

Research Article

The Mayfly, the Worker Ant, the Butterfly and the Octopus: Students' Use of Social Media to Progress Their Dissertations

Marie Norman^{1,2}, Alistair Norman³, Terry Hyland^{4,5}

1. University of Leeds, United Kingdom; 2. Formerly Head of Learning Enhancement and Student Experience / Engagement, University of Bolton, United Kingdom; 3. Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, United Kingdom; 4. Free University of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland; 5. Professor Emeritus, University of Bolton, United Kingdom

Against the background of the ubiquitous use of social media platforms by young people in general, it was entirely predictable that such media would be used by students in higher education. Our research in this sphere focussed on the ways in which social media – in both extent and type – were used by students completing Masters' dissertations. The study, involving 14 students on a management programme, was designed to answer questions about the nature, role and purpose of social media in the learning process and, in particular, to map the pitfalls and benefits of online platforms in this sphere. Our results identified a range of factors which influenced the type of social media selected by students and, on this basis, we make recommendations for student and staff training in social media use to be included as a part of dissertation programmes in higher education.

Corresponding authors: Marie Norman, marie.norman@gmail.com; Alistair Norman, an@lubs.leeds.ac.uk; Terry Hyland, hylandterry@ymail.com

Introduction

Given the fact that 99% of 16-24 year olds use social media each week (Elder, 2016) and teenagers in general spend around 27 hours a week on the internet (Anderson, 2015), it was entirely predictable that social media platforms would receive widespread use by students at all levels of the system. More recent research in the area has confirmed the ever-expanding use of the internet in general and social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and similar platforms in particular, especially in the 13-29 age groups (Cornell University, 2018; Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In general terms, the existing research has tended to offer fairly bland outlines of the positive and negative effects of social media use, though – especially since the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been emerging – there is an increasing concern with the harmful impact of social media use on the mental health of young people (Vigano, 2022).

Our own interest in the research work in this field was concerned specifically with the use of social media by students working on Masters' dissertations, particularly with the selection of the platforms used and the benefits and pitfalls of the use of social media in the ongoing research process. Following a review of relevant literature in the field, our research into the use of social media by management students undertaking Masters' degrees is described and explained. In conclusion, we make some recommendations for practice based on the principal findings of our research.

Literature review

Given the ubiquity of the use of social media platforms by university students, the growth of research in this field has paralleled the exponential development of the platforms. Much of the research follows broadly similar lines which describe the main social media platforms used by students followed by an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages – benefits and pitfalls as we report in our findings – of the use of these platforms in a wide range of educational activities. In the early years of the social media revolution, Blankenship (2010) reported the mixed feelings of academic staff towards the use of such media in learning, and Dabbagh & Kitsantas, (2012) significantly, noted that students themselves reported a high degree of uncertainty and confusion in this area. In line with our research objectives, the literature review is organised in terms of the following principal categories: type of social media used and reasons for choice; benefits/pitfalls of use; and a general category concerned with broad academic views on students' use of social media in learning programmes.

Main Preferences for Social Media Platforms

Prescott (2014) reported that Facebook was the most widely used platform by the students in her research, and that this was principally due to the fact that this form of communication was already widely used by participants. Similar networking platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp were also widely used by students (Purvis, Rodger & Beckingham, 2016; Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2010). Research-specific academic sites such as Researchgate and Academia.edu were noted in research by Gulzar, et al. (2021), and Oueder & Abousaber (2018) reported that YouTube was used extensively by their students.

