

## **Experiences and perspectives of social media in learning and teaching in higher education**

PURVIS, Alison J <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3581-4990>>, RODGER, Helen M and BECKINGHAM, Sue <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5660-125X>>

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## Experiences and perspectives of social media in learning and teaching in higher education

Alison J. Purvis<sup>a,\*</sup>, Helen M. Rodger<sup>b</sup>, Sue Beckingham<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Sport and Physical Activity Research Centre, College of Health, Wellbeing and Life Sciences, Sheffield Hallam University, A112 Collegiate Hall, Collegiate Campus, Sheffield S10 2BP, South Yorkshire, UK<sup>b</sup> Independent Higher Education Consultant, Sheffield, UK<sup>c</sup> College of Business, Technology and Engineering, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

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## ABSTRACT

A qualitative study conducted at a large UK post-92 university explored the experiences and perceptions of lecturers and their use of social media in learning and teaching contexts in different disciplines across the institution. Discussion between participants in two focus groups revealed a range of complex and interdependent factors that influence the successful use of social media for learning and teaching. The facilitated discussions exposed three different perspectives for consideration: personal (the experiences and attitudes of the lecturer and the student), pedagogy (demanded by the learning context in question) and institutional (dictated, or driven by the institution). Themes that arose were used to cluster and further analyse the data. Based on the intersectionality of perspectives, a series of recommendations are made for consideration by higher education institutions for institutional strategy and support for the applied use of social media in learning and teaching contexts.

## Introduction

Contemporary technology has a long history of innovating in higher education (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Appropriate use of technology can improve learning by facilitating us to carry out our established practice more effectively or to innovate practice. While technology is thoroughly and visibly established in the culture of learning within the mainstays of virtual learning environments (VLEs), integrating and embedding new technologies can be more challenging with digital confidence and capabilities hard to measure and build at scale.

Technology has the potential to have a transformative effect on education, not least through the capacity of asynchronous communication tools and behaviours to enhance the face to face learning experience (Chen, 2018; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004); for the simulation or enhancement of environments, for the development of behaviours, or the creation of opportunities for experimentation and discovery. Technologies that introduce or maximise the potential of synchronous and asynchronous contributions (Hrastinski, 2008), or that facilitate online teaching (Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares & Barbour, 2011) can also contribute to learning within the face to face classroom: pre-class, during or as post-class activities.

As online tools and technologies have developed, social media has become regarded as a key tool for supporting applied learning activities. Social media technologies provide tutors with the means to engage

learners with valuable time-on-task learning (Purvis, Rodger, & Beckingham, 2016) and self-regulated learning (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2011). In general, affordances provided using social media present opportunities for users to develop connections and to communicate with others irrespective of time and geographical barriers. Popular social media spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn are designed to be intuitive to use and entirely accessible from any online connected device.

Social media users are active participants within social media culture, creating user-generated content (van Dijck, 2009) and are empowered to create multimedia artefacts using photos, video and audio and upload these to social media platforms. The very nature of many social sites has encouraged the communication of short messages augmented by visual attachments, memes and animated GIFs to enhance or replace a written message, often to convey sentiment or cultural insight (Miltner et al., 2017). Cha, Kwak, Rodriguez, Ahn and Moon (2007) argue that the user-generated video content uploaded to YouTube has transformed the way we view video and television; providing interaction data such as views, ratings, stars and likes to signify the popularity of content (Manca, 2020). Users can search to find niche, topic-specific videos and construct their own learning opportunities.

The adoption of social media for learning is arguably somewhat ad hoc, unpredictable, complex, and often focused on pockets of innovation driven by enthusiasts (Liu, Geerthuis & Grainger, 2020; McLoughlin

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [a.purvis@shu.ac.uk](mailto:a.purvis@shu.ac.uk) (A.J. Purvis).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100018>

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& Lee, 2010; Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2012) as opposed to being supported and implemented in a coordinated way across institutions. The facilitation of social learning is complex and requires consideration of the development of social relationships as well as the appropriate choice of platform (Stürmer, Ihme, Fisseler, Sonnenberg & Barbarino, 2018) with or without institutional support. Although pedagogy has been an integral part of these studies, consideration for upscaling such initiatives and providing appropriate and required institutional support is not evident. The foci of this research is therefore to take a broader view.

The use of social media in higher education should be considered from different relevant perspectives - the self, the course or profession in question, and the institution. For each of these there are competing aspects at play: the demands, needs and the wants of the perspective (whether a context or an individual). The consideration of these different perspectives has revealed themes of conflict, dependency, and specific requirements.

The research questions are: What are the factors, experiences and perceptions which influence the use of social media in teaching and learning in higher education? What are the implications for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with respect to academic practice and the support of the development of digital competencies?

