Understanding the Use of Twitter for Teaching Purposes in Saudi Arabian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The increased use of Twitter in Saudi Arabia has opened new opportunities in higher education teaching. However, there exists a lack of studies which examine academics’ thoughts on Twitter use for teaching purposes. For this study, a questionnaire was distributed to academics in Saudi Arabian universities in order to explore their experiences and opinions regarding Twitter use in teaching. The results of the questionnaire indicated that the top three teaching activities Twitter was used for were: sharing resources, posting important information, and enabling students to ask questions. Positive experiences of using Twitter in teaching focused on: accessibility, the dissemination of important information, student engagement, and the sharing of opinions and ideas. Negative experiences highlighted issues such as a lack of Internet connections, the distracting nature of tweeting, privacy, the small size of tweets, and time management. What this study highlighted was the use of Twitter in higher education teaching was still in the experimental stages of implementation.

KEYWORDS

Academics, Higher Education, Saudi Arabia, Social Networking, Teaching, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

The increased use of social media in Saudi Arabia’s higher education system, has enabled students to undertake various educational activities such as building communities, collaborating with other students, and learning (Al-Khalifa & Garcia, 2013). Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms used in Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring Gulf States. Twitter, a microblogging service, allows users to send or receive messages – called Tweets from users. Tweets consist of a maximum of 140 characters. An analysis carried out by Dubai school of government (Arab Social Media Report, 2014) of active Twitter users (2.4 million users) in Arab countries found that Saudi Arabia produced 40% of the tweets in the Arab nations.

Studies from around the world (Borau, Ullrich, Feng & Shen, 2009; Evans, 2013; Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2010; Lin, Hoffman & Borengasser, 2013; Olive, Samper, Cuadros, Martori & Serrano; Prestridge, 2014; Tiernan, 2013) have explored the issues surrounding utilising Twitter in higher education classrooms. Areas covered by these studies have included the effect of Twitter usage on student engagement, academic performance, ability to learn new subjects such as languages, asking questions via Twitter to classmates, and student addiction to Twitter. Research carried out by (Al-Khalifa, 2008; Dhih, Buragga, Boreqqah et al., 2015;) focused specifically on Twitter use for teaching purposes in universities based in Saudi Arabia.

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Malki (2015) conducted a survey of deans, lecturers, and students at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia regarding Twitter use, and discovered that more than 90% of lecturers used Twitter for academic communication. Lecturers can remind students about webinars, report seminars, and homework as well as answer questions from students. In contrast, several years earlier, Al-Khalifa’s (2008) study of Twitter use amongst Saudi students doing an Introduction to Operating Systems course, found that out of the 190 students in the course, only 60 students agreed to sign up to Twitter to receive classroom announcements and course news. In 2008, when tweets had an option to be sent as text messages on mobile phones, this provided an advantage in a country where there were issues associated with telecommunications. However, issues arose with the tweets on account of the 140-character limit and the large number of characters taken up by encoded Arabic text. Consequently, the content of the tweets was often incomplete. Out of the students on the course, 93% said they enjoyed receiving text announcements and would subscribe to Twitter for future courses.

Dhir et al.’s (2013) critical review of Twitter use in academic surroundings emphasised the positive impact Twitter has on social skills, class dynamics, informal learning, social interaction, motivation, and academic and psychological development. However, what Malki (2015), Al-Khalifa (2008), and Dhir et al., (2013) do not talk about is the opinions and experiences of Saudi lecturers who use Twitter for teaching. The focus of this paper is on exploring the opinions and experiences of academics regarding Twitter use in higher education teaching. The data was gathered via the distribution of an online questionnaire.

The structure of the paper will be as follows: Firstly, the next section introduces Twitter, explores the role of Twitter in teaching, and examines the advantages and disadvantages of using Twitter in the classroom. Secondly, the section on research methodology presents details of the questionnaire design, sampling techniques, and discusses the ethical considerations relevant to the study. The results and a discussion of the study follow the research methodology section, and explore the responses to the questionnaire. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the major findings.

RELATED WORK

Introduction to Twitter

Twitter is a micro blogging service where users send short messages of 140 characters, called tweets, to other users. Tweets contain features such as hashtags, mentions, and URLs. A hashtag is a phrase or word preceded by the symbol #. When a user clicks on a hashtag, tweets containing the same topic or keyword will appear. The use of hashtags provides an organisational system for users searching for specific information. Figure 1 demonstrates how the components of the tweet fit together and appear on Twitter.

Mentions involve referencing another user in a tweet. To mention other users in a tweet, the @ sign is included and is followed directly by the username. URLs link to content such as websites, resources, and articles. In order to limit the number of characters in a tweet (which must be no greater than 140 characters), Twitter shortens all URL links to 22 characters (Twitter, 2016b). Each Twitter user has a set of other users called followers. A follower will see a user’s tweets in his/her timeline and will appear in the user’s list of followers. Friends of the user are those whom the user follows. In terms of Twitter profiles, the default privacy setting is to make the tweets visible to the public.

The Role of Twitter in Teaching

Twitter can be integrated into a variety of teaching activities, as illustrated by Junco et al. (2010) and Malki (2015). Activities include: (a) enabling students to ask questions and discuss topics, (b) sharing resources, (c) providing pastoral care and academic support, (d) increasing opportunities for participation and networking with other lecturers and colleagues, (e) using Twitter as a bulletin board to post important information such as class and campus event reminders, (f) recreational activities,
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