

Theme

Policy

Face (book) the fear: exploring concerns relating to the use of social network sites in HEIs – a female perspective. (0044)

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Introduction

The extent, to which Social Network Site (SNS) usage has grown, in a relatively small timeframe, throughout the developed world, is astounding. In May 2010, Facebook reported having reached 400 million active users worldwide <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>. Nielsen (2009) also reported that 'member communities (category includes social networks and blogging communities) have taken a foothold in every major market from 50% of the online population in Switzerland and Germany to 80% in Brazil.' (p1). It is therefore, unsurprising that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are keen to use this medium for such purposes as marketing, learning and teaching and student / faculty communication. Interestingly, of the 19 major social network sites, in 2009, 16 reported having more female users than males. <http://royal.pingdom.com/2009/11/27/study-males-vs-females-in-social-networks/>

Boyd & Ellison (2007) define social network sites as:

Web based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p20). This 'profile' acts as the user's homepage and includes a range of personal information (e.g. gender, favourite music) and uploaded content such as photos and video clips.

Various academics (Cain 2008; Tufekci 2008; boyd 2007) have attributed four properties to social networks that have relevance for educators when considering the use of social networks in an academic setting: persistence; searchability; replicability; invisible audiences. Persistence is significant as users' content e.g. uploaded photos, could be stored on servers indefinitely, thus potentially causing embarrassment to users at some time in the future. Searchability can leave users open to searchers using the SNS for unintended uses, such as universities using social networks for applicant screening. Replicability refers to the ease with which content can be copied from one space to another; whilst invisible audiences pertains to the ease with which online expression can be 'overheard' both in real time and as a result of the persistence property, at a later date

Purpose of Study & Research Methods

Initial Study 2009

Whilst the use of social network sites in education is becoming an increasing focus of academic research, most studies have focused upon the student perspectives and the benefit for the HEI. In 2009, the authors of this proposal identified that ‘the academic voice’ was missing from the literature in this field; and as such conducted a study within the University of Wales Newport which evaluated faculty perceptions regarding the use of social network sites for student / faculty communication. 32 interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in the academic’s own environment, with 4 questions being used as a prompt to advance discussion. Data, from resulting transcripts, were coded using a combination of priori and emergent codes. Keywords, most commonly talked about topics and comparison were used to develop themes and perspectives. This initial study provided a wealth of rich data with priori and emergent themes including:

Category	Sub – themes
<i>Nature of SNS</i>	Actual content of profiles Perceived ‘ownership’ of social networks (i.e. for students) Privacy concerns (for themselves and for students) Inappropriate comments / behaviour from students (including defamation) Impact upon student careers / professions
<i>Impact upon student / lecturer relationship</i>	The nature of friendship Tutor information disclosure Impact on personal social network usage Student information disclosure
<i>Miscellaneous Concerns</i>	Technical ability of academic Cultural issues Fear of harassment (student / staff and vice versa)
<i>Role of HEI</i>	Requirement for guidance from employer / statement of expectations Requirement for employer to protect both students and

	staff
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The findings of this initial study has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Further & Higher Education.

2nd Phase – 2010 ongoing

One noticeable finding of the initial study was that there were significant gender differences in academic's attitudes to usage of social network sites for student / faculty communication. This was of particular interest to one of the researchers as she had recently formed 'Women in Society' - a multi-disciplinary forum for research relating to women in the 21st century (http://nbs.newport.ac.uk/displayPage.aspx?object_id=13234&type=PAG) . In the initial study, female academics expressed far more concern about usage than their male counterparts, despite the fact that females account for over half of all SNS users worldwide.

Therefore, this paper presentation will disseminate the findings of the second phase study that will particularly focus upon the female academic voice in relation to the use of SNSs for student faculty / communication. In depth interviews will be completed with female lecturers exploring the following concerns from the initial research:

- Risk of harassment
- Duty of care to students (linked to student information disclosure)
- Tutor information disclosure
- The role of the HEI in protecting both staff and students

Furthermore, the 2nd phase study will also consider the views of female student in the light of previous research (e.g Ipsos Mori, 2008; Madge et al ,2009). For example, Hewitt & Forte (2006) investigated student / faculty relationships at a US college and found that a large minority of the students surveyed (particularly females) were not positive regarding engaging with faculty via social networks. Concerns expressed included fear of monitoring and the erosion of a professional tutor / student relationship. Interestingly, some respondents stated that 'it's a social network for students' and 'if they poke me, I might find it strange.' (p.2)

Implications of research

The research will explore female academics' concerns relating to the use of social network sites for student / faculty communication. The in-depth study will build upon

previous research and highlight the fact that gender does impact upon attitudes to SNS usage, within the education sector.

It will also emphasise the role of the HEI in ensuring that itself , staff and students are protected when using SNS for education purposes.

1012 words

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Abstract

Theme

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Title

Face (book) the fear: exploring concerns relating to the use of social network sites in HEIs – a female perspective.

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) appear keen to utilise Social Network Sites (SNSs) for such purposes as marketing, learning and teaching and student / faculty communication. In 2009, the authors of this proposal identified that ‘the academic voice’ was missing from the erudite SNS literature; and as such conducted a study which evaluated tutor perceptions regarding the use of SNSs for student / faculty communication. One of the findings of the initial study was that female academics expressed much more concern relating to the use of SNSs than their male colleagues. Therefore, this paper will present the findings of a follow-on study that specifically explores female academics’ concerns regarding the medium. The study highlights the extent to which gender impacts upon attitudes to SNS usage, within education. It also investigates the role of the HEI in ensuring that itself, staff and students are protected when using SNSs for education purposes.

150 words

