

The student, the private and the professional role: Students' social media use

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Abstract Research has shown that students perceive a distinct divide between educational and private use of social media. The present study explores this divide by focusing on master students' perception of roles when using social media in a higher education context. A qualitative method has been used, mainly comprising of analyses of home exams and interviews, which were conducted with students enrolled in the master's course "Social media technologies". Results support previous research stating that students perceived a distinct divide between educational and private use of social media, and furthermore provide a more detailed understanding of this divide. The results from the study also indicate that there is yet another type of use: social media as a tool for career-building purposes, or what is labeled as *professional use*. Implications of social media for use in higher education are described through the analysis of three roles as performed by the individual: the *student role* in educational settings, the *professional role* for career-building, and the *private role*.

Keywords Social media · Higher education · Student · Performance · Role

1 Introduction

Research has suggested that there is a tension between the use of social media within and outside educational institutions (see e.g. Andersen 2007; Buckingham 2007; Hrastinski and Aghaee 2012; Nikolov 2007; Selwyn 2006), namely through

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educational, private, and professional use. In general, one can understand *educational* to be associated with curricular or learning activities and *private* to be activities associated to the personal life activities (typically “leisure”). In the present paper, the authors use a more nuanced interpretation of private and introduce an additional *professional* use that also includes extra-curricular activities not of “leisure” character, and are associated with profession and career-building.

In a study using surveys with 76 respondents and interviews with 14 students at four UK universities, Jones et al. (2010) found that students perceived a distinct divide between their *learning space* and their *personal space*. Jones et al. argued that educators need to address this divide by either combining or separating these two spaces. Clark et al. (2009) mapped the technology landscapes of 51 young learners (11–16 years) from the UK and identified the blurring of boundaries between in- and out-of-school uses of social media. Students were found to routinely circumvent school-designated rules in order to use social media technologies outside of the educational settings. Clark et al. introduced the term *digital dissonance* to describe the tension that arose between learners’ appropriation of social media and to describe how students and teachers negotiate the educational potential of social media.

This study explores students’ perception of *roles* when using social media in the context of higher education. Biddle (1986) suggested that the use of the term *role* assumes that “persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviors and those of other persons” (p. 67). An individual is characterized by many different roles. For example, an individual enrolled in higher education does not only take on the role of being a student, but is in different contexts a private citizen, a friend, a son or a daughter. The present study builds on and extends research by Clark et al. (2009) and Jones et al. (2010) by conducting a qualitative inquiry of students’ perception of roles when using social media. The students participating in this study were enrolled in a master’s course entitled “Social media technologies”. An assumption of this study is that they can thus be expected to have both competence and interest in understanding the use of social media.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Social media in higher education

Higher education has in the past decades typically been regarded as teacher-centered, where students are passive receivers of knowledge (Duffy and Jonassen 1992; Säljö 2003). In contrast, the social media used by the students more recently is often characterized as being contingent on user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). This dichotomy of a teacher-centered structure versus user-generated content creates a tension as students expect instruction and learning to incorporate social media (Bonzo and Parchoma 2010; Thompson 2007). Bonzo and Parchoma explore this tension through a paradox that occurs as expectations held by the students are inconsistent with the teacher-centered structure, arguing that “*higher education seems to have fallen behind in adopting and adapting the new social media reality*” (p. 912). They claim that if educational institutions can understand the core principles of the use of social media, instead of imposing regulations and directions for it, the teacher-centered

structure will be less strong, the possibilities for collaborative learning will improve, and the students will feel more engaged.

While students demand and expect an increased use of social media within educational settings (see for example Anderson et al. 2010), not all students enter higher education with expectations of meeting a less teacher-centered structure (Margaryan et al. 2011). Also, some studies show a preference among students to keep social networks and learning situations apart (Veglis 2014). Many students can thus be said to conform to fairly traditional pedagogies rather than demand a change in the lecturing practice.

