Distance Learners establish Social Presence on X (Twitter) to build a Community of Inquiry

By: Olivia Kelly, The Open University

@OliviaKellyOU

Distance Learners establish Social Presence on Twitter to build a Community of Inquiry

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Background

Twitter use for students has been shown to:
- Increase engagement (Junko et al., 2013)
- Improve social interaction and integration (Neier & Zayer, 2015)
- Twitter was not designed for educational use (Lacka et al., 2021)
- Limited research in how distance learners benefit from this space.

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Research Questions

RQ1: How does OU student activity on Twitter vary over time?
- Number of tweets
- Structure of networks

**RQ2**: To what extent are students establishing social presence on Twitter within the Community of Inquiry model?

RQ3: How and to what extent does this social presence impact on feelings of identity and motivation?

Social Network Analysis
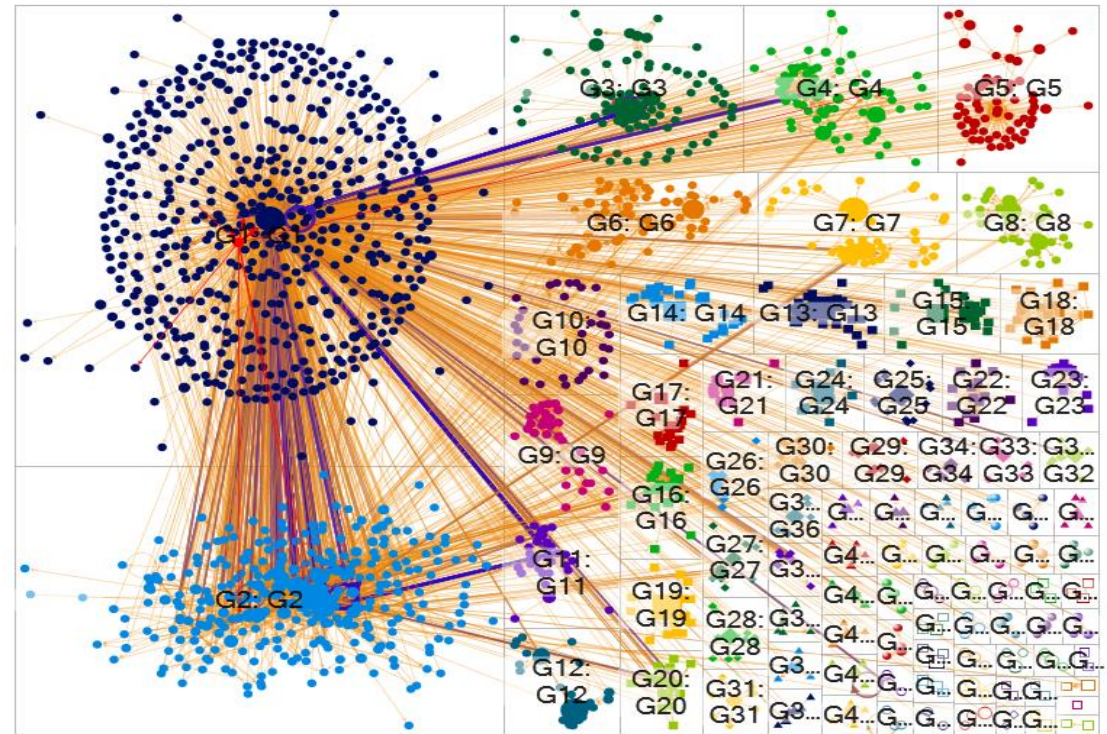
Content analysis using Community of Inquiry model

Interviews analysed using Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM)

