

Social Media: A Psychology Postgraduate's Reflection

By

Donna Peach & Marianne Erskine-Shaw

Social media is increasingly being utilised as a means of sharing research and ideas, showing your skill-set and collecting data. This article reflects on the positives and potential pitfalls for psychology postgraduates of this burgeoning area.

There is a virtual world full of real benefits for postgraduate psychology students. Social media provides an infrastructure that can be utilised to support your research, to help develop your professional profile and to communicate research findings with the public. Making the most of these opportunities often requires time, knowledge and persistence. Luckily, for us, our journey into the digital foray has the benefit of the experiences of others, who have already explored some of the obstacles. The use of social media in a professional setting is becoming widely recognised as a supportive platform to share, connect and develop research practice. However, some in the Psychology/Research field deem not all aspects of social media beneficial (Research Information Network (RIN), 2011). There are many issues, which as professionals we need to be mindful of when engaging in various online social platforms. This article will reflect on the use of social media upon creating a 'digital presence' and carrying out research.

A Digital Presence

Many people in the research field are now turning to social media to present themselves to a wider audience, which may aid in collaborative and further research opportunities. However, creating

a digital identity can be a daunting prospect, particularly for students who are yet to determine what career path they wish to pursue. We can create a digital presence within a variety of social network platforms ranging from more specific, research and professional platforms to more personal blogging available to a wider audience (see Table 1 for useful websites regarding social media use by researchers and academics).

Academic and professional specific - Websites such as *academia.edu* and Researchgate target an academic audience. This platform is useful for following specific researchers of interest, disseminating papers and monitoring impact. The features are extremely useful for communicating research and creating a specific research profile. Similarly, *LinkedIn* is a great way to connect with other researchers and businesses by creating a professional profile (Miah, 2015). However, these platforms are solely academic and it is difficult to provide that 'personal touch'. As postgraduates, connecting with researchers in the field can be daunting and the way in which we convey ourselves may be scrutinised more in these social network platforms. Further, it can be difficult to communicate ideas and general research updates, as the focus is on sharing papers, impact, and maintaining a professional research profile.

Personal blogs and Microblogging - Conversely, there are various social media platforms which although are not solely aimed at academic or professional use, are continuously being utilised for this purpose. In order to create a more personal platform with the opportunity to communicate ideas or unpublished research, many researchers and research groups are using tools such as *WordPress* to create blogs. Blogs allow you to post both large and small writings, are largely useful to gain comments on ideas and research, and are often a vehicle for collaborative opportunities (RIN, 2011). However, it can be difficult to publicise personal blogs to a wider research audience and therefore many academics are turning to microblogs such as *Twitter*. Twitter allows people to share small posts to a wide audience, in 140 characters. Although this allows for a quick read, this may also limit information that is more detailed. For this reason, microblog posts often share links to various webpages or blogs

containing more information. Microblogging websites such as Twitter allow us to communicate information beyond our professional identity, for example; music tastes, food choices and social activities. However, it is important that we are mindful of what we are posting and sharing, and how this may affect our future connections and career. Many employers are now accessing current and potential employee profiles on social networking websites, which in some incidences can lead to disciplinary, dismissal or unsuccessful applicants (Roberts & Sambrook, 2014).

Although the vast array of social media platforms allows many different digital profiles, a downside of this is the time that it can take to keep them up to date. Thus, it is worthwhile to be selective with the platforms that you choose and being mindful of maintaining an appropriate work/life balance. In addition to the time spent updating social media pages, microblogging websites provide copious amounts of information, which can be overwhelming (RIN, 2011). It is therefore important to be selective not only about the platforms we use, but also about the information that we allow to filter into our view, for example limiting the amount of people you follow. There is a lot of interesting information out there, but we cannot possibly read it all!

Nevertheless, postgraduate students have much to gain from having a presence on social media. This is especially the case with Twitter, as increasingly you can use this to connect with your university, library and other subject related organisations. The British Psychological Society (BPS) and many of its Divisions, Branches and Sections have a presence on Twitter making it easy to track developments and events (See Table 2 for useful Twitter and Facebook pages). As a psychology postgraduate student, you may wish to develop closer links with a Section that peaks your interest, or with a researcher in your area. Twitter provides opportunities for you to do this and often you will find academics willing to share information or to respond to requests. Even if the idea of reaching out to a particular individual is daunting, the beauty of Twitter is that engagement may consist of merely liking or retweeting a post, rather than directly connecting with each other. With these opportunities in

mind, it is essential to consider how you want to present yourself. Social psychologists will tell you that those with whom we group ourselves create part of our social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, you may want to consider whom else beyond your interest in psychology you want to connect with on different social media platforms. This can extend to the decisions of what you share, repeat, or retweet. Concern about these issues can lead to social media paralysis; some circumvent this by adding a disclaimer such as 'retweet does not mean agreement'.

