Social media for international students – it's not all about Facebook

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Introduction

International students make a significant contribution to higher education in Australia both in terms of the direct economic benefits and the less tangible advantages such as the internationalisation of the experience for all students studying at these institutions. While almost one third of students enrolled in higher education in Australia are international, the numbers are declining at an alarming rate and universities are paying far greater attention to improving the support offered to international students in a bid to enhance their experience and attract new recruits.

As a key service in Australian universities, libraries have an important role in providing a wide range of support services for international students. From students’ earliest contacts with the university as they commence their studies and throughout their study programs, libraries have a vital role in assisting international students to adjust to their new environment, build their awareness and knowledge of the resources and services available and develop the information skills essential to their ability to become lifelong learners. Australian university libraries also provide a central, collaborative, technology enabled learning hub where students can meet, interact and learn individually and with others. Through their physical spaces, through their staff and through a host of other media, libraries are reaching out to engage and support international students. Increasingly, libraries are using digital media such as websites, online tutorials and most recently, social networking, to communicate and share information with students, both domestic and international.

Bond University, based on the Gold Coast in Queensland has traditionally attracted an enrolment of international students that is proportionally high by Australian standards. Although the overall student numbers are not large (4,407 currently), the University's population of international students has varied between 48% in 2005 and 32% in 2012. To improve communication and engagement with international students, librarians have experimented with social networks such as blogs and Facebook. This paper will focus on a research project undertaken by librarians at Bond University to investigate the social networking sites preferred by international students. It presents the results of a survey of 575 international and domestic students which was designed to address the following three questions:

1. What social networking sites do international students prefer?
2. Which sites do they use to socialise and which do they use to gather and distribute information?
3. How can libraries leverage this information to enhance the international student experience?

Based on the results of the survey, suggestions are made on social networking strategies to improve support for international students.

Literature Review

This review considered previous relevant research, covering:

- The role of the internet and social networking in assisting with international student assimilation.
- The role of libraries, library resources and librarians in supporting international students.

Role of the internet and social networking in support for international students

Kim, Yum and Yoon (2009) found those international students who used the Internet during their study were able to use it to build new relationships with students of the same ethnicity in their host country. Furthermore, students also used these technologies to build new relationships with students from their host country. However rather than focusing on building and maintaining relationships, students’ primary goal was to meet academic requirements. This research focused on Internet use as a whole; however it would have been interesting to
discover whether particular applications or social networking use specifically contributed to the findings of this research.

Lin et al. (2011) conducted a study focusing primarily on the outcomes of Facebook use during international students’ study in the USA. The researchers found that Facebook usage contributed to students’ ability to participate socially and culturally in their new surroundings. Those students who interacted with their U.S. friends on Facebook were better socially adjusted. Lin et al. (2011) found that out of the international students surveyed, 46% of students indicated a social networking site other than Facebook was their primary account.

DeAndrea et al. (2002) discovered the social support gained through social networking use allowed new students to successfully adjust to academic study. In addition to this finding Junco, Heiberger and Loken (2011) found that Twitter use which encouraged for academic discussion had a positive effect on students’ grades, engagement and motivation. It was also noted that students’ and academics’ use of social networking to connect and contact each other was particularly “congruent with their digital lifestyles” (p. 128), meaning both faculty and students are continually online and social networking allows them to connect in a familiar environment. This environment allows for the possibility of students who feel uncomfortable participating in the traditional classroom with the opportunity to interact and connect with students and faculty in a different form.

Research indicates that particular features on the social networking sites will encourage different types of engagement. This was evident in the findings of Valenzuela, Park and Kee’s (2009) study where Facebook Groups allowed students to do civic and political engagement, suggesting that rather than using social networking sites for social participation, students are using these sites for public participation. This concept is supported by Junco’s (2012b) where it was found that students use Facebook for reasons other than to socialise. Information sharing and information collecting activities make up a proportion of time spent on Facebook for students. Those students who use Facebook more for information sharing and collecting activities had higher grades than those who used it more for socialising (Junco, 2012b). This evidence suggests students are using Facebook for educational activities whether it is encouraged or not as in Junco et al. 2011 study.

The role of libraries, library resources and librarians in supporting international students

It has been reported that international students were lacking knowledge or had misconceptions about the role of their host country’s academic library (Baron and Strout-Dapaz, 2001; Hughes, 2010; Knight et al., 2010). Their previous experience with academic libraries often differed significantly from those in their host country. Hughes (2010) found those students experienced libraries as textbook repositories or thought the collection was out-dated. Although some students came to study in Australia with little experience and knowledge of the academic library, Hughes (2010) found that their competency grew throughout the duration of their stay. This lack of awareness and knowledge of the academic library in their host country indicates that international students need better communication from the library. Libraries need to find ways to improve how they assist international students to build their competency at using the online and physical library.