## Method

Two focus groups were used for this research to allow structured conversation and debate that would elicit natural and detailed responses to a set of key open questions. Prior to conducting the research, ethical approval was sought for the collection of anonymised focus group data from members of staff at a UK post-92 University. Participants were drawn from a group of academic teaching staff who had previously taken part in an online survey asking about their use of social media in their experience in higher education. The participants volunteered to contribute their own perspectives, some had actively and successfully used it in teaching, while others had identified themselves as resistant or 'closed' to doing so. The sample was also limited to a recommended size for effectively facilitating focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2001). The first focus group comprised four female academic staff (group 1, coded as F1 to F4), and the second comprised five male academic staff (group 2, coded as M1 to M5). The constitution of each was based solely upon participant availability, and the gender split occurred entirely by chance. Although differences in the groups can be seen, and feature in the findings, we do not attempt to make any gender attributions. Both groups included a mix of different subject disciplines across different departments and disciplines with no overlap or duplication. The age of participants was not recorded but the distribution of experience ranged from within the first 5-years of starting an academic career to part-time due to partial retirement.

Six questions were asked of both groups by the same interviewer over a 60-minute period. There was no deviation from these set questions, the interviewer monitored the conversation and interjected only to repeat a question if necessary or move on to the next. The precise wording used to lead into each question being changed a little to reflect the previous conversation, and both focus groups were shown the questions written on A4 sheets as they were asked to ensure that the same words were used and seen by all participants.

The six questions were categorised as engagement questions, exploration questions and an exit question:

### Engagement questions:

(to get participants talking about the topic and make them comfortable)

- 1 What does 'social media' mean to you?
- 2 What is your experience of using social media for your own professional development (CPD)?

### Exploration Questions:

(more in-depth exploration of the topic)

- 1 What has influenced your decisions about how to use social media for teaching?
- 2 From responses to the questionnaire, the confidence of staff and students were given as a barrier to engaging with social media for learning and teaching, and some of you identified this as an issue. What issues have you experienced relating to confidence and what helped you overcome any lack of confidence that you or your students might have initially had?
- 3 If we [the University] did not support social media development as a university, what would the consequences be?

### Exit Question:

(to allow participants to make any relevant additional comments before the focus group closed)

- 1 Is there anything else you would like to say about social media and its use in higher education?

The same interviewer asked questions to both groups, an audio recording was made and later transcribed by an independent transcriber. An observer from the research team was also present but they did not interject or make any comment during the focus groups.

Focus groups elicit different responses based on the social and professional relationships between the group members and the larger context that they operate within (Cyr, 2016). The analysis, therefore, considers the specifics of the individual comments, the interaction between group members and compares the interactions and nature of the group, and relevant comparisons between the two groups.

The transcriptions were imported into a spreadsheet for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following an initial review of the comments by all members of the research team each comment was then coded for enablers, barriers, confidence, attitude, benefits, and drawbacks. Comments were then selected for quotation based on their representation for the overall conversation and for specific thematic content. All three members of the research team provided input to the coding and review of the comments. The analysis was undertaken in a collaborative workshop format where discussion formed the basis of the thematic review. Following writing of the findings and discussion for this paper, a final review of the original audio recording was undertaken to ensure that a balanced representation of the themes had been presented.

## Findings

### Group differences

The group dynamics, or collective attitude of each focus group, was notably different. The discussion in group 1 felt open, opportunistic, and curious, while in group 2 it felt more practical and primarily sceptical, although not without appreciation.

Group 1 answered the questions with optimism, although they did show some caution. They established a shared understanding of social media rooted in the benefit of sharing social dimensions, community, communication and intimacy, and based on personal feeling:

"...it's my mates, it's my family, but certainly over the last few years for me, it's also been related to myself as an academic and my own personal learning and I'd say it's that massive network that I feel I've got that extends beyond the University now". (F2)

They understood that while the use of social media be perceived as:

"another thing to do and check, you know that burden" (F3)

While simultaneously acknowledging that taking part regularly may result in the participation of many different types of communities: personal, professional and subject-based, to the extent that they questioned, what they would we do if they did not have it:

*"I often think about you know what would we do if we didn't have it, because that sort of thing we would have always" (F3)*

In contrast, the starting point for group 2 was to reach agreement on the tangible functionality and task-driven purpose of social media, establishing that social media is:

*"websites that people can interact on" (M2)*

Which in turn led to a more critical view, with heightened awareness exploration of the idea of "covert" interaction, the recording of clicks, views, likes and searches to inform personalised content, meaning:

*"it's more than the interactive, it's the, no, covertly interactive that I think is, if that's the right word." "you get engaged whether or not you are actually engaging" (M3)*

### Perspectives

The questions elicited rich, wide-ranging discussions in both groups touching on a broad range of topics that we observed could be viewed from any or all of three different perspectives:

- 1 Personal perspective - an individual's own beliefs about social media, expectations, perceptions gained through personal experience, thinking and exploration. This perspective includes value judgements, opinions on tools, approaches or ethical considerations for tools or approaches. There is an overlap here in terms of their professional perspective as individuals - themselves as academics within a discipline and their role as teachers.
- 2 Pedagogic perspective - as in consideration of social media for learning within the curriculum, what is essential and a priority of the discipline? Is it the use of industry-standard tools? Or validation of professional conduct (sector guidelines for behaviour online), or taking advantage of routes through to research, networking or visibility and presentation of individuals as professionals (whether staff or students). It also includes the relationship of the tutor with the student, the role of mentor, or tutor.
- 3 Institutional perspective - as in the infrastructure, policies and guidelines, the support that is provided for students and for staff.

