which also extended beyond it. These stressors and stress affected their mental clarity, classroom performance as both learner and teacher, and touched every element of their lives. While PSTs are under incredible stress, they are also aware of the need for improved well-being. PSTs admit they need to work on strategies and take better care of themselves and their well-being, while also acknowledging the need for positive relationships in their lives (Lemon, 2021). Lemon (2021) argues that students' expressions of stress, awareness of the need for improved well-being and positive relationships are "entangled, influencing one another at every stage," (p. 946). When thinking of this entanglement, self-care should also be considered because, while personal, it is also highly connected to quality teaching and quality teaching experiences. Lemon echoes Head et al.'s (1996) call for teacher education programs to recognize and address the stress of pre-service teaching experiences.

Self-Care

For many pre-service teachers, the growth into a professional teacher is stressful and difficult, and it is important to consider the coping strategies they use, (Hand et al, 1996) as these practices can have an impact on their future professionalism. All coping strategies are not equal and Head et al. (1996) state that for most PSTs, their stress results from poor coping strategies. While many coping strategies are available to PSTs, they are not all created equal. For example, some people cope with stress by binge eating, using or abusing drugs or alcohol, or completely disengaging with the world around them. However other folks might take a different path, choosing professional care to help them learn how to cope. Unfortunately, not all PSTs have access or finances necessary to seek professional care. This is why self-care should be highlighted: these

particular strategies are things that individuals can manage on their own, can potentially cost nothing, and can be supported in a variety of ways that best suit the individual.

The National Institute of Mental Health (2022) defines self-care as "taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical health and mental health" (How can I take care of my mental health, para. 2) and suggests that self-care is not one-size-fits-all. INTERFACE (2021), a non-crisis helpline run through William James College, suggests that self-care consists of reflection, regulation, and relaxation. Cook-Cottone (2015) argues that intentional mindful self-care may prevent and reduce negative outcomes like burnout, and increase positive outcomes like productivity. This can be seen in the large body of research that supports a variety of effective self-care strategies and skills (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Edenfield & Blumenthal, 2011; Lev & Owen, 1996; Norcross & Guy, 2007). Mediation, relaxation, and visualization have also been shown to decrease ratings of stress in those actively engaged in those practices, compared to individuals who did not use such strategies (Lev & Owen, 1996). Self-compassion is a self-care skill that supports emotional regulation and a growth mindset (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). Additionally, exercise and good nutrition are consistently linked to well-being (Cook-Cottone, 2015, Edenfield & Blumenthal, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2012; Norcross & Guy, 2007). Finally, Timmerman (1999) reported that self-care strategies of social support, tailoring, and self-monitoring effectively helped participants achieve lifestyle change goals. Clearly, there is a vast body of research that has attempted to define what self-care is and can look like, while also providing examples of practices that can aid in self-care.

Self-Care as Professionalism

Mental health difficulties are an increased risk factor for unemployment (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2014) and workplace mental stress is higher for teachers than many other professions (Turner & Theilking, 2019). However, research indicates that teachers who are doing well in multiple areas of well-being are happier with their job, more dedicated to their school, more resilient, and have students with higher grades (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Caprara et al., 2006; Kern et al., 2014). Additionally, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) found a strong link between well-being and positive work outcomes and McCallum and Price (2010) argue that well-being strategies are required if beginning teachers are "to be retained as effective practitioners" (p.32). This is key, given the current high rate of teacher burnout and turnover, as well as the shortage of well-qualified teachers. Self-care for educators is then not simply about personal mental health, but also about maintaining a higher level of professionalism. By understanding PSTs' self-care strategies, teacher-educators can better understand their readiness to be professional teachers