Benefits

A study by Gulzar, et al. (2021) found that student use of social media was positively related with students' intrinsic motivation which was subsequently related to students' engagement and students' creativity. Motivation and engagement in learning are integrally connected in much research on student learning, and research in this field has extensively utilised the 'Seven Principles of Good Practice' identified by Chickering and Gamson (1987). These are:

1. Encourages contacts between students and faculty;
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. Uses active learning techniques;
4. Gives prompt feedback;
5. Emphasizes time on task;
6. Communicates high expectations;
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Social media use tends to score highly on items 1,2,3, 5 and 7 (Gulzar, et al., 2021; Cornell University, 2018; Oueder & Abousaber, 2018). Purvis, Rodger & Beckingham (2016) in their research in this field observed that:

The inclusion of social media as a learning tool may optimise that time-on-task by more effectively engaging learners and meet the premise put forward by Chickering and Gamson (1987) that "time plus energy equals learning" (p.3)

Similar positive findings were reported in a review of the research in this sphere by Cornell University (2018) which noted that:

Youth in many of the studies described how social media helped them to "come out of their shells" and express their true identities. They reported liking the ability to write and edit their thoughts and use images to express themselves. They reported that feedback they received on social media helped to bolster their self-confidence and they reported enjoying the ability to look back on memories to keep track of how their identity changed over time (p.1)

In their work with first year nursing students, Price, et al. (2018) reported that '81% of students said that using Twitter had been beneficial to increase awareness of nursing issues within their course' (p.73), and the benefits of other social media platforms for enhancing learning were also noted in research by NMC (2014, 2015) and Prescott (2014).

Pitfalls

Given the above benefits in terms of enhancing social learning and communicating, and increasing time on task, the research in this field also points out a number of drawbacks in terms of the potential distracting features of social media in particular the tendency towards superficiality and wastage of valuable learning opportunities. Cyberbullying, security and privacy issues were highlighted in the research by Zamri, Zaihan & Samat (2018) as a consequence of which teachers recommended students to set up new academic profiles for specifically educational purposes (p.7). Purvis, Rodger & Beckingham (2016) report potential distracting consequences of using social media, observing:

Social media is often seen as a distraction, a platform which has so much content linked to so many different connections that it quickly distracts users away from their original purpose of visiting or taking the user into a number of unfruitful channels (p.4)

Similar drawbacks linked to potential distractions were noted in research by Cornell University (2018) which reported that:

participants said social media was a source of worry and pressure. Participants expressed concern about judgment from their peers. They often felt embarrassed about how they looked in images. Many participants expressed worry that they were addicted to social media (p.1)

The themes of distraction and time-wasting were prominent in disadvantages of social media use in research undertaken by Shankleman, Hammond & Jones (2021), and the extensive research in this sphere involving 1500 young people by the Newport Academy (2021) in the USA noted that – although many youngsters reported a greater feeling of connectedness with their peers, particularly during the Covid lockdowns through the use of social media platforms – there were also many negative consequences of this use with 70% of participants in the survey admitting to hiding their social media activity from parents and significant adults. The researchers noted that the:

constant overstimulation of social networking shifts the nervous system into fight-or-flight mode. As a result, this makes disorders such as ADHD, teen depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and **teen anxiety** worse" (p.2)

General Academic Evaluation

Many of the research studies outlined above conclude with a fairly balanced, compatibilist perspective on the impact of social media use by young people with pitfalls and benefits given equal space. Typical of this approach is the following extract from the *Common Sense Media Report* cited in the Newport Academy (2021) overview of research:

Some experts argue that young people's use of social media is adding to their depression; others that their depression leaves them so uninterested in other activities that they turn to social media by default. [Our] research suggests a third possibility: that many young people who are experiencing depression—whatever the cause—are purposely and proactively using social media and other digital tools to protect and promote their own well-being (p.3)

However, in terms of the use of social media in educational contexts it is important to adopt a more focussed and discriminating approach to the research evidence. With this in mind, the studies conducted by Junco, Heiberger & Loken (2010) and Purvis, Rodger & Beckenham (2016) are clear on the positive teaching/learning advantages of social media use but – given the potential negative consequences such as time-wasting, distraction and cyberbullying (Gulzar, et al., 2021) – it is of crucial importance for educators to have a detailed plan of how social media may be incorporated into their learning programmes along with a robust system for monitoring student engagement in this sphere to minimise potentially negative impacts (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Such planning and monitoring will be essential if educators are to meet the criteria for ensuring and maintaining student mental health and wellbeing outlined in the recent research report on this topic published by the Department for Education (DfE, 2021).