In the process of thematic analysis, it became logical to organise and present the findings against these perspectives.

### Scope

The focus of this research was always intended to be on the use of social media in learning and teaching. However, within the focus group discussions, some of the participants were passionate about sharing their concerns on the blurring boundaries of course promotion, course marketing and the implications of work planning, support, and training. Although this is recognised as a significant area to address, for the purpose of this paper it is felt that this aspect is largely out of scope. The impact of these elements are considered only in the nature of the relationship they have on using social media for learning and teaching.

### Personal perspective

#### Strength of opinion

Although individuals in both groups voiced opinions and rationalised them during the conversation, one participant held a clear stance and described themselves as very confident and competent, but morally opposed to social media and with an expectation for institutions to take responsibility in questioning the role of social media in learning:

*"I find a lot of what happens in social media to be incompatible with good education, ...I engage fully with some of it and I shun other aspects" (M4)*

The individual believed that social media has a range of benign through to evil aspects and that Facebook operates at the 'evil' end of the scale:

*"I think if we start with this idea is whether you can interact with something or not, I think then I feel that you can then start thinking about a scale of benign to evil, with Facebook being the complete evil, because it's a business set up to deceive and everybody that interacts with Facebook believes that it's there for them and that's the complete opposite, it's there to make money for Facebook, to gather data on people individually and collectively. So I think there is something, not in all social media, but in some social media very evil going on that is deceitful" (M4).*

A more tempered view was that institutionally we should consider the ethical implications of social media providers:

*"I'd like to see us as an institution be a bit more upfront about that sort of thing, reflect that attitude a bit more because it's often presented as something that's just totally positive or at best kind of benign" (M5).*

### Professional development and modelling behaviours

Participants described that personal values and professional experience with social media could inform their professional development, and teaching contexts, with one observing that over time they would:

*"... I'm going to apply those principles and I'm going to use them in my teaching, so it's really helped me my development as a teacher". (F2)*

Use of Twitter for building professional networks and sharing information was identified as useful for expanding knowledge and sharing with others as a form of networking. They highlighted the trickle-down effect of their own professional development to that of their students':

*"I mean I get it in two ways, one is trying to build networks, professional networks in terms of a study area or a professional area and trying to get other contacts involved from other universities and from professionals, so there's a sort of networking there. But then you start you know sharing information that you can build on, but there's also the other area where you've got a study area or your teaching area and you find articles and you can use social media to help build that up as a resource ... I'm expanding my knowledge by using it by finding articles, which I will then tweet to share with other people, ... that's student development as well as my own, because I'm learning things that are happening." (M4)*

*"I'm using [Twitter] much, much more for my own professional development, contacts, networking and if that also benefits my students at the same time, I wouldn't say it was coincidental, but we're sort of doing it together" (F1)*

The inference is that their professional use is also of value to students who may belong to the same social networks, it is a combined individual journey and shared journey:

*"I follow other academics, I follow various government agencies and government organisations and I'm looking to find out to keep up-to-date with what's happening, to find out more about what's happening to then pass that onto the students. ...it's as much about my professional development as it would be in that way about the students".(F1)*

### Networks and relationships

There were three different positions on 'following' students and navigating online professional relationships. There was a view of maintaining professional boundaries by not following students:

*"I very, very quickly realised you should never follow students on Twitter because [of] the stuff they say at four in the morning on a Saturday night and it felt slightly stalky really". (F1)*

*"if people are out on a Saturday night or a Friday night and they get a little bit drunk and they do something stupid, it's difficult to retract, that's*

*probably the biggest problem because once it's there it's there, even if you try to retract it, it could take a long time and it's out there and soon as it's been retweeted or re-shared, it's gone" (F4)*

An opposing view that by following students and then to use the real experiences as learning opportunities to model professional attitudes, etiquette and good behaviours for students. The academics described their role as guiding students to become professionals, the development of their professional communication skills and using experiences for learning opportunities:

*"...a few students have tweeted inappropriately and we've sorted it out really quickly, you know they'd had the guidelines, ...we did it in a really nice way, we'd have a chat with the student and explain why ... why they shouldn't do that and say, would you like it if we went on (Twitter to) say, 'I'm just marking this rubbish essay by x'... So, they really appreciated the fact that we had that conversation." (F3)*

*"I do follow the students because you can see what they are saying, and you can use that as a learning tool." (F2)*

*"What influenced me was following some students on Twitter, so like some would follow you, you follow them back and kind of you had some kind of engagement with them and seeing how they used it and I think a lot of them forget that it's a public, kind of broadcast, you know what they're writing is published out there, anyone can read it. Some of the stuff they were writing was, it was just, you know it was just really unprofessional, let's put it that way, it was mindboggling, you know some of them, they just didn't see themselves as young professionals, they saw themselves as kind of teenagers still using Twitter as like a social thing, which it definitely is, but if they're wanting to become young professionals I felt I had a kind of, not duty, but I felt like I should try and steer them a little bit and encourage them to use it a bit more professionally. (M2)*

*"[We've] got personal Facebook pages, but we also have professional Facebook pages. Now I'll follow the students quite happily on the professional one, but I wouldn't accept them on my personal one and I do a similar thing with LinkedIn which yeah I'm on, I'm probably not doing as much with it as I should do, but I do accept students on there, particularly when they're sort of final year students when they invite me." (F4)*