Self-Care and Social Media

At the start of 2024, social media platforms in the United States such as Instagram and TikTok had "239 million active social media user identities" which is equivalent to 70% of the entire population of the country (Kemp, 2024). Social media platforms therefore offer a highly accessed means of sharing information, including information on, and support for, self-care. While much of the research on social media has largely focused on its potential harm to users' mental health, Mullis et al. (2021) examined how self-care is portrayed on Instagram and found generally positive data. Mullis et al. (2021) specifically looked at posts that included the hashtag #selfcare. Tags or hashtags, the symbol # followed by a word or phrase, are frequently used on social media

platforms to indicate key ideas or groups connected to the post. It is common for social media users to search for information via tags. Mullis et al. (2021) analyzed 200 Instagram posts using #selfcare and found that 62% were considered positive, 45% of the posts were explicitly health related, and 23% were related to emotional health. Additionally, they found 69% of studied posts were aimed at "a female audience, featured women, were posted by women, or contained tags directed toward women," (p. 6). The results of this study indicate large social media platforms like Instagram have the potential to provide a positive mental health experience for individuals specifically seeking information on self-care. This data also suggests that pre-service teachers, a group of individuals that frequently identify as women, are likely to find information tailored to their experiences as women.

Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) examined South African university students' experiences with mental-health content on Instagram and their results echo the positive findings of Mullis et al. (2021). Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) found that 67% of participants regularly follow specific mental-health-related accounts, 69% engage with mental health content on the "Search and Explore" page, and 23% search for mental health related hashtags. When asked about the type of mental health content accessed, 80% of participants reported accessing self-care and coping material. Additionally, most participants indicated that the information on Instagram ranged from somewhat to extremely helpful. In open-ended responses, 18% of participants expressed value in the concrete and practical self-care information on Instagram, and some participants specifically stated that the information found via the platform has helped them make positive changes to their lives. This study, like Mullis et al. (2021), indicates the potential for a positive social media platform experience around self-care. Further, this study indicates university students actively utilize social media to support their mental health specifically in the area of self-care.

Both Mullis et al. (2021) and Lekgothoane and Kaminer (2023) highlight a positive portrayal of self-care on a major social media platform, as well as social media platforms as potential sources for users to proactively access self-care information. Additionally, self-care information on social media platforms may provide individuals with healthier ways of dealing with mental health as opposed to excessive drinking, eating, and/or television watching (Mullis et al., 2021). Given the stressors pre-service teachers experience, the importance of self-care to the professional work of teaching, the abundance of social media accounts in the United States, and the indications of social media as a positive source of self-care content, it is only logical to investigate the self-care practices of PSTs as well as how PSTs are using social media accounts for self-care. Therefore, we place self-care at the center of this investigation because personal well-being is a critical component of the professional work of teaching. The self-care practices of PSTs are an important aspect of their developing professional identity as they proactively take actions to help them navigate the world of being a teacher, versus the process of learning to be a teacher.

With that in mind, in this study we attempt to answer three questions: Q1) To what extent do pre-service teachers utilize social media accounts to support various elements of self-care? Q2) To what extent do pre-service teachers enact self-care? and Q3) To what extent do pre-service teachers' following of "self-care" accounts correlate with their self-care practices?

Context of Study: Preservice Teacher Education

Participants in this study were students enrolled in initial certification programs in PK - 12 education programs at two different universities - one mid-size university in the Midwest and one mid-sized university in Texas. Both programs require regular clinical experiences.

Students at the Texas-based university start clinical experience upon their acceptance into the educator preparation program. Students in the secondary program complete 30 observation hours in grades 7-12 at public schools near and far (as much as a 2+ hour drive) from campus before entering clinical teaching placements during their final semesters. While the observation hours are required by the state and the program, they are not tied to courses, so students must fit observations around their course schedule, work, childcare, and other time commitments. Changes to the state education code will soon require students to log 50 hours of observation, increasing the additional scheduling burden. Apart from one module entitled "Staying Sane" which addresses the importance of appropriately handling the stress of teaching, but provides only generic suggestions, and which is included in a required course during students' last semester, there is no direct instruction on self-care or maintaining mental health.

