

Original Articles

Scrolling Toward the Future: An Exploratory Study Examining How Child Life Students Use Social Media for Career Development

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For students pursuing a career in child life, the pathway to the profession is complex, and many are looking to social media for guidance. In this cross-sectional exploratory study, participants completed a survey and semi-structured interview to discuss their use of child life related social media for career development. The child life students used TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook most frequently to gain information on the day-to-day activities of a Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS), tips for becoming a CCLS, and suggestions for experiential learning activities. Qualitative themes centered on social media's ability to provide information about the profession and a sense of community, while also noting the need for more content on the career. Such findings provide guidance for creators and consumers of child life related social media, including recommendations for future content.

Introduction

Many individuals pursue college with the primary goal of securing a career in their chosen field (Anthology, 2025). Research finds college students need support for career development, including advising from a college coach/advisor (Strada Education Foundation, 2024), experiential learning opportunities (Gray, 2024), and knowledge on the labor market of their chosen field (Strada Education Foundation, 2024). Students seek these supports in different ways, such as visiting their college career center, getting guidance from family and friends, and gathering internet-based information (Mowreader, 2024; Strada Education Foundation, 2024). More recently, there has been a significant increase in the use of digital resources for career development (Beachum & Krallman, 2024; Sampson et al., 2018).

As social media has become readily available and utilized over the last two decades, research has started to examine how college students are using it for career development (Aluri & Tucker, 2015; Beachum & Krallman, 2024; Trang et al., 2024; Zachos et al., 2018). College students widely use social media to support personal branding, networking, and career exploration (Ciampa et al., 2016; Trang et al., 2024). In fact, social media is considered essential by college students for building a professional presence (Astleitner & Schlick, 2024). Platforms like LinkedIn are commonly used for professional networking and job searching, while others, such as Instagram, help students connect with professionals and gain insights into various industries and career paths (Mishra et al., 2024). One survey found that 58% of college students seeking internships or full-time employment reported using LinkedIn as a primary tool in their job search (College Pulse, 2020).

Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) are integral members of the healthcare team who address the psychosocial

needs of pediatric patients and their families during hospitalization and medical experiences, while also facilitating optimal developmental outcomes for children (Romito et al., 2021). Becoming a CCLS is a rigorous process as aspiring professionals must meet all academic and clinical requirements set by the Child Life Certification Commission (CLCC, 2024a). These include obtaining a bachelor's or master's degree, successfully completing required courses (i.e., child development, play, family systems, loss and bereavement, child life, research) and a 600-hour child life clinical internship supervised by a CCLS, and passing a certification examination (CLCC, 2024a).

The path to pursuing the child life profession is not always clear to emerging professionals (Boles et al., 2024; Sisk et al., 2023). For example, an aspiring professional may pursue a child life degree with an internship embedded in academic requirements, while another may take courses at several institutions and pursue an internship without support from an advisor. When navigating this process, students find many unknowns, such as how to obtain an internship, and face a need for mentorship to provide information and support (Boles et al., 2024). Child life students look to faculty members, online resources, and social media for guidance on these matters (Adelson et al., 2022; Boles et al., 2024; Hammond, 2021), with social media noted as the most popular avenue for information on pursuing child life (Boles et al., 2024).

Boles and colleagues (2024) report child life students are using social media to navigate issues related to career development. This is expected as college students, in general, report using social media for personal branding, networking, and career exploration (Ciampa et al., 2016; Trang et al., 2024). However, to date, no study has specifically aimed to examine how child life students use social media

in their pursuit of the profession. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how child life students use social media to aid in their journey to become child life specialists. Specifically, the following research questions were explored:

1. How do child life students use social media related to child life?
2. What are child life students' motivations behind consuming child life social media content?
3. How does child life social media content impact students throughout their journey to become eligible for certification?

Methods

Procedure

Following Institution Review Board exempt level approval from a large public university in the Southeast United States (# 24-09-7933), participants were recruited using a convenience sampling strategy. To be eligible for participation, a person had to be 18 years or older, English speaking, a student pursuing child life certification, and a consumer of social media related to child life. Starting in October of 2024, flyers, summarizing information about the study, were distributed via social media platforms and to personal and professional contacts. Flyers and study information were repeatedly posted on child life social media pages geared to child life students (e.g., student Facebook pages, regional student organizations). Study information was also shared on the listserv of the Child Life Academic Society (a non-profit organization made up of child life academicians), asking members to share with their students. Furthermore, the research team shared flyer information via personal contacts to academicians and students. Recruitment continued through April of 2026. A QR code was included on the flyer that, when scanned, brought participants to a Qualtrics survey. Upon entering the survey, participants were prompted with a study consent form where they were able to provide electronic consent.

