

## The Fetishisation of Digital Platforms for Graduate Career Development

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### Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### Abstract

This article argues for the vital importance of theorising the development of digital platforms as a site for supporting career development as an example of the fetishisation of technology. In Higher Education, graduate transition has become an increasing area of policy focus, whilst universities have increasingly become digitised in response to critiques of their own shortcomings. These issues are explored through a longitudinal study of how graduates used digital platforms to support their post-university career transitions. Through this, a series of typological narratives are presented that describe graduates' relationship to digital platforms. This is theorised as fetishisation, drawing on the 'irrational beliefs' and 'veiled realities' that make up individuals' experiences of using digital platforms for their careers. It is then argued that fetishisation provides an important perspective on the relationship between career and digital technology.

### Full paper

Universities have become reliant on digital technology for learning and teaching, student support and administrative functions (Bates, 2019). A decade ago, Selwyn (2014) positioned these developments not just as the product of technological developments but significantly as the way that universities and technologies are imagined. Selwyn notes that as higher education institutions have moved into their 'mass' phase, this has been accompanied by significant critiques of higher education from wider society. Higher education institutions are, according to Selwyn, frequently imagined as having a negligible positive impact on students or producing research of significant value for society. Selwyn notes that at a similar point in time, big tech companies have come to dominate a range of areas of society. This has created a fertile ground for the development of the belief that to deliver on the outcomes that are expected of them, higher education needs to embrace new technologies developed by big tech companies.

This paper will particularly look at how these themes have been developed in how graduate career transitions are discussed on campus. There has been a significant move towards seeing digital technology as prefiguring positive student outcomes. The developments that Selwyn describes have led to a growing focus on the need to develop 'digital' graduates who are 'digitally literate' (Belshaw, 2011). In the realm of graduate transition, this has been conceptualised as 'digital career literacies' (Hooley, 2012). This paper will argue that it has become increasingly common sense for universities to believe that increased levels of technological options across a range of domains is vital for institutional and student success. This paper is particularly interested in the way that this has developed into 'digital career literacy', which conceptualises a series of digital attributes which students, among others, could adopt to better manage their graduate transitions. This paper is going to take a critical stance towards digital career literacy. Rather than seeing the move towards developing digital career literacy as progressive and empowering for students, this paper will instead argue that digital platforms have been constructed as a fetish. A fetish is helpfully described by Naidoo (2016) as promoting irrational confidence but also '[veiling] social processes and negative consequences' that is to say, a fetish hides aspects of social reality from view or understanding. This creates two related processes where irrational beliefs are imbued onto an object whilst simultaneously obscuring significant aspects of reality.

Through data gained from a longitudinal qualitative study, this paper will present data that reveals a complex interplay between technology and individual agency, shaped significantly by the phenomenon of fetishization. As graduates navigate the landscape of career development, their belief in the transformative power of digital platforms often eclipses critical awareness of the inherent limitations and systemic issues tied to these technologies. This paper particularly presents this around the irrational beliefs and veiled realities that make up this understanding of fetishisation. This argues that fetishisation shows the enmeshed ideological and structural issues at play inside digital platforms and presents a more robust account of how and why platforms and career development interrelate than the one put forward by digital career literacy. This process simultaneously obscures the often negative realities of digital platforms such as harassment and precarity; it serves to reinforce individualistic behaviours among users, but it also obscures the actual behaviours and business models of these same platforms.

