Social Media in Higher Education: Exploring Content Guidelines and Policy using a Grounded Theory Approach  

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Abstract

The growth and rapid change of social media technologies and societal norms regarding social media has caught many organizations off-guard. Universities, who must manage their reputations, were particularly susceptible to such changes as they have multiple stakeholder groups, including existing social networks that quickly adopted social media tools. Furthermore, universities have also adopted social media for teaching and learning, adding to the complexity of developing policy regarding social media. This research in-progress presents a qualitative approach for policy evaluation and presents initial results derived from the evaluation of fifty social media policies. Key factors derived from these policies are examined and compared. Additionally, future research directions are presented.

Keywords

Social media, policy, higher education, grounded theory.

Introduction

The massive growth in social media use by individuals and organizations has changed the way organizations communicate and collaborate both internally and externally (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr 2010). This includes institutions of higher education using social media for reasons such as marketing, recruiting, making announcements, posting course content, and facilitating group projects (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar and Canche 2012). Additionally, supporters of a university, students and faculty often utilize social media to promote research, upcoming courses and events, and to communicate with students. Attempting to manage the use of social media is important as social media can impact the reputation of an institute of learning either positively or negatively. It has been shown that an organization’s image can be impacted through perceived online reputation (Gregg and Walczak 2008; Walczak, Gregg, Borkan and Erskine 2014). In order to safeguard that reputation, universities often create policies; however, these may also impact the ability for such institutions to adapt to rapidly changing educational practices.

This tremendous growth in the use of social media has brought benefits, as well as risks, requiring the establishment of policies regarding the use social platforms in a higher education environment (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). A study of 132 accredited medical schools in the United States revealed that while nearly all had some sort of a social media presence, only a little more than 10% had policies or guidelines referring to social media (Kind, Genrich, Sodhi and Chretien 2010). Social media, which presents new communication challenges for higher education organizations, allows for direct communication with
information-consumers as well as dialogue between information-consumers. Progressive institutions should attempt to engage and manage both of these types of dialogues (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Not surprisingly, Eyrich et al. (2008) revealed that public relations practitioners were early adopters of social media compared to corporations, higher education, non-profits or sole practitioners.

The prevalence of social media use in higher education often precedes the ability of governing bodies to safeguard themselves, their faculty, staff and students (Tess 2013). This study attempts to investigate this phenomenon. While there is anecdotal evidence that supports the claim that technology adoption moves faster than the ability to develop and regulate through policy, this study asks specifically who has developed policies and what specific topics they address. The knowledge gained from this study will directly benefit institutes of higher education who are attempting to develop and revise their social media policies.

Social media in higher education has already transformed practice by creating new ways of teaching and learning (Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011). An example of the pedagogical use of social media is in personalized learning environments (PLEs). PLEs are platforms for the distribution and incorporation of learning content that can be reused and repurposed based on learner needs (Fiedler and Väljataga 2011). Social media serves as a core component of PLEs as faculty members adopt various forms of social learning tools within their courses (Tess 2013). This blend of tools encourages social engagement, a core aspect of building community in teaching and learning (Arenas 2008). The adoption of PLEs, as with other rapidly advancing educational technologies used to support pedagogy and curriculum development, has outpaced the ability for academic institutions to effectively address such changes through policy (Chan 2013; Rosenberg 2001; Spector 2010). The importance of social media in higher education has expanded over recent years; however, there is still a significant research gap regarding policies and their application to social media.

Of the research that has been conducted, Kaplan et al. (2010) suggest five key points for organizations, such as higher education, seeking to use social media, including 1) carefully selecting the appropriate social media channel, 2) deciding whether to build a new social network, 3) ensuring communications alignment across channels, 4) integrating with your corporate image and 5) ensuring appropriate access to the social media channel. Furthermore, they provide five suggestions for the successful use of social media, including being an active participant, posting interesting content, being humble, avoiding content that appears too polished and sharing information honestly.

To better understand how higher education institutions govern the use of social media, a qualitative analysis of existing social media policies was conducted.