After providing consent electronically, participants completed a survey where they reported demographic and background information as well as their experiences regarding their usage of child life social media content. Survey questions consisted of open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The final survey question gave participants the option to leave their contact information if they would be willing to participate in a focus group interview. Those who provided contact information were contacted by a member of the research team to schedule an interview, which utilized a semi-structured format. In the interview, participants were asked to describe their use of social media related to child life, their motivations for engaging with this content, and the perceived impact of social media on their journey toward entering the profession. See Appendix A for the semi-structure interview guide. Participant names and information were blinded, and interview audio was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Measures

Demographic and Background Survey. Demographic questions asked about participants' age, gender, and race. Additional questions gathered information about participants' child life and educational journey (e.g., type of degree, presence of CCLS faculty member at their university, affiliation status, coursework completed related to certification eligibility, status of internship application). The survey also asked questions related to participants' child life related social media usage through four questions, both open-ended and multiple-choice in nature. These questions assessed how frequently child life students consumed child life social media content, what social media platforms they accessed, what they enjoyed about consuming this content, and their favorite creators of this content (See Appendix B).

Analysis

Background and demographic data were entered into IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 29 to analyze frequencies and distributions. Means and standard deviations were reported for continuous variables, and frequencies and percentages were reported for nominal variables. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify and report patterns within the open-ended survey questions and then the interview transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis of the open-ended survey questions was performed first and separate to the analysis of interview transcriptions. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis involved six phases: familiarizing oneself with the data set, generating codes, identifying, reviewing, and defining themes, and reporting examples of those themes.

For phase one, the first and last authors became familiar with the data by reading over each transcript at least two times while jotting down initial notes. Then, in phase two, the first and third authors reviewed transcripts and the initial notes from phase one to develop initial codes. To support crystallization, the second author also coded four transcripts by identifying and defining codes. Then, all authors met to review and finalize codes, addressing points of disagreement until agreement was achieved. Peer debriefing enhanced transferability and trustworthiness and provided time for coders to reflect on potential biases that could have impacted coding. With the finalized codes, the first author then recoded all transcripts.

Then, in phase three, the first author developed themes by grouping like and repeated codes into the same group and defining when to use the theme. Then, the first, second, and third authors met to talk about the themes, discuss discrepancies, and reach unanimous agreement for the themes. During this debriefing, the authors discussed saturation and determined repeated patterns were evident across the data and interviews were consistently reinforcing existing themes. In phase four, the first author confirmed the findings were grounded in the data by reading through the coded excerpts for each theme. The final two phases involved the first author discussing each theme in

relation to the research questions and integrating quotes to define the themes and report examples.

Reflexivity Statement

The research team consists of child life students and an academican who coordinates a child life academic program. Therefore, the research team are considered stakeholders in the experiences of child life students. To enhance transferability and trustworthiness, the research team, which included the first, second, and third authors, talked through potential biases (e.g., personal experiences with child life social media, personal experiences applying to child life internships, knowledge of identified needs of child life students, accessibility to social media) prior to data analysis and during coding and theme debriefings. While the research team reflected on this and considered other perspectives, the student and academic perspective were present in each stage of the study.

Results

Survey Results

Participants

Surveys were started by 48 participants, and 21 were removed during cleaning due to ineligibility or incompleteness, leaving a total of 27 participants who completed the survey portion of the study. Most of the participants identified as White ($N = 25$, 92.6%), non-Hispanic or Latino ($N = 25$, 92.6%), and all were female ($N = 27$, 100%). The mean age for survey participants was 23.1 ($SD = 3.7$). These findings are expected as the child life profession is predominantly White and female (Ferrer, 2021). Most of the participants were seeking a degree, either at the graduate ($N = 13$, 39.3%) or the undergraduate level ($N = 10$, 45.8%), and the majority were seeking a Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS)/Child Life major/degree ($N = 22$, 81.5%). Additionally, most participants identified having a CCLS faculty member in their academic program ($N = 22$, 81.5%). Almost half of participants reported they were not yet applying for internships ($N = 13$, 48.1%), while some were in the process of applying ($N = 3$, 11.1%), others were currently in an internship ($N = 10$, 37%), and a few already completed an internship ($N = 1$, 3.7%). The mean time spent working towards completing the eligibility requirements for certification was 20 months ($SD = 15.0$).