Students enrolled in the initial certification programs at the institution in Michigan experience field placements across four semesters that vary in grade level, district location, and district resources. In their Junior 1, Junior 2, and Senior 1 semesters, participants have a 40-hour field placement requirement. This field placement work is spread across the 14 weeks of the semester and occurs on a weekly basis. While these hours are required, students must fit them into their schedules, but classes in this program meet only two days a week in order to alleviate some schedule stress. Additionally, participants also have an embedded literacy course during these semesters, where they attend their course in a different local school district, learn skills from their instructor, and then immediately implement these skills with children. In their Senior 2 semester, participants are in their internship, which requires more than 400 hours in the classroom.

Methods

Data Sources

The participants represented a spectrum in regard to where they were currently in their programs of study, with some just finishing their first semester of professional courses and others who just finished their internships. Because we decided to keep the survey responses anonymous, we are unable to determine from which university responses came, as well as the age of the participants. This is important, as the midwestern university uses a cohort model as a means of supporting students, which could potentially alter feelings of well-being and self-care. Additionally, age could be a factor in the responses, as social media usage varies, based on age, race, gender, income, education, and community location (Pew Research Center, 2021).

After obtaining appropriate IRB approvals, surveys were sent out via email to approximately 160 students total, between the two universities. The initial survey was sent toward the beginning of the Winter/Spring semester and gave respondents an approximate four-week window of time for completion. Additionally, the survey was sent again to the same potential participants two weeks later as a reminder. After this second email request, we ended up with 26 research participants (85% female, 15% male). The majority of respondents indicated they were preparing to teach elementary (77%) followed by high school (15%) and middle school (8%). Additionally, the majority of respondents reported they were preparing to teach general education (73%) followed by Art (15%), ELA (English-Language Arts) (8%), and History (4%).

Data Collection and Analysis

Our inquiry took a quantitative approach, as we worked to gain an understanding of how pre-service teachers (PSTs) define self-care, what practices they implement as self-care, and how social media sites might play a role in their understanding and practices. Quantitative studies focus on how often a phenomenon occurs, which, in the case of this study, is the importance of self-care practices and the misunderstanding of self-care definitions, practices, and the relationship between self-care practices and social media usage.

In order to collect data, the researchers created an online survey. This survey contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions as a way to collect both quantitative data as well as in-depth descriptions from participants. The survey questions were based on the Mindful Self-Care Scale (MSCS) (Cook-Cottone and Guyker, 2018). The MSCS was developed with the explicit purpose of aligning to actionable self-care practices connected to physical care, supportive relationships, mindful awareness, self-compassion and purpose, mindful relaxation, and supportive structure. It is well known that students in educator preparation programs are stressed and struggling, but what is less known is how they are using social media to manage this stress and identify actionable areas for change. With this in mind, we used a modified MSCS which included open response, Likert, and multiple-choice questions to help better understand actionable ways to support PSTs. The survey can be seen in Appendix I.

Taking a quantitative approach allowed us to collect and analyze data in order to discover potential trends or relationships, while also developing insights that can improve future practice - both our own and that of other teacher educators. By engaging in survey research, we were able to interact with a pool of PSTs from two different universities, using convenience sampling given our proximity to PSTs. Once the data was collected, we first engaged in descriptive statistics (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006), working to calculate the mean and mode for each question, while also looking for any potential outliers. Next, we worked to visualize the data by representing the data graphically in order to identify patterns, trends, and outliers. Finally, we followed that analysis with open-coding of the follow-up questions to look for any potential themes.

While there were opportunities in the survey for participants to elaborate on their "yes" or "no" answers, across the survey, only 30.7% of respondents did so, outside of the question that asked explicitly for PSTs to describe their self-care practices. This speaks to flaws in the survey design. While the intention was to collect more details, the follow up questions ended up becoming redundant, which could be why most PSTs either chose not to respond or stopped responding as the survey went on.

Results

Social Media and Dimensions of Mindful Self-Care

Q1) To What Extent Do Pre-Service Teachers Utilize Social Media Accounts to Support Various Elements of Self-Care?

The analysis of the survey responses showed that respondents regularly (54%) use Instagram, followed closely by both Snapchat (42%) and Tik Tok (42%), with 23% of these users purposefully following accounts connected to what they perceive as self-care practices (Figure 1).

