

## Social Media Usage by Academics: Some Comparisons from a Developing Country and Developed Countries' Perspectives

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*Across the globe academics and students are increasingly using social media and social connections for educational purposes. This article focuses on a comparison of particular countries regarding their use of social media in teaching by academics and whether they can utilize this platform for effective communication for engaging students in learning activities as well. The objective is to clarify the usage of social media tools by academics by comparing a multi developed country study (comprising the UK, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Continental Europe and Canada) and a separate developing country study i.e. South Africa. The data was obtained by using SurveyMonkey and executed during 2014 at tertiary educational institutions. The developing country supplied 204 usable responses and the developed countries 711 responses. Suggestions are made regarding the educational environment when using social media tools. It is concluded that academics are communicating with students in a positive way via the use of social media tools for educational purposes, but that much scope exists for improvement in the use of social media for educational purposes by academics. There are also some differences in the use of social media by academics when comparing the developing country and developed countries.*

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### 1. Introduction

Although it is surprising it is nevertheless true that the electronic revolution and particularly the evolution of social media in the contemporary world have increased meteorically since the start of the new millennium. Today it is present in all aspects of life, no matter whether it is digital media being used by a business to speed up recruitment processes and internal communications between staff or the plain use of computers in all spheres of modern domestic and business life. The new digital era has also placed new demands on communication systems, to accommodate generation Y in particular who demand instant feedback on a variety of issues they are involved in, in the social environment.

Nash (2015) claims that mobile and tablet devices are increasingly being used to access social media applications and refers to the International Telecommunication Union figures which show that mobile penetration is about 96% around the globe, which is nearly 7 Billion mobile connections. Dixon (2015) also stated that there are more than 2 billion users of social media worldwide, which represents 40% of internet connection users. Facebook has the greatest use with more than 1.3 billion people globally. Academics obviously also embrace electronic media in their teaching to transmit knowledge and to enhance the learning

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experiences of students. Furthermore, it is clear that social media technology usage in teaching enhances student participation, engagement and communication. It also strengthens relationships between academics, students and communities as postulated by Wiid, Nell & Cant (2015) as well as by Welch (2012).

Young (2014) states that e-Learning is the delivery of content to individuals and groups via the Internet and is enabled by the support of Information Computer Technology (ICT). It is unsurprising that eLearning and social media go hand in hand as means used by academics to enhance and enrich students' learning experiences. Internet based social media technologies are designed and developed to improve social connections in a community. Social media applications include Facebook, Google Plus, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram and Web Blogs, all of which have become very popular among students and educators. In view of the growing importance of social media it is clear why the use thereof has been accommodated in the educational environment in various countries (Wiid, Nell & Cant, 2015; Lupton, 2014).

The objective of this research project is to determine academics' use of social media tools and their views on using it. The research questions are the following:

- What type of social media is used by academics to enhance student learning?
- What social media and frequency thereof is used by academics as a lecturing tool?
- Are there differences between academics in a developing country and developed countries regarding the use of social media tools?

The next section focus on what social media is and the awareness thereof as well as the literature review. Section three then focuses on the methodology. Section four entails a discussion of the results of the comparison of the two surveys' findings of the developing country and developed countries. In section five the limitations of the study and the conclusions are presented.

## 2. Literature Review

It is acknowledged that electronic communication has become very popular and is a highly preferred means of communication in organisations for a variety of purposes (Rahman, Arora & Kularatne, 2014; White, Vanc & Stafford 2010). Accepting that e-mail is a highly preferred method of internal communication, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM 2012) however pointed out the increasing use of social media in the workplace. Social media use for communication purposes in the education environment is therefore a logical progression in the educational process as well, according to the Education Council NZ (2015b).

SHRM (2012, Para. 1) defines social media as "... web-based tools and technologies used to share information and turn communication into interactive dialogue with internal and external audiences through Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter". On the other hand Mangold and Faulds (2009: 357) define social media slightly differently as, "... a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues." The Education Council NZ (2015a) outlines the characteristics of social media more precisely as being the following:

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- Users are able to have, initiate and continue social interactions with peers and other social media users and are creating and maintaining online profiles and IDs.
- Social media applications are largely public online platforms that are accessible 24/7 through different locations and all the major computer and mobile devices.
- Internet based platforms that enable all the users to: create, adapt, share and sustainably reuse information and content. It enables the users to engage in digital collaboration and dialogue. It provides linkages to create groups, networks and communities.
- Content and information on social media is largely created by the users, is persistent and can be subject to conditions of use.