Social Media Usage

The majority of participants reported viewing child life social media content once a week ($N = 13$, 48.1%). See [Table 1](#). Instagram ($N = 26$, 92.9%), TikTok ($N = 20$, 71.4%), and Facebook ($N = 9$, 32.1%) were the top three social media platforms participants used to access child life content, with others noting using LinkedIn ($N = 7$, 25%) and YouTube ($N = 3$, 10.7%). Participants listed over 25 creators of child life content on social media. The most frequently mentioned were Child Life Nicole ($N = 15$, 53.6%), Child Life Mommy ($N = 9$, 32.1%), Association of Child Life Profes-

sionals ($N = 6$, 21.4%), and Child Life on Call ($N = 6$, 21.4%). See [Table 2](#) for a complete list of child life content the participants noted consuming.

Survey Themes

Survey analysis of the open-ended question, "What do you enjoy about consuming child life related social media?" identified four primary themes: 1) daily life of a CCLS, 2) source of information, 3) community, and 4) different perspectives. Each theme encompasses multiple subthemes that further describe participants' perspectives of and experiences with child life-related social media content.

Daily Life of a CCLS. Participants discussed that one way they used social media related to child life for career development was to gain exposure to the daily activities of a CCLS, most often, this came in the form of videos highlighting the daily life of a CCLS. There were two subthemes that emerged from daily life of a CCLS: 1) enhance knowledge of scope and practice and 2) exposure to daily variability. For the subtheme of enhanced knowledge of scope and practice, participants spoke about how this type of content allowed them to see the roles and responsibilities a child life specialist has daily. For example, one participant said, "I like hearing different perspectives on their job duties. The day in life videos show me a first-person account on what I should expect." Another participant also stated that, "[This type of content] gives me an insight into what the everyday looks like." Regarding the second subtheme of exposure to daily variability, participants noted that day-in-the-life videos emphasize the dynamic nature of the child life profession and how every day is different. For example, one participant stated:

I like learning more about the [child life] program and what it consists of, because each day can be very different. Sometimes I see days in my life, and they vary based on the day and the cases so not each day is the same, which can be exciting.

Source of Information. Participants reported using social media for information gathering, specifically to find: (1) new tools and interventions, (2) career insights and field developments, (3) tips for pursuing the profession and (4) available opportunities. For the subtheme of new tools and interventions, participants spoke about using social media to identify new strategies and techniques to employ when working with patients and families. For example, one participant said, "I enjoy learning tips from current long-term child life specialists." While another participant stated, "Seeing creative ideas for ways to support patients!"

Regarding career insights and field developments, participants reported using social media to stay updated on goings-on in the profession and how people are applying their child life skills in a variety of new, unique ways. For example, one participant said they "[look] at the updates on child life and the new things CCLS come out with" on social media. While another expressed, "I also like seeing where people have expanded their child life knowledge into new roles."

Table 1. Demographics and Background of Survey Participants

	N (%)	M (SD)	Range
Age		23.1 (3.7)	19-35
Gender			
Female	27 (100.0)		
Race			
White/Caucasian	25 (92.6)		
Two or More Races	1 (3.7)		
Other	1 (3.7)		
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic/Latino	25 (92.6)		
Hispanic/Latino	2 (7.4)		
Degree Level			
Graduate	13 (46.4)		
Undergraduate	10 (39.3)		
Non-degree Seeking	4 (14.3)		
Degree Major			
HDFS/Child Life	22 (81.5)		
Psychology	1 (3.7)		
Missing	4 (14.8)		
CCLS Faculty			
Yes	22 (81.4)		
No	1 (3.6)		
Missing	4 (14.8)		
Internship Status			
Not Yet Applying	13 (48.1)		
In an Internship	10 (37.0)		
Applying	3 (11.1)		
Completed Internship	1 (3.7)		
Time Spent Pursuing Eligibility Requirements for Certification (Months)		20.0 (15.0)	3-48
Child Life Social Media Usage			
Often (Once a Week)	13 (48.2)		
Always (Everyday)	8 (29.2)		
Sometimes (Once Every 2 Weeks)	4 (14.8)		
Rarely (Once a Month)	1 (3.7)		

For the subtheme of tips for pursuing the profession, participants noted that they use social media content to aid in preparing for practicum and internship, as well as the certification exam. For example, one participant stated, "Some creators share exam prep and sample questions to help prepare, and I really appreciate that." Another participant said, "I also liked learning helpful tips/tricks when applying and interviewing for internships." As for available opportunities, child life students are utilizing social media to gain information on various volunteer and learning opportunities. For example, one participant stated that they use social media to "learn about opportunities (volunteering across the country, exam tips/webinars)."