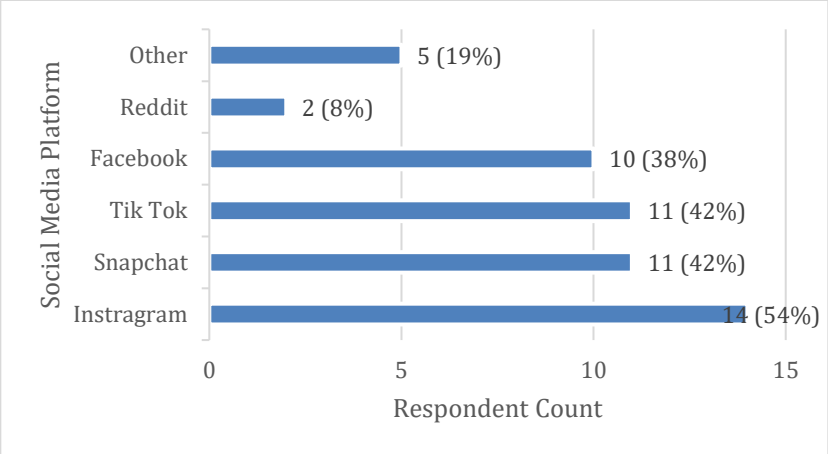

Figure 1: *Social Media Platforms Regularly Used*

The majority (77%) of respondents reported they do not follow accounts on social media connected to their self-care, however, respondents did report following accounts connected to various dimensions of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). When asked about specific dimensions of mindful self-care, 46% of respondents reported following accounts who contribute to their having supportive relationships and self-compassion, 42% reported following accounts who contribute to their having a calm awareness of their thoughts, 31% reported following accounts who contribute to their practicing mindful relaxation, 27% reported following accounts who contribute to their maintaining an organized space for work/school tasks, 23% of respondents reported following accounts who contribute to their being physically active, and 19% reported following accounts who contribute to maintaining a manageable schedule and a balance between the demands of others and what is important to them (Figure 2).

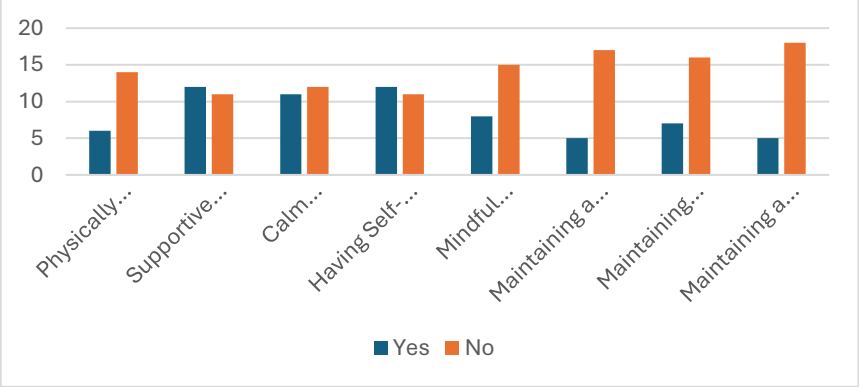

Figure 2: *Follow Accounts that Contribute to Mindful Self-Care*
(Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018)

When asked who they follow on social media and why, there were no common responses. However, there were themes across the accounts that participants mentioned. Respondents specifically named 14 social media accounts all with large followings (hundreds of thousands to millions of followers). Most accounts (71.4%) were female-led. The other four accounts were run by men, and two were run by heterosexual couples. Additionally, most accounts (71.4%) were focused on

lifestyle content (cooking, personal life, travel, etc.). Four accounts were focused on faith-based or mindset content (motivation, habits, non-professional mental health advice) and two accounts were focused on mental health from professional mental health practitioners.

Responses about followed accounts frequently spoke to emotional aspects of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018) and included explanations for why this area of self-care is important for the respondent. For example, one participant shared,

> These accounts give me daily reminders that it is okay to have different types of emotions, like getting upset, or being stressed or exhausted. But they also give reminders that it's okay to take a break, your body needs time to reset and breathe. Everyone needs time to themselves or to do something they enjoy.

