



Evidence Summary

Social Networking Tools for Informal Scholarly Communication Prove Popular for Academics at Two Universities

A Review of:

Al-Aufi, A., & Fulton, C. (2015). Impact of social networking tools on scholarly communication: A cross-institutional study. *The Electronic Library*, 33(2), 224-241. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EL-05-2013-0093>

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate the adoption, use, perceived impact of, and barriers to using social networking tools for scholarly communication at two universities.

Design – Cross-institutional quantitative study using an online survey.

Setting – Academics working in the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences at two universities: one in Europe and one in the Middle East.

Methods – An online survey was devised based on a previous survey (Al-Aufi, 2007) and informed by relevant research. The survey was

piloted by 10 academics at the 2 participating universities. Post pilot it was revised and then circulated to all academics from similar faculties at two universities. Three follow up emails were sent to both sets of academics. The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive and inferential statistics were analyzed using ANOVA tests.

Main Results – The survey achieved a 34% response rate (n=130). The majority of participants were from the university based in the Middle East and were male (70.8%). Most of the responses were from academics under 40 years of age. The use of notebooks was prevalent at both universities. “Notebooks” is used as a term to describe laptops, netbooks,

or ultra-book computers. The majority reported use of social networking tools for informal scholarly communication (70.1%), valuing this type of use. 29.9% of respondents reported they do not use social networking tools for this purpose. Barriers were identified as lack of incentive, digital literacy, training, and concerns over Internet security. Among the non-users, barriers included low interest in their use and a perceived lack of relevancy of such tools for scholarly communication. The types of tools used the most were those with social connection functions, such as Facebook and Twitter. The tools used the least were social bookmarking tools. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test indicated that there was no significant difference at the 0.05 level between the use of social networking tools at both universities, with the exception of using tools to communicate with researchers locally and with publishers at one of the universities.

Both universities use tools for communication with peers and academics internationally. The responses were mainly positive towards the perceived usefulness of social networking tools for informal scholarly communication.

Conclusion – The authors conclude that despite the small sample of the community of academics investigated, there is a general trend towards increasing use and popularity of social networking tools amongst academics in the humanities and social sciences disciplines. As technology advances, the use of such tools is likely to increase and advance among academics. The authors point to pathways for future research including expanding the methods to include interviews, focus groups, and case studies. Another angle for research of interest is interdisciplinary differences in the use of prevalent tools such as Facebook and Twitter.

Commentary

This research investigates an emerging field of social networking tools in the context of informal scholarly communication. The literature review reveals that some research has investigated this topic. The authors' research offers seven categories of social

networking tools: social connections, multimedia sharing, professional, academic, blogging, social bookmarking, and cross-platform mobile apps. However, as technology and social networking tools are ever-evolving, the literature is quickly outdated as newer tools emerge and are adopted. The current research study offers an insight at a distinct point in time of their use amongst a particular academic sector, humanities and social sciences, which is valuable. It provides an insight into the prevalence of social networking tools among academics working in vastly different countries operating under different higher education systems, which is also of interest.

The specificity of the population and presentation of results score high on Glynn's critical appraisal checklist (2006). The inclusion criteria are outlined. Although the sample size is small, the interpretation of the results is relevant to the population studied. Ethical considerations were taken into account; however, this is not described in any detail. It is unclear how many questions were contained in the survey. Results are presented in eight tables, and questions make use of Likert scales. However, the data analysis using ANOVA is not appropriate given that all of the results are nominal, ranks, or Likert-type responses. The use of a Chi-square would have been more statistically sound. A good analysis of the results is given with discussion in relation to the data collected.

There is a comparison made between the two academic institutions under study, but there is no description given of the IT infrastructure in place at either university. It would have been interesting to include the wider socio-economic context for the adoption of social networking tools in both countries.

The survey questions are not included in the article or appendix, and it is not clear if all of the questions that were asked are described. It would have been useful to have included the survey so that it could be replicated by further studies. The authors outline clearly and precisely the limitations of the study and offer several ideas and suggestions for future

directions which would build upon the current research.

Librarians working in academic settings will find this study to be of interest in that it explores the use of social networking tools in two universities. Librarians working in each of the universities in question may benefit from reading this research in full, as it offers a unique insight into adopted social networking tools of academics at their institutions. In addition, librarians may benefit from adopting findings from this research into their own engagement with researchers, for example in the areas of outreach, instruction, research, collection development, and collaboration.

References

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