Methodology

Our participants were 14 management students, from various nationalities, who had just completed the final stage of a Masters' degree (the dissertation) at a UK university. The participants were social media users prior to undertaking their dissertations and all, bar one, had used social media for academic purposes prior to starting their dissertations. All participants used social media in the process of doing their dissertations.

In respect of the use of social media for academic purposes when undertaking the dissertation, the research investigated what social media platforms participants used and the purposes they used them for, why they selected the specific platforms, and what benefits and pitfalls they experienced in their use of social media.

The research questions were:

1. What social media platforms did participants use, for what purposes, and why did they choose to use them?
2. What benefits and pitfalls did participants experience in their use of social media?

Data were collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews; interviews were on average 45 minutes long. Participants were asked about (i) their use of social media for academic purposes when undertaking the dissertation, (ii) what social media platforms they used, the purposes they used them for, and how they selected the platforms, and (iii) what benefits and pitfalls they experienced in their use of social media.

Ethical procedures required by the University were followed (e.g., gaining approval for the research to take place, briefing participants, informed consent). The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using line-by-line analysis (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019) with the help of computer software. Data were coded and formed into categories.

Findings

This section reports the findings addressing, firstly, the social media platforms participants used, the purposes they were used for, and the reasons for choosing to use them, followed by the benefits and pitfalls participants experienced in their use of social media.

The social media platforms participants used, the purposes they were used for, and the reasons for choosing to use them

Social media platforms used by participants were: Facebook, IMO, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit, Skype, Twitter, Xing, WhatsApp, YouTube and Slack. Participants used social media platforms to access and use social networks to:

- find people and interest groups (e.g., special interest groups (SIGs), subject experts, contacts, research participants);
- obtain information and find resources (e.g., obtain feedback on research ideas, find out others' opinions including conversations around the dissertation topics, find out what companies are in a particular field, find resources such as articles and podcasts);
- organise data collection and collect data (make arrangements to interview their research participants and conduct the interviews, make arrangements for distributing questionnaires and distribute them);

- access peer support;
- liaise with dissertation supervisors.

Most participants used social media for some of the purposes listed above, rather than for a single purpose.

There were seven factors mentioned by participants as reasons for their choice of platforms: the platform as a location; ease of use; ease of communication; access to subject experts; type of platform; capabilities of the platforms; and participant familiarity with the use of the platform. Not all were mentioned by all participants.

i. The platform as a location

Some participants explained that it was necessary to use platforms that were used by those they wanted to communicate with – as one participant put it, there is “no point” in using social media platforms if the people you need to communicate with are not users of those platforms. For example, one participant chose to distribute her questionnaire via Facebook because her research participants were her “friends on Facebook” and they did not use other platforms. She explained that she did not use other platforms for this task because her friends “are not on them” and reported: “Facebook is where most of my friends are - this is where I can easily connect with them”. Another participant commented that, because the dissertation topic was business-related, he used LinkedIn as that was where to find the “experts” on the topic to communicate with. Another explained that Instagram was chosen as it was “more popular” with the target community and hence the “best” platform to use to contact appropriate people. There was some evidence of platforms being chosen due to there being country norms. For example, one participant explained that she chose Instagram because, in her home country, most businesses use Instagram and hence it was the best platform to communicate with entrepreneurs who were her target community. Another participant explained that in his home country, a “WhatsApp message [is used] instead of calling” and, although he personally used Twitter, he did not use Twitter for communicating with others to advance his dissertation as that would not have been productive, instead he used WhatsApp, the platform the target community used. This participant pointed out that when selecting social media platforms, it is essential to be constantly thinking about which platforms the people you want to communicate with use (“So all the time you’re thinking about other people - the people who are going to participate [in your research]”).