Other responses spoke to areas of personal growth. For example, one participant explained, "Yes, I watch a lot of media analysis videos that encourage me to be aware of how I think about subjects". Additionally, some participants shared that they follow accounts focused specifically on mental health needs, sharing, "I do follow a psychologist who talks about understanding anxiety and depression, along with strategies that help it". While many responses were focused on using social media for mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018), some respondents spoke of social media as an escape; "I like to escape through beautiful and stimulating visual content."

The responses of respondents who indicated they did not follow accounts on social media connected to their self-care ranged from a desire to add such accounts, "No, I would definitely love some referrals" and "No, but I should!", to a belief that social media is not helpful, "Social media ends up being more of a hindrance than a tool…"

Self-Care

Q2) To What Extent Do Pre-Service Teachers Enact Self-Care?

Almost half of respondents (42%) reported participating in self-care five or more times a week and one-third of respondents reported participating in self-care two times a week (Figure 3).

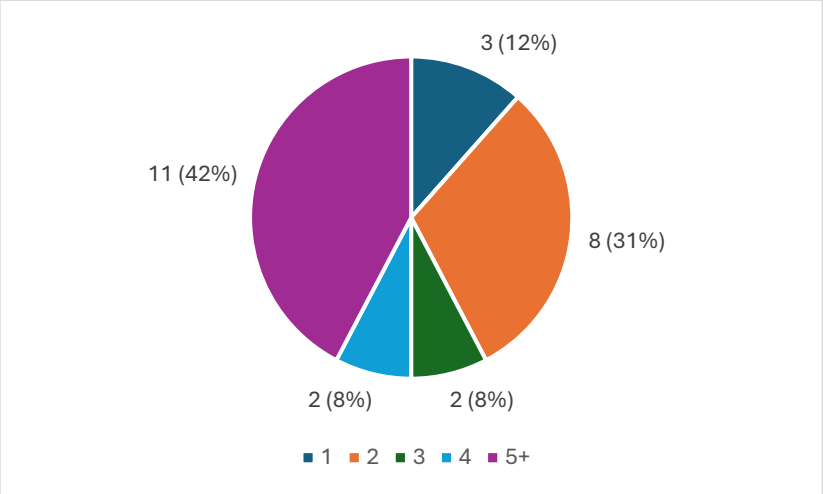

Figure 3: *Count of Practice of Self-Care During the Week*

When asked to rank the most important element of self-care (when given the options of reflection, relaxation, or regulation), regulation was ranked first by the majority of respondents (54%), followed by relaxation (33.3%), and reflection (13%) (Figure 4).