As well as a moderate position of following students on specific social media tools when they are seen to deliver a professional purpose:

*"I do accept students on [LinkedIn], particularly when they're final year students when they invite me". "I say if you're ever tweeting professionally, I will follow you then, let me know and I follow quite a few graduates who've gone on, so I think it's important". (F4)*

## Time

A great deal of discussion related to time as a resource and the groups explored the issue of time from different angles. The always-on nature of social media and maintenance of a work-life balance was raised as a factor increasing stress and impacting on openness to engage with social media. Successful use of some tools in some contexts may require a high level of engagement, and this may simply not be possible. There was a feeling of reluctance to engage with social media because of its time-absorbing potential:

*"I try and keep my job as 9-5 as possible". (M3)*

*"I'm already so busy and I think I'd be stressed because I'd have to keep topping it up, I couldn't just leave it, I'd have to keep adding things". (F3)*

A pressure and a reticence to join some social media sites was expressed, and anxiety about it becoming another thing to manage and dedicate time to. A participant had set up an account but not done anything with it, though they did recognise that it would be good to spend time developing their profile for the benefit of course promotion:

*"...I got into it almost by accident and now it's a negative because my profile is not kept up-to-date" (M3)*

*"[with] LinkedIn you are representing the university and yeah, absolutely we should all have up-to-date LinkedIn profiles, I'm amazed that some of us don't, I think that's absolutely critical". (M2)*

This led to concerns when the use of LinkedIn moves from personal and individual use to its use for the formal promotion of courses and institutional representation. This change in emphasis has an impact on staff and moves LinkedIn to a labour creating activity, rather than labour saving. There was apprehension about the time this would take, but also the responsibility that might be associated with this:

*"I've got a whole stack of things that I need to do as course leader and here's another one that's going to take me x number of hours, where am I going to get those hours from? And I find this with so many of the technological tools that we're encouraged to use, they're not labour saving whatsoever, they're labour creating and the question that you're asking is, what's the balance, what benefit do I get from investing all that time in it and for me the benefit there would be to the course, which is of benefit to the university. So how is the university helping you to find the time to build that profile?" (M4)*

*"I do use social media a lot professionally, but it's not kind of on my work plan, it's not you know it's all that extra and it is a lot of extra time". (F3)*

The behaviour of 'skimming' Twitter for information discovery was not seen as a central part of professional development, but the skimming and picking of relevant information for later was considered by participants to be useful even as they acknowledged that they only revisited approximately 10% of saved resources:

*"you open it up and the first thing you see is a link to an article ..that for me is the beauty of Twitter", "when you're sat on the bus, or sat for ten minutes. ...a really good example of general interesting tidbits." (M2)*

*"I'd probably revisit about, I reckon about a tenth of the things that I save and bookmark in some way" "I can leave things for literally years and then at some point something becomes a priority". (M5)*

One participant described how social media has changed their approach to accessing news and personalising a digital version that relates to her interest. While this takes some investment of time to set up, it was noted that this was not necessarily an additional pull on time availability once established.

## Confidence, visibility and overcoming barriers

Participants identified their personal confidence challenges and their willingness to be visible on social media platforms. The posting of content online came with it the risk of staff feeling or being judged on their contributions and the potential impact of online exposure.

*"... they're really fearful of being judged or actually they're really fearful of saying something which then gets retweeted and retweeted and then it all goes pear-shaped and I just say to them, well don't say that then, I mean you know, don't tweet junk". (F1)*

*"... all of a sudden what I'd written in a tweet had gone to like 100,000 people, that was seriously scary, it's the only time it's ever happened... You can then understand why people think, wow, I had no control over that... so it is a bit scary". (F1)*

## Pedagogic perspective

### Learning from others

Participants reported they were most influenced by successful examples of practice and where they could easily identify the benefits for

their students and the wider learning community. Where they saw good uses of social media they would follow the model of those examples:

*"I wanted to use that principle in the classroom to try and get the students to chat, so it was using tried and tested things that worked and tried to engage that. And then similar to the Facebook, someone else had used it, so we thought, let's try this in the class". Once they had their own successful experiences their confidence would grow, and they would be encouraged to continue developing their practice. (F2)*

#### Inclusive practice

Participants' consideration of inclusive practice either changed how they engaged students in social media-rich activities, or influenced if they used it at all:

*"[I've] had three female students who are [of a specific religion] and were very concerned, not necessarily about being on social media, but concerned about what if somebody puts something inappropriate on", in this case, the tutor ensured that use of social media was not the only way to interact, it was not critical to assessment "it was an optional thing, that people didn't suffer a lack of it". (F3)*

#### Confidence

Where confidence was high, there appeared to be a lack of empathy for those experiencing barriers to using social media with respect to the tools themselves, as well as its potential use:

*"I'm always slightly mortified when staff ask me to show them how to use Twitter because it seems so intuitive, it's like asking somebody show me how to [make] toast, you know to make toast, it's not that difficult, but there's obviously a barrier there when people approach it for the first time". (F1)*

While it was apparent that students were seen as mainly confident users of social media for their own personal needs, this was not always the case for their professional use within the course. Participants discussed the challenges of building confidence in students, particularly when they were not with students directly in the classroom:

*"it's a bit like they're getting published... suddenly they're thinking, oh I've got to behave like a student here, my tutor's going to read it, ... what if I say something stupid?" (F3)*

*"they haven't got you in the room smiling and nodding and [saying] yeah, that's good and encouraging". (F3)*

The participant in question gave an example of managing this through modelling and then responding positively when students communicated and dealt with online situations effectively.