It is clear that social networking can create a virtual culture, based on diversified media systems, that uses computer/mobile mediated communication (Research New Zealand, 2015). Social Media culture stems from the content created by audiences and it is based on the principle of sharing and participation. According to Huang (2014) it is accepted that when using social media people create content and also go on to make conversations and communities using openness and connectedness.

Figure 1, presented below, which was compiled by the Education Council NZ (2015a) presents a very good visual outline of what social media components entail and is used for the purpose of contextualising the components of social media. Let's now focus on what social media is, as well as the usage in various developed countries as well as in a developing country. The educational publishing company Pearson in the USA periodically undertakes surveys using representative samples of American academics. A report by Seaman and Tinti-Kane (2013) says that more than half (55 per cent) of these academics use social media for professional purposes, other than teaching, at least monthly, but only 41 per cent do so for teaching purposes. LinkedIn was the most used site for professional purposes other than teaching. For teaching purposes, blogs and wikis are most often used, followed by podcasts, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

Social media has the potential to transform the fundamental nature of education and academic writing as well. Scholarship and knowledge creation is enhanced by using social media due to the sharing and participation culture of social media platforms. Nel (2013) also points out that users of social media should encourage and promote two-way communication so that the information relay is fair and effective for all concerned. Users should also be in a position to utilise innovative ideas from all participants to gain excellence in desired educational outcomes (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013).

In her multi-country study Lupton (2014) states that there have been various published reports and surveys outlining the usefulness, benefits and drawbacks of social media usage by academics and students in recent years. The results and recommendations of research reports offer insight into how academics are strategically using social media in order to reap many benefits in their academic endeavours. The benefits of social media include connecting and creating networks, not only with students and other lecturers but also with people outside universities, which promotes openness, giving and receiving support and social sharing. The reports and research on social media have largely been positive, however, certain people have also raised concerns in regard to issues related to privacy, professionalism, injudicious use, ethical usage, time pressures, lack of credibility and problems of possible plagiarism.

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Figure 1: What is Social Media?



Source: Education Council NZ (2015a)

Lupton (2014) highlights the benefits of social media use in academic practice as follows:

- It enables the users to have more direct conversations and influences.
- It helps students to keep in contact with their teachers.
- It provides the ability to chat and start conversations at any point in time.
- Makes it easy to disseminate information to a large audience.
- It creates a culture of sharing and building new connections
- It provides real time rapid access to vast professional networks.
- Strong networking is possible through social media which is otherwise a difficult task.
- Access to unlimited up to date information and support that can be utilized for various purposes.
- Interactions and connections between diversified people which is otherwise not possible.
- It increases the ability to read information greatly as it can be accessed through mobile devices.
- It keeps track of information/opportunities internationally by following key players, leaders and authors.

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- It is a fast and very effective way of communicating with students.

Nel et al. (2014:65) outline that in South Africa Facebook and Twitter appear to be the most popular social media tools used across the country and that the trend seems to be to use it more and more in business activities as well. Erasmus et al. (2015) also emphasise in their overview of e-learning that this trend is becoming more prominent in South Africa and that the environment created by it for use by academics is far-reaching and has accelerated so much over the past ten years that perhaps 25% of all learning will take place via electronic means in the next five years.

Parker (2015) made a comment regarding developed countries, saying that 84% of New Zealand students under 25 use Facebook every day, which shows that there is a greater awareness and use of social media amongst the younger generation. This implies that the use of social media by academics as part of their educational tool kit for student education is appropriate, as the majority of younger people own electronic communication devices. Dixon (2015 pp.9-10) states that the use of social media in New Zealand is high and claims that four out of five New Zealanders with an internet connection have a social media account, with 87% using Facebook. In New Zealand many businesses interact with their clients via social media when dealing with complaints or announcing offers or good deals. There is also awareness that different social media options exist and that communities should use a social platform that suits their needs. There are also other platforms apart from Facebook or Twitter such as Instagram or, on the other hand, the more touchy-feely approach of Vine which could also be used for social media purposes or one could even use Pinterest. Anecdotally, professional users appear to make more use of LinkedIn. NZ academics are also encouraged to use social media to help students to develop positive behaviour, and to encourage them to apply respectful values in all interactions on social media platforms. According to Retta (2012), educational institutions and academics also use social media as a tool kit for educational purposes which improves the educational delivery and learning of students, in developed countries in particular.