ii. Ease of use

Some participants chose platforms because they were easy to use for themselves and those who they wanted to engage with. For example, one participant explained that it was very easy for her research respondents to use WhatsApp to complete the survey she was conducting – she said that she easily sent a survey link to her respondents via WhatsApp, and then it was simply a matter of the respondents clicking on the link to complete the survey (“It’s a matter of just clicking on the form and it’s easy for them [respondents] to answer the questions”). Another participant commented that if a person was at his/her desk with a PC, Skype would be good to use to conduct a research interview with that person but, if they were not at their desk, then WhatsApp on their phone would be a good option as it is easy to use on the move. A participant, who used Twitter every day, commented on how easy it was to use Twitter (“very easy with a smart phone [and] I have the app on my phone”).

iii. Ease of communication

How easy it was to communicate via the platform was a key factor in the choice of platform. Sometimes participants used different platforms to communicate at different stages in the research process for ease. For example, one participant described making initial contact with potential research interviewees via Facebook, and then switching to Skype because she needed to have a “long chat” with those she contacted. Another participant’s interviewees were “spread out” geographically, and so she used Skype.

iv. Access to subject experts

Some participants wanted to find “experts” in the topic that their dissertations were focussed on and selected platforms that gave them access to the experts. Some participants used LinkedIn to track down and communicate with the experts they wanted to interview or seek information from. They chose LinkedIn because it is a “professional social media network” and was where they could find the experts. One participant used Reddit to find experts; he described Reddit as a “giant chat room ... [with] tens of thousands of chat rooms” and, within Reddit, he found chatrooms on his dissertation topic which gave him access to experts. Some experts were to be found on more than one platform (e.g., “some experts are on Twitter and Xing [the German equivalent to LinkedIn]”).

v. Type of platform

When deciding which platforms to use, some participants made a distinction between professional and social purposes – some platforms were seen as ‘social networks of friends’ and others as ‘social networks of professionals’. LinkedIn was considered to be a professional network. For example, one participant commented that with LinkedIn “you find more educational write-ups, you find career networks there”. He described Twitter and Facebook as being “just for social networks and posting of articles ... and keeping up with friends”. He commented further that, with LinkedIn, “you are sure that you

can get a reliable contact that could be useful for you either academically or professionally”. Another participant said that she used LinkedIn to “know about people’s profiles ... what they’ve done before” and to find out about them prior to talking to them. Another used LinkedIn to “get a better understanding of what companies were in the field” she was studying (“I only knew a couple [of organisations], so I wanted to see what more there were out there – I want[ed] to see if there were new start-ups”). One participant referred to LinkedIn, Xing and Twitter as being more “formal than Facebook” and explained that because her dissertation topic was business related, she used the formal platforms.

vi. Capabilities of the platforms

Participants commented on using particular platforms due to the platform’s capabilities. Some found that Skype was best for interviewing and was better than WhatsApp and IMO. For example, one participant explained that with Skype, interviews can be done via the computer and “it’s easy to type something ..., you can have a notebook, ... you can record the conversation”. The participant further explained that “with WhatsApp I’m not sure there’s those features”. Another participant who wanted to conduct face-to-face interviews said: “it’s not possible using IMO [because] the video quality is not good ... that’s why I use Skype – Skype is much better for recording and I can see the expressions – on Skype the video is clearer – in IMO the video is not clear”. A few participants mentioned choosing a platform due to it having good sound. One participant used Pinterest because she could find information about topics there in a simplified form.

vii. Participant familiarity with the platforms

One participant gave her own familiarity with the platforms as the reason for choosing them (“I think they’re the ones I know and they’re the ones I’m used to, so I feel really adequate in getting things done quickly”). Although this was mentioned only by one participant, all participants needed to be, or become, familiar with the social media platforms they used.

Benefits and pitfalls participants experienced in their use of social media

Benefits

There were five categories of benefits – (i) User-friendliness; (ii) Ease of getting tasks done (iii) Access, connection and communication; (iv) Knowledge gain; and (v) Efficiency – as well as some miscellaneous benefits experienced by participants.

The first category, *User-friendliness*, is about social media being easy to use (“social media platforms are really straight-forward”; “it [the social media platform] is so easy to use”). This is important because participants were unlikely to have had time to invest in learning to use complicated platforms as that would have taken time away from the task of doing the dissertation, which was intensive.