**Literature Review**

Recent articles regarding social media, higher education and policies were investigated using EBSCOhost, ERIC and Google Scholar. This review revealed that social media is a term that is broadly used to describe any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community (Joosten 2012). Although a universal definition does not yet exist (Kaplan et al. 2010), social media is often described through examples. Social networking sites, blogs, wikis, multi-media platforms, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds are among the applications typically included in recent illustrations of social media (Barnes and Lescault 2011; McEwan 2012). Included in the broad category of social media types are subsets such as social networking sites (SNSs) also referred to as social networking or online social networks. SNSs such as Facebook and LinkedIn are web-based services that allow users to make personal profiles, create content, and share messages by connecting with other users in the system (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Some researchers have defined social media through the more inclusive term Web 2.0 (Gruzd, Staves, and Wilk 2011; Kaplan et al. 2010).

The task of defining social media is challenging because of the frequent and rapid advancements of such technology. Social media evolves as developers create new or enhanced features to meet the demands of users and to showcase the increased capabilities of technology. For example, currently Facebook users can...
send messages, add friends, update personal profiles, join groups, develop applications, host content, and learn about other users through their online profiles (Hogan, Quan and Haase 2010), while new features are continuously being developed.

The elusive and transitory nature of defining social media highlights the challenge of developing concrete policies and guidelines for their use (Kaplan et al. 2010). A policy is a principle or protocol to guide decisions and achieve desired outcomes. The purpose of a policy is to safeguard the institution, faculty members, administrative staff and students (Kind et al. 2010). Universities can protect themselves, their faculty and their students through the adoption of relevant policies.

Research Methodology

As university policies should encompass multiple elements including outreach, pedagogy, community engagement, advancement, innovation and student success, policies from fifty leading universities were analyzed for this study. This analysis was conducted from February 2013 through September 2013. The policies analyzed in this study were obtained through publicly available documents that were published online. This allowed the researchers to aggregate related policies from individual universities to better associate related data. All universities included in the sample had one or more publicly available social media policies.

The sample universities were randomly selected from the 2013 US News and World Report ranking of education institutions, following previous research methodology (e.g., Gordon and Berhow 2009; Irwin and Gerke 2004; Linvill, McGee and Hicks 2012). Each of these universities demonstrated a social media presence.

Two subject matter experts performed an initial coding of policy content using the Atlast.ti qualitative research platform and revealed large quantities of qualitative data for further consideration. Subsequently, a reexamination of the initial coding revealed focused categories. Finally, thematic coding was applied to extract highly refined themes. This approach was used in alignment with the qualitative research methodologies and goals as outlined in the Straussian Grounded Theory Method (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The first three stages of the Grounded Theory Method were applied in this research-in-progress. Repetitions of these analyses were conducted until no additional relevant information could be extracted from the policies. We plan to further evaluate the findings of this paper to produce a cohesive model that can be applied to policy development in various environments, particularly universities.

While all the policies evaluated were derived from top-tier universities as identified by the 2013 US News and World Report ranking, these institutions represented unique characteristics. For instance, over two thirds of the policies analyzed were from private institutions. Additionally, the majority of the universities were classified as located in the middle (26%), southern (24%) and north central (24%) regions of the United States according to their regional accreditation. For a detailed overview of descriptive statistics concerning the universities from which policies were retrieved, see Table 1.
Analysis

To perform the research analysis all fifty policies were coded within Atlas.ti and common policy elements were extracted and analyzed. This was done in alignment with the established Grounded Theory Method, which is a systematic research methodology involving the discovery of theory through the analysis of data. Grounded Theory Method operates almost in a reverse fashion from traditional social science research. Rather than beginning with a hypothesis, the first step is data collection. From the data collected, the key points are marked with a series of codes, which are extracted from the text. The codes are grouped into similar concepts in order to make them more workable. From these concepts, categories are formed, which are the basis for the creation of a theory. The clustered quantities of relevant factors revealed key policy statements as defined by exemplar universities. This natural break revealed the common social media policy elements.

