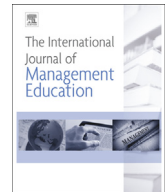




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An exploratory case study examining undergraduate accounting students' perceptions of using Twitter as a learning support tool



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ABSTRACT

At a time when social media is being increasingly used by students, there appears to be an expectation that it should also be used for educational purposes. The aim of this exploratory case study is to investigate the perceptions of undergraduate accounting students using Twitter as a learning support tool. The literature suggests the use of Twitter supports a range of communication functions as well as pedagogic functions. Although there have been few studies, the educational literature is generally positive about the use of Twitter, whereas there is an emerging non-educational literature about the operational aspects of Twitter which provides evidence of potential limitations in its educational use. This study provided students with a range of experiences using Twitter as a learning support tool. The students involved offered a range of perceptions about its value in supporting accounting education. Overall, this exploratory study demonstrates the relatively complex perceptions of accounting students about using Twitter. It is concluded that while Twitter has some communication and pedagogic potential, educators should plan its use carefully in the context of its limitations and operating dynamics. As a result educators should expect some unpredictability in students' motivation and varying support for its use.

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1. Introduction

The use of direct communication via electronic social media or social networking has become an integral part of the lives of many people, not least the lives of students. For many students social media appears to be a central part of their life style. This raises the question for universities as to whether there is benefit in attempting to integrate social media into educational processes.

This paper presents the findings of a small exploratory case study which examined accounting students' perceptions about Twitter, when used as a learning support tool.

The social networking site Twitter has over 645 million subscribers, although the Twitter growth rate has now slowed to about 30% per year ([Internet Live Statistics, 2014](#); [Statistics Brain, 2014](#)). An analytical snapshot of Twitter showed that 73% of its subscribers were in the age range 15–25 years ([Beevolve, 2012](#)). Twitter allows its users to post microblog entries called tweets (over 500 million tweets per day worldwide). Tweets are limited to 140 characters in length, so tweets need to be concise and

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focused. Subscribers can link their tweets to online pictures, video, audio and other links. They can 'follow' the tweets of other subscribers. When topics become popular the subject is said to 'trend'. A profile page provides a Twitter subscriber with some social networking functions by identifying interests, affiliations and tweet history. The appeal of Twitter appears to be based on the cheap access, immediacy, intimacy and urgency associated with information exchange, fast messaging, conversation, expressing opinions, discussion of ideas, sharing resources and general chatter. Many Twitter subscribers appear to find it an irresistible, perhaps even distracting, part of their daily lives for communicating with others, sharing information, personal self-promotion and social networking in virtual communities (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010; Grossecck & Holotescu, 2008; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007; Skiba, 2008; Stevens, 2008).

There were two motivations for this exploratory study. Firstly, previous research with accounting students (Burgess, 2008 and Osgerby, 2012) found a significant and unexpected use of social media for inter-student communication during assessed group outside of the formal planned arrangements for communication using a Learning Management System (LMS). These students expressed a view that use of social media should be included as part of their education as well as preparing them for commercial working practice. Secondly, a number of investigators have attempted, with varying success, to make use of social media for educational purposes. In general the results of these studies were positive and potential widespread benefits were forecast. Yet the literature tends to be ambiguous about the perceptions and attitudes of students using Twitter to support learning. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to extend the evidence base by investigating the perceptions of first year accounting students using the social media tool, Twitter, implemented overtly as a learning support tool.

The first section of the paper reviews the literature about the use of Twitter as a learning support tool and its potential for communication and pedagogic uses. The following section describes the research methodology and how Twitter was used in various ways during a module called Management Accounting and Information Technology. The results are presented and discussed in the next section which identifies several relevant issues leading to a final conclusions section and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

To provide a context for understanding students' perceptions about the use of Twitter as a learning support tool the literature is considered from three perspectives.

- Students and their likely preferences.
- Communication and usage.
- Pedagogy.

These areas derived from the literature are delineated here because they may influence and be reflected in the student perceptions which are the object of this study.

2.1. Students and their likely preferences

Today's students, have been labelled as "digital natives" (Prentsky, 2001, Selwyn, 2009; Buzzetto-More, 2012) or "Generation Y" (born 1978–1995) or "Millennials" (Kinash, Wood, & Knight, 2013; Ross, 2014). These students have been described as growing up with home computing, cheap electronic goods, fast mobile communication, internet and social networking. There has been speculation that such students are more likely to prefer receiving hyperlinked information quickly in small amounts, multitasking, processing pictures and sounds rather than text, interacting through social media, networking with others to enhance their learning and receiving relevant learning material "just in time" (Ross, 2014). Then "Generation Z" ("*Net Generation*", born 1995–2020), which is just appearing in tertiary education, has been forecast as going to be able to excel at information processing (Kinash et al., 2013; Prentsky, 2001; Ross, 2014).

In this context, the literature offers factors which may influence students' perceptions. Today's students are likely to accept and even demand the use of social networking within the educational environment as part of the learning process (Buzzetto-More, 2012; Selwyn, 2009). The characteristics and pedagogic needs of students (Generation Y and the rising Generation Z) may be misunderstood by their teachers who may be struggling with the positive and negative implications of adopting new technology for pedagogic purposes (Cochrane, 2014). Generational differences may be quite significant in a technology driven learning environment where the rising younger generation of students using information processing skills competently and routinely outside the classroom are faced with in-class use of information processing tools that are not being used to their full potential and/or their integration is poorly conducted by older teachers (Gu, Zhu, & Guo, 2013; Kinash et al., 2013; Ross, 2014).

Students' opinions may change quickly and teachers should be cautious about assuming students' needs. For example, Thoms (2012) compared students' perceptions before and after using Twitter. Initially 43% of respondents were optimistic that Twitter would positively impact learning (49% were neutral). Post-trial, there was an increase to 35% of respondents indicating that Twitter did not support learning. Initially 77% of respondents felt that Twitter would support interaction (8% disagreed). Post-trial only 25% of respondents felt that Twitter actually increased interaction (29% disagreed). Initially 69% of respondents agreed that Twitter would increase levels of community (3% disagreed). Post-trial, students' views had changed with only 45% of respondents agreeing there was an increased level of community (17% disagreed). Fox and Varadarajan

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