The second category, *Ease of getting tasks done*, is about the use of social media making it easy for participants to do certain tasks. For example, participants mentioned that social media made it easy to: gain access to people and information; make contact and communicate with people; and to find, share and distribute information.

The third category, *Access, connection and communication*, is about social media enabling participants to access networks and to connect and communicate with people in those networks. For example, participants commented that: they were able to find research respondents (“I think the main benefits is to get respondents”), people would read their messages sent via social media (“friends will read my messages”), they knew where to locate people (“[I] know where to find people”), and they could connect and chat with people (“[I can] connect... with people”; “[I can] chat with fellow students”).

The fourth category, *Knowledge gain*, is about participants gaining knowledge via social media. Participants benefitted from: finding out how others approached the topic they were researching (“I got a very good understanding of how others approach the topic”), finding literature on social media (“I got literature”), having access to different ideas (“I’d find so many different ideas”), and being able to find simplified material:

Information I’d find on social media is simplified and made visually appealing – really helped me out – because a lot of times when I’d been reading academic papers I’d get bored or tired or just felt like [there was] too much information, it’s such an easy way to get a break but still be getting information into my head.

The fifth category, *Efficiency*, is about the use of social media being time efficient (“It was really quick to find the [research] participants”) and meant that our participants did not have to travel, for example, to attend meetings and to conduct their research interviews. The efficiency of social media made our participants’ research more manageable than it would have been if they had not used them.

In addition to the five categories, participants explained that social media: was convenient (“it [Skype] was convenient”); made the research possible (“[social media] was a rescue for me”); was a “cost-effective” way to conduct research; and enabled them to get social, technical, and academic support. The richness of social media was also seen as a benefit.

Pitfalls

There were five pitfall areas – (i) Information quality; (ii) Distractions; (iii) Responder let-down; (iv) Technology let-down; and (v) Negativity generator – and most participants experienced some of the pitfalls.

The first pitfall, *Information quality*, was about the quality of information obtained via social media. Participants found that they could not always “get the best information” and could not always rely on the information found in social media platforms (“they might not be accurate – sometimes there is no source for these statistics”). Participants had to be careful in their use of information presented in social media platforms, for example, one participant explained: “So I have to be picky, I have to search for the important and accurate information through the social media because not everything can be used in our academic research.”

The second pitfall, *Distractions*, was about there being distractions which disturbed participants’ on-task activities on social media. Participants recounted being distracted by: irrelevant information they were finding on social media platforms (“Yes getting side-tracked a lot. It’s so easy for me [to be distracted]”; unwanted pop-ups and advertisements (“Sometimes you get like unwanted ads and all sorts of [things] – bit frustrating.”; and noise (“when you’re not in a conducive environment ... noise can be a distraction.”).

The third pitfall, *Responder let-down*, was about people not responding, or taking a long time to respond, to participants’ requests. One participant mentioned that the messages she sent via LinkedIn were not responded to quickly (“Some users respond late, so you might send someone a message then you get the reply two days after”). This participant commented that she needed the information “instantly”. Another acknowledged that to obtain the target number of research participants it is necessary to “track down” many more, and another commented that using social media gives people the chance not to respond without feeling guilty (“it gives them [contacts] the opportunity to not respond quite easily, and not be too bothered by it.”).

The fourth pitfall, *Technology let-down*, was experienced by a few participants. One participant, for example, described having to change interview dates due to problems with connectivity (“there was some kind of network connectivity issue, so it wasn’t really smooth – so I had to do it [the research interview] the next day”). Another was let down due to the limitations of the tools and their use of them; this participant experienced Skype not working properly:

the Skype calls didn’t work as I wanted them to work – although I would say most of the time it was not the program’s fault, but something was wrong with the settings or a headset wasn’t plugged in or whatever. A few times this led to a delay of a few minutes which is – in the whole process of the dissertation this is okay, but nevertheless if you are in the situation if you really want to ask a few questions and you don’t get it started it is annoying.

