

Like, Comment, Retweet: Identifying Students' Social Media Preferences for Receiving Library Communications

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Abstract

The majority of academic libraries currently use one or more social media websites in their efforts to communicate and engage with students. Some of the most widely used sites are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Education Library users at the University of British Columbia were surveyed and asked to rank whether they preferred receiving Education Library communications from Facebook, Twitter or WordPress (blogs). The results indicate that students ranked Facebook first, WordPress second and Twitter third. Students also provided explanations for their rankings, and Facebook was the top choice because it is the most widely used as well as the most convenient way to access Library information. Additional research in this area should be conducted at other academic libraries.

Keywords

Academic libraries, social media, Facebook, Twitter, blogs

Introduction

The University of British Columbia is widely regarded as one of Canada's top research universities and has a total enrolment of 58, 284 students (UBC, 2014). The main campus is located in Vancouver, Canada and features eight branch libraries. The Education Library primarily serves students and faculty in the Faculty of Education and the most popular program in this faculty is Teacher Education, which leads to a Bachelor of Education degree. In the fall of 2013, a total of 628 students were enrolled

in this program. The objective of the current study is to review the Education Library's social media strategy by surveying students to ascertain if they prefer the Library use Facebook, Twitter or Blogs for its communications with them. The results of the study will help to determine which tool(s) continue to be used in the future.

The continued popularity of Web 2.0 has completely transformed how academic libraries communicate with their users. Many libraries have a variety of social media accounts that they use to engage with their users. Types of interactions facilitated by social media include reference service, library contests, and the delivery of general information regarding services, events or facilities. Darcy DiNucci is credited with creating the phrase "Web 2.0" in 1999, and Stephens and Collins describe it as "facilitating communication, conversation, information sharing, and collaboration within the online community" (Kim & Abbas, 2010, p. 212). In 2010, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Research Planning and Review Committee announced that new social networking tools are among the most significant technological developments affecting academic libraries (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2010, p. 286-292). The Online Computer Library Center further acknowledged the increasing importance of social media in libraries in 2013, when it added social networking as one of the core competencies that library staff must demonstrate in order to meet the expectations of contemporary library users (American Library Association). Over the past decade, libraries have used social networking tools to communicate, connect and collaborate with their users in unprecedented ways and current research suggests this trend will continue.

The most recent estimates available about the number of active users on Facebook indicate that it has in excess of 1.44 billion active monthly users from around the world (Facebook, 2015, p. 14). In 2014, approximately 17.8 million were active users in Canada (eMarketer, "Number of Facebook Users in Canada"). In 2007, Ellison estimated that up to 95% of undergraduate students had Facebook accounts, and one would expect that this number has since risen (p. 7). Although the total number of Twitter account holders is much smaller, it is still impressive. By the third quarter of 2014, Twitter had 284 million regular monthly users, 5.6 million of whom reside in Canada. That number is expected to rise to 8.75 million users by 2018 (eMarketer, "Number of Twitter Users in Canada"). According to its website, WordPress has approximately 409 million active monthly users who view over 18 billion pages each month. Users publish 42.6 million new posts every month and they receive 63.8 million comments. Although blogs are written in more than 120 languages, English is by far the most widely used and represents 71% of all written communication. The next most frequently used language is Spanish, which accounts for 5% of all published posts (WordPress, n.d.).

Literature Review

The first scholarly article concerning academic libraries and social media was published in 2006 by Maness, but it was not until 2009 that a researcher examined whether students wanted to connect with librarians through social media (Connell, 2009, p. 25).

In the years since, very few researchers have surveyed students to ascertain their preferred social media sites for engaging with libraries, and of the studies that have been conducted, none have been at a Canadian university. Some researchers have made important distinctions between the various Web 2.0 resources. Rutherford (2010) argued that there are three clear categories: content sharing and organizing, content creation and editing and social network sites (p. 703). Examples from each category include: YouTube, WordPress and Twitter, respectively.

