



# Social media usage by higher education academics: A scoping review of the literature

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## Abstract

Despite extensive proliferation of social media in different domains, higher education academics' use of social media remains unclear. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by providing a scoping review, covering the last five years of extant literature. It compiles and analyses previous empirical studies concerning academics' usage of social media, the benefits of social media for academics, and the challenges and barriers that academics face when using or considering using social media. The review of twenty-four published articles shows that not all academics currently use social media and those who do, tend to use it for research dissemination and personal reasons, mostly career and network development. Many academics do not use social media for teaching, mostly due to a lack of awareness, skill and confidence in using this emerging technology. Despite this limited use of social media by academics, social media provides clear benefits for career development, research and teaching, including: improved communication with various stakeholders, increased opportunities and contacts, and increased student learning and satisfaction. This review is intended as a timely introduction to current thinking about the usage of social media by higher education academics globally. By outlining the status quo in this under-researched field, it informs and becomes a useful basis for further research and highlights the need for academics to become more aware of, and accustomed to, using social media in their professional lives, not only for research and career development purposes, but – most importantly – also for learning and teaching.

**Keywords** Social media · Academics · Higher education · Learning and teaching · Benefits · Challenges

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## 1 Introduction

The widespread proliferation of online technologies is reshaping the way academics connect, communicate and collaborate with their diverse stakeholders. To facilitate these interactions, social media has rapidly come to the forefront. Social media includes social networking sites, video sharing sites, photo sharing sites, bookmarking sites, discussion forums and wikis (Chugh and Ruhi 2019). Social media is making its mark on academia as it opens new avenues for academics to publicize their work and engage with a wide audience, including the public, stakeholders like students and practitioners, as well as other academics within and outside their own discipline (Carrigan 2019).

Globally, there are more than 3.8 billion active social media users (Chaffey 2020) – this corresponds to nearly half the world’s population and thus also includes teachers at various educational levels: school teachers of different ages and experiences actively use social media to search for content, share information, interact with others and enhance their skills (Murphy 2018), while teachers in higher education (from here on referred to as academics) use social media to promote social scholarship by making their research more accessible, contributing to broader conversations and enabling the general public to become active participants in the construction of knowledge (Pausé and Russell 2016). However, at the same time, many academics do not use social media, or use it only to a very limited extent, because they are uncertain about its uses, benefits and drawbacks; may face cultural or institutional resistance; worry about getting distracted from their main academic duties; and other pragmatic and pedagogical reasons (Manca and Ranieri 2016a).

It is clear that social media usage is infiltrating academia (Vandeyar 2020), but it is equally clear that this does not happen extensively or consistently, and the literature presents very little insight into this emerging phenomenon. There is a growing body of scholarly literature on social media usage by students but scant on social media usage by academics (Al-Qaysi et al. 2020; Hrastinski and Aghaei 2012). At the time of writing, the authors were not aware of any literature reviews that have amalgamated prior research in this area. Hence, through a literature review lens, this article explores the usage of social media by academics globally. Thus, by conducting a scoping review, we seek to address the following research questions:

1. What do higher education academics use social media for?
2. What are the benefits of social media for higher education academics?
3. What are the challenges and barriers to social media use for higher education academics?

Specifically, this study seeks to contribute to the social media literature by examining the myriad ways in which academics are using social media throughout the world, as well as the benefits, challenges and barriers they face when using or considering the use of social media. Such a review depicts an important milestone in the progress of this field of research, particularly as the review is focused on social media usage of academics, not students. For the purpose of this paper and for clarity, an academic is anyone working in a higher education institution in a teaching and/or research-based role.

Despite the increasing attention social media has been receiving in the literature, its usage by academics is an innovative concept that lacks sufficient perspective and research. By exploring this under-researched area, this article generates two key contributions: firstly, this article presents a comprehensive list of articles over the past five years that will assist other researchers looking for references on this topic. Secondly, it provides a critical analysis of the research but with the broad scope of a primer.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section presents the research method and results, after which the different uses of social media by academics are explored in section 3. Section 4 outlines the benefits that academics can gain from social media usage, which is then followed by the challenges and barriers in section 5. Discussion and outlook follow in the next section. Finally, section 7 provides conclusions along with limitations and ideas for future research.