The fifth pitfall, *Negativity generator*, is about the generation of negativity within the student peer group when using social media for peer support. This was only mentioned by one participant, but it has important implications. The participant explained about “negatives” being “passed around” the group:

I think when one of my classmates was stressed and they spoke about how stressed they are, I would automatically kind of pick up on that and then start realising that maybe I should be stressed as well, and kind of pass it on – so I think that’s the downfall also – the negatives get passed around.

This participant explained that when compared to feeling good when good things were passed around, the impact of the negativity was stronger than the positivity experienced (“I feel it was even more stress impactful – like the negative messages. It stuck around longer.”). As the dissertation experience can be stressful for students, additional stress from negativity is likely to be unhelpful.

Discussion

Social Media Usage

Participants used social media platforms to undertake tasks they needed to do in connection with their dissertations and experienced benefits from doing so, indicating that social media can be valuable tools for students to use when doing their dissertations. Social media were enablers for our participants, enabling them to connect with people to interview, to access knowledge and support, and to work efficiently and cost-effectively whilst doing their dissertations. The dissertation experience can be quite isolating for students, and social media enabled some of our participants to connect with others (e.g., subject experts, their peers), enriching their social and professional experiences.

Although all of our participants used social media in connection with their dissertations, they did not all use them to the same extent. In Figure 1 below, we have created a 2x2 Social Media Usage Matrix representing volume and depth of social media usage based on our research findings. Four categories of users – The Mayfly, The Worker Ant, The Butterfly and The Octopus – are represented.

<p>The Mayfly</p> <p><i>Use of limited social media tools for a limited purpose.</i></p>	<p>The Worker Ant</p> <p><i>Use of limited social media tools for a range of purposes.</i></p>
<p>The Butterfly</p> <p><i>Use of several social media tools for a limited purpose.</i></p>	<p>The Octopus</p> <p><i>Use of several social media tools for a range of purposes.</i></p>

Figure 1. Social Media Usage Matrix

The Mayfly: The mayfly is the user who touches on social media use almost in passing. They will probably only use a single tool, or maybe two, and will use that tool or tools for limited purposes and, usually, only a single purpose. So, for example, someone who is an existing user of a platform like LinkedIn may use that in order to see if there are conversations around their dissertation topic, or someone may use Instagram for finding appropriate people to interview or to complete a questionnaire and make contact with them.

The Worker Ant: The worker ant is the user who makes use of a limited range of tools which they feel comfortable and confident to use. They probably use a single tool, or maybe two, but use the platforms in some depth and for a range of purposes. So, for example, a LinkedIn user may use the platform to sensitise themselves to conversations around the topic, to ask questions, to find appropriate interest groups and to target people who can assist either by providing information, being the subject of interviews, or completing an online questionnaire.

The Butterfly: The butterfly is the user who uses a range of tools but only uses each of them for relatively limited purposes. Whilst they are capable of using several platforms, and do so at a range of stages across the overall dissertation process, they do not necessarily use any of them in significant depth. So, for example, they may use LinkedIn to help them to find participants for interviews, Reddit to access conversations around the topic and a tool such as Skype or WhatsApp to conduct remote research interviews.

The Octopus: The octopus is the user who capably and confidently uses a range of tools and does so for a range of purposes across the dissertation process. They make use of a range of facilities and affordances of each of the platforms to their advantage and combine the use of tools and platforms capably. So, for example, they may initially use tools like Reddit and LinkedIn to sensitise themselves to the types of conversations around the topic that they are investigating. They may then move on to use those platforms plus others such as YouTube to help them to gather information and start to put together a picture of appropriate participants for their research. Participants will be targeted across a range of platforms such as LinkedIn, Reddit and Facebook, and communication with potential participants will be handled on each of these platforms in order to convert them from potential to actual data collection subjects. Data collection will be carried out using an appropriate platform or platforms, and the facilities of the platforms in terms of initial communication, recording etc. will be used appropriately. At later stages, post formal completion of the dissertation, such a user may also choose to share the details of their findings on a platform such as LinkedIn or Facebook in order to enhance employability, although none of our participants reported using social media for this purpose.