Community. Participants recognized community as a key benefit of engaging with child life social media content. Specifically, they spoke about how engaging with child life social media provides them with 1) connections to others in the field and acts as a 2) source of encouragement. In the subtheme of connections to others in the field, participants described how this social media content helps foster a sense of belonging in the child life profession. One participant said, "[Provides] a community who understands and wants to discuss issues or just new changes regarding the ACLP." For the second subtheme of source of encouragement, participants described how child life social media content provides motivation and inspiration to continue pursuing the profession. For example, one participant

Table 2. List of Social Media Consumed by Child Life Students

Creator Name	N (%)
Child Life Nicole	15 (53.6)
Child Life Mommy	9 (32.1)
Association of Child Life	6 (21.4)
Child Life on Call	6 (21.4)
Child Life Barbie	3 (10.7)
Your Child Life Pal	3 (10.7)
Child Life with Ally	2 (7.1)
Child Life Alex	2 (7.1)
Child Life Behavior	2 (7.1)
Advent Health Women and Children	1 (3.6)
Adventures in Child Life	1 (3.6)
Child Life Confidential	1 (3.6)
Child Life Disaster Relief	1 (3.6)
Child Life and More	1 (3.6)
Child Life Saver	1 (3.6)
Child Life Student Network	1 (3.6)
Child Life Therapist	1 (3.6)
Child Life To Go	1 (3.6)
EKS Child Life Journey	1 (3.6)
Peace Hope Play CCLS	1 (3.6)
Southeastern Association of Child Life Professionals	1 (3.6)
The Child Life Mentor	1 (3.6)
Your Child Life Friend	1 (3.6)
Vandy Child Life	1 (3.6)

noted that it “...provides ideas and encouragement for myself as I get ready to leave for internship and head more into the field...” Another participant stated that the content is “...inspiring, creative, [and] affirming...”

Different Perspectives. Participants discussed how the content they view exposes them to diverse perspectives within the profession. Specifically, they spoke about how child life social media exposes them to 1) child life in different locations/regions and the 2) positive and challenging aspects of the profession. For the subtheme of child life in different locations/regions, participants spoke about how interesting it is to see how different child life programs operate in various regions of the country. For example, one participant said, “I enjoy being able to see others’ experiences with child life. I have only ever studied in [one] state besides a one-month practicum...so being able to see and explore others’ experiences world-wide is very unique and interesting to me.” Another participant wrote, “[I] appreciate seeing things that are happening in child life programs in other regions.” Related to the subtheme of positive and challenging aspects, participants spoke about how child life social media shows both the exciting and hopeful aspects of the profession, as well as the more negative parts. For example, one participant expressed:

I enjoy videos that are focused on more than just the “bad” parts of child life. By bad I mean how competitive the field is, how the pay is not enough, or how the certification test is impossible. I love watching videos that highlight all the good CCLS do and how rewarding of a position it is.

Another participant said they do enjoy the “relatable content (low pay, compassion fatigue, lack of understanding of child life role).”

Interview Results

Participants

A total of 8 participants were interviewed in the study. The interview participants were predominately White ($n = 7, 87.5\%$), non-Hispanic or Latino ($n = 7, 87.5\%$), and all female ($n = 8, 100\%$), with a mean age of 23.0 ($sd = 5.1$). All of participants indicated that they were degree-seeking, with the majority being undergraduate students ($n = 6, 75\%$). All participants ($n = 8, 100\%$) identified HDFS/Child Life as their major and reported having of a CCLS faculty member in their program. Regarding the internship process, half of participants reported that they are currently in an internship ($n = 4, 50\%$), while others reported that they have not yet applied ($n = 3, 37.5\%$) or were in the process of applying ($n = 1, 12.5\%$). The mean time spent working towards eligibility requirements for certification was 28.6 months ($sd = 14.6$).

Social Media Usage

Half of participants who participated in the interview reported viewing child life related social media content everyday ($n = 4, 50\%$), while others viewed it once a week ($n = 2, 25\%$) or once a month ($n = 1, 12.5\%$). One participant did not report on this question. Instagram ($n = 6, 75\%$) and TikTok ($n = 5, 62.5\%$) were the most frequently used social media platforms, with others using Facebook ($n = 2, 25\%$), LinkedIn ($n = 2, 25\%$), and YouTube less frequently ($n = 1, 12.5\%$). Interview participants listed 14 creators of child life content on social media, with most mentioning Child Life Nicole ($n = 5, 62.5\%$) and Child Life Mommy ($n = 3, 37.5\%$).