## 2 Research method and results

Literature reviews are an important part of academic projects and they help to advance knowledge, facilitate theory development, close over-researched areas and identify new research areas. The information systems field, however, lacks review articles (Webster and Watson 2002). With an aim to address the research questions in detail and other related objectives, a scoping review of the literature is carried out. Scoping reviews address broader conceptual topics, provide a rigorous and transparent research method (Arksey and O'Malley 2005), allow for the exploration of literature and include systematic activities such as focusing on a specific topic, with well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria and clearly defined research procedures (Peterson et al. 2017).

In January 2020, a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed journals was carried out based on keywords that included social media, academics and academia. Boolean operators (And, Or and Not) were used along with wild cards to ensure the search yielded maximum results. Active filters were used to limit the search. The search, which focused on the following four databases, yielded 203 articles published over a five-year duration from 2014 to 2019: Education Collection, ProQuest Central, Scopus (Elsevier) and Web of Science.

First, duplicates and articles not written in English were excluded. Second, given the focus of this review, only articles set within a higher education context, and focused on academics' use of social media were included. Any studies, which solely focused on students or professional staff were excluded, but the small number of articles, which focused on a mix of higher education academics, professional staff and research students, were retained. Given that demographic or socio-economic characteristics issues did not arise through the review of the literature and this was not the key focus of the research, such aspects were not explored in detail.

Abstracts were screened to ensure the publications were a close fit to the inclusion criteria. The screening often involved reading every article carefully to ensure that it focused on the use of social media by academics, whether it was for teaching, research, networking or other professional uses. Multiple articles mentioned that academics can use social media for private and professional purposes (e.g. Manca and Ranieri 2016b; Mou 2014; Prescott 2014; Sobaih et al. 2016; Veletsianos and Stewart 2016), but none

of the reviewed articles focused solely on private uses. All forms of social media were included. Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria and relevant filtering, a total of 17 articles were identified. To further complement these articles and ensure a wider coverage, a relevant search of the first ten pages of Google Scholar was also conducted. This led to the identification of an additional 7 articles. Details of the final shortlist of 24 articles are outlined in Table 1.

To synthesise previous research, content analysis is considered to be an effective technique for qualitatively analysing research documents (Wilding et al. 2012). The qualitative content analysis approach is research question oriented, involves text evaluation and is useful for summarising when the research question is open (Mayring 2019). As illustrated in Table 1, the search yielded 24 articles, of which 18 studies focused on primary data collected from participants from 10 distinct countries, 5 studies had focused on participants globally and 1 study had participants from 6 Arab countries. Apart from the global studies, there was a prominent absence of literature focusing on academics from Asia. In terms of methodological approach, the most favoured method was surveys, followed by interviews. Interestingly, one-third of the reviewed studies did not specify the platform they assessed. This implies that these papers generically used the tags social media, social networking sites, social networking tools or online social networking platforms in exploring the usage of social media. This also demonstrates the interchangeable nature of these terms and how researchers often tend to go with the most generic term of all i.e. “social media.”

As the terms ‘social media’ and ‘social networking sites’ are often used interchangeably in the selected articles, for the purposes of this paper, they are used interchangeably too. However, as previously outlined, social media includes social networking sites, video sharing sites, photo sharing sites, bookmarking sites, discussion forums and wikis.

### 3 Uses of social media

The first part of this literature review documents the various ways in which academics use social media and, as will become apparent, academics use social media for a wide range of activities spanning the typical academic duties of research and teaching, alongside other activities including professional development, career and image enhancement, and networking (Dermentzi and Papagiannidis 2018; Donelan 2016; Knight and Kaye 2016).

Jordan and Weller (2018) found that academics used social media as a personal learning network, whereby junior academic staff tended to use it mostly to build their profile and career and more senior staff tended to use it to disseminate and share information. Meishar-Tal and Pieterse’s (2017) study of 81 researchers at three academic institutions in Israel confirmed this as it established that 65% of researchers used academic social networking sites (ASNS), albeit not intensively, for the primary purposes of self-promotion, ego-bolstering, acquiring professional knowledge, belonging to a peer community, and assisting interaction with peers. Similarly, Knight and Kaye (2016) found that academics’ use of Twitter was influenced mostly by their desire to enhance their reputation, while Elsayed (2016), who examined the usage habits of Arab researchers from six government-owned universities, found that most researchers joined an ASNS to share publications and communicate with fellow researchers.