Jones et al. (2010) studied students' use of social media for learning and compared use to the reasons for learning. The results showed that the participants perceived a significant gap between personal and learning spaces, most often due to their perception and experience of "learning and social life". The participants saw social life as pleasure while learning included a "painful process" and thereby some refused to use the same social media for learning as for "studying" or during the "lectures". Jones et al. concluded that learning needs to be designed to address the individual's preferences either to combine or to separate their learning spaces and personal spaces.

These findings can be compared to the research by Clark et al. (2009), who described consequences of social media use within the educational context in terms of a *digital dissonance*. They used this term to explain students' use of social technologies within formal school settings, and how these technologies are used to create spaces predominantly for socializing amongst students. Their findings showed that even though the students had access to a wide range of technologies, they did not automatically transfer their knowledge about usage to support their own learning. Instead, they actively and routinely circumvented school-designed rules so as to be able to use social media technologies for purposes not related to studying. The digital divide identified by Jones et al. and the digital dissonance described by Clark et al. highlight the challenges involved in bridging social media and higher education.

Studies from the UK, US, Germany and Sweden have showed that higher education students mainly use social media for social interaction (DeAndrea et al. 2012; Hrastinski and Aghae 2012; Madge et al. 2009; Selwyn 2009; Wodzicki et al. 2012). For example, Selwyn (2009) focused on the use of comments and messaging in Facebook. Through a qualitative study involving 909 undergraduate students in a UK university, Selwyn found that messages and comments could be characterized as 1) reflecting university experience, 2) exchanging practical and academic information or 3) providing social support. The messages were often ironic, sarcastic or humorous. The study participants used social media for social support and to coordinate their studies rather than to engage in deep or collaborative learning.

2.2 Individuals' performance of roles

Goffman (1959) described a dichotomy of the "front region" and "back region", or the front and the back stage of an individual's performance of self. The front stage represents a space where the individual is trying to enact an idealized version of the self according to a specific role. An example of a front stage is when an individual is trying to be an appropriate lecturer (Hogan 2010). The back stage is described as a place where the illusions and impressions (for the front stage) are intentionally and openly constructed (Goffman 1959). This back stage can often appear less socially

acceptable. A performance that belongs to one individual's front stage can be associated with the back stage for someone else. For instance, some teachers will admit the need to revise a lecture in progress while others will conceal the fact that the lecture is unprepared.

Goffman's dramaturgical approach, likened to a stage play, is used to describe an individual's performance of roles. It describes how an individual seeks to perform roles as convincingly as possible with local adaption depending on the particular audience, time and place. In Goffman's work, the concept of audience refers most often to one homogenous audience, and can be understood as, for example, one's family, the fellow students, or the colleagues at work. Goffman describes that when audience segregation fails and someone sees the performance of an individual that would not belong to the front stage for this particular part of the audience, problems in managing different impressions arise. According to Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) even an imaginary audience (or, in social media, a loosely defined audience) will challenge behaviors and thus have impact on the individuals' performance.

Today, previously disconnected conversations can, by the use of social media, be exposed to multiple audiences at the same time; this could be understood as a collapse of audiences. Some of the previously segregated audiences can collapse into one single audience either intentionally or accidentally (Papacharissi 2010). An accidental collapse of audiences may occur if one is unaware of the potential visibility of a message or a conversation. For example, an accidental collapse of audiences may occur if one posts a message in a social media with the intention that the message should reach out to one specific audience (i.e. one circle of "friends"), the message might spread outside that audience regulated either by constraints in the social media chosen or by being shared to someone outside of the intended audience.

It has been suggested that social media services, which offer access to control features, are inherently private and can be considered to be a "back stage" (boyd 2006; Lewis et al. 2008; Robinson 2007). However, Hogan (2010) argued that the notion of a back stage *is not* the same as private, defining private as the place where individuals can put their role aside and be themselves. Hogan further explained that the idea of expected privacy online does not imply that one by default has something that may contradict one's other roles. In the present study, the authors do not categorically assign social media to a front or back stage, but acknowledge that any individual can perform on either.

