The Attitude Towards and the Use of Social Networking in European Higher Education: An Exploratory Survey

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, social networking is becoming a more and more powerful tool for students for communication, sharing of information and discussions on various topics. The study presented in this article investigates the extent to which teachers from different European countries use social networking sites in their teaching practice for different purposes and what their attitude is towards the use of social networking in higher education in general. The study is intended to seek clarity on the issues, whether the use of social networks is related to teacher information about social networking sites; their participation in interest groups and research for the use of social networks in education; and whether the results obtained from the survey vary according to the country. For this purpose, the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics is used. On the other hand, the study explores specific areas of the use of social networking in higher education, with an emphasis on their efficacy.

KEYWORDS

Europe, Exploratory Survey, Higher Education, Social Media, Social Networking, Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Students in the 21st century are growing up constantly connected to the world around them through smart phones, tablets, and computers. The European Commission has adopted a Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP, 2018) which includes 11 initiatives to support technology-use and digital competence development in education. According to the Digital Economy and Social Index (DESI, 2018) there is an urgent need to boost digital competences in Europe and to improve the uptake of technologies in education because 37% of the EU workforce has low digital skills (or none at all), less than half of students are in schools which are highly equipped digitally and only 20-25% of them are taught by teachers who are confident using technology in the classroom. In order to meet the unique learning needs of digital natives, teachers need to move away from traditional teaching methods that are disconnected from the way students learn today (Morgan, 2014; Aviles & Eastman, 2012). Students from the digital age thrive on creative and engaging activities, varied sources of information, and a more energetic environment. Teachers are faced with the challenge to understand how they learn, how they communicate and interact with the world in order to meet the needs of today’s students and to teach more effectively.

Nowadays social networking is becoming a more and more powerful tool for communication, sharing of information and discussions on various topics. According to a worldwide survey, approximately 2 billion web surfers are using social networks today (Statista, 2018). The wide

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academic and research interest in the use of social networking for educational purposes in higher education is the natural result of the constantly growing popularity of social networking. In recent years there has been extensive academic and research interest in the use of social networking for educational purposes (Acharaya, Patel & Jethava, 2013; Voorn & Kommers, 2013; Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang & Liu, 2011; Kropf, 2013; Arquero & Romero-Frias, 2013; Alam, 2018; Carapina, Bjelobrk & Duk, 2013; Ghanem, El-Gafy & Abdelrazig, 2014; Doneva & Gaftandzhieva, 2017; Abu-Shanab & Al-Tarawneh, 2015; edWeb, 2009; Faculty Focus, 2011) and the presentation of higher education institutions on social networks (Golubić & Lasić-Lazić, 2012; Golubić, 2017).

According to UK company Pearson (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011), a learning company that promotes the effective use of technology, “A majority of faculty now use social media in a professional context (any aspect of their profession outside of teaching). Use of social media for teaching purposes has lagged even more, but like the other patterns of use, it has increased every year. The number of faculty who use social media in the classroom still does not represent a majority, but teaching use continues its steady year-to-year growth. Faculties are sophisticated consumers of social media. In general, they see considerable potential in the application of social media and technology to their teaching, but not without a number of serious barriers”.

A number of surveys have been conducted worldwide on the use of social networks by teachers and students (Hendee, 2014; Faculty Focus, 2011; Zanamwe, Rupere & Kufandirimbwa, 2013; Mardikyan & Bozanta, 2017; Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Kolan & Dzandza, 2018; Abu-Shanab & Al-Tarawneh, 2015). The results of these surveys show that teachers do not use social networking sites for communication with their students (Ghanem, El-Gafy & Abdelrazig, 2014; Hendee, 2014; Faculty Focus, 2011) and during lessons (Hendee, 2014). Teachers use social networking sites to share information and resources with educators, to create professional learning communities and to connect with peers and colleagues (edWeb, 2009), to improve students’ engagement in their course and their educational experience (Hendee, 2014; Mardikyan & Bozanta, 2017; Rutherford, 2010; Rodriguez, 2011; Junco, Elavsky & Heiberger, 2013).

Most of these surveys are held within a university or country (some of them are conducted in countries outside the Europe). Therefore, the summarised results of these surveys do not allow us to draw conclusions about the attitude of teachers towards the use of social networks in Europe.

The objective of the study is to investigate whether the extent of knowledge about social networking of teachers in tertiary education from European countries and their research interests on the use of social networking in education is related to which teachers use social networking in their academic practice.

The paper presents the method, organization of the study and thorough analyses of the results in accordance with the study objectives. Some general conclusions about the latest trends in the use of social networking in education are derived.

**SURVEY METHOD**

This section describes briefly the process for data collection and analysis, in order to contextualise the sections that follow.

The study’s method is based on an empirical approach – an exploratory survey using questionnaire for data collection, that has been used to study the attitude towards the use of social networking in Bulgarian higher education (Doneva & Gaftandzhieva, 2017).

The questionnaire contains 20 questions and statements divided into three sections. The questions in Section 1 (see Appendix 1) aim to determine the profile of respondents: gender, age, degree, title, university, country and the degree of awareness of participants about social networking. Section 2 includes a list of 8 statements with numbers 8-15 (see Appendix 1) asking the teachers about the use of social networking in their academic practice for different purposes: formal use (for communication, consultation, discussions, organization, sharing of information, see Statements 8-10), during training
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