**Table 1** Studies included in the review

Author(s) and publication year (chronologically)	Focus of the article	Country/Location where the study was conducted	Research method	Social media platform assessed in the study
Mou 2014	Examines how academics present themselves on social media and how the public evaluates them based on their social media content	China	Content analysis and online experiment	Sina Weibo
Prescott 2014	Explores teaching style and attitudes towards Facebook as an academic tool	United Kingdom	Survey	Facebook
Gachago et al. 2015	Explores lecturers' experiences using WhatsApp in their engagements with learners	South Africa	Focus group and personal reflection	WhatsApp
Guerin et al. 2015	Explores how blogs and blogging relates to academic development	Australia	Case study	No specific platform specified
Mansour 2015	Assesses the usage of social networking sites	Kuwait	Survey	A range of social media platforms
McPherson et al. 2015	Explores the role of Twitter as an informal learning space for academic development	Australia	Vignette	Twitter
Mikki et al. 2015	Compares digital presence on academic networking sites	Norway	Secondary data analysis	ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Google Scholar Citations, ResearcherID and ORCID
Quan-Haase et al. 2015	Examines how Twitter is used for scholarly practice and the informational and social gratifications it provides	Global	Interview	Twitter
Costa 2016	Interprets perceptions of digital scholarly practices	United Kingdom	Interview and field notes	No specific platform specified
Dermentzi et al. 2016	Studies the differences between intention to adopt social networking sites and other online technologies for engaging with academic peers	Global	Survey	No specific platform specified

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and publication year (chronologically)	Focus of the article	Country/Location where the study was conducted	Research method	Social media platform assessed in the study
Donelan 2016	Explores the use of social media for professional development and networking opportunities	United Kingdom	Mixed methods (Interview and survey)	No specific platform specified
Elsayed 2016	Investigates researchers' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of academic social networks	6 Arab countries	Survey	ResearchGate
Manca and Ranieri 2016b	Explores the use of social media for personal, teaching and professional purposes	Italy	Survey	A range of social media platforms
Knight and Kaye 2016	Explores usage of Twitter in academic contexts	United Kingdom	Survey	Twitter
Sobaih et al. 2016	Investigate the use of social media as a teaching and learning platform in a developing country	Egypt	Mixed methods (Survey and interview)	A range of social media platforms
Velestianos and Stewart 2016	Explores uses of social media to disclose challenging personal and professional issues	Global	Interview	A range of social media platforms
Cilliers et al. 2017	Investigates the intention to use social media for work-related purposes	South Africa	Survey	No specific platform specified
Manca and Ranieri 2017	Investigates perceptions and attitudes towards social media use for scholarly communication	Italy	Survey	A range of social media platforms
Meishar-Tal and Pieterse 2017	Analyses the use of academic social-networking sites	Israel	Survey	ResearchGate and Academia.edu
Murrie and Cilliers 2017	Investigates factors that determine the adoption of social media	South Africa	Survey	No specific platform specified

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and publication year (chronologically)	Focus of the article	Country/Location where the study was conducted	Research method	Social media platform assessed in the study
Dermentzi and Papagiannidis 2018	Examines the factors that motivate academics to adopt online technologies for public engagement	Global	Survey	No specific platform specified
Jordan and Weller 2018	Identifies preferred academic social networking platforms and their usage in professional lives	Global	Survey	A range of social media platforms
Sapkota and Vander Putten 2018	Investigates perceptions and usage of social media in classroom and business contexts	United States	Interview	No specific platform specified
O'Keefe 2019	Explores the use of Twitter for the purpose of academic development and presents its challenges	United Kingdom	Interview	Twitter