Table 3. Demographics and Background of Interview Participants

	N (%)	M (SD)	Range
Age		22.9 (5.1)	19-35
Gender			
Female	8 (100.0)		
Race			
White/Caucasian	7 (87.5)		
Two or More Races	1 (12.5)		
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic/Latino	7 (87.5)		
Hispanic/Latino	1 (12.5)		
Degree Level			
Undergraduate	6 (75.0)		
Graduate	2 (25.0)		
Degree Major			
HDFS/Child Life	8 (100.0)		
CCLS Faculty			
Yes	8 (100.0)		
Internship Status			
In an Internship	4 (50.0)		
Not Yet Applying	3 (37.5)		
Applying	1 (12.5)		
Time Spent on Eligibility Requirements for Certification (Months)		28.6 (14.6)	11-48
Child Life Social Media Usage			
Always (Everyday)	4 (50.0)		
Often (Once a Week)	2 (25.0)		
Rarely (Once a Month)	1 (3.7)		
Missing	1 (3.7)		

Interview Themes

Interview analysis identified five primary themes that seem to reflect and structure participants' use of child life-related social media for career development: 1) content exploration and usage patterns, 2) navigating student journey to profession, 3) source of information, 4) community, and 5) need for more. Each theme encompasses multiple subthemes that further describe participants' perspectives of and experiences with child life-related social media content.

Content Exploration and Usage Patterns. Participants discussed how they found, explored, and interacted with child life social media content. Specifically, they spoke about (1) content discovery and (2) frequency of content consumption. Regarding the subtheme of content discovery, participants spoke about how they initially sought out the content on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. One participant said, "TikTok really is my Google if I'm being honest. So, when I was trying to figure out things, I looked up child life specialists..." They discussed how, after initially searching for the content, their algorithm took over and began to show them more related con-

tent over time. Participants discussed, "I came across her page by just looking up child life mainly on TikTok. But then I also feel like it generated on my account because...the algorithm sees what you look up", and "I'm definitely seeking it out. And then I feel like because I seek it out, it pops up on my recommended for sure."

Related to frequency of content consumption, participants noted that they consumed more child life social media content at various points, and it generally evolved with need. For example, a participant discussed, "I definitely started seeing more content recently when I was applying to internships...But I feel like it has gone down since I started my internship", and "I was consuming a lot of social media about internships and about that process when I was walking through that over the summer. But I've kind of avoided anything about the certification exam just because I'm not there yet..."

Navigating Student Journey to Profession. Participants recognized that child life social media content highlights the pathway to becoming a child life professional, including emphasizing 1) the challenges of becoming a CCLS and 2) the amplification of feelings associated with the process. For the subtheme of challenges to becoming a

CCLS, participants spoke about how child life social media content has shown them how difficult it can be to obtain an internship and pass the certification exam. One participant said, "...the test is hard; the internships are hard. Just because you get an internship doesn't mean you're going to pass the test. And it's just very not encouraging." Another participant stated, "I do think social media has kind of terrified me a little bit more than I was about the exam."

Regarding the subtheme of amplification of feelings, participants noted how content about becoming a child life specialist brings a wide array of emotions ranging from fear and anxiety to excitement and eagerness. For fear, one participant discussed, "I think sometimes when I'm looking at content that's related to child life, there's a lot of fear...Fear that I will never get there, but also fear of, if I do get there, is this going to be sustainable for me?" Another stated, "It definitely worried me a little and just made me frustrated and upset to see how difficult it really is to get into the field." Participants also noted that this kind of social media content fosters feelings of comparison. For example, one participant said, "So, it's like, oh my gosh...she got an internship at [name of hospital], so if I don't get mine there, does that mean I'm not good at what I do?" It also shows participants what others will do to secure an internship placement, as seen when one participant noted, "I found it very interesting how people prepare, how much they study, and what they're willing to do to get an internship." At the same time, participants did cite that some content does make them feel excitement to enter the field saying, "...What comes in terms of looking at day-in-the-life [videos], I love those. Those are great feelings. They're very positive. Makes me very eager to get into the field", and "It's a lot of excited but anxious at the same time."

Source of Information. Participants discussed how they used child life social media content to gather information about various aspects of the profession. Specifically, they spoke about how they consume information regarding 1) the pathway to the profession, 2) exposure to field and ongoing changes 3) child life scope of practice, and 4) professional boundaries. Regarding the subtheme of pathway to the profession, participants said that content provided useful information and tips on how to obtain an internship and pass the certification exam. One participant stated, "...she has exam questions of the day, and she'll just give super helpful tips about the interview process and tips for just going through internship. So, as a student, I think it was something really helpful that I liked." Participants also noted that social media content provided information about jobs and professional opportunities. For example, one participant said, "And then there's always job listings [on Facebook groups]. So, it's just kind of nice to see where people have openings to have child life specialists there."