Findings

An initial analysis of the key policy factors is discussed next, along with specific examples from universities included in the research sample. Table 2 presents the key factors and their definitions. Following this, detailed descriptions and examples are presented. These findings indicate that top-tier universities differ in how they approach social media through policies and guidelines. The findings further indicate that the acceptance of social media was presented quite differently, however trends in the various topics addressed emerged through the analysis. This is in line with the expected outcome of a Grounded Theory Method approach. While the key factors present a wide range of concerns, it should be noted that most of the policies did not address the implications of social media on teaching and learning.
### Table 2. Key Policy Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Codes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounts</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to aspects of account management, naming, access and ownership.</td>
<td>U1, U2, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U10, U11, U13, U14, U15, U17, U21, U23, U24, U26, U27, U28, U31, U33, U37, U40, U42, U43, U47, U48, U50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branding</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to branding and marketing, including institution identity protection and approval processes for certain branding criteria.</td>
<td>U1, U3, U5, U6, U7, U22, U23, U24, U28, U29, U31, U32, U33, U36, U37, U41, U43, U48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to content type, quality, tone of voice and content approval process.</td>
<td>U19, U24, U25, U27, U28, U29, U30, U31, U32, U35, U36, U42, U43, U45, U46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>Guidelines clearly identifying the account holder and not representing an entity that one is not authorized to represent.</td>
<td>U1, U3, U4, U7, U9, U12, U13, U14, U16, U17, U20, U21, U23, U24, U27, U28, U29, U30, U31, U32, U33, U36, U39, U40, U41, U42, U43, U47, U48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to monitoring social media accounts for activity and engage as necessary.</td>
<td>U2, U3, U4, U6, U7, U9, U12, U21, U31, U32, U33, U38, U40, U42, U43, U49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to concerns related to the promotion of oneself or third parties.</td>
<td>U2, U5, U6, U7, U12, U14, U16, U20, U21, U22, U23, U24, U27, U33, U36, U37, U39, U40, U41, U45, U47, U48, U50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety/Security</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to protecting confidential data and ensuring that personal safety are not placed at risk.</td>
<td>U1, U2, U3, U5, U7, U9, U15, U17, U20, U23, U24, U28, U29, U30, U32, U33, U37, U42, U43, U48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness</td>
<td>Guidelines referring to the concept of posting current and relevant information.</td>
<td>U1, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7, U9, U10, U11, U14, U17, U20, U21, U23, U24, U29, U32, U37, U38, U41, U42, U48, U49</td>
</tr>
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### Accounts

Key findings in this research indicate that some institutions encourage account creation and participation in social media, while others explicitly do not. For instance one university suggests, “employees have wide latitude to create and maintain a presence on social media channels” (U1). In contrast, another university suggests that its employees should “add Marketing and Communications as an administrator” to their social media accounts (U8). In fact, numerous universities required or encouraged multiple administrators for departmental accounts (U8, U9, U26, U22, U36, U49, U50). Additionally, it is often suggested that a full-time employee be assigned to administer university social networking accounts (U8, U23, U35, U37, U49). In other cases it is suggested that the university retain editorial rights over any departmental account (U18, U22) and that the right to post as a department can be rescinded at any time (U14.) An often cited reason for having an editorial administrator is to ensure continuity of the site should an employee leave the university.

Some universities discouraged individuals from representing the institution entirely (U1, U7, U48, U49). In such cases, it was mandated that the central communications office manage social media accounts. These institutions cited difficulties with assigning the task to an already full-time employee due to potential resource limitations (U1, U7, U12, U48). They also advised individuals that creating social media accounts without the consent of the school would result in the deletion of the account and possible disciplinary action. Alternately, in at least one case, a university required the use of a personal e-mail account to reduce the perception that the social media participant is an authorized representative of the university (U33).
In addition to declaring how accounts are to be managed, some universities discussed the mandatory or suggested naming conventions for social media accounts used by their representative departments. For instance, one university specified that individual or departmental accounts should be named in such a way as to ensure that they do not misleadingly represent the entire institution (U1). However, other universities suggested that the full university name should appear prominently in the social media account name (U23). Account naming suggestions were also provided based on specific social media platforms, in some cases even detailing account name lengths (U19, U30).

