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Purpose of social networking use and victimisation: Are there any differences between university students and those not in HE?

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ABSTRACT

Current literature widely reports successful uses of social media as a source of information, collaborative and learning tool for students in higher education. Although universities increasingly promote the use of Social Network Services (SNS) little is known about how students use them. Also the adverse effects of social media activity, such as cybercrime victimisation in HE, are under explored. Concerns over informal leisure use of SNS by students leading to cyber victimisation may help explain slow adoption of social media in education. This paper shows, however, that students use SNS in a similar way to those users who are not in education, with more than 60% using SNS for both socialising and gathering information. We find that students are less likely to be victims of cybercrime than non-students suggesting that SNS activity is less risky within the university lifespan. The implications of this study are significant for policy and practice for universities and educational authorities.

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1. Introduction

To any University student the world before Facebook is hard to imagine. Social media has become second to none communication and collaboration medium for the young (Office for National Statistics, 2013). Its ease of use, straightforward interface and endless capabilities have earned it a deserved place in the current technological landscape. The reasoning behind joining social networks have been explored relatively well using gratification theory. For example (Cheunga, Chiu, & Leeb, 2011) found that social related factors increase the intention to use social networks amongst students. Being the default collaborative choice by students, it was only a matter of time until universities felt pressured or led by technology-inquisitive lecturers to put social technology into educational use (Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011). Earlier research links social networking with the social capital theory (e.g. Benson, Morgan, & Filippaios, 2014; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). In particular social capital embedded in the network ties within SNS has been shown to facilitate knowledge sharing and career management. Furthermore, the role of social capital and motivation to contribute in social networks and professional virtual communities has been viewed through the lens of the social capital theory (Chiu, Wang, & Hang, 2006). Researchers confirmed

that “facets of social capital—social interaction ties, trust, norm of reciprocity, identification, shared vision and shared language—will influence individuals’ knowledge sharing in virtual communities” (p. 1872). Ultimately knowledge sharing in social networks is driven by both community-related outcome expectations and personal goals. This explains why the capabilities of social media found a wide range of applications in educational settings. Yet, student body of social media users, parents and university staff alike are concerned about the dangers of information disclosure and cyber-threats, which users are exposed to via social technology.

Information vulnerabilities, threats and roles of benign and malicious agents in online data transactions have been explored in depths in e-commerce settings (Dhillon & Backhouse, 2001). Personal information privacy model has been used as a recognised approach to explaining information disclosure behaviour and criminal activity threatening privacy in cyberspace and includes agents in information sharing transactions, both benign and malicious (Conger, Pratt, & Loch, 2013). The nature of social media interactions presents a set of idiosyncratic challenges in education. Many online applications are specifically developed for academic use, such as Learning Management Systems, and restrict access to university resources to authorised users. On the contrary, social media applications are provided by third party and most students use their existing accounts for interactions at university, often forgetting to enforce privacy constraints. Whilst accounts of academic applications of social media are emerging in recent publications (Baran, 2010; Benson & Morgan, 2014; Moran et al., 2011; Zhang,

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Liu, de Pablos, & She, 2014), studies suggesting solutions to privacy concerns in educational uses of social technologies are lacking. Previous research addressed the transition of traditional forms of crimes affecting population, including students, and investigated how online activity leads to victimisation, such as cyber fraud (Pratt et al., 2010). Furthermore, adverse impact of social media on adolescent individuals has been explored in the literature (O’Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). The emergence and effects of cyberbullying on social networks have been researched by Patchin and Hinduja (2006), who drew attention to this new form of victimisation through social networks. However, most studies tend to explore a homogeneous population, i.e. they did not draw comparison between subgroups of social media users. Even less attention has been paid so far to the investigation of differences between HE students and those who are not in education. This paper aims to shed more light on this matter by investigating the why and how individuals use SNS and whether their usage patterns have consequences for possible victimisation. We also draw the comparison between those users who are currently enrolled at university and those who are not in Higher Education. To do this, we undertook a survey of social networking users to gain a better insight into the barriers, which are significant and prevent wider adoption of social technologies in education.