For exposure to field and ongoing changes, participants discussed how content provides information about what child life is to other healthcare professionals and the broader community. For example, participants stated, "I think social media has helped bring exposure to that and making a lot more people aware of what the profession is...", and "I think it helps nurses understand what we do

and just everyone understand how many hats we wear in the field and how many things we can do." Participants also noted that social media content keeps them updated regarding changes occurring in the field, including changes made regarding certification requirements. One participant said, "[Social media account name] has been posting a lot of discussion around the new requirements in regard to internship being community-based or hospital-based."

Regarding the subtheme of scope of practice, participants talked about how social media allowed them to "preview the profession" and see what child life specialists do in their daily lives at work. Participants stated, "I found it really helpful to kind of see what I was getting myself into", and "I think helpful to see how...it's not going to be the same every single day. It's very different." Participants also spoke about how child life social media has given them new ideas to implement with children and patients. For example, participants stated, "...you get more ideas that you might not think of", and "I feel like it's given me a lot of ideas when it comes to different activities that I could do with patients..."

In the subtheme of boundaries, participants reflected on how they have observed child life specialists face challenges in maintaining professional boundaries at work. Several participants noted that this struggle is frequently depicted on social media, where child life specialists share personal experiences from their day-to-day lives. One participant recounted, "I've seen a 'day in my life,' and she's like, 'I stayed 3 hours past when I was supposed to stay,'" and "This patient left, and I was sobbing." This type of content highlights the emotional demands of the role and emphasizes how maintaining healthy boundaries can be difficult in such a career.

Community. Participants provided information about how child life social media content has provided them with more engagement with the child life community. They discussed how it acts as a 1) source of support and 2) highlights relatability. Regarding the subtheme of source of support, participants discussed how content acted as a source of true transparency. One participant stated, "She talks about the realness of it like you're going to have your great days and you're going to have your hard days...that is super important." Participants also discussed how it has made them feel more connected to the child life community. For example, one participant said, "I feel like social media is a really great way of bringing more people together..." For the subtheme of relatability, participants spoke about how child life social media content helped them see that they were not alone in the process to becoming a CCLS. It also showed them how others previously in their position made it through to the end. One participant noted, "I think it's encouraging to have somebody and people there to be like this is what was helpful for me...showing the aspects of how they went through the process and how they got to the end", and "I think child life social media for me was really unique and special because it was like representation; I was able to see myself in these people..." Participants also discussed how it allowed them to see how rewarding the profession is. One participant stated, "It's

definitely made me want to do it more and see how valuable it is for the kids and seeing how it can really impact them.”

Need for More. Participants noted that there are gaps in child life social media content being produced and available for consumption. Participants specifically discussed the need for more 1) TikTok videos, 2) transparency, and 3) content from multiple perspectives. In the subtheme of TikTok videos, participants stated that they primarily consume TikTok videos and more of this content should be created showcasing the child life profession. One participant stated, “I wish more people had TikTok’s because I found that to be the most helpful thing.” Regarding the subtheme of transparency, participants discussed how they would like content to be even more transparent and highlight both the positive and negative aspects of the profession. A participant noted, “...for the most part, it’s pretty good. But...I would just say more transparency with some creators.” Related to the subtheme of content from multiple perspectives, participants spoke about how more content should be created to highlight different perspectives such as perspectives of students, interns, professors, and people of color. A participant said, “[Child life social media content] shows child life from a very specific lens because there’s not a lot of influencers and it is such a broad field...I think it narrows the field a little bit more to that traditional setting.” Furthermore, one participant also stated:

...there’s not a lot of people of color who are child life specialists...I definitely wish there were more TikTok videos from their point of view just because...it’s harder to feel this is a place for you, that you belong, if you’re the only one there.

While another reflected, “I think it’d be interesting to see other college students talk about it or...even professors being like, here’s my tips and tricks.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how child life students use social media throughout their student journey to become a child life professional. The current study provides information on which social media outlets child life students are using, how frequently, and their motivations for using social media as a tool for career development. Similarly to Boles and colleagues (2024), this study revealed that students are looking to social media to support their pursuit of a career in child life. It was found that child life students use social media as a resource for exploring the field and gathering information to support their student journey, as well as connecting with peers and professionals to receive encouragement and affirmation throughout the process.