Although an extensive number of positive and negative effects of Facebook usage in academic libraries have been identified, most of the research has focused on how it could be used to market library holdings and services to users or to disseminate library news (Wan, 2011, p. 308; Collins & Quan-Haase, "Social Media and Academic Libraries," 2014, p. 1). A comprehensive survey by Kim, Sin and Yoo-Lee examined social media tools most frequently used by undergraduate students as sources of information (2014, p. 448). Their results indicated that blogs are commonly utilized to: obtain others' opinions/comments, access recreational information, and to receive updates/news. Chua and Goh noted some major geographical differences concerning library blog use. While most North American libraries use them to publish library news, European and Australian libraries use them in a subject-specific manner to target distinct populations (Chua & Goh, 2010, p. 208). Students' interest in following libraries on Twitter should be explored further, as Collins and Quan-Haase found that Twitter surpassed Facebook as the tool that academic libraries used most frequently ("Are Social Media Ubiquitous," 2014, p. 64).

Although very few studies have examined the use of Web 2.0 technologies by Canadian academic libraries, a study by researchers from Manitoba and Ontario provides a notable exception. Collins and Quan-Haase conducted a longitudinal study of the adoption rates and usage patterns at 21 academic libraries in Ontario. Their findings demonstrate that Facebook is used primarily to disseminate library news, share photographs, and to supply information about library services and resources; essentially, it is an information repository and is not used to communicate or network with library users. This is in stark contrast to how Twitter is being utilized. Librarians have embraced the social nature of Twitter and predominately use it to communicate and interact with library users (Collins & Quan-Haase, "Are Social Media Ubiquitous," 2014, p. 64).

A comprehensive survey of four hundred Canadian academic librarians and their attitudes toward and use of social media was conducted by Guistini in 2010. The data indicated that 77% of librarians believe that it's a high or a very high priority for librarians to have a basic knowledge of social media (Guistini, 2010, p. 3). Guistini (2010) found that the same percentage reported that they wanted to deepen their knowledge of social media and 23% stated it should be either a priority or a very high priority for each library to have a Social Media Librarian (p. 3).

The results of a quantitative study by Kim and Abbas suggest that academic libraries may not be adept at identifying and utilizing the social media tools most preferred by

their users (2010, p. 215). They combined a random sampling of the tools offered by 230 libraries with a survey of students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty at two universities in the American Midwest to see how well libraries were meeting users' needs. They found that despite the fact that 73% of the libraries provided RSS feeds, only 10.8% of patrons used them (Kim & Abbas, 2010, p. 215). Furthermore, 4.3% of patrons used podcasts, even though they were offered by 27% of libraries (Kim & Abbas, 2010, p. 215). A final discrepancy was noted concerning the utilization of bookmarks: although 42.5% of patrons used them, only 22% of libraries provided them (Kim & Abbas, 2010, p. 215). This evidence supports the hypothesis that librarians need to better match their enthusiasm for social media to the social media sites library users are interested in using.

Although the majority of researchers recommend that academic libraries adopt the use of social media tools without reservation, Dickson and Holley, from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, identified a number of areas of concern. Their study reviewed the literature published from 2006 to 2009 concerning library 2.0 and various social networking tools found in the Library Literature and Information Full Text database (Dickson & Holley, 2010, p. 469). They noted the following: that the majority of research commending the use of social media tools by academic libraries is anecdotal, showed low student usage rates, and lacked data to demonstrate that students are interested in communicating with libraries via these tools (Dickson & Holley, 2010, p. 469, 474). These findings support Bodnar and Doshi's assertion that more critical thought and assessment needs to be done with regard to academic libraries' use of social media (2011, p.104). Echoes of this sentiment can also be found in Connell's study. In her survey of student opinions regarding an academic library's use of Facebook as an outreach strategy, Connell found that a "one-size-fits-all model does not work when it comes to using social network sites for library outreach" (2009, p. 33). Similarly, Epperson and Leffler noted that libraries should become more cognizant of the need to assess which social media tools they will invest their time and resources in on a case by case basis (2009, p. 371).

There are several studies that have looked specifically at Facebook and Twitter adoption in academic libraries. For example, a study conducted by Sachs, Eckel, and Langan from Western Michigan University's Waldo Library examined how receptive students were to receiving library-related information via Facebook. Students were surveyed regarding their attitudes toward having the Library as a friend on Facebook. Of the 123 valid returned surveys, over two-thirds of users initiated the Facebook friendship and 90% of undergraduates thought that it was a good way for the Library to keep students informed (Sachs, Eckel, & Langan, 2011, p. 41).