Participants who used social media in a limited way (e.g., the Mayfly) missed out on additional benefits that they could have experienced had they made more extensive use of them. The Worker Ant was efficient in the use of social media by exploiting one or two platforms for a range of purposes and this indicates the value added by knowing about, and being able to use, a few platforms that are highly useful. The Butterfly and the Octopus could exploit the benefits of using several platforms.

One aspect that surprised us was that none of our participants used specialist platforms for the research community (e.g., ResearchGate, Mendeley, Vitae, Academia.edu) and, as beginning researchers, by not using them they missed out on finding useful resources for researchers and obtaining helpful advice and guidance from experienced researchers with good research profiles.

Choice of platforms

The reasons for the choice of platforms were very practical (e.g., technical capabilities of the platforms, their ease of use, and the 'platform as a location'). The idea of the 'platform as a location' is very interesting; the platform was where helpful individuals could be found – not the work organisation. With professionals being mobile and not tied to a specific institution for the length of their careers, the 'platform as a location' means that people can be located easily. Another interesting finding was that some participants carefully thought about the needs of their communication-partners (e.g., their research

participants, subject experts) when deciding on which platforms to use, for example, they used the platforms that were convenient for their communication-partners. Some of our participants were able to use a variety of platforms and were able to quickly learn how to use new platforms that helped them to access communication-partners. Thus, those who could use a variety of platforms, and learn to use new platforms quickly, had more access to people and resources than those who could not. This draws attention to the importance of students having such skills, as those who do not have those skills cannot fully benefit from what social media have to offer beginning researchers.

Problems around the use of social media

The use of social media was not without problems and our participants raised issues around information quality, distractions, being let down by people they were trying to contact and being let-down by the technology (which we referred to in our Findings section as 'Responder let-down' and 'technology let-down'), and the generation of negativity in the peer group. As our participants were doing a piece of academic work, the quality of information they selected for use in their dissertations needed to be good, and they acknowledged that the quality of some of the material on social media is not good. Learning to differentiate between good-quality and poor-quality sources available on social media is a skill that students need to acquire, and it was clear that our participants had that skill; however, our participants were postgraduate students and perhaps undergraduate students seeking sources on social media for academic work may not be as knowledgeable and may need guidance. One of the pitfalls of the use of social media our participants experienced was there being distractions, and for our participants the distractions were ones which disturbed their on-task activities on social media. Our participants were distracted by, for example, irrelevant information they were finding on social media platforms such as unwanted pop-ups and advertisements. As distractions can be timewasters and a cause of frustration, it would be fitting for students to develop strategies to deal effectively with them (e.g., the self-discipline to keep on-task and avoid being distracted, the use of pop-up blockers). 'Responder let-down' and 'technology let-down' issues caused some of our participants to be frustrated and negatively affected their timeline. It is interesting that one of our participants expected 'instant' responses to her communication and considered a response in 'two-days' time to be a 'late' response. As students' timelines for dissertations can be tight, such 'let-downs' are very significant to them. 'Responder let-down' and 'technology let-down' issues draw attention to the need for students to be aware of these potential pitfalls and to ensure they plan accordingly and have realistic expectations, and indeed this is something that academic staff could draw students' attention to at an early stage in the dissertation process. As some of the 'technology let-down' was attributed to the participants' use of the technology rather than the technology per se, it is important for students to be adequately and appropriately prepared when it comes to using the technology. The pitfall, 'negativity-generator', although only mentioned by one participant, is important as it highlights that, although social media was used for peer support which is expected to be a positive aspect, there is a potential negative side. Our participant commented that "negatives get passed around" the group and linger causing additional stress. This indicates that a potential role for tutors and supervisors is to encourage students who use social media for peer group support (where there is no 'tutor as moderator' presence) to ask questions and voice any concerns they have about their work and the academic process.

Conclusion

Our research has found specific information of value to those preparing students to undertake dissertations, and those supervising them, regarding how social media can be used to support students doing their dissertations. It draws attention to the range of ways that social media can be used to support the dissertation process. The use of social media when undertaking the dissertations, can enrich students' experiences and skills, help them to work efficiently, saving time and money, and can give them the opportunity to enhance their professional networks. However, our research also highlights that some students may not be exploiting social media fully. In addition, our research highlights some pitfalls that might arise and we have suggested ways to avoid possible negative aspects of using social media.

