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The possibilities and perils of academic social networking sites

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is twofold: the first aim is theoretical – to review extant literature on academic social networks, while considering current limitations and potential avenues for future research; the second objective is practical – to introduce an illustrative comparison guide that researchers can use to identify and distinguish between the functionalities of popular academic social networking sites (ASNSs), including Academia.edu, Mendeley.com, ResearchGate.net, Zotero.org, and Google Scholar.

Design/methodology/approach – The review of research is descriptive and conceptual.

Findings – The overarching outcomes of the review suggest that research on academic social networks falls into two primary arenas – promises (i.e. potential benefits to the academic community) and perils (i.e. reservations expressed by scholars). The authors recommend that a greater focus on the unique characteristics and utilities of specific sites and a more robust understanding of scholars' use preferences and practices is warranted in future and ongoing research.

Originality/value – This is the first review of ASNSs to provide comparative descriptions for scholars to utilize when making decisions about adoption, use, and research.

Keywords Social media, Social networks, Academic social networks, Higher education, Academia.edu, Mendeley.com, ResearchGate.net, Zotero.org, Google Scholar

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Digital technologies and social networks serve essential functions in job sectors throughout the United States and globally. Yet, when compared with other global institutions, higher education has been comparatively slow to adopt digital social networking into organizational practice. The primary purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of current research on the adoption of digital social networking sites among those working in higher education, while highlighting primary themes, current limitations, and directions for future research.

The review suggests that dominant trends in current research on social media in higher education ultimately revolve around two recurring themes: first, potential benefits to the academic community; and second, reservations expressed by scholars. We propose that future areas of research focussing on scholars' academic social networking site (ASNS) preferences and use patterns will benefit extant scholarship in this domain, and we introduce a descriptive comparison guide that researchers can use to identify and distinguish between the functionalities of some of the most popular ASNSs, including Academia.edu, Mendeley.com, ResearchGate.net, Zotero.org, and Google Scholar.

Review

Embraced for their utility in business environments, social media outlets are now becoming increasingly prevalent in higher education. Today, many different academic groups and individuals use multiple different forms of social media to create an online



presence and develop collaborative relationships with peers and colleagues (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013).

Social media, broadly defined, is used to describe a number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Joosten, 2012; Tess, 2013). These systems are regularly used to form online “communities” or “spaces” that produce open discussions and promote the free exchange of ideas (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013; Weller, 2011). Examples of social media include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, multimedia platforms, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (Tess, 2013). To narrow the scope of this review, ASNSs will be the primary focus, although other forms of social media will be mentioned in brief when relevant.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networking sites are distinctive communication platforms that allow individuals to 1) construct public or semi public profiles within a bounded system, to 2) regulate connections, and to 3) browse the connections of others. Social networking sites that are particularly relevant for use in higher education include: Academia.edu, Mendeley.com, ResearchGate.net, Zotero.org, and Google Scholar. These sites offer users a way to organize and display research, create professional profiles, and make connections with people who share scholarly interests (Mangan, 2012). They are unique from other social media platforms in that they offer social networking experiences tailored to academic professionals that move beyond the broad functionalities of outlets like Facebook and Twitter (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013).

Although social media use by faculty members continues to grow into the millions, the impact on higher education is less clear (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013; Roach and Gainer, 2013). Presently, scholarship on social media in higher education focusses on how digitally networked resources can be utilized as learning aids in the classroom. Less studied, but equally important, is the question of how social media platforms are utilized by higher education professionals in order to establish, build, and further their research agendas and academic careers. To tap into this conversation, this review examines how online social networking platforms are being adopted in, and adapted to, higher education, with a consideration of both the possibilities and perils that face academic researchers.

Possibilities: Potential benefits to researchers

The emergence, rise, and continuation of ASNSs is linked closely to principles of knowledge dissemination through open access. Open-access articles, or open educational resources, are defined as technology enabled, openly shared educational resources for non-commercial consultation, use, and adaptation. Typically, these materials are made available through the web or internet, including social media, and are principally used by instructors and educational institutions (Adams *et al.*, 2013; Veletsianos, 2013).

Scholars have publicly written in support of open access, claiming that across disciplines, open-access articles possess a greater research impact than articles published solely through traditional methods (Antelman, 2004). An important caveat, however, is that open access does not always equate to free access. In “predatory” open-access publication models, the author is asked to assume the costs of publication (Beall, 2010; Willinsky, 2006). Unlike for-fee predatory providers, ASNSs such as Academia.edu and Mendeley.com relay the costs of publication to advertisers and investors rather than directly to the researcher (Beall, 2010).