McPherson et al. (2015) demonstrated how Twitter can be used to disrupt and enhance academic development practices by building and maintaining social networks and informal learning processes. More recently, O’Keeffe (2019) added to this line of research by documenting academics’ perception that Twitter is a useful tool to assist with informal academic development and learning, in particular learning about academic knowledge and practices. Also focusing on Twitter, Quan-Haase et al. (2015) explored what informational and social gratification digital humanities scholars obtained from using Twitter as a social medium. The analysis found that there was no one definitive use of Twitter, but it was instead seen as a ‘fit for purpose’ tool, but that it is important to understand the digital intricacies of the medium if academics want to engage with other users in a meaningful and creative way. Participants also noted that Twitter enabled them to stay up to date with relevant discipline research and provided them with a sense of gratification by finding a voice. Dermentzi et al. (2016) split the various social media options into social networking sites (SNS), which focus around a person’s profile and contacts, and other technologies (OT), which focus more on content than contacts (e.g. websites, blogs, forums, etc.): academics tended to use SNS to maintain existing contacts, but tended to use OT to connect with other academics in their research area whom they did not yet know personally. In other findings, the authors reported that academics preferred SNS rather than OT to maintain their professional image, and – when seeking information – academics preferred OT because these have a long history of providing reliable information and are perceived to better address their privacy concerns.

In a China-based study of college professors’ self-presentation microblogs, Mou (2014) examined how the public evaluates these professors based on the content of their microblogs. The study found that professors tended to be involved in academic discussion, followed by personal issues (i.e., parenting and caregiving), and lastly public affairs. As the level of academic seniority increased, so too did discussions associated with academic matters and public affairs, which helped senior academics to establish a significant fan base more so than their younger academic counterparts. In terms of how the public evaluated professors, it seems that not only is it important that *what is said* but *who says it*.

All studies reviewed thus far have in common the fact that academics seem to use social media for research-related purposes (e.g. obtaining and disseminating research), networking, professional development, and career/image development. However, a further key element of academics’ duties is the education of students. Mansour (2015) found that faculty staff tended to use social media for social engagement purposes rather than for instructional and educational purposes. In fact, some faculty members indicated they did not use social media for educational purposes and, of these non-users, nearly half were not aware of the benefits associated with the usage of social media. Similarly, Knight and Kaye (2016) established that academics use Twitter with the intention to enhance their reputation, rather than to improve the learning experiences of students.

Nonetheless, there is literature suggesting that academics do use social media for learning and teaching purposes: amongst those is Prescott (2014) who investigated academics’ use of Facebook as an educational tool and found that the small number of educators who used Facebook for learning and teaching did so primarily to share information with students; the results also indicated that teaching styles have an impact



on attitudes related to the use of Facebook as an educational tool. For example, those practising a learner-centred approach agreed (more than those who practice a teacher-centred style) that staff and students should be accountable for their online behaviour and that they should be made aware of the implications if they transgressed.

Sobaih et al.'s (2016) study of the value and use of social media at eight public Egyptian higher education institutions found that although the respondents were personally active on social media and agreed that it could provide significant value, particularly as a learning tool, its usage was minimal because of a mistaken belief that social media platforms were developed solely for social, not academic, purposes. On the rare occasions when faculty members used social media in an educational setting, its use related to four factors: teaching and learning (e.g. communicating and sharing information with students); student support (e.g. supporting students in non-academic matters); community building and connection (e.g. connecting students with graduates and one another); and program marketing and promotion (including promotion of programs and seminars).

Several studies examined the demographic characteristics of academic social media users. Manca and Ranieri (2017) established that age, number of years in the teaching profession, and disciplinary field were relevant motivating factors, while gender and academic title showed negligible impact on a scholar's motivation to access social media. Somewhat contradictory, Mansour (2015) concluded that the main academic social media users were males, aged between 41 and 50, full-time employees, PhD holders, assistant professors specialising in information technology and their teaching experience ranged between one and five years. In a Norwegian study, Mikki et al. (2015) found that approximately 37% of researchers had at least one social media profile and older male professors and PhD students were the most likely social media profile holders while women were underrepresented.

The above review of academics' uses of social media clearly shows that there is growing uptake of social media in academic circles and this seems to currently focus mostly on research- and networking-related purposes, rather than education-focused purposes. Table 2 summarises the different uses of social media for academics as

**Table 2** What do academics use social media for?

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Uses of social media

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1. Academic learning and development
  2. Acquiring and sharing information
  3. Career development
  4. Developing social and professional networks
  5. Discussing academic, public and personal affairs
  6. Profile building
  7. Self-promotion and reputation enhancement
  8. Sharing research publications
  9. Social engagement
  10. Staying up to date with research
  11. Teaching and learning
-

reported in the current literature. However, the review also demonstrates that there are many academics who are not making use of social media (yet). A better understanding of the benefits of social media usage for academics is required to convert non-users into users – the following section reviews extant literature on those benefits.