There are a variety of social media used within university courses for communication between students and teachers, even if they were originally designed for other purposes. Examples of such include Facebook (designed for communication among friends), LinkedIn (designed for professional networks) and Twitter (designed for communicating without a defined audience). Today, many social media are often integrated with merged or joined profiles, or by allowing to post to several services simultaneously.

The merge of functions and user profiles allows an audience connected to one social media to view activities of individuals who have user profiles in interconnected social media. This implies that individuals may want to adapt similar behaviors in several services, or beware of unintentional visibility across services. In a recent study, doctoral students experienced that a networked learning environment introduced complex private and academic social structures that inflicted on their studies, and where a

conscious positioning was necessary to form strategic faculty—student relationships (Koole 2013).

3 Method

During the autumn of 2010, the course “Social media technologies” was taught at KTH Royal Institute of Technology. The focus of the course was on analyzing characteristics of social media. The teacher provided the students with a definition of social media taken from Wikiversity: “[Social media are] Internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information and experiences” (Wikiversity 2010). The course included reflections on issues arising from students’ individual and collective everyday use of these technologies, as well as reflections on the effects of social media use on individuals, groups and society. The course enrolled students who all had at least a bachelor’s degree in an area relevant to social media technologies. An online survey was distributed to the students to serve as recruitment basis and selection criteria for interviews.

Two types of data were collected. First, answers to an essay question from the course home exam, and second, interviews with a selection of the students. One question in the home exam was designed to understand the student’s perception of roles by assuming a meta-perspective and viewing social media from another role, in form of a written essay. The exam question asked the students to imagine themselves being the teacher of a fictive course, and to reflect upon advantages and disadvantages of implementing social media technologies in that course. The students were further asked to argue for their use or non-use of these, to suggest examples of use, and finally to motivate their choices. (We expected these students to have a relationship with social media that would be uncontaminated by the didactical considerations that for instance teachers or teacher students would need to have. They were not explicitly asked to mention or write about roles; this information could instead be extracted from their answers.)

We used material extracted from the exam texts to identify similarities and patterns, inspired by Miles and Huberman (1994). Then we examined the most commonly used words to further discover inherent patterns, as we assume that word frequencies reveal importance and reduce risk of biased interpretations; word frequency reports will prevent missing important words overlooked in the first step. The collected text from the exams was analyzed using the text analysis tool Textalyser (2004), inspired by methods described in related research (Kol and Scholnik 2008; Miyazoe and Anderson 2010).

The data set was manually spell-checked to reduce the risk of misspelled words influencing the analysis, and to collate abbreviated words with their full version. The data set was then filtered with exclusion according to the following rules: 1) terms that were expected to have little impact to the results but would appear frequently (including direct quotations of exam instructions such as “student”, “course” and “teacher”), 2) references to course literature, and 3) names of social media services. The final list of words after filtering would thus contain only the text material that was most relevant for our investigation. To ensure that we had reliable data, an independent researcher reviewed the different steps in the data preparation process.

In order to explain the findings from the home exam, semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed by a researcher without connection to the

students in question (Robson 2002; Warren 2002). Having semi-structured interviews allowed greater flexibility in responses. Another reason for including interviews was to decrease the risk of biased answers due to the fact that the home exams were graded. To improve the validity of the study, the selection of candidates for interviews was done prior to analyzing the home exams. In order to acquire a wide range of students' attitudes the selection was based on results from the survey. The patterns and similarities connected to the students' perception of roles that had been identified during the text analysis were then brought up during the interviews; one question, for instance, was "Does your private, educational or professional use of social media differ in terms of tools or habits?".