In general, college students use social media like Instagram to learn about careers (Mishra et al., 2024), and the current findings suggest this is true of child life students. The data provides evidence that child life students are consuming child life related social media frequently and are looking to it for information related to the profession—the daily experiences of CCLS (both positive and negative), the scope of child life practice, and tips for success in becoming

a CCLS. Recent studies consistently report that child life students need more information, particularly about how to navigate the internship process (Boles et al., 2024; Burns-Nader et al., 2025; Sisk et al., 2023). The current study discovered that child life students utilized social media more often during specific points of the process, such as when applying for internships, when they likely need more information and support. The need for information about internships is likely exacerbated given that the process is so competitive and many child life students are unable to get an internship (Boles et al., 2025; Wittenberg Camp et al., 2023). Child life related social media appears to be a needed information resource for students pursuing the profession.

Interestingly, child life students really focused on social media in relation to information and community, with little to no discussion about using it to create a professional presence. This was unexpected as social media is often used by college students to build a professional identity, such as through LinkedIn (Astleitner & Schlick, 2024; Mishra et al., 2024). Interestingly, the child life students in the current study rarely mentioned LinkedIn but placed great emphasis on the use of TikTok and Instagram. Child life students reported using social media related to child life as a way to see what it is like to be a CCLS. Child life is a relatively small profession, consisting only of 6,000 CCLS worldwide (CLCC, 2024b), and students likely have limited opportunities to see CCLS in everyday life, career days, books, or television shows. Therefore, it is understandable that child life students are using platforms such as TikTok and Instagram more often. These platforms are designed to feature daily life experiences, whereas LinkedIn is designed to connect people—those seeking jobs/employees and those networking for business or thought development (Hayat, 2025).

Themes reflected consistently, across surveys and interviews, that, for child life students, social media created a sense of community with others who were experiencing similar needs, frustrations, and aspirations. Few studies have examined student experiences (Boles et al., 2024; Burns-Nader et al., 2025; Sisk et al., 2023; Wittenberg Camp et al., 2023), but there is a growing body of evidence that the experience is a difficult one (Boles et al., 2024; Burns-Nader et al., 2025; Sisk et al., 2023). Boles and colleagues (2024) identified helpful supports for emerging professionals to include information from mentors, classmates, and social media. However, the current findings suggest that students also need a sense of belonging and a sense of connection with others who are experiencing a similar process. This could be especially important for students who are not affiliated with an academic program. Future research should examine how students from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds consume and interpret child life–related content on social media platforms.

Child life students also identified the need for more social media related to child life, specifically content featuring students and professionals of color. Child life is a predominately White and female profession (Ferrer, 2021), and participants’ comments suggest social media related to child life may also be predominately White and female. In

a recent study, Gourley and colleagues (2023) found that child life students of color often experience barriers, including navigating the process on their own and feeling isolated from peers. Students of color discussed the need to find a way to fit into the profession as a person of color (Gourley et al., 2023). Lack of representation of diverse child life students and professionals in social media content may further reinforce such barriers and limit a sense of belonging in child life students who are not White and/or female.

Limitations

This study includes a few limitations. The sample size may be considered small. However, for qualitative methodology, it is understood that a smaller sample size can produce conceptually dense data suitable for the identification of themes (Guest et al., 2006). However, the sample consisting primarily of White, female students from child life academic programs. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to other groups, including professionals. A larger and more diverse participant sample is needed for future research to further explore child life perception and utilization of social media content. Additionally, the study occurred during a temporary ban on TikTok in the United States which may have created a shift in social media focus. The inability to use TikTok may have influenced participants to use another social media platform or avoid social media entirely. Those who deleted TikTok could not re-download it for almost a month, causing a potential gap in social media usage.

Implications

The findings of the current study have several implications. First, for students, these findings highlight the need to engage critically with social media content, particularly given that information shared online may be inaccurate or misleading (Sampson et al., 2018). Developing media literacy skills may help students more effectively evaluate content related to securing an internship and preparing for the certification exam. Academic programs and instructors are therefore well positioned to support students by explicitly addressing the role of social media in career development, including guiding students toward credible resources.

Additionally, child life academic programs and instructors may consider integrating social media resources, accounts, or related discussions into coursework to help students intentionally navigate online content. Child life programs, child life professional organizations (e.g., Association of Child Life Professionals, Child Life Academic Society, regional organizations) and practicing CCLS may also benefit from these findings by recognizing social media as a meaningful avenue for education, recruitment, and advocacy, particularly through sharing realistic portrayals of their clinical work and diverse professional pathways.

The findings also provide guidance on the development of future child life social media content. There is a need for social media that provides a community, or a place where students can feel seen and not alone. Also, child life students want to see more content created by CCLS and/or students of color, as well as CCLS working in academics or community-based settings. Most importantly, child life students want to see social media that provides them with accurate information and transparency about the profession and becoming a CCLS. Content creators who are CCLS must reflect on ethical considerations when creating social media, including their commitment to support student development (Child Life Certification Commission, 2023).