Part of the draw for these niche networking sites are functionalities that allow for networking with other scholars. As such, ASNSs are collectively, and colloquially, referred to as “Facebook for Nerds” or “Facebook for Scientists,” primarily due to their social networking functions. Like similar sites aimed at the general public, ASNSs can be used to network and search for other users with similar interests (Mangan, 2012), essentially reducing the friction points that keep scholars from communicating with one another. Furthermore, academically oriented social media and open-access practices may help dispel the stereotype of the lone academic by encouraging “sharing” as a scholarly and educational practice (Veletsianos, 2013) – a value that is strengthened as information and resources spread to the general public (Morrison, 2010).

In related veins of discourse, scholars express support for broadening and extending research to the public – a case made through the participatory rhetoric surrounding open access (Veletsianos, 2013). This group of authors include Briggie and Mitcham (2009) who note that networking technologies fundamentally alter how researchers view themselves, their subjects, and their extended communities. An outgrowth of that shift in mindset is academia’s duty to provide quality information necessary to create connected, informed, and democratically minded citizens (Weller, 2011).

It is, then, a sad irony that under the traditional publication system, consumers of expensive academic journals are also the ones producing them, often at little cost to the publisher (Roach and Gainer, 2013). Commercialization of the literature restricts the flow of knowledge for a profit thereby limiting the free exchange of ideas (Beach *et al.*, 2007; Roach and Gainer, 2013). Limitations on access, at this time, are closely related to economics and the rising costs of journals whose rapidly rising prices have outpaced inflation (Shockey and Eisen, 2012; Roach and Gainer, 2013).

In response to such concerns, the peer-to-peer networks created through ASNSs can provide the means to connect scholars and allow them to effectively crowdsource valuable materials such as hard to access data and publications. Likewise, ASNSs can be used to efficiently distribute information, increase participation and collaboration, and provide avenues for scholars to organize academic conferences and events (Veletsianos, 2013).

Beyond making connections and networking, scholars are also utilizing ASNSs to create scholarly identities in ways not achievable in the past. In traditional university cultures, faculty are often reduced to numbers – grant dollars, teaching-evaluation scores, etc. – however, on ASNSs, academics now have access to a number of specialized tools to create their digital presence (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013; Veletsianos, 2013). This digital presence is at times used to garner mass media attention thereby connecting research and information to larger publics.

Peer-to-peer networking, open-access publication, and public outreach are just a few of the functionalities that academics are employing via ASNSs. In a recent study of academics’ social media use, Gruzd and Goertzen (2013) identify eleven uses for social media in academia. Surprisingly, low-ranking on the list were publishing findings (10 percent), garnering mass media attention (6 percent), and discovering new funding (4 percent). Rather, uses such as networking (35 percent), self-promotion (39 percent), and collaborating (32 percent) were highly regarded by the respondents. By in large, information gathering behaviors ranked as the top uses for participants. The information gathering uses most valued were: keeping up to date with topics (53 percent), following others’ research (52 percent), and discovering

new ideas from publications (48 percent). These outcomes are ultimately reflexive of scholars' desire to situate their research within larger scholarly conversations, which necessitates keeping abreast of work occurring in online spaces (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013).

In addition to search capabilities, new academically based social media sites, such as Mendeley.com and Academia.edu, make personalized recommendations on what to read next, similar to the models that Amazon.com or Netflix employ. This not only links valuable research to users, but frees up time that would otherwise be used to search for corresponding articles (Mangan, 2012). ASNSs not only link users at the click of a button, but they are optimized for search engines that have the potential to attract readers to the users' scholarship. To showcase this functionality, sites like Academia.edu and ResearchGate.net provide analytic tools for tracking readership including the number of views, countries of visitors' origin, viewers' referring sites, etc. (Kincaid, 2011; Roach and Gainer, 2013). This information allows scholars to make informed decisions about which sites offer the most gain in terms of readership and research impact.

Perils: Reservations expressed felt by scholars

Just as ASNSs present possibilities to researchers, they also introduce perils. Scholars' reservations primarily stem from popular conceptualizations of social media at large. With the exception of the academically based sites listed previously, social media websites not developed for formal education lead to questions concerning their adaptability and suitability to higher education (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013; Mangan, 2012; Tess, 2013). Not only do scholars question whether the structure of social media sites can be tailored to academic needs, they also question whether meaningful professional discussions (Friesen and Lowe, 2012; Tess, 2013) and public outreach (Morrison, 2010) can be cultivated via social media.