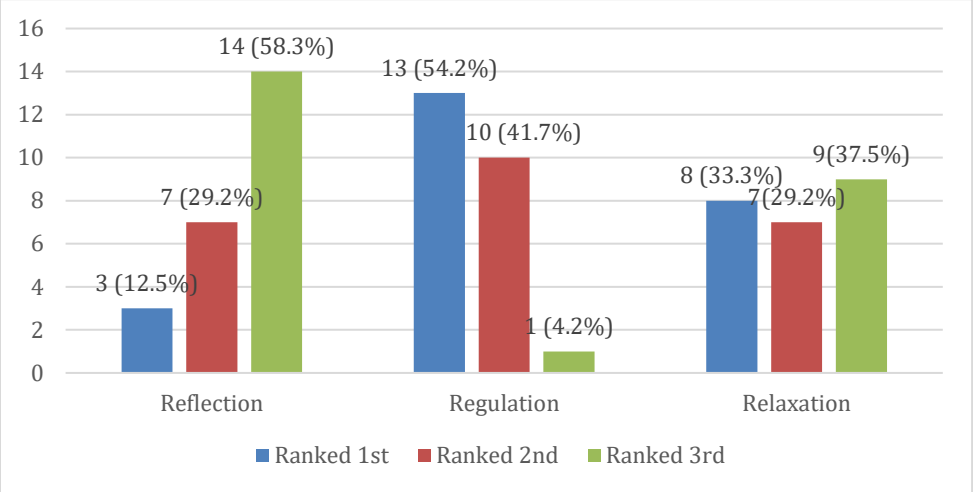

Figure 4: *Ranking of Most Important Elements of Self-Care*

When asked how strongly respondents agreed with statements about mindful self-care, the majority of respondents positively agreed (6 or higher) that they spend time with supportive people (85%), they keep their work/school space clean (78%), remind themselves that failure is part of human experience (74%), maintain a manageable schedule (62%), participate in effective self-care practices (59%), practice good physical care (57%), and balance the demands of others and what is important to them (54%).

When asked to describe the self-care practices they participated in regularly, the most common responses connected with themes of exercise (42.3%), beauty routines (30.8%), and getting outdoors (30.8%). However, the least common themes connected to getting proper sleep and practicing proper nutrition (15.4%), spending time alone (11.5%), and journaling (7.7%).

When respondents described their self-care practices, one participant shared, "I like to get outside and run often and that definitely helps me with my self-care." Other responses looked similar, with several participants mentioning "going on walks," working out a specific number of days per week, frequent bike rides, or spending time gardening. The data indicated that most participants took their physical well-being seriously. Additional respondents indicated that they preferred activities focused on personal grooming such as "long baths," "skin care every day," and putting on makeup. Finally, some respondents stated they knew when they needed time alone and planned for that in their schedule while others stated they "journal to free space in my mind."

This awareness of the need to take care of their physical and mental well-being speaks to Lemon's (2021) work; specifically, the understanding that there is room for improvement as it relates to strategies for true self-care. However, the PSTs' responses also echo the work of Head et al. (1996); namely, that while there might be a recognition of the need for self-care, the coping strategies that many PSTs mentioned are often very poor and do not address how the National Institute of Mental Health (2022) defines self-care.

Q3) To what extent do pre-service teachers' following of "self-care" accounts correlate with their self-care practices?

Nearly one-quarter of respondents indicated they follow individuals on social media that are connected to their self-care, however, when the accounts were described, they did not match with respondents' stated self-care practices. This is interesting, given what Mullis et al. (2021) found regarding the number of posts on Instagram that were devoted to women and that were positive and/or health related. While there are social media accounts out there that might help with self-care, it appears that the PSTs in this survey are not following them.

Discussion

Understanding the self-care practices of pre-service teachers, their conceptualization and enactment of these practices, and how the practices interact with social media usage is important for teacher educators. Teachers' plates have always been overwhelmingly full and that constant state of being overwhelmed seems to be even more prevalent today. The support and care that pre-service teachers need are at the front of our minds as teacher educators. We know it is critical to meet PSTs where they are by understanding their current habits in an effort to support them in developing behaviors, skills, and dispositions that will best serve them in becoming successful educators who can handle the overwhelming nature of a job in education. With that said, despite the knowledge that teaching is an emotionally, physically, and professionally stressful job, it is rare that PSTs are given explicit direction as it relates to how to care for themselves.

Social Media

Most respondents reported using social media, which is not surprising; however, they reported not following accounts connected to their self-care. This was somewhat surprising given that 19-46% of respondents reported following accounts connected to various dimensions of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018). This contrast suggests that pre-service teachers may not have a full understanding of what constitutes self-care. This is understandable as there is a long history of research dedicated to clarifying the definition, as well as students' conceptualizations of self-care (Levin& Idler, 1983; Martinez, et al., 2021; Wilhelm, 2023). This also suggests that there is a need for educator preparation programs to work with PSTs to better understand the wide spectrum of self-care and its connection to well-being. Educating PSTs in this area is critically important, given the number of accounts followed that speak more to being an influencer than being a trained professional.