Research also found students were unaware of the role of the librarian in the academic library. In particular students did not know librarians were available for providing research support (Hughes, 2010; Liu and Winn, 2009). This could be due to students not often approaching library staff for assistance or anxiety about doing so (Knight et al., 2010; Mehr and Bilal, 2007). However, students did state they wanted contact with the library. Students reported email was their preferred method of contact, and when learning about using library resources having the option to complete an online tutorial was preferred (Sackers et al., 2008). These findings suggest students are quite comfortable with self-directed learning online and communication through email.

This theme of technology preferences continues in further research. Students feel comfortable with using the library’s online resources although they have limited information literacy. Students were often described as being technologically fluent, with a high ability for using the
Internet (Hughes, 2005; Knight et al., 2010; Liu and Winn, 2009; Mehra and Bilal, 2007). However, few of the students in Hughes’ (2010) research had experience using library databases, one particular student cited that their library did not provide any access to electronic resources. Although students do have high technical abilities the evidence suggests they still need assistance when it comes to using library online resources.

Methodology

Anecdotal reports from lecturers at Bond University suggested that students from some countries, particularly China, were preferring sites other than Facebook. In order to investigate further, a survey of Bond’s international students’ social media preferences was created. Domestic and international students were asked about their social networking choices and usage. Five hundred and seventy-five completed responses were gathered representing a response rate of 13%. The breakdown of domestic respondents (69%) and international respondents (31%) closely matches the student population which is currently 68% domestic and 32% international.

Data analysis

Demographics

The gender balance of respondents was heavily weighted towards females, at 68%. Seventy-six per cent of the survey respondents indicated they were under 25 years of age and the majority were in the range 20-24. Sixty-nine per cent of the respondents were domestic students while 31% were international. International students came from 39 different countries and 46% indicated their first language was not English. Of these, the most commonly spoken first language was Chinese or a Chinese dialect. Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 in the Appendix provide a visual presentation of the demographics of the survey respondents.

Social networking usage

Students were asked to nominate from a list, the social networking platforms on which they had an account, and the length of time they had had the account. Facebook was the most popular for both domestic and international students, with 514 out of the 575 respondents indicating they had a Facebook account. Second most popular was YouTube, with 335 respondents indicating they had an account. Twitter was third with LinkedIn fourth. For domestic students Tumblr was a close fifth, while Google Plus was fifth for international students. Only those sites with more than 10 users are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Plus+</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foursquare</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MySpace</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOL</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renren</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ozone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Numbers of respondents with accounts

The large number of countries represented and the small number of respondents from many of the countries meant that doing a complete analysis by country was not useful. Therefore the top five countries based on the highest number of respondents were chosen for more detailed
analysis. Due to the variation in the numbers of respondents, percentages have been used so comparisons can be made between countries. The percentage is based on the number of respondents to each question from that country (shown in brackets).

More detailed analysis was carried out on the usage of the top three sites, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Most respondents have had a Facebook account for more than two years. By comparison, the majority of respondents don’t have a Twitter account and those who do have accounts are more likely to have joined the site within the last two years. The usage of YouTube shows a pattern more similar to Facebook than Twitter. That is, although the usage is not as high as Facebook, the majority of users have had accounts for more than two years. (Appendix Figure 3)

Taking a more detailed look at the data for the selected top five countries, 64% of respondents from China indicated they have had their Facebook accounts less than 2 years. Although all respondents from China do have an account, 12% indicated they don’t use it. A small percentage of students from Canada and USA don’t have Facebook accounts, or have an account but don’t use it. (Appendix Figure 4)

The pattern of length of usage is significantly different for Twitter. In comparison to Facebook, a much greater percentage of all respondents from these countries don’t have an account or no longer use it, and a greater percentage from all countries have had their Twitter accounts a shorter time. (Appendix Figure 5)

The length of usage patterns for YouTube are different again for respondents from these selected countries, with 25% of respondents from China having had their account less than one year, but only 19% don’t have an account, while 40% of those from Canada don’t have an account. (Appendix Figure 6)

**Frequency of usage of Facebook**

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they use their social networking sites.
While the majority of respondents from all countries are using Facebook several times a day, a much greater percentage from China use it less regularly. (Appendix Figure 7)

**Reasons for using social networking sites**

Respondents were asked to select the reasons for using social networking sites from the provided list. The most commonly selected reasons were social activities (Chatting with friends, Keeping up with friends’ activities and Staying in touch with family). The use of Facebook for Information sharing and collecting activities was also quite high for both cohorts. Around 60% of international and domestic students indicated they use Facebook for Sharing information. Domestic students’ use of Facebook for Finding information was slightly higher at 59% than international students (49%).