Proponents of general social media sites claim that instantaneous distribution allows for scholarly conversations to progress at a much more rapid pace, especially compared to that of traditional journal-based scholarship (Mangan, 2012). However, some scholars believe that the ease and speed of these conversations may diminish the quality of the contributions and prefer to publish in peer-reviewed journals (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013). Richard Price, founder of Academia.edu, admits that concerns over quality and credibility remains a pertinent issue, one that he believes, however, is overshadowed by the benefits (Mangan, 2012).

Currently, social media sites can be used as dumping grounds for publications that have not been (or could not be) published elsewhere, as well as preliminary research, works in progress and conference presentations that have been abandoned (Mangan, 2012). And, scholars are not always willing to share original ideas or papers flagged for traditional publication due to plagiarism concerns and academic pressure to publish elsewhere.

In the current academic reward and promotion structure, traditional forms of publication and information exchange are considered to be adequate and are entrenched within the process for hiring, tenure, and promotion (Veletsianos, 2013). Newer online forms of publication are considered supplemental at best and may not generate the same professional rewards (Veletsianos, 2013). While it has been suggested that social media and digital technologies may one day alter the ways scholarship is organized, delivered, and experienced (Weller, 2011), current metrics are

not in place to evaluate the quality and impact of such participation, leading some scholars unwilling to participate (Veletsianos, 2013).

Users who do register for scholarly social networking sites can become overwhelmed by the demands, leading them to either avoid newer reiterations or let their accounts sit dormant (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013; Mangan, 2012). Although the founders of networking sites insist that they have a profound impact on scholarly research and career goals, some scholars report experiencing information overload and others doubt the need for social media platforms devoted to higher education (Mangan, 2012).

Digital inequality, both in terms of access and literacy, may also be exacerbating scholars' struggles to adopt these new tools (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012). Jenkins *et al.* (2009) explain that while access to technology has been a major consideration in recent years, the real concern is a lack of know-how relative to using specific technologies in order to achieve positive goals. Additionally, by design, social networking sites take advantage of social connections made outside of the sites themselves which can unequally benefit those who already have a strong network in place (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012).

Concerns outside of scholarship presentation and dissemination also impact the adoption of ASNSs. For instance, privacy issues, such as the practice of selling user data, contribute to the unease felt by scholars. Similarly, the concept of lateral surveillance, or using technological tools and sites to observe others without their awareness can cause a certain level of uncertainty among adopters. Additionally, homophily, or the tendency to only connect with similar or like-minded people, can create highly fragmented environments or communities, which limit the generative or information-seeking goals associated with ASNSs (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2012).

Discussion

As higher education scholars attempt to negotiate their participation in ASNSs, they are working to establish a professional online culture unique to academia. This culture and the practices used to encourage and maintain participation will continue to impact academic research and professional expectations in the future.

Since academic social networks are continuously evolving, it is necessary for researchers to stay abreast of platform updates and changes in use, particularly among their scholarly peers. Regrettably, scholarly examination of social media adoption for professional academic purposes remains sparse. While work related to using social media in the classroom is readily available, there are only a modest number of articles concerning social media use by academics. The majority of articles available broadly overview the adoption of social media by scholarly communities but few focussed on specific platforms and even fewer offer practical advice or guidelines for use within higher education. We, therefore, recommend that a deeper exploration of scholars' ASNS preferences, use, and practice is warranted in future and ongoing research.

Ultimately, this review reveals that work concerning the specific characteristics and utilities of existing and emerging academic social networks is still needed. Up to this point, practical means of identifying, detailing, and comparing the unique attributes of academic social networks are not readily available to scholars and researchers. To begin filling this void, we end with a descriptive comparison guide (presented below), for scholars to utilize when making decisions about adoption, use, and research (Table I).