The 14 specifically named accounts that students reported following can, based on the number of followers, be considered "influencers". Peter & Muth (2023) point to multiple definitions of influencers, however, their inclusion of Schach's (2018) description of influencers as "individuals who, due to their digital network, personality strength, topic expertise, and communicative activity, have perceived credibility regarding certain topics and can make them accessible to a broad group of people through digital channels" (Peter & Muth, 2023, p. 165) best fits with the focus of this paper. Peter & Muth suggest that influencers can be conceptualized as opinion leaders who "range somewhere between friend and role models, which is why followers are more likely to trust their recommendations" (p.165). This trust and perceived credibility can provide influencers with the "ability to shape and change their follower's behavior with their content" (Durau 2022,

p. 212). This ability was clear in many of the PST's comments explaining why they followed the accounts they follow. Many respondents indicated they followed accounts because the accounts provided "motivation," "advice," or "help." Additionally, a few respondents commented specifically on the personality of the individual(s) running the accounts as the reason for following the account.

The lack of credentials for the followed accounts, however, is concerning. Only two stated followed accounts were connected to professional mental health practitioners; the others were generally *average* individuals with no clear training in the elements of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018) in which PSTs listed them as an account followed. This lack of training was especially glaring in the social media account of a former lawyer who has millions of followers and is well known for offering life advice.

Another concern connected to influencer-run social media accounts is the general lack of transparency. While influencers present themselves as friends and role models (Peter & Muth, 2023), the reality influencers present is highly curated and commonly considered a "highlight reel" publicly showing the highs while keeping the lows private. Influencers are concerned with engagement and follower numbers. These concerns do not lend themselves to radical honesty. This is not to say that every influencer-run account is smoke and mirrors, but as a whole, influencers are less likely to post content showing the full reality of their lives.

The responses of PSTs indicate they truly listen to and are influenced by the accounts they follow. This speaks to one of many reasons why teacher educator programs should and could better support their PSTs by vetting popular accounts offering self-care, mental health, psychological, and health advice and creating a curated list of accounts specifically connected to well-being from individuals with recognized training and certifications within their specific areas of knowledge and expertise. Such a list may help PSTs better connect with high-quality and honest support to improve or maintain their well-being.

Self-Care

Most respondents ranked regulation: utilizing strategies to calm down and cope with stress as the most important element of self-care. This ranking interconnects with the accounts the pre-service teachers reported following. For example, the top categories of followed accounts included accounts that contributed to PSTs having supportive relationships and self-compassion, calm awareness of their thoughts, and practicing mindful relaxation, all of which support regulation. Many of the statements about dimensions of mindful self-care (Cook-Cottone & Guyker, 2018) to which PSTs responded positively connect with regulation (i.e., time with supportive people, reminders that failure is part of life, manageable schedule, balance desires and demands of others). Further, PSTs' stated self-care practices such as exercise, beauty routines, proper sleep, and journaling can help with self-regulation (Ishizawa, et al. 2012; Oaten & Cheng, 2006). This indicates that while PSTs may be unsure of the definition of self-care, some are practicing elements of it.

Other responses indicated that pre-service teachers not only did not understand the concept of self-care, but were in possible need of intervention. For example, one PST reported dedicating two days a week to washing their hair, another reported taking care of their hygiene, and a third reported being excited about taking a shower and doing their hair and make-up on the same day. This suggests that the PSTs may be so over-stressed that basic grooming is the highest level of self-care of which they are capable. Interviews with students would help bring clarity to these types of statements. Ensuring teachers have skills to care for their students as well as themselves— both

personally and professionally—is critically important if we have the goal of sending field-ready, transformative educators out into the profession. When teachers have stronger self-care habits, they are better able to work with children who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as those who come from culturally diverse backgrounds (Turner & Theilking, 2019). They are also more likely to have the skills and determination to stay in the profession long-term (Jackman, 2022), a critical need given the current teacher shortage across much of the United States. Clearly, self-care is much bigger than just taking care of oneself.