## 4 Benefits of social media usage

Research has found that the increasing usage levels of social media in the form of Twitter, ResearchGate, Academia.edu and LinkedIn were often accompanied by an increased number of motivations for using social media – these motivations also largely reflected benefits of social media usage, including: existing contact networks and work opportunities (e.g. if academics are invited to join social media or participate in a project); possibility of self-development (e.g. career progression); providing a platform to extend networks within the academic community; as well as improving communications with their peers and students (Donelan 2016; Manca and Ranieri 2017). McPherson et al. (2015) argued that Twitter can open doors to wider research opportunities and increased access to experienced prospective research collaborators. Other research even goes so far to suggest that the use of ASNS increased academics' willingness to publish (Elsayed 2016). More broadly, Dermentzi and Papagiannidis' (2018) study of 250 academics found that social media benefits academics as it allows them to engage with the public.

Murire and Cilliers et al. (2017) found that lecturers were keen to adopt various forms of social media in their teaching because they felt confident that they already possess the skills to integrate it into their units, and because they perceived that it supports better teaching and learning, in particular it would help improve students' social skills, academic performance, productivity, as well as greater collaboration and communications with students. McPherson et al. (2015) had explained a reason for this, particularly in the context of Twitter: the use of social media in learning and teaching moves education away from the outdated hierarchical, one-directional ways of learning. Gachago et al. (2015) supported these views as they reported on the use of WhatsApp to support blended learning with distance and on-campus students. Their study confirmed that the accessibility and immediacy of WhatsApp as a mobile technology helped facilitate learning and removed obstacles associated with physical and geographical boundaries. The authors also found that the use of WhatsApp helped reflective learning processes within and outside the classroom. WhatsApp allows learners and facilitators to engage in more informal ways, crossing professional and social boundaries – thus helping to facilitate transformative learning.

Some research suggests that the use of social media can also benefit academics in terms of the results of course and teaching evaluations: for instance, Mou (2014) found that professors' ratings increased when they moved their microblog discussions away from personal to professional issues; however, their likeability index decreased. In another interesting finding, the study noted that a professor's evaluation would improve (irrespective of content it seems) if they can garner a large fan base following.

In summary, the review of literature demonstrates a variety of benefits that social media can bring to academics, in terms of their research and teaching roles. Table 3 summarises the different benefits of social media usage for academics.

**Table 3** What are the benefits of social media usage for academics?

## Benefits of social media

1. Access to more research opportunities
2. Improved networking and communication with peers and students
3. Increased access to experienced researchers
4. Increased motivation to continue using social media
5. Increased student ratings
6. Increased willingness to publish
7. Supports and facilitates teaching and learning
8. Transcends physical and geographical boundaries

## 5 Challenges and barriers of using social media

As the previous sections have demonstrated, academics increasingly use social media for various parts of their work, and the benefits of using these are undeniable. However, the literature also outlines a range of challenges and barriers to social media usage in academia – this section explores these challenges and barriers in more detail. Donelan (2016) found that the main barriers offered by academics for not using social media included lack of time (time to learn and use social media); lack of confidence, ability and skills; lack of interest; and negative perceptions (particularly with regard to the use of Twitter and blogs) in terms of the usefulness of social media to complement learning and teaching. More recently, Sapkota and Vander Putten’s (2018) study on social media in learning and teaching established that although academics accepted the importance of social media as a tool to use in business, they could not agree on its inclusion in the curriculum.