![Figure 2 Reasons for using Facebook](image)

As the use of social networking for finding information is of particular interest in this study, a more detailed analysis of the responses to which sites are used for finding information was conducted. Figure 3 shows the percentage of total respondents who use each site for finding information.
Figure 3 Percentage using sites for finding information

Figure 4 shows the percentage of total respondents from the selected countries who indicated they use this site for finding information. Only sites where some entry was above 10% are included.

Figure 4 Sites used for finding information by students' home country

Facebook is used for finding information by respondents from all countries. Sixty-four per cent of respondents from Malaysia indicate they use it for this purpose, while only 39% of respondents from China do so. Twitter is used as much as Facebook for finding information by respondents from Norway, while less than 30% of respondents from Canada, China, Malaysia and USA use Twitter for finding information. Respondents from all countries indicate they use YouTube for finding information, with over 50% from Malaysia (highest) and Canada and China the lowest at 25% and 28% respectively.

Of particular interest is the usage of Renren, at the same level as Facebook, for finding information by respondents from China. While not surprising, it does highlight the importance of not forgetting alternative platforms for reaching particular cohorts of international students.
Respondents were also asked to select their two favourite sites from the list provided, and to provide a reason for their preferences. The results are shown in Figure 5.

Not surprisingly, the top three favourite sites were also the top three most heavily used.

The reasons for selecting these sites as favourites were analysed and categorised as social, useful and ease of use. The majority were social reasons in some way, such as:

- All my friends are using these sites
- To keep in touch with friends overseas
- Get information on my friends
- There are so many people in these networks
- They bring two people closer and in an effective way
- Everyone has an account
- Most people around me use it, so I can get in touch with more people

The next most common reason suggested ease of use. Other comments reflected the ease of access to information using these sites. Two respondents clearly indicated their choice not to use social networking sites with the following responses:

- I meet the person face to face or by telephone
- Once again I do not use social networking sites

Educational usage

Respondents were asked if they used any of the social networking sites for any of the listed educational purposes. Facebook at 91% and YouTube at 27% were the only two sites that over 10% of respondents indicated they used for some educational purpose. As shown in Figure 6, Facebook is used to some extent for all the listed educational purposes, but YouTube was only of use for most students for finding information for their studies.
Figure 6 Educational usage

One of the comments in particular (below) identified the benefit to students of social networking, although not directly related to academic work.

*It happens we share frustration about school through facebook [sic]. But never as a tool to enhance studying*

Although the total numbers were not high, it is interesting to compare the educational usage of Facebook and Renren by respondents from China. While activities that would normally involve students from many countries are done using Facebook, those where the respondent could choose to target other students from China saw a higher usage of Renren. It is particularly interesting to note that when asking for help with their studies, these students are more than twice as likely to use Renren as Facebook. (Appendix Figure 8)

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used social networking sites for the listed educational purposes. While the significant majority of all respondents indicated less than once a week, there were more than 10% of respondents using them much more frequently for the listed educational purposes as illustrated in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7 Frequency of use for educational purposes
One respondent made their feelings about the question clear with the following response:

*Social Networking and class that is an oxy moron.*

Other comments ranged from *Never* to *Creating Project Groups to arrange meetings and share all work.*

As well as the reported usage of social networking sites for educational purposes, the researchers were interested in students’ attitude to using these tools for communication with the University and its representatives. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements in Figure 8 below.

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8** Respondents' attitude to using their social networking sites to communicate with the University

**Discussion**

The survey conducted as part of this research project has generated a wealth of data on social networking preferences and usage for both international and domestic students at Bond University. The analysis in the preceding section reveals important trends for international students in comparison with their domestic counterparts. The data has also captured a number of interesting trends relevant to all students' social networking usage. The evidence is
summarised to help libraries and others in higher education select appropriate communication channels for engaging both international and domestic students.

In the context of the questions posed for this research project, the social networking sites preferred by international students, as an aggregate group, differ only marginally from domestic students. For example, the usage of the different social media sites for domestic and international students was the same for first to fourth most popular (in order, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn). Facebook was used by 85% of international students and 91% of domestic students. This reflects the findings of the 2011 ECAR National Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology which reported that 90% of students use Facebook (Dahlstrom et al., 2011). Students from China were the only international group to exhibit a noticeable difference in their use of Renren (72%) and Qzone (56%).

Further analysis indicates some variances in length and frequency of usage between international students from different countries. Students from China were more recent comers to Facebook and YouTube while a large percentage from all countries have had their Twitter accounts a shorter time. The majority of students from all countries use Facebook several times a day although students from China use it less frequently than other international students.

