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PhD students' presenting, staging and announcing their educational status - An analysis of shared images in social media



Martin Salzmänn-Erikson^{a,*}, Henrik Eriksson^b

^a Faculty of Health and Occupational Studies, Department of Health and Caring Sciences, University of Gävle, Sweden

^b Department of Health Sciences, The Swedish Red Cross University College, Stockholm, Sweden

A B S T R A C T

Little research has been conducted on the question of academics' use of social media. The effects of social media on the educational environment of postgraduate students need to be further explored. The purpose of this study was to investigate the underlying values and ideas of being in postgraduate education by analysing 176 posted photos on social media. The findings show that PhD students manifest their educational status by presenting themselves as being in a process, staging academic artefacts and announcing important achievements towards the goal of earning their degree. These activities represent a global understanding of being a PhD student, that exists regardless of nation, gender or ethnicity and as such represents a “meta curricula” that exists above and beyond any locally defined PhD syllabus. It should be considered that the constant mirroring of PhD student life that has been made possible via social platforms seems to gain in importance and that the enculturation into the academic culture that exists among postgraduate students' own activities on social media needs to be taken into account when addressing postgraduate education, in practice as well as in research.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the popularity and increased use of social media (Chung & Koo, 2015; Shan et al., 2015; Valenzuela, 2013). The Pew Research Center has monitored the use of social media among American citizens since 2005. They report that a strong majority of the US population uses social media to receive news and to share information on different platforms and similar phenomena are seen worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2017; Madden & Jones, 2008). On a philosophical level, sharing content on social media may be best understood in the words of Sherry Turkle “I share therefore I am” (Wang, 2013, p. 1). Sharing, thus, is a way to gain attention and companionship. Along with individuals' usage of and engagement in social media, corporations, universities, public organizations, and others also use social media to spread messages about their organization (Bélanger, Bali, & Longden, 2014). Research has tended to focus on the use of social media and users in various contexts such as market branding and health-related matters (Li & Mousseaux, 2013; Salzmänn-Erikson & Hiçdurmaz, 2017). However, research addressing the use of social media among academics is more restricted. Thus, in this article, we focus our investigation on postgraduate students' use of social media in order to seek the underlying values and ideas posted in images on social media.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: martin.salzmann@hig.se (M. Salzmänn-Erikson).

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2. Literature review

Previous research has shed light on students in higher education who have engaged in improper social media use (Essary, 2011; Smith & Knudson, 2016; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016). It is valuable to note that Harrison, Gill, and Jalali (2014) stressed the risks of blurring boundaries between socialization and educational use of social media among medical students. They acknowledged the lack of universal policies to monitor social media behaviour among students. Subsequently, several other studies have also acknowledged the risks of using social media among students in healthcare educational programs (Walton, White, & Ross, 2015; de Gagne, Choi, Ledbetter, Kang, & Clark, 2016). The studies revealed that a small but significant proportion of students shares potentially unprofessional content.

2.1. Enculturation into the academic culture

Enculturation is a process of socialization by which people learn the requirements of a culture and acquire values and behaviors appropriate or necessary in that culture. The word cover both deliberate socialization that shapes individuals participating for example in educational programs and the informal aspects of socialization that exists within that framework and lifestyle (Johnson, Ward, & Gardner, 2017). Furthermore, Anderson (2017) described that PhD students are socialized through local practices and discourses from mediating behaviors, affective stances and (in)actions, thus addressed as the doctoral gaze. Hence, PhD students do not only exist in an academic vacuum; for example, they may have families and other obligations outside of the scholarly community.

According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the doctoral education constitutes the highest level of education, classified as level eight. Doctoral education leads to an advanced research qualification and the attainment of a doctoral degree. The program requires at least three years of full-time education and the production of a thesis based on original research, which distinctively differentiates it from the lower levels of Bachelor's degree (level 6) and Master's degree (level 7) (ISCED, 2011). The situation for PhD students also differs from the lower levels in other respects, as they also engage in academic work and in the teaching of undergraduate students. The majority of existing research within the field of doctoral studies has mainly focused on the relationship between PhD students and their supervisors (Lee, 2008), and on strategies and tactics in supervision (Hockey, 1996), the quality of supervision (Kam, 1997), PhD students' perception of being supervised (Krauss & Ismail, 2010), attrition rates and reasons for attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Bair & Haworth, 2004), the experiences of international students (Borg et al., 2009) and loneliness (Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). Further, research has also acknowledged that the life of PhD students involves periods of stress (Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012). Gardner (2008) emphasized problems of socialization for doctoral students who do not 'fit the mold' due to family situations, such as having children, being above the average age or being part-time students. Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka (2011) reported that completing a PhD program is both challenging and joyful. In later work by Stubb et al. (2011), they explored doctoral students' experiences of their scholarly communities in terms of psychosocial well-being. They reported that students experienced stress, exhaustion, and anxiety, but also that scholarly communities were considered a source of empowerment.

Lupton (2014) conducted an international online study on the subject, in which over 700 academics participated. Lupton found that academics saw social media as a way to establish and promote international relationships. Furthermore, the article pinpoints similar problems to those previously addressed with regards to the blurred boundaries of the private and the professional personae. In addition, the results from that investigation also address the issues of sharing copyrighted contents, how to deal with negative responses, and worrying about plagiarism. When it comes to students entering a doctoral program, they are socialized into the academic culture, that is, they acquire knowledge of skills, values and norms (Chin & Colin, 2016). However, out of all the issues that might be explored in relation to the use of social media, little research has been conducted on the question of academics' use of social media. Especially the use of social media regarding academic culture and what it is like to be educated in an academic environment. This aspect of the educational environment, and what social media has meant for postgraduate students need to be further addressed and explored, hence this study.

3. Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate the underlying values and ideas of being in postgraduate education as shared in images posted on social media.

Research Question:

- What are the common values and ideas of being in postgraduate education connected to the images of PhD student life that are posted on social media?
- How are the common values and ideas regarding educational aspects reflected, via images on social media.

4. Method and materials

When designing this study, we chose an archival and cross-sectional observational study design in order to access data material that was freely available from posts on social media. For gathering the data, a platform was used to scan different social media services. To find the most relevant keywords for this study, we consulted a senior account coordinator at the company providing the platform. We determined keywords relevant for the aim of the study, and these were: #phdstudent, #phdstudents, and #phdstudentlife. With access to an Application Programming Interface (API), we extracted the study sample from the three social media sites

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