Librarians at Sam Houston State University in Texas surveyed 702 students on their use of social media technologies, as well as their preferences for connecting with the Library. Their results revealed that 75% of students were disinterested in using Twitter for Library purposes while slightly more than 20% were open to following the Library in order to receive updates (Cassidy et al., 2011, p. 385). They also found that 34% of

students showed enthusiasm for receiving updates about news, events, and resources from a Library blog (Cassidy et al., 2011, p. 385-386).

There are limited metrics available to evaluate academic library blogs, however Chatfield et al. from UCLA's Biomedical Library published a study in 2010 that surveyed 22 US academic health sciences libraries on how they each assess and evaluate the libraries' main blogs. Of the respondents, 95% stated that they used their blogs to promote "library print & electronic resources," and "access to library resources," as well as to "introduce operational, physical space, and service changes," while 64% targeted the blogs to a wide variety of users (Chatfield et al., 2010, p. 152-153). The majority of the libraries surveyed (60%) used WordPress as their blogging platform and one respondent stated it was their preferred choice because of its ease of use and customizable features (Chatfield et al., 2010, p. 155, 158). Sixty-one percent of library blogs allow readers to post comments (those that do not said it is due to spam issues) and libraries could increase engagement in this area by allowing posts to be made privately and/or providing a feedback link or email address (Chatfield et al., 2010, p. 156, 160) to encourage users to contact them.

Keeping a blog up to date, interesting and relevant to users can be difficult. Respondents suggested maintaining a posting schedule and having a bank of go-to articles about technology tips and search strategies to use in between new posts, as blogs that post infrequently might not receive many reads (Chatfield et al., 2010, p. 159). While 21 libraries were not evaluating their blogs, 38% responded that they planned to implement evaluation criteria such as number of blog hits, comments or number of RSS subscribers (Chatfield et al., 2010, p. 157). However, the authors noted that counting the number of hits might not be a reliable measurement, as librarians viewing the blog count as hits. Furthermore, if comments are disabled on the blog it is difficult to determine if the blog is seen as being effective. Chatfield et al. (2010) suggest that more research be done to better determine assessment strategies for library blogs.

Draper and Turnage, from Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, looked at blog use in academic libraries and how blogs are marketed to their communities. In 2006, the authors created an 18-question survey using SurveyMonkey, sent it out to various library listservs and received 265 responses from academic libraries (Draper & Turnage, 2008, p. 19). Their findings indicate that most of the libraries (86%) used blogs to notify readers of library news and events, as a method to market their libraries (76%); and were geared toward students (58%) (Draper & Turnage, 2008, p. 19). Interestingly, the authors found that less than half (46%) of academic libraries market their blogs and the most popular marketing method was providing a link to the blog on the library's homepage (Draper & Turnage, 2008, p. 20).

Other research provided a subjective review and recommended WordPress use by libraries to connect with library users (Cooke, 2008, p. 354). Overall, it appears that research done pertaining to blog use by academic libraries focuses more on the librarians' view and intentions for the blog rather than on the perception of the end user. It is evident that the majority of the literature concerning Web 2.0 use among libraries

focuses on Facebook and Twitter. To date, there is a lack of research on WordPress and blog usage by academic libraries and how to assess their success or gain insight from the intended academic library users.

Although the use and impact of Facebook and Twitter by academic librarians has been studied extensively, the overwhelming majority of the research has been conducted at American colleges and universities and there remains a paucity of research on how these Web 2.0 tools have been adopted by Canadian post-secondary institutions. By surveying students about their preferred social media sites for receiving library communications, the current study builds on earlier research that focuses on how academic librarians use social media to connect with library users.

Methodology

The participants in this study were students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree program at the University of British Columbia in the fall of 2013. The Education Library has an established information literacy program that is fully integrated into the Faculty of Education's curriculum. As a result, every B.Ed. student attends an Introduction to the Library workshop that is held during class time in September or October. At the end of each Introduction to the Library workshop, the instructor (librarian) asked students to complete a two-question, print survey in the classroom (see Appendix A). They were informed that they had the right to refuse participation and that their responses were anonymous and confidential. Institutional policy indicated that Ethics approval was not required because the data contained in this article represent a secondary usage of data collected anonymously.

Students were asked to rank their first, second and third preferred Web 2.0 tools to receive communications from the Library. Their choices were Facebook, Twitter and WordPress (blog). Students were given these three options because Facebook, Twitter and WordPress were the three tools used to reach out to students by the Library where the survey was conducted. Although all three sites are examples of Web 2.0, Facebook and Twitter are social networking sites while WordPress is a standard Web 2.0 site.