Site name	Description of site	Primary purposes/Use capabilities	Strengths	Weaknesses
Academia.edu	<p>Academia.edu is “a platform for academics to share research papers. The company’s mission is to accelerate the world’s research.</p> <p>Academics use Academia.edu to share their research, to monitor deep analytics regarding the impact of their research, and to track the research of academics they follow. 34,034,662 academics have signed up to Academia.edu, adding 10,601,210 papers and 1,830,921 research interests. Academia.edu attracts over 36 million unique visitors a month. (www.academia.edu/about)</p> <p>Academia Inc. (“Academia.edu” or “we”) offers a social networking service that enables its users, including graduate students and academics, to create academic profile pages and to connect with other users around the world (see the “Services”) through the website, accessible at academia.edu” (i.e. the “Site”) (www.academia.edu/terms)</p>	<p>Share research papers/ “dashboard” to display work</p> <p>Create an academic profile</p> <p>Networking</p> <p>Crowd-sourcing (ideas, funding/ grants, co-authors, etc.)</p> <p>Generates suggested researchers and research interests (on home page)</p> <p>The news feed updates on new papers added to particular research topics</p> <p>Calls for papers (CFPs) are also presented here</p>	<p>Presents an open-access publishing platform</p> <p>Serves as a Scholar-focussed social media platform</p> <p>Over 30 million registered users and over 10 million uploaded texts as of March 2016</p>	<p>Efforts not typically recognized for tenure and promotion</p> <p>Students and many researchers are not habitually using it as a search tool</p> <p>Confusion over copyright laws, especially after the Elsevier takedown</p> <p>Push-back from major publishing companies –who may take legal action(s) in the future</p>

(continued)

Table I.
A comparison guide
of academic social
networking sites

Table I.

Site name	Description of site	Primary purposes/Use capabilities	Strengths	Weaknesses
ResearchGate	<p>ResearchGate was "built by scientists, for scientists."</p> <p>"It started when two researchers discovered first-hand that collaborating with a friend or colleague on the other side of the world was no easy task.</p> <p>Founded in 2008 by physicians Dr Ijad Madisch and Dr Sören Hofmayer, and computer scientist Horst Fickenscher, ResearchGate today has more than 9 million members. According to the founders' description of the site, "We strive to help scientists make progress happen faster. Our mission is to connect researchers and make it easy for them to share and access scientific output, knowledge, and expertise. On ResearchGate, they find what they need to advance their research."</p> <p>Source: www.researchgate.net/ about</p>	<p>Top 5 uses (as expressed by and quoted on the site)</p> <p>(1) Share your publications, access millions more and publish your data</p> <p>(2) Get stats about views, downloads and citations of your research</p> <p>(3) Find the right job using our research-focussed job board</p> <p>(4) Connect and collaborate with colleagues, peers, co-authors, and specialists in your field</p> <p>(5) Ask questions, get answers and find solutions to research problems</p>	<p>More than 9 million members (with adoption rates that signal continued growth)</p> <p>Conveniently organized – see description of live feed and home page</p> <p>Live Feed allows you to upload and access articles/publications; to access, request, and bookmark others' work; and to ask/answer a question in a particular discipline, research area, or theoretical tradition</p> <p>The home page will also show your network activity (who is connecting with whom) and jobs you may be interested in</p> <p>Provides unique metrics of "RG impact" (including an "RG score" and "Impact points")</p>	<p>Science heavy/not prominent in the humanities and arts; adoption in the social sciences is mixed and moderate</p> <p>Efforts not recognized for tenure and promotion, though accessing citations, etc. is easier than through Academia.edu</p> <p>Many researchers and students are currently not using it as a search tool</p> <p>Concerns about evolving copyright laws</p> <p>It is not clear how RG impact scores are calculated</p>

(continued)

Site name	Description of site	Primary purposes/Use capabilities	Strengths	Weaknesses
Mendeley	<p>“Trusted by institutions worldwide”</p> <p>“Over 3 million students, ranging from undergraduates to professionals use Mendeley for organizing, writing, collaborating and promoting their research”</p> <p>“Join millions of researchers today”</p> <p>“Mendeley streamlines your workflow, saving you time to focus on what is important”</p> <p>Source: www.mendeley.com</p>	<p>“5 Ways Mendeley Helps You”</p> <p>(1) All your research in one place – Securely stored and accessible across devices, you can search and sort your references, documents and notes in one place – right down to the keyword you’re looking for</p> <p>(2) Read and annotate on the go – Use Mendeley online or offline to access your PDFs on the move. Highlight, annotate and add sticky notes to capture your thoughts in context</p> <p>(3) Citation and bibliographies – Generate your citations and bibliography in the style of your choice</p> <p>(4) Sharing and collaboration – Publicly or privately share reading lists, references, or full-text articles. Create groups to tackle research assignments, share feedback, and write papers with your collaborators</p>	<p>Desktop, web, mobile, and tablet versions</p> <p>Good way to organize a library of research and resources</p> <p>Search feature is very advanced and user friendly</p> <p>See purposes for more</p>	<p>Only 3 million of the sites 6 million registrants are active users</p> <p>Aims to capture “students, ranging from undergraduates to professionals” – while this broad approach widens the overall adoption rate, failure to narrowcast may also 1) lower the site’s appeal to some researchers and 2) lessen the rates of active participation</p> <p>Does not generate or suggest other related research</p> <p>Requires the user to do the searching and uploading</p>