4 Results and analysis

This study is based on two collected data sets: 1) answers to an essay question from the course home exam, and 2) interviews with students. In this section the collected data are analyzed, in particular from the first data set, and the results presented. When applicable, the second data set, which consists of opinions stated in interviews, is used to further explain the findings.

The course enrolled 59 students (aged between 20 and 34 years, mean 23 years). The online survey that was distributed to recruit students confirmed that the target group could be classified as frequent and experienced users of computers (average 14.2 years), the Internet (average 11.5 years), and of social media (6.6 years). They estimated their daily use of social media to 2.4 h. It is reasonable to assume that experienced users also can provide richer insights.

All students submitted the exam text. This text formed a data set consisting of 37 848 words (3329 unique words). We conducted eight semi-structured interviews. An early and important discovery from our coding was identification of three types of roles: the student, the private, and the professional, and these are therefore described in the following.

4.1 Perception of roles

The most frequently used terms in the data set were, after the filtering process, in descending order: *communication*, *work*, *share*, *available*, *follow*, *ties*, *role*, *personal*, *private* and *relationship*. The list provided an entrance to manually review the texts and to investigate the above-mentioned terms from the perspective of roles. When reviewing sentences containing frequent terms in full, we identified concerns about a distinction of what is private or what is work: "I think it is important to make a distinction to what is private, and what is work. Every person needs some free time to relax (...)". Another example of how a student argued in relation to the use of social media was: "The reason that I wanted to use Facebook in the course was that it's a site already visited by most [people] every day. I eventually came to that the conclusion that a Facebook visit is of personal business and some people don't want to mix their personal/private life with their school/work". The concern about private and work was also raised during the interviews where the arguments extended to include how important it is to consider how everything that is published is also public.

We found patterns in the data indicating different interpretations of what can be considered private- and work-related use. Private use according to the students' responses was the use for leisure, or communication with close friends and families. Work-related use could be understood from two different angles; one that was related to formal education raising ideas and issues concerning the student use, e.g., some students referred to their education as being their work, and the other was related to the use of social media as a tool for career building, and thereby representing work as in their current or future profession. As such, the different uses can be attributed to the front and back stages, or different performed roles (see Goffman 1959).

4.2 Three types of roles

From the analysis three distinct roles were identified: the private, the student and the professional role. In the following, it is shown that a merging of these roles can take place. The following part primarily uses material and quotes from the home exams, while the interviews were used to explain the findings. The interviews support that different social media were used for different purposes, or that the same social media was used for private, student and professional purposes, but in different ways.

4.2.1 The private role

From the analysis, we could see that students perceive a certain kind of social setting where private information become public through the use of social media which in some sense arguably brings the backstage performance front stage. Meanwhile, other students acted online with less openness about mixing private and non-private content. Another concern raised by the students referring to what they called their "private sphere", was about information storage and how the shared information will remain available online after they have finished their university education.

A recurring statement concerned the distinction between private and work, it is complicated to be logged on to a social media for one purpose - addressing one specific audience, for example - while wishing to avoid disturbances from others aimed at a different role for the individual. The conflict of simultaneously being online and unavailable seemed to apply regardless of role: "*You might be online and busy with your studies, but what other people see is that you are online and accessible.*" Either they were concerned about being disturbed while studying or they were concerned about the expectations of them always being online, resulting in an experience of less headroom for being private.

There was an understanding that different services offer different levels of privacy and the possibility of adjusting privacy settings such as visibility and access control was known to be possible but was not, generally, explored in detail. In the words of a student: "*I don't use separate accounts but I can imagine to set security measures so professional relations cannot see private conversations and pictures.*" The service most often mentioned in regards to privacy concerns was Facebook, it was agreed to reveal too much private information. In general, social media which require bidirectional approval to form a link (*Facebook, Orkut, Friendster, etc.*), were perceived more private than others.