While trends and hashtags are great, they don't compare to educative spaces that make clear what is and is not beneficial to health and well-being. In order to build a future workforce of teachers who are not only sound in their professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions, but also in their personal care habits, continuing to learn more about this issue is critical.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small number of respondents to the survey, as well as the limited nature of the survey. Also, a high portion of the respondents identified as female. A larger number of respondents in general and specifically a larger number of respondents who identify as male would provide increased generalizability. Additionally, participants in the study anonymously self-reported which may have caused problems with validity as participants may not understand the questions, lack the self-awareness to assess their stress and self-care practices, and/or feel uncomfortable discussing their mental health practices even in an anonymous format. Removing the anonymity of the survey would have allowed us to hold post-survey focus groups, which would have allowed respondents to clarify and elaborate on their self-care practices. Additionally, asking the students to share the accounts they follow on social media would have allowed us to better code the accounts for connections to self-care and well-being. Head et al. (1996) pointed out that reliability and validity are difficulties in assessing stress in pre-service teaching candidates. Representation of respondents, student recognition of stress, and how to respond to it are all difficult to assess via survey in reliable and valid ways. This is also true for assessing participant enactment of self-care strategies. While we attempt to specifically address elements of well-being, we must consider that students follow social media accounts and participate in self-care tasks that they do not consider self-care, and vice versa.

Implications for Practice and Research

Multiple studies have shown that teacher self-care practices are critical but have not fully investigated how teachers come to these practices. Future studies need to continue to examine not only self-care practices, but teachers' understandings of what self-care is and the resources used to support self-care. Directions for future studies include additional survey questions that ask pre-service teachers to share demographic information such as first-generation college student status and eligibility for PELL grants, the rating of their stress before starting their education preparation program, during their program, and currently (if an in-service teacher), as well as their beliefs about how teachers care for themselves. Additionally, conducting structured interviews, coding of followed social media accounts, and longitudinal data collection that follows pre-service teachers into their first years of teaching will improve the quality of the data.

Additional survey questions and interviews will allow respondents to better clarify and elaborate on their self-care practices, which in turn will support a deeper understanding of self-

care practices and perceptions. A longitudinal study that follows pre-service teachers through field experiences, internship/student teaching, and their first three years of professional teaching will increase the data on how self-care practices build on and support the whole teacher.

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Appendix

Quantitative Questions	Multiple Choice Responses
Before beginning, please share some general information about yourself and your program of study. First, gender identity:	Female Male Non-binary Choose not to say
Before beginning, please share some general information about yourself and your program of study. Next, preparing to teach at what level:	Elementary School Middle School High School
Before beginning, please share some general information about yourself and your program of study. Finally, preparing to teach what content:	General Education (elementary, all content areas) ELA Math Science History Art Foreign Language
What social media apps do you use on a regular basis? (Select all that apply.)	Instagram Snapchat Tik Tok Facebook Reddit Other (please specify)
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I practice good physical care.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I spend time with people who are supportive, encourage me, and/or believe in me.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I remind myself that failure and challenge are part of the human experience.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I keep my work/school space organized.	A value between 1 - 10.

With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I maintain a manageable schedule.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I maintain a balance between the demands of others and what is important to me.	A value between 1 - 10.
With 1 being "strongly disagree", 5 being "I don't know", and 10 being "strongly agree", please respond to the following: I practice effective self-care.	A value between 1 - 10.
How often do you participate in self-care during the week?	1 time each week 2 times each week 3 times each week 4 times each week 5+ times each week
Do you follow individuals on social media that are connected to your self-care?	Yes No
Rank the following elements of self-care by which you feel is most important.	Reflection: noticing your reactions and patterns so that you can plan for self-care Regulation: utilizing strategies to calm down and cope with stress Relaxation: engaging in activities that bring joy, play, and connection
Qualitative Questions	**Response Type**
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you being physically active? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you having supportive relationships? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you having a calm awareness of your thoughts? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you having self-compassion? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended

Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you practicing mindful relaxation? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended	
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you maintaining a manageable schedule? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended	
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you maintaining an organized space for work/school tasks? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended	
Do you follow individuals on social media who contribute to you maintaining a balance between the demands of others and what is important to you? If yes, please describe who you follow and why.	Open-ended	
Please describe your self-care practices.	Open-ended	
If yes, please describe who you follow and why [Follow up to quantitative question: Do you follow individuals on social media that are connected to your self-care?]	Open-ended	