**Branding**

Protecting a university’s identity was a key factor found in numerous policies. Much like with account information, two polarized opinions regarding the use of branding were found. Many universities encouraged the use of official logos, icons or imagery (U3, U5, U12, U14, U37, U39), while others specifically ask that all social media accounts not operated by the central communications office refrain from using such imagery (U11, U23, U41). In other cases, administrative approval is required before using any official branding (U13, U20). Others require or suggest that departments work with a central office to determine appropriate branding (U3, U6, U9, U19). Two universities suggest that photos used in social media also reflect the brand and reputation of a university. Examples include identifying campus buildings in photos (U30) and ensuring that individuals in photos adhere to the university dress policy (U4).

**Content**

The factor of content dominated the policy and guideline documents evaluated. A substantial emphasis was placed on the quality, tone of voice and the relevance of content (U19, U24, U25). Most institutions encouraged open and honest discussions and not simply deleting possibly offensive posts. Rather, social media facilitators were to guide the conversation, encouraging individuals to share their thoughts while keeping an open mind and respecting the opinions of others (U31, U32).

Ensuring respect for others and avoiding excessive persuasion was also mentioned in a number of policies. Some the sample universities addressed the issue of ‘bullying’ and suggested ideas on how to appropriately manage such situations (U32, U35, U38, U44). While some universities outlined the types of language and behavior that is not condoned by the institution (U2, U4, U10, U21, U48), most universities only suggested to be respectful, without providing specific examples or detail.

Several of the sample policies required either peer or institutional review of all content posted on social media websites by their staff and faculty members. Most of the sample universities required a third-party review of all content by a communications office or other designated body (U30, U35, U38, U42).

**Disclosure**

Warnings about disclosing private information, specifically the United States regulations known as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) were a key factor in most social media policies. Several policies requested that social media facilitators not disclose university business, such as personnel changes, lawsuits or financial information (U24, U42, U45, U32). Yet, some institutions had no mention of HIPAA or FERPA rules, nor any statement about disclosure.

Although guidelines regarding the disclosure of information were included, transparency was also a key element. For example, some policies emphasized transparency in regard to information sharing (U13, U25, U27, U41). However, in certain cases, transparency was not mentioned at all (U4, U3, U39, U49). Clearly stating a social media facilitator’s role at an institution, as well as his or her scope of knowledge on a specific subject, was emphasized (U35, U45, U48). This was notable as it conflicts with the one of the key benefits of social media, which is the ability to share information and participate in discussion with anonymity. Furthermore, honesty, affiliation and expertise were suggested for effectively delivering information and engaging audiences (U7, U5, U8, U12).
**Monitoring**

Policies emphasized that it is the responsibility of the administrator of a social media account to monitor the social media site, ensuring that social media content is always current and accurate (U8,U11,U21,U44). To ensure consistency, creating a process for posting and monitoring content through various social media channels simultaneously was encouraged. Such systems should address what kind of content will be distributed, a general timeframe for distribution, and a schedule for monitoring and responding to feedback (U20,U25,U14). By their nature, social networking sites are participatory and involve sharing among multiple users. However, the importance of monitoring real-time discussions for non-relevant or abusive comments was clearly outlined. Specifically, moderating comments and being transparent about doing so was suggested (U12,U14,U20,U22,U25,U50). If possible, configuring a social media site to moderate comments before they appear to the general public was suggested. This capability was particularly essential to aid in the deletion of any non-related comments and to block individuals who repeatedly post offensive or frivolous comments (U12,U14,U20,U50).

**Promotion**

Since some units within a larger university may seek to promote their social media presence independently, such strategies were addressed (U2,U5,U6,U7,U12,U14,U16,U21,U22,U23,U24,U27, U37,U39,U40,U41,U45,U47,U48,U50). As the success of social media relies almost exclusively on user engagement through sharing of content and discussions, encouraging such interaction may be considered an essential component of a successful social media strategy. Hyperlinking social media posts to relevant university content is considered a method to effectively promote content. Two social media policies suggested that paid advertising should be used to aid in promotion (U32,U36).

Higher education institutions also discouraged the promotion of commercial businesses or financial transactions (U11,U38). Furthermore, revenue from advertising was forbidden by one institution (U20).