4.2.2 The student role

Many of the students proposed that *the social media used* for studying should differ from social media used for private purposes. The main reason presented was in order to minimize distraction as the use of social media was described as making it difficult to concentrate on specific tasks. Some students expressed uncertainty about how to ensure an effective use of social media in their studies, and requested and expected advice from their teachers: “*Teachers now have one more responsibility. That is directing students effectively use the social media tools to study.*”

In the responses the majority of the students suggested that social media should be used to support engagement in their role of being students, and reflected on themselves as active participants: “*The use of [social media tools, such as wikis, blogs and forums] allow students to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners in the lectures to potential participants and primary subjects.*” Active participation was considered important.

The majority of the students saw that social media could enable informal communication and increased interaction between the course participants, and also between students and teachers. The interviews supported the notion that social media generally could reduce perceived boundaries between students and the teacher, for example by providing the students with the opportunity to ask questions with less fear of appearing unknowledgeable, i.e. questions that they did not dare to pose in the classroom. The communication that occurred was described to bridge the distance between the teacher and the students: “*(...) contributes to a kind of bridging between teachers and students in a different way. You get a closer contact, in my opinion.*” Furthermore, the communication was described in terms of an “*on-going communication form*” which differs from e-mail and face-to-face communication.

The possibility of having an increased informal communication was explained by the students as a result of the actual use, rather than the system design. This possibility also came with the awareness that different social media imply different constraints. Some of the students described this as an experience of a one-way communication between the teacher and students, independent of which system they used. For example, blogs were mentioned as reinforcing present patterns of the teacher disseminating one-way information to the students: “*The main reason why I would not do discussions on the course blog is that blogs are much more one-sided and does not provide an equality between the teacher and the students.*” A similar experience of one-way communication was mentioned that underline another aspect of the distancing between student and teacher in the use of learning management systems (LMS): “*The problem with [LMS] as [I] see it is that it is rarely utilized by the students, it is often used as a one-way communication, with the teacher as the transmitter and the students as passive receivers.*”

However, it should be noted that some of the students asked for a type of communication that can easily be interpreted as promoting teacher authority: “*The interactivity between the students and the teacher should stay at a proper and limited level so that the teacher can provide the correct information and knowledge (...)*”. This view reflects how for some students the teacher’s position as a professional is something that should be looked up to, and being on an equal level could adventure this.

4.2.3 The professional role

The data analysis has revealed a third role that is an addition to the private and the student roles typically mentioned in the literature. From the word frequency analysis, we could find that future career building and professional networking were mentioned as the main reasons for incorporating social media in educational settings. An expressed request for extending the implementation of social media in educational settings puts forward a strategic use rather than only a wish for using social media to support learning: *“This would contribute to students getting more “weak ties” and a larger network that they could use in the future”*. In their desire to use social media for professional networking, the students also transferred part of the responsibility to the teacher. A student noted when taking on the role as a teacher: *“Since education is not only about memorizing stuff and developing in a professional field, but also about getting the valuable contacts and relationships, I, as a teacher, would like to facilitate this process in some way.”*

During the interviews a student was asked to further explain if private, educational or professional uses of social media differ: *“It does in the use of certain social media tools. Things like [the LMS] and SharePoint are specifically designed for use in professional or educational environments”*. Another student explained: *“Almost all of my social media usage are for private use. Perhaps only LinkedIn is used for purely professional profile, while Twitter is a [mix] of both since its content can easily be accessed by public.”*

The fact that many students distinguish between private and professional use also made them experience that social media bridge their different roles. One of the offered reasons was the presence of different audiences: *“(…) many of the typical social media I use privately have attracted many companies and are slowly changing from a purely “me and my friends network” to a network that includes professional relations.”* The students also brought up and reflected an awareness of that potential employees might use social media to search for them: *“I’m aware that potential employers might be looking at my Facebook or Twitter account, to name a few”*. This awareness impacted on how the students chose to act within social media, also during times when they were expected to participate in their student role.