A great opportunity is available for psychology postgraduate students through online engagement with the Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group (PsyPAG). If you are studying psychology at a postgraduate level in a UK institution then you are automatically a member of PsyPAG (there is no registration fee). At PsyPAG there is a team of representatives on the committee who run the social media outlets (Communications sub-committee). Therefore the PsyPAG twitter and Facebook pages are extremely active with plenty of posts regarding employment, events, articles and much more. There is huge potential to extend the PsyPAG online community and if this is something you would be interested in, then do not hesitate to get involved and engage with their social media pages. The importance of a supportive network throughout postgraduate study is not to be underestimated, so get online and take part in this vibrant community!

Social Media for Dissemination

Another advantage of social media is in its use as a mode of disseminating research findings. Social media can be a good resource to identify traditional outlets for research such as journals or conferences. However, in our increasingly 'open' academic world, you can also share links to your research papers, particularly helpful if published in an 'open' access journal. I would suggest this is of particular use to psychology as a discipline that integrates across the social research spectrum. Using social media can help to develop networks with researchers in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, to evaluate and extend your research. Such activity can serve to increase your citation

profile, but perhaps more importantly; it can provide opportunities to collaborate on future projects. Although the ability to share newly published work has an array of benefits, it is becoming increasingly more common for newly published papers to be subject to mass criticism across social networking sites such as Twitter and in blogs (Mandavilli, 2011). This brings about questions as to whether authors of such papers should reply to criticism online or whether to reply in a more traditional way (at conferences or in journals) (ibid). It is important to remain professional in response to online criticism and to inhibit progression in to public arguments, which could affect your reputation as a professional researcher. However, to provide a counter argument to this matter it is interesting to note that the volume of Twitter mentions are positively correlated with downloads and early citations (Shuai, Pepe & Bollen, 2012). Therefore, social media is arguably a useful tool in the dissemination of pre-published and newly published articles.

Social Media as a Research Tool

The accessibility of information within the social media realm is vast. At the click of a button, you can extend your knowledge base, by accessing blogs, podcasts, videos and connecting with the current researchers in your field. Platforms such as *SlideShare* are a valuable source of knowledge providing access to millions of presentations; similarly, you can upload your own slides thus extending your online footprint.

In addition, there is potential to use your social media presence (with ethical approval) to invite others to participate in your research. Using social media for recruitment potentially allows you to extend the diversity of your participant pool with people who may otherwise be inaccessible to you. However, it also raises questions about the public or private intent that people who share information on different platforms have. From this complex boundaries and ethical complexities emerge as to what can be regarded as informed consent. The BPS have helpfully provided guidance to help

researchers navigate the ethical challenges of what they term internet-mediated research (IMR; British Psychological Society, 2013).

Finally, it is important to remember some of the other important risks that inhabit any social media activity. As psychological student researchers, you may have an interest in its propensity to increase incidents of cyber bullying or its impact on mental health. These concerns are important as they influence people and they could affect you. In addition, it is vital that you maintain your professionalism and adhere to the conduct expected by your institution, organisation and the BPS. To ensure good social media practice it is worthwhile becoming familiar with the relevant guidance. It is also important to be aware that as a student with looming deadlines common complaints of social media feeds are their usefulness as a vehicle for procrastination.

Despite the challenges, it is evident that there is huge potential for psychologists to engage with social media in various ways. It is an exciting time to be a social scientist and to help construct this social research space. Much about the future remains unknown, but we can be sure that the relationship between social media and social researchers will remain transformative.

Correspondence

Donna Peach
Lecturer in Social Work: University of Salford
PhD Student: University of Huddersfield
Independent Researcher: MOSAIC II
Email: donna@donnapeach.co.uk
Twitter: @Donna_Peach & Curator of @phdforum @socphd

Marianne Erskine-Shaw
 PhD Student: Edge Hill University
 Email: erskinem@edgehill.ac.uk
 Twitter: @marianne_eshaw

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Useful Websites

Useful Websites	
Website	Description
http://www.andymiah.net/2012/12/30/the-a-to-z-of-social-media-for-academics/	<i>The A to Z of Social Media for Academia</i> – includes brief descriptions, examples and links.
http://libguides.ncl.ac.uk/c.php?g=130194&p=851118	<i>Social media for research</i> – Guide on various social media tools
http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/communicating-and-disseminating-research/social-media-guide-researchers	<i>Social media: A guide for researchers</i> – Downloadable PDF guide discussing benefits and criticisms

Table 2: Social networking pages for Psychology Postgraduates

Useful Twitter and Facebook pages for Psychology Postgraduates	
PsyPAG	Twitter: @PsyPAG Facebook: PsyPAG
PsyPAG Quarterly	Twitter: @PsyPAGQuarterly
British Psychological Society	Twitter: @BPSOfficial Facebook: British Psychological Society
British Psychological Society Conferences	Twitter: @BPSConference Facebook: BPS Conferences
British Psychological Society Research Digest	Twitter: @ResearchDigest Facebook: BPS Research Digest
The Psychologist	Twitter: @psychmag Facebook: The Psychologist
PhD Forum	Twitter: @PhDForum

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