#### Purpose and value

Although the benefit of using Twitter and Facebook in learning was inconsistently understood or valued by focus group participants, there was a clearer agreement of the benefits of LinkedIn as a professional network. Participants had seen an increase in use by peers, one describing how most staff in their area used LinkedIn and encouraged their students to do so too to build their professional networks:

*"When they're going out on placement and they're getting recommendations from places like that, that's the way they're building their professional profile, so we do see LinkedIn as a tool for long-term development". (M4)*

There was debate about the perceived value of the different types of social media. It was voiced that there was a need for concrete evidence of the benefits to students, how and why a social media tool was being used, and examples of the benefits of engaging in using the tool. One participant felt very strongly about this:

*"It's not good enough for you to imagine things that are possible with this technology. I'm well aware that there are all sorts of possibilities that present themselves when we engage with these technologies, ..when we're, as often happens in education, we're presented with these tools and we're told, "this gives you this benefit" and there is no evidence for that statement whatsoever. ... I find that this is a common attitude in education and the problem with that is that as individuals the onus is on us to keep up with what's going on with very little support and until somebody's actually able to say, look, here is the evidence that this really makes a difference, I'm going to stay sceptic". (M4)*

The discussion also raised the issue of blurring boundaries. Most could see a range of purposes for professional social media tools (LinkedIn), however, there was concern when its use changed from a learning application to a university business-orientated application. For example, the use of LinkedIn to promote courses to prospective students. This led back once again to whose responsibility is this and what time is allocated to undertaking this work and overlapped with the institutional perspective.

#### Institutional perspective

##### Institutional support

When asked what the consequences would be if we didn't support social media development as a university, participants were clear that it should not be supported just because it was a popular tool with students but that it should be used to benefit education and the student experience:

*"so we should be looking at ways of harnessing that and using it for the benefit of education and our students, I totally agree with that, but the actual argument is more nuanced than just saying, they're using it, so we should be using it". (M4)*

##### Prioritisation and resource

There was a clear tension between engaging with existing technologies (such as using the virtual learning environment) and exploring a new or emerging technology that could enrich or enhance the learning experience. The open availability of social media tools and the need of the profession or discipline to engage with these tools were seen as strong drivers for using them, but this create tensions with institutionally supported tools:

*"So it's a question of that support will, someone's keen and someone likes it, they embed it in their module and it will go like I use Twitter, but others, like yourselves, will continue using the [institutional virtual learning environment] tools, which are fine". (M1)*

There was a consensus that it was often unclear which technology is officially endorsed and supported. Guidance on how social media could be used and embedded within a module was called for in a similar way for the way in which the virtual learning environment should be used. It was accepted that not all social media could be covered, and prioritisation would need to be given.

*"I could call [technology enhanced learning support] up and say you know come and help me with [the virtual learning environment] and ... he's obliged to do that, but if I call him up and say you know I want to set up Twitter for my course, I don't know whether he's supposed to do it or not, you know there is a whole grey area there, it's not as clear cut as it is for the much more institutionalised area". (F1)*

The availability of support staff who know and understand the different tools that are available was seen as a crucial element of institutional-level support. Participants felt that the support was important for the development of social media for learning but that the impact of that support was difficult to measure:



*"If we didn't support social media development, fewer people would use social media for learning purposes, but the impact is hard to quantify". (M5)*

#### Responsibility, safety, and inclusivity

The issue of distributed responsibility emerged as social media present each of us with ways to engage students, potential students and so on: through professional environments like LinkedIn where we each have autonomy of our profiles, group two identified that poor profiles may have a negative impact on the course itself, create a bad impression and lose potential students who may not follow through to course sites:

*"I had a bit of an issue with LinkedIn because a module used LinkedIn so I had to sign up for it... students started inviting me to LinkedIn, so I thought, yeah, I'll turn it on, but I didn't put a full profile on there and I'm a course leader, so people keep on looking at it and I still haven't put a full profile on there, so it's actually backfired, because I don't want to spend my time doing another thing. So again I got into it almost by accident and now it's a negative because my profile is not kept up-to-date." (M3)*

That lack of good, current practice may mean that institutionally we are missing opportunities and not meeting our students' expectations. For example, how mobile technologies are being used by our students.

There were tensions between the safety and support for university hosted or endorsed tools vs external tools that tend to offer more flexibility and authenticity but without any control or support:

*"So it needs, the [VLE] support needs extending into these other products, but it's a question of adoption within the university. (M1)*

The VLE was described as being more inclusive in the sense that all students in a cohort would be enrolled with access to the VLE and the tools therein, whereas not all students may wish to engage with social media tools for learning, or indeed, at all. Similarly, students could practice their social media skills within a VLE in a way that is safe:

*"It's a lot safer if we do this in Blackboard and not on something that is visible to the whole world." (M4)*

Students at a distance, in countries with limited access to social media platforms, may be disadvantaged by the use of social media tools outside of university controlled digital platforms. Participants expressed concern for the institutional lack of control or responsibility for external and open social media tools and the potential issues of cyberbullying, unprofessional behaviour, and lack of privacy.