Finally, we suggest that, for students doing dissertations, the topic of using social media specifically to support the dissertation process could form part of the curriculum that prepares students for doing dissertations. It is also something that supervisors could advise students about as part of the supervisory process. This may, of course, require support for academics / supervisors who may not feel completely comfortable using the range of social media across the dissertation process.

References

- Anderson, E. (2015). Teenagers spend 27 hours a week online: how internet use has ballooned in the last decade. *The Daily Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/digital-media/11597743/> accessed 12/3/22
- Auxier, B. & Anderson, M. (2021). Social Media Use in 2021. *Pew Research Centre*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/> accessed 3/4/22
- Blankenship, M. (2010, 29 November). How social media can and should impact higher education. *Hispanic Outlook*, 29 November 2010, 11-12

- Chickering, A.W. and Gamson Z.F. (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. (Eashington, DC: American Association for Higher Education) March 1987, 3-7
- Cornell University (2018). *The Pros and Cons of Social Media for Youth*. <https://evidencebasedliving.human.cornell.edu/2021/10/18/the-pros-and-cons-of-social-media-for-youth/> accessed 21/3/22
- Dabbagh, N. and Kitsantas, A. (2012) Personal Learning Environments, social media, and self-regulated learning: A natural formula for connecting formal and informal learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 15 (1), 3-8.
- DfE (2021). *Student Mental Health and Wellbeing: Insights from higher education providers and sector experts*. (London: Department for Education)
- https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/996478/Survey_of_HE_Providers_Student_Mental_Health.pdf
- Elder, R. (2016). 99% of young British people use social media very week. <http://uk.businessinsider.com/99-of-young-british-people-use-social-media-every-week-2016-8>, accessed 15/3/22
- Gulzar, M.A., et.al. (2021) How social media use is related to student engagement and creativity: investigating through the lens of intrinsic motivation, *Behaviour & Information Technology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2021.1917660>
- Junco, R., Heiberger, G. & Loken, E. (2010) The effect of Twitter on college student engagement and grades. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27(2),119-132
- Newport Academy (2021). *Does Social Media Affect Teenagers?* <https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/well-being/effect-of-social-media-on-teenagers/> accessed 2/6/22
- Linneberg, M., and Korsgaard, S. (2019) Coding qualitative data – a synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal* Vol.19:3 pp. 259-270
- NMC (2014). *New Media Consortium Horizon Report 2014 Higher Education Edition*. <http://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2014-higher-education-edition/>
- NMC (2015). *New Media Consortium Horizon Report 2015 Higher Education Edition*. <http://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2015-higher-education-edition/>
- Oueder, M. & Abousaber, I. (2018), A Study of the Impact of Social Media Usage on Academic Performance. *American Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences*. 40(1):77-88
- Price, A.M., et al. (2018). First Year Nursing Students' Use of Social Media. *Nurse Education Today*, 61 (2):70-76.
- Purvis, A., Rodger, H. & Beckingham, S. (2016). Engagement or distraction: the use of social media for learning in higher education. *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, 5(1): 1-5
- Prescott, J. (2014). Teaching style and attitudes towards Facebook as an educational tool. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 15(2): 117-128
- Shankleman, M., Hammond, L. & Jones, F.W. (2021). Adolescent Social Media Use and Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Thematic Meta-synthesis. *Adolescent Res Rev* 6, 471–492 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-021-00154-5>
- Vigano, C. (2022). Is crackdown on social media for teenagers too late? *TachoPacks*. <https://tachopaks.co.uk/is-crackdown-on-social-media-for-teenagers-too-late.html> accessed 5/4/22
- Zamri, N.S., Zaihan, N.A. & Samat, M.F. (2018). *A Review of Social Media Usage Among Students*. KONVENSYEN KEBANGSAAN PEMIMPIN PELAJAR (eISBN: 978-967-16271-7-4)

Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.