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RQ1: Twitter networks
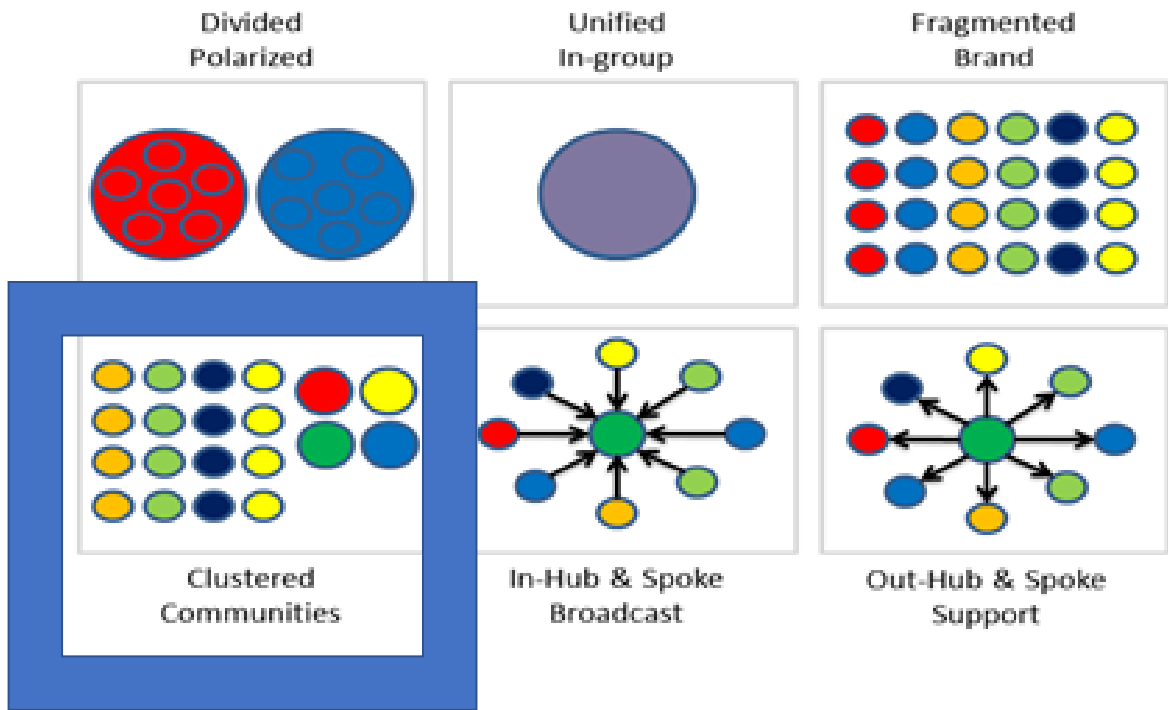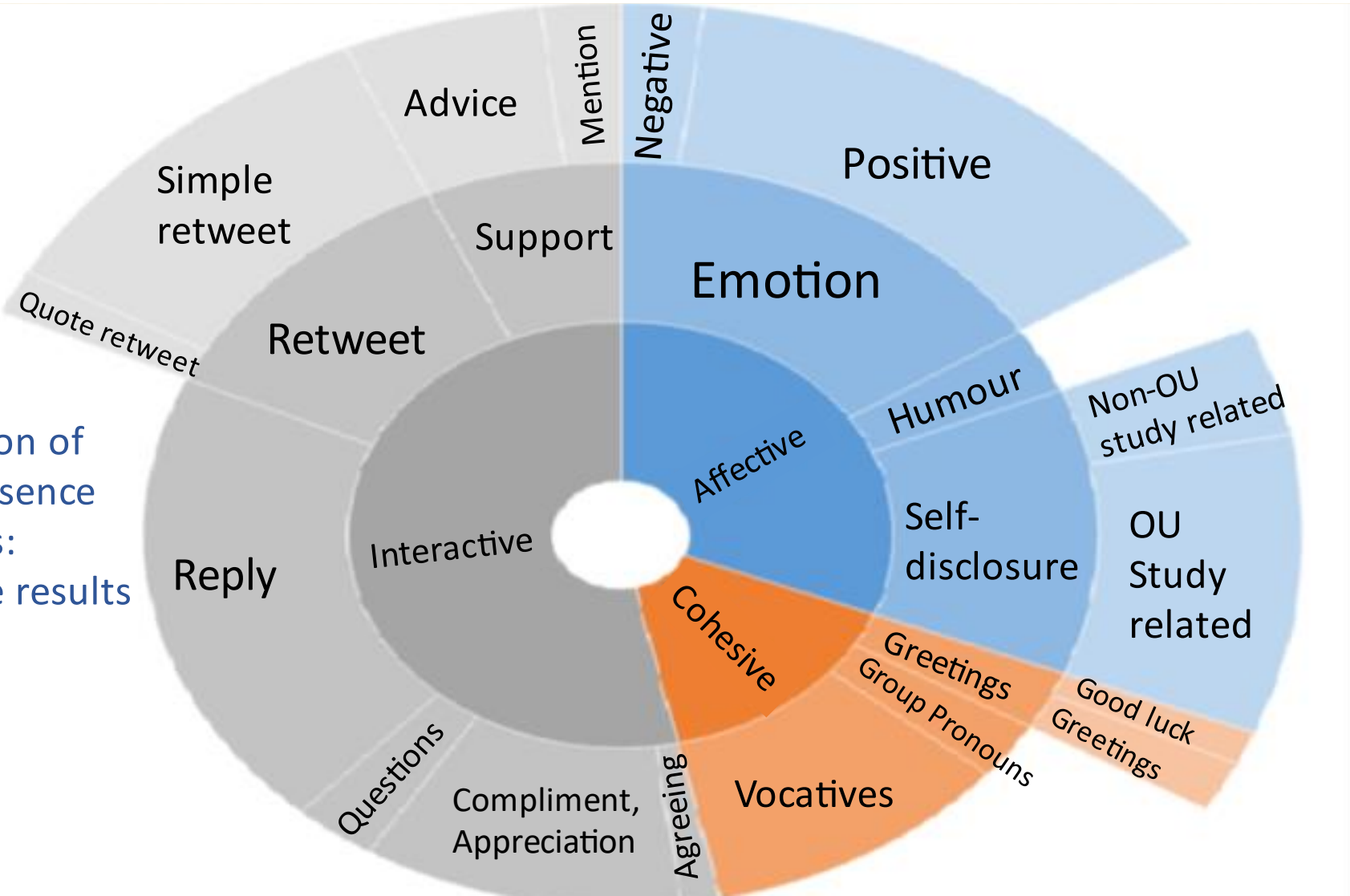