According to Borges (2012) the history of social media witnessed the establishment of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube only a little more than a decade ago. Furthermore, one of the first handbooks on how technology is transforming scholarly practice was only recently published by Neal (2012). Moreover, according to Lupton (2014), only a minority of academics have taken up the use of social media tools and platforms as a regular part of their professional work. Longitudinal national studies in industry and academic institutions are therefore extremely limited due to the relative newness of social networking as a communication mechanism. Research focussing on comparisons, particularly with developing countries, is therefore also very limited to date.

Current comparative research into the use of social networking sites by academics for teaching purposes at educational institutions within developed and developing countries is scarce and hence provides the motivation for this research project. The results will provide developing countries in particular with guidelines and pointers as to how social media could support students and enhance their learning in view of the many educational challenges experienced in developing countries like South Africa.

### 3. Methodology

The research studies discussed in this article were respectively executed by Lupton (2014), being the developed countries' study, and Wiid, Nell and Cant (2015) being the developing

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country study. Both studies used SurveyMonkey to gather the data. The questionnaires for both studies used similar social media tools to identify social media usage frequency. The SurveyMonkey surveys for both studies were closed after being open for two months. Useable responses respectively totalled 204 in SA and in the developed countries 711. The results of both studies were subject to SPSS analysis.

This research project only focused on social media use over the last few years because social networking sites are relatively new in respect of being used by academics in teaching. Limited previous data is available, particularly for comparisons between developed and developing countries which provided, as said before, the motivation for this research project.

The results of these two research studies are compared in this article to identify similarities and differences between the said countries' academics' use of social media tools.

### 4. Comparison of the Two Surveys' Results

The results for the type of social media used are discussed first, followed by what social media is used and the frequency of use.

**Table 1: Type of social media tools used**

Social media tool	Developed countries%	Developing country%
Facebook	42	84.13
Twitter	90	61.76
LinkedIn	60	61.27
Pinterest	9	53.43
Academia	49	-
Myspace	-	50

**Source:** Lupton (2014: 14); Wiid, Nell, and Cant (2015:401)

It should be noted that other tools used in the separate surveys, which do not overlap and thus prohibit comparative analysis, are as follows: In the developed countries the response rate for tools used were: Academia.edu 49%, ResearchGate 33%, Personal blog 32%, YouTube 25% and Google 21%. In the developing country results the only other social media tool that was listed was Myspace and the response rate was 50%.

From the results presented in Table 1 it is clear that Facebook is far more prominent in the developing country than in the developed countries, whereas Twitter on the other hand, is the most prominent for developed countries and much less so in the developing country survey. Surprisingly LinkedIn recorded virtually the same score for both surveys. It is surprising that there is a huge difference between Pinterest usage in developed and developing countries.

It can be deduced that developed countries are more sophisticated in their use of social media for academic work by academics in that Twitter features very prominently. Conversely, the use of Facebook does not seem to be as popular in developed countries, perhaps because the novelty is still high in the developing country context for academics. It is also surprising that Myspace does not feature in the developed country context at all. This could perhaps be ascribed to the profile of the academic institution which participated in the survey, being primarily an open distance learning institution. This could perhaps be countered by the high use of Academia.edu which is very high in the developed country context.

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Let's now analyse the frequency of use of social media presented in Table 2. It should be noted that the scales referring to frequency of use for the two surveys are not identical. They are skewed by the fact that for the developing country response, the number of hours per week was used as the scale, whereas for the developed countries it was merely listed which social media was used for academic work and regarded as useful.

**Table 2: Frequency of use of social media tools**

Social media tool	Developed countries %	Developing country % *
Facebook	14	12.79
Twitter	83	8.73
LinkedIn	14	11.2
Pinterest	2	1.83
Academia.edu	22	-
Myspace		1.96

\* Exceeding 6 hours per week

**Source:** Lupton (2014:15) Wiid, Nell, and Cant (2015:401)

Analysing the results presented in Table 2, it appears that there are noticeable differences between the two surveys. The results are perpetuated from Table 1 namely that Facebook remains the most popular in developing countries, whereas in developed countries, Twitter is head and shoulders above all other social media tools being used. Surprisingly, LinkedIn drops significantly, but is still in far greater use than Twitter in the developing country survey. Yet, in the developed country survey it has dropped significantly. It is also interesting to note that Pinterest has about equal usage in terms of the context of frequency for both surveys.