Finally, future research should continue to examine how child life students engage with social media, as well as how child life professionals, clinicians, patients, and families interact with and are impacted by this content. For example, future studies need to explore the role of professional boundaries and ethical practices when child life clinicians discuss patient variables on social media. Further exploration may help establish best practices for leveraging social media as a supportive and accurate professional resource within the child life field.

Conclusion

This study found that child life students are frequently turning to social media to gain information and support related to the pursuit of the child life profession. Particularly emphasized were the use of social media as a source of information and place to become connected to the larger child life community. Specifically, participants described the importance of social media in increasing their exposure and understanding of the career, as well as the pathway to the profession. With these emerging professionals turning to social media for guidance as they enter this career, it is critical that the content being created is accurate, transparent, and showcases multiple perspectives to provide the best representation of the profession and set students up for success as they enter the field.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Guide

General Descriptions of Social Media Use

1. Tell me about your social media use specific to child life.
 - a. What sites/content/ groups are you following? How often?
 - b. What types of content do you gain from these accounts?
 - c. How did you learn about them or begin following them?
 - d. What feelings you have when viewing child life social media content?
 - e. Tell us about your favorite “type” of content to view? Include information about why this is your favorite.

Reasons for Consumption of Social Media

2. Describe why you consume child life-related social media content?
 - a. What is your primary motivation behind viewing child life-related social media content?
 - b. Tell us about the times you seek more child life content.
 - c. Tell us about how the frequency with which you view child life content has changed or remained the same throughout your time as a child life student.
 - d. What do you identify as “positives” and “negatives” to having child life social media content accessible for emerging professionals?
 - e. What social media content do you feel is missing or you would like to see available?

Influence of Social Media

3. Describe how the social media content you’ve viewed has impacted you as an aspiring child life specialist
 - a. Describe how the social media content you’ve viewed may have influenced your perception of the child life profession.
 - b. Tell us how you think social media may have influenced your thoughts about the pursuit of certification.
 - c. Discuss how child life content may influence others’ (non-child life people) perception of child life.
4. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked about?

Appendix B

Demographic Data

1. Are you an individual who is completing requirements for eligibility for the child life certification examination (e.g., degree, required coursework, internship)?

1. Yes
2. No (end of survey)
2. Do you use social media specific to child life (e.g., watch TikTok’s about child life, follow child life Instagram pages, etc.)?
 1. Yes
 2. No (end of survey)
3. What is your race?
 1. White or Caucasian
 2. Black or African American
 3. American Indian or Native American
 4. Asian
 5. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 6. Two or more races
 7. Other
4. What is your ethnicity?
 1. Hispanic or Latino
 2. Not Hispanic or Latino
 3. Decline to answer
5. What gender do you identify as?
 1. Male
 2. Female
 3. Nonbinary
 4. Prefer not to answer
6. How old are you? _____
7. Are you a degree seeking student at a university?
 1. Yes
 2. No (Skip past)
8. If yes, which degree are you currently pursuing?
 1. Undergraduate
 2. Graduate
 3. Doctoral
9. If yes, what major are you currently pursuing?
 1. Child life major/concentration
 2. Psychology
 3. Child development
 4. Other (list)
10. If yes, is there a CCLS faculty member at your university?
 1. Yes
 2. No
11. If no, are you affiliated with a university?
 1. Yes
 2. No
12. If no, which best describes how many of the required courses for eligibility for the child life certification you have completed?
 1. 3 or less
 2. 4 to 6
 3. 7 to 9
 4. All 10

13. Approximately how long (in months) have you been working towards completing the eligibility requirements for certification? _____
14. Which best describes where you are in the internship process?
 1. Not yet applying
 2. Applying
 3. Applied and did not receive an internship
 4. In an internship
 5. Completed internship
15. If you have not yet received an internship offer, how many application cycles have you applied (skip logic from above)? _____
16. Which best describes how frequently you view social media specific to child life?
 1. Rarely (once a month)
 2. Sometimes (Once every two weeks)
 3. Often (Once a week)
 4. Always (Everyday)
17. What social media platforms do you use the most to view child life content?
 1. Instagram
 2. TikTok
 3. YouTube
 4. Facebook
 5. LinkedIn
 6. Twitter ("X")
 7. Other (list)
18. What specific creator(s) do you follow or view their content? (Please provide account name(s).) _____
19. What do you enjoy about or get out of viewing social media specific to child life? Open text
20. If you would be interested in participating in a focus group Zoom interview about your experiences with child life social media, please share your name and email address here.