Possible network structures (Smith et al., 2014)

Network structure image of OU related tweets showing clustered community

RQ2: Building Social Presence within a Community of Inquiry

Distribution of Social Presence Indicators: Aggregate results

RQ3: Themes which emerged from each VCRM reading

Overall story
- Beneficial Time
- Incidental learning
- Twitter platform affordances

Individual Voice
- Student identity
- Motivation
- Sharing problems

Relationships
- Community and Connection
- Networking/career
- Position in relationships

Social Context
- Pandemic
- Nastiness
- Politics

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Triangulation

- SNA demonstrated existing networks - content analysis showed how networks are created through language use.
- Both SNA and interviews demonstrated lack of hierarchy in OU related Twitter discussion.
- Student identity a regular feature in tweets & interviews – key issue for distance learners.
- Social presence – High level evident in tweets. In interviews, students regularly discussed self-regulation of tweets to control how they present themselves online.

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Contribution to knowledge

- Methodological – Updated Social Presence Indicators for SM.
- Knowledge – Understanding benefit of informal distance learner networks to develop sense of community.
- Higher levels of distance learning
- Social media use ubiquitous
- Growing importance of Social Presence in SM
- HE Institutions need to know how to facilitate SM communities

Limitations

- Data only from OU students
- Only collected tweets using search terms ('OpenUniversity' and 'OUStudents'). Many tweets related to OU discussion missed.
- Updated Social Presence indicators limit direct comparison with previous research.

Future Research

- Include coding of GIFs and images for social presence
- Analysis of OU official accounts
- Analysis of lurking if software facilitates
- Future updates to social presence indicators as SM develops
- Analysis of how academic use of X/Twitter has changed following Elon Musk's takeover