(continued)

Table I.

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Site name	Description of site	Primary purposes/Use capabilities	Strengths	Weaknesses
Zotero	<p>"Zotero is a free and easy-to-use research tool that helps you collect, organize, and analyze research and lets you share it in a variety of ways. Zotero includes the best parts of older reference manager software – the ability to store author, title, and publication fields and to export that information as formatted references – and the best aspects of modern software and web applications, such as the ability to organize, tag, and search in advanced ways. Zotero interacts seamlessly with online resources: when it senses you are viewing a book, article, or other object on the web, it can automatically extract and save complete bibliographic references. Zotero effortlessly</p>	<p>(5) Showcasing your work – Connect with colleagues, peers or classmates to follow their research output. Showcase your published research to millions around the world</p> <p>Legalese stated purpose found here: www.mendeley.com/terms/</p> <p>Networked research tool – collects, tags/organizes and analyzes research resources</p> <p>Allows participants to network and share research</p> <p>Provides storage</p>	<p>Captures bibliographic information effortlessly</p> <p>Good way to organize a library of articles</p> <p>Article sharing functions can be used for collaborative, co-authored, and team-based research projects</p>	<p>Does not differentiate between useful/relevant information that the user has read and information that is merely opened/glanced at</p> <p>Requires the use of tags</p>

(continued)

Site name	Description of site	Primary purposes/Use capabilities	Strengths	Weaknesses
	<p>transmits information to and from other web services and applications, and it runs both as a web service and offline on your personal devices" (www.zotero.org/about/)</p>			
	<p>"Zotero is an open-source project committed to providing the best research tool available anywhere. Our philosophy is that what you put into Zotero is yours, and one of our founding principles is to make it as easy as possible to take the fruits of your research where and when you want it and to share it how you like – or to choose not to share it at all.</p>			
	<p>We are a nonprofit organization and have no financial interest in your private information. However, some of Zotero's advanced features require you to supply us with information; for example, Zotero synchronization requires you to transmit your Zotero library data to our server.</p>			

(continued)

Table I.

Site name	Description of site	Primary purposes/Use capabilities	Strengths	Weaknesses
Google Scholar	<p>You should note that participation in these services is up to you and can be adjusted at any time in your Zotero preferences”</p> <p>Site: www.zotero.org/support/terms/privacy</p> <p>“Google Scholar provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. From one place, you can search across many disciplines and sources: articles, theses, books, abstracts and court opinions, from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other websites. Google Scholar helps you find relevant work across the world of scholarly research.”</p> <p>Site: https://scholar.google.com/intl/en-US/scholar/about.html</p>	<p>Search all scholarly literature from one convenient place</p> <p>Explore related works, citations, authors, and publications</p> <p>Locate complete documents through your library or on the web</p> <p>Keep up with recent developments in any area of research</p> <p>Create a public author profile</p> <p>Track article citations</p> <p>Graph citations over time and compute citation metrics</p>	<p>Ranks documents by “weighing” the full text, where it was originally published, who it was written by and how often and recently it’s been cited</p> <p>Easy-to-use search tool</p> <p>Citation tracking and metric calculator is valuable for tenure and promotion</p>	<p>Keeps track of citations to your articles and allows you to see who is publishing your work</p> <p>Capable of graphing citations over time and computing citation metrics</p> <p>Profiles are minimal, with name and institutional affiliation – does not allow for presentation of extensive bios</p> <p>Results for Google Scholar searches are not always relevant</p> <p>The frequency of site updating is unclear – i.e., the most recent publications are not always available</p> <p>The counts of citations are not always accurate</p>

We remain optimistic about the future of research in this domain and believe that greater understanding will emerge as scholars continue to share and study the successes and challenges of utilizing digital social networking in academia.

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