#### Digital environment

The concept of social media as an institutional environment (learning or otherwise) was explored by both groups. The online social media space is as valuable as physical space and can be utilised by an institution, they are considered to have the potential to extend and enhance the connection to our physical spaces. Participants commented that investment in social media could offer some economies over building additional spaces:

*"I think it's neglected and actually probably it makes it more economic sense to develop [the usage of social media over bricks and mortar] because you don't have to buy bricks, you know you've just got it there" and "there is a lot of talk about brick and mortar kind of real buildings, but there isn't that same amount of talk about social media and social profiles up there, at least not that I hear". (F3)*

#### Institutional competition

Irrespective of the platform, a justified and evidenced use for the 'benefit of education and our students' was considered important. Understanding how students use (or could use) their mobile devices to support their learning was raised as an area of relevance, and there was a

concern that if the uses of smart technology were not identified and acknowledged by an institution, or there was no urgency to employ the relevance of technologies there may be a risk of losing students to other universities appearing to value digital technology more openly and visibly.

*"...if we don't do stuff now with social media and technology ... we're just going to get left behind and you know students won't, they won't come here, they'll vote with their feet, they'll go to [a different University]". (M2)*

#### Institutional profile

It was acknowledged that not using social media would affect our institutional profile and reputation and therefore risk a potentially significant financial implication with reduced marketing impact and student recruitment:

*"it's about attracting students and generating revenue for the institution, whether it would have a massive impact on the quality of learning, teaching and assessment, I don't know". (M5)*

Participants were concerned that the institution was missing opportunities to maximise the reach of social media and missing the potential for course teams to take ownership of some of the promotion of their courses:

*"The opportunities [lost for not] presenting ourselves as a university ... it's very frustrating and often I come across people in other parts of the University who will say, oh we had this really good course but we didn't recruit and saying, well what did you do ... it's not in their hands they don't feel like they have ownership of kind of the marketing". (F3)*

Participants were clear that despite potential tensions between academic viewpoints and marketing viewpoints, the two groups need to work together to avoid the risks of using social media without support or direction:

*"[if] one of the roles of course leader is marketing the course ... it needs support and it shouldn't be something that a course leader is left hung out to dry and say 'well how come your LinkedIn page isn't attracting 20 students a year?'". (M4)*

The agreed point was that there should be broader support and not an additional unrecognised or unresourced individual responsibility. There was frustration at the perceived absence of boundaries or consistency in approach to the use of social media in the institution:

*"There's no royal dictat, but then again you don't know where the boundaries are". (M3)*

#### Discussion

The focus group conversations revealed a complex picture of interdependency and overlap between personal, pedagogic, and institutional perspectives. Each of the perspectives, and their intersectionality, evolves as technology, behaviours, and infrastructure progress. The findings demonstrate that personal perspective, interpretation and understanding often leads the way for individuals and informs their pedagogic practice, a view found not only in relation to social media (Balakrishnan, 2017) but elsewhere in the higher education 'quality' discourse (Wood & Su, 2017). The institutional perspective can be both conflicting and reactive rather than proactive as it lags behind the perspective of the individual, but institutions need to be responsible and considered while supporting and guiding staff (Bonzo & Parchoma, 2010; Stathopoulou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2019). It helps to imagine each of the perspectives slowly evolving over a timeline, woven together, and sharing the changing social and digital environments or dimensions.

## Personal perspective

The focus group discussions illustrate that each individual has a personal perspective on social media and its value. Personal views, beliefs and priorities are shaped through experiences and exposure wherever they take place (whether in professional or personal lives). Our value judgements tend to adapt or solidify with experience or by hearing of the experiences of others (Jung & Ro, 2019). Personal perspectives and attitudes of enablers and inhibitors (Sullivan & Koh, 2019) can close or open gateways to use of social media for learning, and inform our approaches to sharing, learning, promoting, and developing good practice in others and ourselves. A common perception from the focus groups was that of the need to keep personal and professional online identities and interactions separate. A perspective that is also shared by students (Maloney, Moss & Ilic, 2014) and acknowledged by our participants in their role in modelling good online professional practice to and with their learners.

Perhaps an interesting finding was that many of the reported potential negative aspects of social media use were not identified as prevalent issues by the participants. A number of negative outcomes of social media use have been suggested: information overload, communication overload, lack of self-regulation, fatigue, depression, narcissism, stress and decreased academic performance (Purvis, Rodger, & Beckingham, 2016; Whelan, Islam & Brooks, 2020). However, the emphasis of concern in the discussion was much more aligned to the appropriate use of social media platforms and keeping a professional identity carefully curated and separate to the personal (Carpenter, Kimmons, Short, Clements & Staples, 2019). Such a view may be an outcome of the questions being open ended and the main thematic question being posed about confidence of staff and students, rather than other negative or positive experiences of social media in learning and teaching.