Mansour’s (2015) study compared challenges of users and non-users of social media: users cited a lack of trust regarding SNSs and a lack of training as significant challenges for ongoing use, while non-users displayed a lack of awareness of, as well as interest and trust in SNSs. Other research added detail specifically about the lack of trust displayed by non-users: they stated their unwillingness to access and use SNSs derived from concerns about the trustworthiness and reliability of information on SNS, alongside worries about security and privacy (Manca and Ranieri 2017). Interestingly, while some studies (e.g. Herzog 2015; Jaschik 2015) reported uncivil chatter on social media by scholars can result in negative outcomes, Veletsianos and Stewart’s (2016) study found that such uncivil chatter may actually lead to some positive outcomes and therefore it seems that these so called uncivil remarks do not necessarily translate into negative feedback or outcomes.

A further barrier to social media usage is the attitude regarding social media’s focus on personal, rather than professional contexts: although university staff used social media to assist them to complete their work, they did not actively use social media to complete various problem solving and administrative tasks because they did not consider social media platforms to be legitimate ‘work tools’ (Cilliers et al. 2017). When it was used, it was used as a ‘last resort’ and only when all other avenues had been exhausted. What was interesting, however, was the almost paternalistic attitude of

staff wanting to protect both themselves and the university from the inappropriate use of social media.

Guerin et al. (2015) explored how the positioning and use of an academic blogging site within the university could be used to build an informal learning community among users and encourage a doctoral writing pedagogy. However, while blogging sites provide a platform to help students engage with their supervisors and allows academics to share insights with fellow academic developers, the authors warn that the increasing popularity and widespread use of blogging sites may undermine its value. Despite the benefits of social media, staff were also concerned that they would eventually have to pay a service fee to remain registered and they could also become easy targets for email spammers (Elsayed 2016). Gachago et al. (2015) advised that further research is required in terms of the ethical issues that may arise with the introduction of applications such as WhatsApp if a much larger scale use is to be contemplated.

In a study of eight Egyptian higher institutions, Sobaih et al. (2016) identified several concerns and barriers regarding the use of social media. These were itemised as (1) privacy and security concerns; (2) time commitments; (3) loss of control; (4) digital divide; (5) variations in mobile services; (6) grading and assessment issues; (7) integration with Learning Management Systems; (8); institutional support; (9) infrastructure issues; (10) ethical issues; and (11) student awareness. Because of these barriers, the authors concluded that the use of social media in higher education requires more considerable attention from researchers and policymakers.

Costa (2016) observed that while academics preferred to publish their research in social media where it provided greater access to readers, the university hierarchy would prefer for it to be published in high impact journals even though readership of these journals may be extremely limited in its coverage and thus restricting its usefulness in terms of imparting knowledge and information to a wider audience. Because academic promotions within the university sector are typically based on traditional publication channels, research participants are forced to publish their research in both mediums (thus becoming double gamers) while they attempt to change the inculcated beliefs of the university bureaucracy.

Some staff members chose not to use social media because they lacked the appropriate skill, because of past negative experiences, because of a lack of trust in the medium, or a perception of hidden power structures (O’Keeffe 2019). However, in choosing and using a relevant social media platform, staff preferred to use more than one ASN platform, and they relied on friends’ recommendations, the number of publications and the network’s reputation as the main criteria to help choose an ASN site (Elsayed 2016). Table 4 summarises the challenges faced by academics in the usage of social media.

## 6 Discussion and outlook

We live in an ever-changing world and the use of social media in academia is not immune to such changes. What initially began as a fad has now grown into a multi-million-dollar industry where most academics access social media sites for either personal or professional endeavours, or both. The use of social media for educational purposes is limited only by the resourcefulness of users. Gone are the days when

**Table 4** What are the challenges academics face in using social media?

## Challenges of using social media

1. Fear from uncivil chatter
2. Inadequate skills and training
3. Lack of agreement to include it in curriculum
4. Lack of trust
5. Low awareness and interest
6. Security and privacy fears
7. Low self-efficacy and confidence
8. Inadequate time to learn and use new technology
9. Unclear benefits

academics could get by with a chalk and talk approach to student learning. Today's students want more, they want to be exposed to learning practices and teaching materials that take advantage of developments in social media. No longer can academics provide learning approaches that may have been acceptable at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Times have changed and academics must move with the times and as this review highlights, there is still a long way to go in using social media to its full potential in academia.