This paper has the following structure. Having discussed uses of social networks by students and instructors in universities, we draw readers’ attention to the concerns of social technologies. Further, we explore Conger’s et al. (2013) PIP model and propose its extension for social media information flow in educational settings. We then describe our dataset, the online survey of active social media users, followed by the discussion of findings. We conclude the paper with an empirically tested model of student behaviour on social networks and discuss the implications for education institutions wishing to adopt social networks as a collaboration, communication and learning medium.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Student use of social networking

Social networking is a relatively a new phenomenon and opened unparalleled opportunities for individuals to engage online (Sharma & Crossler, 2014). These unprecedented levels of engagement include the use of social networking sites (SNS) in educational settings. But are students ready to equally embrace academic and social uses of social media? Do their preferences of collaborative tools for socialising and learning differ? Are social media applications for learning imposed onto students by instructors or are an organic extension of social networking into education? Recent studies investigating uses of social media by teaching faculty report multifaceted applications of the new technology in education. Academic staff actively integrate social elements in their teaching (Zhang et al., 2014), as (Moran et al., 2011) show almost two-thirds of all teaching staff turned to social media in their class sessions, including assigning students “to read or view social media as part of course assignments, assigning students to comment on or post to social media sites” (Moran et al., 2011, p. 11). In another study by Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty (2010) it was found that SNS have enabled students to collaborate with faculty, thus facilitating educational communications. Researchers concur that since social interactions are an integral part of education, social media is a useful tool to foster social exchange (Vollum, 2014).

Educational activities conducted on SNS vary depending on the nature of the SNS used by students. For example, Yahoo groups and wikis are used to discuss schoolwork whilst SNS capable of hosting video podcasts are being used for engagement, enhancing student attitudes and motivation (Andrews, Smyth, & Caladine, 2010). SNS,

such as Facebook, is easily accessible and easy to navigate and is used by students to ask questions related to their studies and for interactive learning (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Polsgrove & Frimming, 2013). In a recent experimental study, Facebook was used as an instructional network to enhance mathematics education at undergraduate level and found that students actively participating in discussions via Facebook performed better and had higher satisfaction rates (GreGory, GreGory, & Eddy, 2014). Many educational institutions have successfully integrated SNS to support students upon arrival on campus after admission and help them adjust to the new collage environment, get to know their peer and create a sense of belonging by promoting socialising by building a support network via SNS (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012; Selwyn, 2007; Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Chi-Wai Kwok, 2010). Others have used SNS such as Twitter to “give students a low-stress way to ask questions, for book discussions, send class and campus reminders, and organise study groups” (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011, p.4).

Even though the above evidence suggests that students effectively use social technologies for ‘cyber-hangouts’ enriching their learning (Howard, Curwen, Howard, & Colon-Muniz, 2014, p. 9), some argue that students shy away from using SNS for educational purposes and are not too keen on blurring the boundaries between informal socialising and academic learning (Baran, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010). Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) found that whilst undergraduate students generally use Facebook for socialising and sometimes for informal learning, they do not consider SNS such as Facebook formal learning. Similarly, Selwyn (2009) found that students use Facebook for informal, cultural learning but overall content related to education that is posted on social media is minor. There is a clear delineation between students’ acceptance of social media as an instructional tool and socialising means. Hence, we hypothesise that:

H1. Use of social media for learning and as a source for information is less favoured by students in comparison to informal social purposes.

2.2. Online victimisation and social media use

According to data from Pew Research Internet Project, 89% of social media users are between the ages of 18–29.¹ Another industry survey reveals that 96% of students with Internet access use social media and 59% of them use it for educational purposes.² However, given the increasing number of young adults using SNS, opponents of social media warn that SNS are ‘not secure environments for young people and expose younger generation to cyberstalking and offensive contacts’ (Tynes, 2007, p. 575).

Some researchers argue that SNS are distracting and students should not be encouraged to use them in the classroom (Bugeja, 2006). This brings about logistical issues such as bandwidth limitation on campus when more students use SNS at any one time some of which might get distracted and use SNS for entertainment purposes rather than educational (Bosch, 2009, p. 192). There is also the concern regarding language barriers in using popular SNS such as Facebook and Twitter since English is the predominantly used language on such sites. Even though, page translation options are available in some instances, it is limited to few languages and the translations might not be highly accurate (Bosch, 2009).

Compared to traditional Learning Management Systems, social networks provide a ‘personal learning environment’ and this

¹ <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>. Further information about what percentage of the 18–29 group are students is not available for this research.

² http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/schools-social-media-stats_b46620.

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