The analysis of students’ motivations for using social media sites reveals that the most common reasons for both international and domestic students were social activities (chatting with friends, keeping up with friends’ activities and staying in touch with family) but more than half indicated they use Facebook for sharing and finding out information. Students are using the most popular social media sites (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) for finding information; however there are some variations in usage between students from different countries. For example, almost half the students from China use Renren as much as Facebook for finding information. Students from Norway use Facebook and Twitter equally for finding information; however students from most other countries use Twitter for finding information less frequently.

In terms of using social networking for educational purposes (such as sharing information about study topics, arranging study groups, asking for help with studies, etc.), Facebook and to a much lesser extent YouTube, were the preferred sites. Interestingly, for students from China, Renren was used predominantly when other students from China were involved, but where students from many countries were involved, Facebook was preferred for the gamut of educational purposes canvassed. Although this survey found that use of social networking sites for educational purposes was much less frequent than usage for social activities, the 2012 ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology noted a significant increase in use of social networking sites for academic purposes from 2011 to 2012. For example, increases of 21% for LinkedIn, 20% for other social networking sites and 18% for Twitter were found. Notably, use of Facebook for academic purposes had decreased by 7% in the same period. (Dahlstrom, 2012)

Addressing the perennial question on the “personal/social” versus “professional/institutional” use of social media sites, students indicated some ambivalence about their acceptance of the latter. Almost half were comfortable with connecting to University and Faculty social media sites, however about two thirds were either non-committal or disagreed with connecting to their lecturers’ social networks and about a third agreed that they would like to keep their academic and social life separate.

The evidence strongly suggests that Facebook is currently the social networking site of preference for domestic students and the majority of international students. It is also the site used for the widest range of activities identified by Junco (2012a) as congruent with improved engagement and better academic outcomes.

Students’ frequent use of YouTube to find information for educational purposes suggests that Libraries should be using the site to deliver information that students are seeking to assist them in their studies. This could include information skills training and information research techniques assistance, etc.

The usage of Twitter indicates that as a newer site, its popularity and use is still developing and it should be monitored as a potential medium for engagement and support. As noted above, the
2012 ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology bears out this assumption indicating Twitter usage for academic purposes increased by 18% between 2011 and 2012. (Dahlstrom, 2012)

For institutions with a large cohort of students from China, use of Renren and possibly QZone should be monitored for potential as engagement sites.

As Junco (2012a) recommends, higher education staff have the opportunity to design support activities using Facebook, and other social networking sites, that will be beneficial to students’ engagement and by extension, have a positive effect on their overall academic experience.

Conclusion

Social networking sites have undoubtedly become an integral part of the everyday life of the Net Generation. Our findings confirm that in addition to social activities, international and domestic students are connecting via social media for a wide range of educational purposes including group work and sharing and gathering information. While the information shared may be incomplete or even inaccurate, students are using social networking sites to validate ideas and make decisions.

The opportunity exists for librarians to join the ‘conversation’, to share information and to impart information literacy skills via social media. For example, Facebook can be used to inspire discussions among relevant interest groups and for academic interaction and participation in a more personalised way. YouTube can be used to introduce new information, concepts and services at the point of need. Librarians can further tap into the opportunities afforded by using social networking tools to facilitate cross-program collaboration. This can be achieved by building community activities and integrating the communication tools in a way that best engage students as recommended by Wallace and Howard (2010).

To date, the majority of libraries that use social networking have used it as a marketing and promotional medium to push out information and announcements. Our survey results strongly suggest that libraries need to further exploit the strengths of different social networking sites. Social networks are rapidly becoming the “platform for participation and collaboration” identified by Leadbeater as a defining feature of the library of the future, where “users increasing share information amongst themselves as well as drawing on the library’s resources” (Leadbeater, 2010, p195). Careful consideration of the purpose of the communication along with an understanding of which sites are most commonly used for which purposes will result in more engagement with library users.

This research project has contributed to the growing body of evidence on how international and domestic students use social networking sites. It’s definitely not all about Facebook! We can leverage this information to assist us to think differently about how we offer core services, how we interact with clients and ultimately, how we build more vibrant library communities.
References


Appendix Data Analysis

Demographics

Table 1 Age categories by gender (1 figure represents 1%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 or older</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Home country as selected by international respondents (% of all respondents)
Figure 2  Number of respondents who nominated a language other than English as their first language

Social Networking Usage

Figure 3  Comparison of length of usage between Facebook, Twitter and YouTube
**Figure 4** Length of students’ Facebook usage by home country

**Figure 5** Length of students’ Twitter usage by home country

**Figure 6** Length of students’ YouTube usage by home country
Figure 7 Frequency of usage of Facebook by students’ home country

Figure 8 Comparison of educational usage between Facebook and Renren by respondents from China