In terms of the overall findings, it is clear that there are noticeable differences in the use of social media between the developed countries and developing country survey results. It can be deduced that there may be a difference in sophistication and preference by academics in the context within which they do teaching. It could also be due to the ease of or availability of social media devices by students to benefit from these electronic means of education in the academic environment. There is perhaps also greater maturity amongst educational institutions and their students in the developed countries than in the developing country. This reflects the choice of and preference for the use of particular social media for academic work and the use thereof by academics in the learning environment to enhance learning.

The results of this study's comparisons reveal similarities as well as differences in academics' use of social media in teaching in a developing country (South Africa) and various developed countries. Social media tools which are in use was identified in terms of what could be taken on board by academics, to improve social media in educational institutions in a developing country in particular, as research of this nature is very limited.

After the analysis was executed it became clear that the objectives of the research project had been met and that the research questions were answered. The nature and extent of differences between developed and developing countries were also revealed.

As far as the future is concerned it is clear that there are developments in social media trends which academics should be aware of for use in future teaching. Brunton (2015) highlights that YouTube is the main source of content for NZ students (6 to 14 years) which indicates that students are already familiar with this social media tool making its use by academics very easy to accept by these students in the future.

## **5. Conclusions**

Some limitations are discussed first after which the conclusions are presented. The South African survey, as a developing country study, was undertaken at a single educational institution only, whereas the developed countries survey was open to volunteers from any academic institution. Caution should therefore be exercised in relation to the developed countries study, as it could be suspected that the volunteers were probably pro-social media users already. The results should thus not be taken as absolutely generalizable to the population of academics in the developed countries study. A further note of caution is that the developed countries study included 2% responses which could be classified as developing countries, but which was included in the overall results for developed countries. Furthermore, the developing country study only focussed on one academic institution which should also cause the results to be viewed with caution. They reflect a very limited snapshot of the need for and use of social media in a developing country.

A comparison of the need for and use of social media from the learners' point of view was not addressed in this research and should be undertaken as a separate future research project. A comparison with other countries' state of the use of social media is not included in this study and could shed light on the global state of affairs. No attempt was made to investigate the use of social media at secondary school level either, as it was beyond the scope of this research. It could certainly be considered in future research for comparative purposes and could shed light on the readiness of pupils to embrace social media at tertiary level should they continue their studies.

It is suggested that a study be executed to cover various tertiary educational institutions throughout South Africa to gain a more representative view of what the actual use and need for social media is in a developing country's academic environment. Furthermore, a more comprehensive and in depth comparison of a number of developing countries compared to developed countries could shed more light on the state of the use of social media tools in academic teaching. It could also highlight the frequency of the use of social media by academics to identify more robust trends in the exciting new electronic age. However, due to the dearth of data available on comparisons of this nature the limitations are acceptable to identify a profile of this nature, no matter how big the limitations are. Some research based results is better than no profile at all, in the spirit of research instead of mere guesswork.

Conclusions are presented below which address pertinent issues. Knowledge which had not existed before has been created in a developing country context, specifically in South Africa. These results could also provide suggestions to academics in other developing countries as to what social media teaching tools they could utilise to improve students' educational experience and achieve success with their studies in future.

It is clear that the use of social media has become an essential aspect of the toolkit of academics to enhance their teaching and to improve the learning environment for students. In addition, the learning environment can become more interactive and exciting for the learners and also infuse enthusiasm for both academics and learners by employing the tools that are available. The positive outcome is that social media broadens peoples' minds and their perception of things they can do or help others to do. Although the results presented in this article should be viewed with scholarly caution, they could provide some interesting insights about the use of social media tools by academics in developed and developing countries. The results, however, become broadly indicative of the types of social media tools

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which are being used in higher education across various, mostly developed, countries, as opposed to developing countries.

The results and implications could perhaps be applied to the tertiary educational systems in other countries as well, in spite of the daunting limitations which have been outlined in this article.

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