The pressure of academic workload and available time to try new things was reported as a key barrier to engagement with new technology by Regan et al. (2012) and Haber and Mills (2008) in relation to online teaching more broadly. However, the quality of online learning activities can be greater than other modes and provide engagement of all learners rather than just the more confident, as may be seen in face-to-face learning activities (Cheston, Flickinger & Chisolm, 2013). The experiences of those involved in the focus group highlighted that where they felt positive about their social media skills, they were more likely to take ownership of their further skills development in relation to social media and digital learning.

## Pedagogic perspective

The *pedagogic perspective* is largely influenced by personal perspectives (student or staff) and our willingness to explore or experiment; also by the working and learning landscapes, it is shaped by consideration of factors such as ethics of social media companies (Jacobson, Gruz & Hernández-García, 2020) and the potential of the online environment. The pedagogic perspective was clearly the least challenging perspective for the participants. Where they could see the perceived benefits and perceived usefulness (Sullivan & Koh, 2019) for learning and student engagement and ownership of learning (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010), and particularly where colleagues exhibited good practice that they could follow; it gave them confidence for trying things out and then continuing to develop their practice. Where concerns existed, it was about the inclusive approach to using social media and understanding that some learners may choose not to engage with some aspects of social media due to their personal perspective and potential perceived complexities or barriers (Purvis, Rodger, & Beckingham, 2016; Sullivan & Koh, 2019). Where participants had confidence, they could tend to lack empathy for those experiencing barriers although the challenges of building confidence in students was a key discussion point.

Different types of social media had different perceived values in relation to learning and teaching. Evidence of the benefits for learning was

critical and where social media tools had a perception of being a social tool (i.e. Facebook) compared to a professional tool (i.e. LinkedIn) the consideration of the blurring of boundaries was raised (Maloney et al., 2014). Similarly, where a professional tool had a second purpose of reputational and marketing value to the organisation, there was a boundary there for the time and expectation to maintain a profile, something that was not related to pedagogical practice or student experience. Although, again, where positive examples and experiences could be seen or drawn upon (Chen, 2018), both academics and students are more open to using social media for learning where they may have categorised tools as only for non-learning purposes. It is evident that where staff and students have analysed the affordances of social media for learning purposes, and made their own choices and adaptations, any social media tool can be used effectively for learning (Manca, 2020).

## Institution perspective

The key themes highlighted by the focus groups in relation to institutional enablers and barriers were focused on the achievement of clarity about the institutional approach and the what and how social media use is supported by the institution (Balakrishnan, 2017). Specific guidance for how to implement social media effectively in learning experiences, particularly with case studies and examples, was a key for enabling new users of social media for the purposes of enhancing learning experiences. Therefore, institutional support for developing learning and teaching in social media-enhanced learning should be characterised by clear, visible and specific support and delivery of staff development which is targeted at social media use (Jenkins, Browne, Walker & Hewitt, 2011). Similarly, the tension between social media for institutional and course marketing needs to be clarified and supported to avoid unnecessary tensions with learning and teaching (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

The *institution perspective* is responsible for providing the right fertile ground for safe, supported, and guided use for personal and pedagogy as appropriate (Stathopoulou et al., 2019). The institution benefits from good personal and pedagogic practice, though it can often provide or contribute to barriers or undermine it (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Institutional strategies often align with using new technologies to support learning, certainly at the authors' institution, our strategic ambition to be the leading applied university implies that students will benefit from the contemporary, functional learning experience, and applied and contemporary use of social media contributes to this. UK Higher Education Institutions all have strategies for graduate outcomes that the effective use of social media would positively contribute to (Killian et al., 2019). As such the sector needs to move beyond the conversations about tools and approaches being trend-driven and easily dismissing social media as a learning tool. As educators, we should have been in no doubt that smart digital technologies were integral to the learning experience and that has become very clear as the global pandemic of COVID-19 impacted higher education in 2020 (Crawford et al., 2020). Institutions need to be progressive and forward-thinking so as not to lose a competitive edge for themselves as organisations or the competitive attributes of their graduates in a modern and evolving workplace.

Institutions must be clear on their expectations of social technologies in learning and as a part of the student experience and how they differ to the use of social media for digital marketing (Camilleri, 2019; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). This will have bearings on an institution's stance on the role of digital in learning in their offer to students (Stathopoulou et al., 2019). Supported pathways where the use of social technologies is critical, include: time, training, skills development, and defining rationale; in addition to ensuring good practice in personal data management, human resources, support, ethics, and behaviour policies. Clarity on these is required when there are potential overlaps of personal ownership of social media versus the professional. The motivation to explore social media was a grey area as it was felt that there was insufficient information provided by the university to show the benefits and impact to warrant doing so. Making decisions about



which tools or approaches to use requires clarity about the range of tools supported, provided, or approved at an institution. Staff and students need signposting for how they make the right decisions for their needs and given a space where open discussion about social media in learning can take place (Manca & Ranieri, 2015).