5 Discussion

The study explored students’ perception of roles when using social media in the context of higher education. Results provide a more detailed understanding of the divide between educational and private use of social media that also emphasizes social media as a tool for career building. From the analysis three roles emerged: the student, the private and the professional role. This study supports the presence of a *digital dissonance* between educational and private use of social media, as suggested by Clark et al. (2009), and also the addition of a third role, the professional role. However, the term *intersecting roles*, rather than digital dissonance is preferred, because the roles are partly overlapping and the boundaries can be difficult to distinguish. Where Jones et al. (2010) see two different, sometimes overlapping, modes of using social media, the results of this study suggest a higher degree of fluidity that depends on the individual;

i.e., individuals might take on the private, the student, or the professional roles to different extents.

Social media is here also seen to facilitate fast role transitions as an individual's behavior (front stage performance) can move quickly from one role to another. Reduced effort in moving in-between roles and in acting a specific role regardless of physical location and time makes the boundaries between roles diffuse. This diffusion can be explained as *an intersection of the three roles* where an individual simultaneously enacts two or even three roles. For example, an individual can be located in the classroom participating in a lecture in their role as student, and simultaneously act in the private role, communicating with a family member through social media. One of the consequences of these intersections is that students report experiencing that social media distracts from their formal learning environment. Results indicate possible difficulties in their understanding of how to use social media to support formal learning, and they asked guidance from teachers. These insights echo the findings of Anderson et al. (2010) from a distance education setting.

While Selwyn (2009) found that students use Facebook mainly for social support and to coordinate their studies, the present study encompassed many different social media services and could demonstrate a conscious use of these, not only for study, but also in a professional role with the aim to prepare for future careers. We remind you that considering the course the students were enrolled in, they should be expected to have a developed understanding of how social media may be supportive. They were also getting close to finishing their university studies and had in many cases already started to look for work within their profession.

The study is exploratory and partly based on a home exam. There is a risk that students were biased towards what they thought their teacher expected of them when completing the home exam. To this end, the findings were triangulated with the interview data. Here the focus was on the student perspective, and the next step is the perspective of teachers and designers of online learning environments in order to gain understanding of using social media to support education. Early work in this area includes Margaryan et al. (2011) and Brown (2012). Empirical evidence of a third role suggests the need for further studies to better understand the implications of using social media for extracurricular activities.

5.1 Conclusions

Based on the three roles identified in the study, a future challenge is to design social media that take into account how multiple roles are displayed in the interaction. In this sense, the question would be how social media, in the particular context of higher education, could support the students' evolving needs associated with the roles identified in the present study. Special attention must be paid to tensions arising between these roles.

Furthermore, as suggested by Zhao et al. (2013), temporal aspects must be considered in the persistence of available data associated with different roles (i.e., the contents they produce in terms of text, links, photos, videos, and more). For instance, both temporal and spatial aspects are associated with the notion of "role" and may thus cause conflicts when specific needs, goals, concerns and even audiences change over time. Zhao et al. also suggested to learn about and design how users take care of their

data and how the relationship between them and their data might change over time. Again, this makes it crucial from a design perspective to recognize tensions between different roles. For instance, the system should reveal who is in the audience and how the audience can change over time, thus helping the individual create and manage private, professional or students' groups. Zhao et al. admitted that even though separate platforms could be used for separate purposes, in reality people use the same social media for multiple purposes. Comments from the students in our study supported this observation.

Awareness about different roles becomes important when social media is introduced in educational settings. When teachers decide to interact and communicate using social media, they might unintentionally lead the students to perform roles that contradict the expected reaction. This is a risk in particular if the use of social media differs from what is considered appropriate in each social situation.

Because of the above, social media in higher education should be flexible enough to offer the students support in managing their online activities, which can be associated or attributed to different roles assumed over time. Furthermore, teachers need to be aware of how introducing social media in their courses may on the one hand contribute to the social aspect of learning, and, on the other hand, open for intriguing questions about interpreting students' behavior in relation to the course's learning purposes.

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