Using Social Media as a Tool for Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media has become ubiquitous in many industries, including higher education. Emerging research shows that incorporating various social media platforms into course instruction can increase student interest, participation, and engagement as well as provide instructors and students with multiple platforms for communication and research that can be used to enhance the sense of community in an online group. This study determined whether various groups of students had differing attitudes toward using social media for class assignments. The recommendations provided are intended to help instructors interested in using social media for class assignments to learn more about how various student groups perceive this practice.

KEYWORDS

Class Assignments, Social Media, Student Preferences, Teaching With Twitter

BACKGROUND

Technological advances constantly create new opportunities for instructors to distribute information and connect with students in ways that will help them succeed in the classroom and beyond. The volume of growth that has taken place within the realm of social media has made platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram appealing in many industries, including higher education. In 2017, 2.01 billion people were active on Facebook (Facebook, 2017), making this site attractive to organizations that wish to reach a large number of people for a low cost. About 328 million active users are on Twitter, with more than 500 million tweets sent each day. Eighty percent of Twitter users are active on mobile, implying that the vast majority of regular users receives their updates while on the go (Twitter, 2017).

While Facebook and Twitter have long held the lead in number of users, Instagram and Pinterest are not to be discounted regarding the amount of people who can be reached through these platforms. About 700 million users are on Instagram, a number that doubled between the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2017 (Heath, 2017). More than 175 million users are active on Pinterest, a virtual bulletin board site (Pinterest, 2017). In the United States, multi-platform use is on the rise. More than half of all online adults now regularly use at least two social media sites. Nearly eighty percent American
online adults (79%) use Facebook. This represents 68 percent of American adults. Roughly one-third of online adults (32 percent) use Instagram, while 31 percent of the same population use Pinterest and 24 percent use Twitter. Seventy-six percent of Facebook users report that they use the site daily, while half of all Instagram users (51 percent) use the site daily. Instagram and Twitter users tend to be younger than Facebook users (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The Impact of Social Media**

Social media began as a way to keep people connected by providing a way to efficiently share photos, videos, text, and web links, often in real time, and has developed into a force that has impacted and continues to impact – or in some cases, revolutionize – organizations. Marketing processes and strategies have embraced social media channels as a way to communicate with customers through relationship building and retargeting. Personally, social media has changed the way many people keep up with family or friends, so naturally it has changed the way users “keep up” with their favorite organizations. News media has also been significantly impacted by the rise of social media. Newspaper subscriptions, etc. are on the decline, and many turn to various social media platforms to keep up with the latest information. Fifty-four percent of Millennials report that their primary source for news is social media (YPulse, 2017).

Social media has also impacted the way job seekers market themselves for employment. Increasingly, undergraduate and graduate students are expected to engage in some sort of personal branding with an online presence. In many cases, job recruiters expect students to go beyond creating a great resume, and be able to prove themselves as active members of their discipline by following and creating industry-related content online, especially via social media accounts (Harris, 2015). Social media has also created a new way of influencing the public. These platforms connect users with celebrities, political leaders, industry experts, etc. in a new, more direct way. In recent years, some users have utilized these platforms to create social media “campaigns” to raise money or make changes in the world via crowdfunding. Perhaps the most well-known is the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge of 2014, in which donors were encouraged to video themselves pouring a bucket of ice on their heads, and then post the video on social media and challenge other friends to complete the dare and make a donation to the fund. In total, more than 115 million dollars was raised, and the funds were used to help fight the disease through research, care services, and public policy programs (ALS, 2014).

**Social Media in Higher Education**

Similar to the business world, institutions of higher education have also been significantly impacted by the rise of social media. Most colleges and universities now have some kind of presence on Facebook, Twitter, or both. A presence on a social media platform allows colleges and universities to engage in social conversations with prospective students, current students, alumni, supporters of the school, and interested community groups in new, efficient ways. Oftentimes, individual academic departments also maintain their own social media accounts that cater to different, specific audiences.

Perhaps one of the most positive ways that social media impacts higher education is in the new channels for communication that have opened between students and their peers, between students and instructors, and between students and content. Instructors in many disciplines can now show, rather than tell students about course-related events and topics, and find new ways to keep up with the latest information to share with students. Instructors can also connect with each other in a more streamlined, global way to share information with colleagues within their discipline. Instructors can also assist in connecting students with successful professionals/role models from their disciplines.
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