Applications of Social Media in Academic Library Services: A Case of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Library

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, social media have had a vast number of users and attracted academic libraries to use this new media to connect with their user communities. It allows librarians to communicate and share information with, and even provide services to users. This study examines the Pao Yue-kong Library at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyUL) that has been using social media to promote their information resources and services. However, throughout websites observations and tracking records on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube of the PolyUL, it was found users are not as numerous as other commercial organizations. Some recommendations were suggested to the PolyUL for enhancing communication with its users.

KEYWORDS
Academic Library, Facebook, Qualitative Study, Social Media, Twitter, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

Since social media are getting more and more popular over the past decade, there have been tremendous technological advances of communication relationship between the academic libraries and users (Kingsley, 2012). Consultations, discussion forums, and surveys are no longer the only way to collect user opinions. To substitute these traditional methods, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are becoming more favorable for the general public to express their views instead of the traditional channels (Kim & Abbas, 2010).

As social media has been found to help communicate with users in an interactive way (Jothi, Neelamalar & Prasad, 2011), this study aims to provide insights into the benefits and challenges of using social media for the Pao Yue-kong Library at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyUL). This can help the PolyUL investigate how to make use of social media to enhance services and facilitate information sharing among users, which in turn helps the PolyUL users utilize library resources more effectively. This study will also provide a better picture for the use of social media, going beyond the focus on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which have been utilized by the PolyUL.

In brief, this study is designed to tackle three research questions, i.e., (i) to examine the application of social media by the PolyUL; (ii) to find out if social media have really helped the PolyUL to achieve user engagement and what opportunities have been offered; and (iii) to explore what the PolyUL can do to achieve better user engagement with social media.

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The scope of this study is focused on the application of social media of the PolyUL, namely, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, tracked during the period of 1 June 2014 to 30 June 2015. Based on the findings, we provide recommendations to assist the PolyUL to achieve better user engagement with this novel media.

This paper is developed as follows. In the next section, we provide the background information about the PolyUL. Then, we present our literature review on social media and its usage in the academic libraries. Afterwards, we will discuss the data collection and the data analysis. We then conclude this paper with our discussion on our observations, as well as providing recommendations to the PolyUL on how to better utilize the social media to interact with its library users.

HONG KONG POLYTECHNICAL UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The PolyUL was established in August 1972 to serve the Hong Kong Polytechnic, which was granted the full university status and renamed as the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) in 1994. In December 1995, the PolyUL was officially named after the late Sir Yue-kong Pao in appreciation of a generous donation to the University by the family of the millionaire (PolyUL, 2012). Currently, the library building is a six-storey purpose-designed building with an area of 16,662 square meters, providing the storage areas of archives, books, and other library materials, as well as approximately 3,600 study places for its users. The PolyUL also houses a 24-Hour study center, group discussion rooms, teaching and learning labs for library instruction classes, group rooms for use of audio-visual materials, study carrels for private study, and a special room for the visually disabled (PolyU, 2014).

The PolyUL comprises of one of the largest collections of scientific, engineering, and business materials in East Asia. Other areas of strength are its collection in areas such as information technology, computing, nursing, textiles and design. The present holdings exceed 2.4 million items, to which more than 24,000 volumes are added annually. Around 2,700 active print serial titles are held in the PolyUL. Via the Internet, the PolyUL provides round the clock access to near 46,000 unique full-text e-journal titles, over 370,000 e-books, and a wide array of multi-media and e-learning programs. The PolyUL also maintains several special collections and a self-developed databases, including a comprehensive Standards Collection, the PolyU Examination Paper Database, a Digital Image Gallery and a Slide Collection. In addition, the PolyUL provides access to a unique and heavily used collection of over 28,900 local Chinese and English language television programs (PolyU, 2014). In brief, the PolyUL is one of the most important academic libraries in the territory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Social Media?

Social media can be defined as a website that provides a virtual community for people interested in a particular subject or just to “hang out” together (Shaheen, 2008). Users can create their own online “profile” with biographical data, pictures, likes or dislikes information, and any other information they choose to post. They communicate with one another by voice, chat, instant message, video conferencing and blogs, and the service typically provides a way for members to contact friends of other members (Boroughs, 2010). One of the most commonly used social media application is social networking sites, such as Facebook and GooglePlus, which Boyd and Ellison (2007) them as “web-based services that allow individuals to: (i) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Social media has a series of characteristics. First, it is run in broadband speed and its messages can be instantaneously delivered. Users of social media can be always on the online platform and it can be reached at any time and any place as long as he/she is “online”. Second, the frequency of
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