### Intersectionality of perspectives

The use of social media in learning and teaching results in us navigating new dimensions of technology in practice, and that has a range of requirements personally and institutionally. The dimensions of public face, extended classroom, new behaviours, new expectations, different roles, articulating ourselves as individuals, and the presentation of the institution are clearly complex and multi-faceted (Liu et al., 2020). An appreciation that actions such as connecting with students within your course or module on LinkedIn versus friending on Facebook, can have different implications and outcomes. The need to have a public face and digital identity that belongs to both an individual and an institution requires an advanced understanding of how to manage online behaviours and experiences. For many staff at higher education institutions, this is still relatively new, despite the availability of many social media channels for the last two decades (Manca, 2020). The personal perspective of using social media professionally may vary depending on the individual, from an especially important part of their work to something that they have not really considered. Individuals find themselves navigating rules of public engagement, at times feeling vulnerable, at others empowered. Meanwhile, institutions place increasingly greater value on online professional representation, and the need to protect themselves from negative publicity (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

Tensions may exist between personal and professional practice, and fundamental beliefs and principles (Carpenter et al., 2019). Staff and students may feel compromised to go against their personal stance, or resigned to it, while others will be firm in their stance. Where pedagogy demands or suggests the use of a particular tool or approach that requires the adjustment of personal principles, a safe or guided path should be clear for both teaching staff and students. Critically, individuals in the higher education community should be supported to have open attitudes to the use of social media for learning and an appreciation of positions different to those that they already hold (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

Ownership and responsibility for implementation of social media for learning is likely to be best placed at a course level where the effective use of social media can be carried out with the local understanding of the structure, boundaries and expectations of staff and students. Where appropriate and whenever possible social media use should refer to appropriate professional body standards or expectations (O'Regan, Smithson & Spain, 2018) but providing opportunities for putting these into practice and facilitating critical awareness of professional and personal identities. Where such standards do not exist, facilitating a critical exploration of what these should be within a safe learning environment should be prioritised by tutors.

### Limitations

The voices of two focus groups of educators have been considered and analysis of the group discussions taken as a representation of the views of academics at a UK Higher Education Institution. An unintended consequence of self-selection based on individual availability was the gender bias of the groups; one being all female and the other all male. It was felt that the participants who contributed to the focus group were in the main either advocates of the use of social media, or conversely critical of its use for a range of reasons. To some extent there is a concern that a focus group discussion can be led by the more vocal and that participants tend to seek validation from one another (Jung & Ro, 2019). Not able to hear individual reactions or being influenced by what others said, the middle-ground voice may not have been represented. However,

the debate within the groups was also quite self-critical and evaluative of their use and the limitations of social media. The groups were not enthusiasts per se or overly biased in their views. A critical viewpoint may potentially have highlighted further considerations for the need for institutional support to enable the use of social media to be confidently introduced in their practice.

### Recommendations and future research

In the new current context of COVID-19 and the rapid acceleration of the necessity of use of digital technology in learning and teaching, there are likely to be further changes in perceptions and uses of social media for learning in higher education. There is potential to extend this research to a wider audience to identify further implications on practice. Extending further would allow exploration of the key issue of how institutional support can provide the support to overcome inhibitions and barriers experienced by staff. A scoping exercise could provide a useful collection of good practice that could then be considered by others. Furthermore, the ethical issues raised in relation to privacy, data mining and subsequent use of information gathered from social media sites warrants further attention. There is an opportunity to provide detailed guidance for educators and indeed all users of social media to ensure individuals are correctly informed and aware of how they can take ownership of how information can be used.

Based on the thematic analysis and interpretation of the focus group discussions and in connection with other research evidence, we present some institutional recommendations for supporting the development of the use of social media for learning and teaching in higher education.

We recommend that institutions should provide:

- 1 A clear statement about the support and expectations for the use of social media within the university community
- 2 Support and specific guidance for the use of professional networks which develop staff and student professional identities.
- 3 Principles for consideration in using social media for learning and teaching.
- 4 A protocol for guiding how social media accounts are best administered for groups and peer learning.
- 5 Guidance for dealing with online behaviours and encouraging positive and professional online interactions.
- 6 Sharing of examples of pedagogic uses of social media in practice.
- 7 Supporting appropriate risk-taking in exploration of emergent social media technologies.

### Conclusion

There are three competing demands, needs, and wants from three perspectives of self, course/profession, and institution. There are many overlapping and shared elements to these perspectives. A strong influence on use of social media for learning is the personal (individual staff member) use of social media. Reservations and barriers to an individual staff member's use of social media are difficult to overcome solely by understanding the potential advantages to using social media with students. These barriers and obstacles are more likely to be stronger and can only be challenged effectively by a clear institutional framework of support and development.

The ubiquitous nature of interaction on the web and the rapid change of technologies means that social media has largely become indistinguishable from standard internet practice. It is therefore inevitable that human behaviours evolve with the change in the available ways that we can interact and communicate with each other. However, few of us question the ethics or the personal and societal consequences of change, and the views of those that do challenge the accepted norms appear to be extreme or alarmist. Institutions must take the responsibility as a community of staff and students to remain cautiously critical, not simply adopting evolving social behaviours as mainstream without critique.

We must promote critical awareness as part of the learning design process, and encourage holistic thinking, including sustainability, ethics, impacts, and personal boundaries.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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