The results include some qualitative data because the final question asked students to explain their selections. The qualitative responses were codified into five different themes. The first theme represented students who said they made their first choice because it was the best choice. The second included students who selected their first choice because it was the best of the three options they were given. The third theme of respondents indicated a preference for Library information to be shared through email. The fourth theme represented responses where students requested the Library information only be shared through the Library website. The final theme was reserved for students who expressed a desire not to receive any Library communications. For responses that included alternative communications channels (other than the options given), the preferences mentioned were email and website-based information updates.

Of the 628 students enrolled in the program, 397 completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 63%. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used because it is an efficient method for analyzing large amounts of quantitative data. A series of frequency tables were created and used to analyze the surveys and determine the results.

Results

To determine which social media tools students preferred for receiving Library information, the researchers created Frequency Tables to analyze the data. Table 1 indicated that 61.9% of respondents chose Facebook as their primary choice, 29.2% ranked it their second choice and 8.8% ranked it their third choice. These figures contrast sharply with the results for Twitter where only 13.7% of respondents selected it as their first choice, 31.2% as their second choice and 55.1% as their third choice (see Table 2).

Table 1

Frequency of Facebook Rankings

	Frequency	Percent (%) of total responses	Valid* percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Valid 1.0	231	58.2	61.9	61.9
2.0	109	27.5	29.2	91.2
3.0	33	8.3	8.8	100.0
Total	373	94.0	100.0	
No response	24	6.0		
Total	397	100.0		

*Missing responses removed

Table 2

Frequency of Twitter Rankings

		Frequency	Percent (%) of total responses	Valid* percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Valid	1.0	47	11.8	13.7	13.7
	2.0	107	27.0	31.2	44.9
	3.0	189	47.6	55.1	100.0
	Total	343	86.4	100.0	
	No response	54	13.6		
Total		397	100.0		

*Missing responses removed

Students did not reject the use of WordPress to the same degree as they did the use of Twitter; however, they were not as enthusiastic toward WordPress as they were toward Facebook. 31.4% of respondents listed WordPress as their first choice for receiving Library information, 35.8% ranked it second, and 32.8% listed it as their third choice (see Table 3).

Table 3

Frequency of WordPress Rankings

		Frequency	Percent (%) of total responses	Valid* percent (%)	Cumulative percent (%)
Valid	1.0	113	28.5	31.4	31.4
	2.0	129	32.5	35.8	67.2
	3.0	118	29.7	32.8	100.0
	Total	360	90.7	100.0	
	No response	37	9.3		
Total		397	100.0		

*Missing responses removed

With regard to Facebook, the most common reason respondents gave for selecting this tool as their preferred method of receiving Library news and updates (51%) was because it was the only social media tool listed that they used. The next most common reason (28%) was that it was the most convenient and easiest way to access Library information. For those who ranked Facebook as their last choice to receive Library communications, the majority (54%) said they were looking for a convenient and easy way to access Library information and for them, Facebook wasn't it.

The majority of respondents who selected Twitter as their first choice for receiving Library communications (78%) did so because they felt that Twitter was the most convenient and easiest way for them to receive this type of information. Respondents also noted that they preferred Twitter because it was the only source they used, the most commonly used source or the most appropriate for Library communications. The majority of students who ranked Twitter in last place (33%) said they only used one of the three sources listed, and that Twitter was not it (Facebook was typically the only source they used). The second most common reason Twitter was ranked low, cited by 26% of respondents who ranked Twitter as their last choice, was that they wanted a tool that they used frequently and they did not use Twitter frequently. This is in stark contrast to Facebook, which was much more heavily used.

The most common reason cited by the 30% of respondents who made WordPress their first choice for receiving Library information was that it was the most convenient way for them to access this information. The second most common reason (25%) was that it was their most frequently used tool. Another reason given by 21% of respondents was that it was the most appropriate source for Library communications. A number of respondents further clarified this reason saying that they preferred to retrieve Library communications themselves, rather than having it sent out to them through other types of social media.