**Safety and Security**

While the need for security and an awareness of cybercrimes are essential for safety and security, few social media policies mention these key elements. For instance, one institution stated only “be safe, be cautious of ’phishers’” (U5), while another institution simply advised users not to “post content that could create a security risk for the account holder or the institution” (U36). Institutions advised users and administrators to employ security practices, but did not explain what those practices would encompass (U1,U33,U34,U44). One institution reminded social media account holders that they are prohibited from posting any pictures of restricted access areas and information technology facilities (U9). Only few institutions emphasized the appeal for malicious individuals to target social media accounts associated with large institutions of higher education (U23,U43,U45).

The specific security risks encountered when using mobile devices to manage social media accounts were also mentioned. One institution specifically warned users that “such activity is outside of sound security practices and should never be utilized, even in a case of an emergency (U23)”.

Another institution advised users to “not allow someone else to create and manage accounts on your behalf”. Ironically, the same institution required that at least two full-time employees administrate and have access to all social media accounts that are associated with the school (U48).

**Timeliness**

Timeliness, with regard to keeping content current, was strongly emphasized in numerous policies (U3,U5,U6,U8,U13,U14,U15,U21,U24,U27,U34,U37,U47). Specifically, it was often stated that timeliness of content adds a sense of credibility to the institution and value to relevant discussions. Responding to social media inquiries promptly was credited with instilling a sense of competence and credibility with
social media participants. Policies indicated that timeliness can dictate the level of engagement a social media presence may have (U4,U10,U21,U25,U50). To encourage the timeliness of postings and responses, one university suggested that social media facilitators respond to comments within 24-hours (U49).

**Discussion**

The findings of this research-in-progress indicate that top-tier U.S. universities vary in their approach to addressing social media through policies and guidelines. The analysis of policies demonstrated that the adoption of social media was either encouraged, discouraged or neutral. Most surprising, considering the role of institutions of higher education, was that most of the policies evaluated ignored the implications of social media on teaching and learning.

This study provides benefits to practitioners and researchers. Practitioners, in this case university administrators, may benefit because the initial findings of this study provide a framework of the key factors found in existing higher education policies related to social media. Such an understanding is essential for the development and revision of effective social media governance. Furthermore, these findings reveal positive and negative aspects of existing policies and highlight critical gaps.

In addition to university administrators, information systems researchers may benefit from this study in two ways. First, this study suggests and demonstrates the application of qualitative analysis for policy evaluation and development. This technique could be applied to the evaluation of various types of policies across industries. As far as the authors are aware, this study present the first time that such an analysis of policies and guidelines has been conducted. Second, this study suggests a policy analysis approach toward better understanding organizational technology adoption. While the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Diffusion of Innovation (DoI) theories attempt to explain technology innovation at an individual and organization level, each does not address the impact of organizational policy on adoption (Davis 1989; Rogers 2010). Thus, this research could be expanded to explore at which point policy should be implemented during the technology adoption process and to determine if policy usage has measurable effects on the technology adoption process.

An initial recommendation of this research project is that universities should expand their focus on social media to include their pedagogical applications. For instance, specific policy statements that address university branding may actually hinder the use of social media as applied to learning. An example of this would include the policies that specifically state that social media accounts can only be created and managed by a central marketing department. This could be challenging for faculty members who wish to include such tools in their classes, which is essential for contemporary instructional design.

The next steps for this research-in-progress include further coding and performing an examination of relationships between the key social media factors identified. These findings will be combined with other research approaches, such as surveys of policy developers, faculty members and students, which will be used to further explain how social media has impacted institutions of higher education and how such institutions have responded. Furthermore, it is planned to explore why different institutions selected their various approaches to social media policy. Such an exploration could reveal which specific organizational attributes impact social media policy approaches.

**Conclusion**

This paper presents a novel approach toward the evaluation of social media policies in higher education. The initial results of this research-in-progress reveal that there are substantial differences in policy approaches toward social media within fifty top-tier U.S. universities. Furthermore, such policies often do not address key aspects of teaching and learning and instead often place emphasis on marketing and branding. An analysis of fifty policies was performed using the *Grounded Theory Method* and two independent coders evaluated each policy. Next steps in this research-in-progress include further evaluation of the results toward extracting theoretical implications. It is suggested that this research could
augment existing technology adoption research approaches and could establish the importance of policy design in technology adoption.

REFERENCES