Social Media Ranking Correlation Analysis

In looking at the correlation between how users' preferences for one Web 2.0 tool affected their view of the other tools presented, a few details emerged. Fifty-eight percent of students who chose Facebook as their preferred tool ranked WordPress last. In contrast, 67% of those who ranked Facebook last indicated that their first choice was WordPress. This shows that the majority of students who had a strong preference for Facebook had an aversion to WordPress and vice versa. This distinction could be a result of the inherent differences of the two sites—one is a social networking site that can be quickly scanned, while the other is a standard Web 2.0 site that typically involves reading longer passages.

Seventy-nine percent of students who selected Twitter and 75% of those who chose WordPress as their first choices designated Facebook as their second choice. When first and second choices are considered, it is clear that Facebook was, by far, the most preferred option for students to receive Library information and updates. The results

clearly indicate that Twitter is seen as a less appropriate site for Library information to be shared.

A high number of students chose WordPress as the most appropriate source for Library communications because it allows them to go to a Library blog and retrieve information when they want to, without having Library communications enter into their outside social feeds. For those opposed to using WordPress for Library communications, the reasoning was often the opposite—they did not want the added step of having to go and retrieve the information from a Library website.

Though not an option in the survey, a number of respondents commented that instead of the three choices given to receive Library communications—Facebook, Twitter or WordPress—they would instead prefer to receive Library information and updates via email. Of all respondents who left a comment to explain their rankings, 5% indicated that their actual preference would be to receive Library information and updates through email notifications. This indicates that some students do not want to receive Library communications through Web 2.0 tools, and would prefer to maintain communication with the Library via traditional email updates. This finding indicates that in their efforts to communicate and engage with all students, the Education Library should recognize that not all students are accessible via Web 2.0 and that a small minority prefers a more traditional approach to communication. As a whole, these results were important because they provided the Library with the evidence it needed to establish a more effective, relevant and sustainable social media presence.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the results of this study were valuable to those working to establish a more sustainable social media strategy at the University of British Columbia's Education Library, there were a few inherent limitations. The first is the study's lack of generalizability. The survey had a small sample size comprised solely of B.Ed. students, so the results are not generalizable to students in the Faculty of Education's other programs or to students enrolled in other programs at the University.

Furthermore, while the survey asked students to rank their preferred social media sites for receiving Library communications, it did not include a question to determine if they wanted to receive Library updates via those channels. The rationale for that decision was that a considerable amount of staff time was already being used to maintain all three Web 2.0 accounts and the survey results would be used to determine which tool(s) would continue to be utilized. That said, including a question to gauge students' willingness to connect with the Library through social media would have yielded additional, insightful results.

Even though Twitter, Facebook and blogs are among the most widely used Web 2.0 technologies (Phillips, 2011), this study did not include other popular technologies, such as: YouTube, wikis, instant messaging, RSS feeds; or the sites that have recently seen a large increase in usage, such as: Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Foursquare, Yelp and

Google+. Additional research investigating students' preferences for the most current social media websites should be undertaken.

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of the present study was to determine whether students preferred to receive Library communications through blogs, Facebook or Twitter. Based on the results of this survey it is evident that, for the three choices given, students strongly prefer Facebook for receiving Library communications. The reasons for this are because they believe it is both the most convenient, and the most suitable, method for them to receive Library information.

While Twitter was used by a fair number of students, the majority did not feel that Twitter was an appropriate medium for delivering Library information (see Table 2). Students noted that Library content was unwanted in their Twitter streams, or else expressed the concern that, while they used Twitter, it was a social media platform they checked very infrequently.

These survey results indicate that students have definite, personal preferences and differing opinions about which platforms are appropriate for Library communications. Furthermore, data suggest that Facebook is the best choice for the Education Library, as it attempts to promote its resources and services to as many people as possible. However, in order to reach the maximum number of students, the researchers recommend that the Library use a variety of Web 2.0 platforms. One major challenge is that each different platform requires different communication strategies and techniques in order to be effective. Furthermore, the mores for social media communication, and the platforms used, can change dramatically in a short period of time. The Education Library may not have sufficient staff, resources or the skills required to keep up with these changes.

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Appendix A

Survey

Question 1- How would you prefer to hear about events, workshops, new products and services at the Education Library?

Please rank your response (1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice):

 _____	 _____	 _____
By visiting our Facebook page: facebook.com/ubceducationlibrary	By visiting our Twitter page: twitter.com/UBCEdLib	By visiting our website & blog: education.library.ubc.ca/blog/

Question 2- Please explain your choices