As the literature has highlighted, academic usage of social media varies greatly. Jordan and Weller (2018), for example noted that senior academics tended to use social media as a personal learning network and to disseminate and share information while more junior academics used it for career development. Meishar-Tal and Pieterse (2017) found that the usage of social media by academics at three Israeli institutions was not intensive, being primarily used for self-promotion, ego-bolstering and assisting interaction with peers. Interestingly, the findings from the above grouping of studies (and there were many in this category) seemed to imply that academics were more interested in using social media for personal reasons (including for their own career and research development), rather than using it to improve the learning experiences of their students.

In terms of the benefits of social media usage, again the review found that social media benefits academics' personal careers and research, rather than their ability to enhance student learning. There were exceptions, however: for example, Gachago et al. (2015) reported that the use of WhatsApp helped facilitate both blended learning and reflective learning with distance and on-campus students.

The most significant finding in terms of the challenges faced by the introduction of social media into academia was the lack of agreement about its inclusion in the curriculum. Sobaih et al. (2016) echoed the views of many academics by itemising the following eleven concerns: (1) privacy and security concerns; (2) time commitments; (3) loss of control; (4) digital divide; (5) variations in mobile services; (6) grading and assessment issues; (7) integration with Learning Management Systems; (8) institutional support; (9) infrastructure issues; (10) ethical issues; and (11) student awareness.

The literature review has highlighted a lack of enthusiasm or motivation by many academics to combine the facilities available from social media to enhance student

learning. Instead, it would appear that academics are more interested in using social media platforms for personal, rather than students' learning endeavours. While the review found a few exceptions where academics use and see the benefits of using social media to enhance student learning, the majority of usage by academics relates to personal and self-interest motives. This approach needs to change, and if it cannot be driven by academics, then the administrators of universities need to take the lead and direct university departments and academics within these departments to make use of social media to enhance student learning.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper focused on the rapidly growing phenomenon that is social media. In particular, the paper considered an under-researched user of social media: the teacher in higher education, that is, the academic. Since there is scant, but growing, literature exploring social media usage by academics, it is timely to take stock of the extant literature, which is why the purpose of this paper is to present a scoping review to identify the uses, benefits and challenges/barriers of social media for academics. A systematic approach to literature search was carried out, and the resulting 24 research papers were reviewed according to the three research questions:

1. What do higher education academics use social media for?
2. What are the benefits of social media for higher education academics?
3. What are the challenges and barriers to social media use for higher education academics?

In terms of usage of social media, the paper identified that it can be used by academics for a wide variety of purposes, covering all aspects of the academic role, including research and learning and teaching. However, the review also made evident that academics use social media mostly for research and career development reasons, including networking, rather than to support learning and teaching activities. On the positive side, this finding shows that academics are starting to embrace the power of social media to extend their reach beyond their ivory towers as it allows them to share their research work with an audience much wider than the typical reader of an academic publication. However, on the negative side, this finding highlights that academics appear to be motivated to use social media mostly for personal reasons, as opposed to student experience reasons. Given that students tend to be avid users of social media, and given the current times when student experience and the notion of 'students as customers' are gaining importance in the higher education sector (Budd 2017), this is an omission which needs to be addressed, either by academics themselves, or by the university management more broadly.

In addition to the uses of social media for academics, this scoping review also outlined the current literature referring to benefits and challenges of social media for academics. In terms of benefits, the review established that social media can provide a range of positive outcomes for academics, including increased opportunities to communicate with peers, students and (prospective) collaborators without physical or geographical barriers, which may even lead to increased student satisfaction, new

research opportunities, and an increased willingness to publish. In terms of challenges, the extant literature refers largely to a lack of awareness regarding the uses and benefits of social media; an unwillingness to use social media due to a lack of time, skill, ability, interest, or self-efficacy; and a fear of privacy and security issues, as well as uncivil interactions on social media platforms.

The scoping review presented in this paper clearly demonstrates that little is known about academics in the context of the uses, benefits and challenges of social media, which points towards the need for increased attention from the academic community towards themselves as important (potential) users of social media. In particular, it is recommended that higher education institutions provide awareness-raising and training opportunities to all staff, not only about the uses and benefits of social media for research and career development, but also about its applicability to learning and teaching. Such training should incorporate online technology skills to build confidence, as well as knowledge about managing privacy and security concerns in the social media environment.

Despite the interesting insights provided in this paper, it is not free from limitations, which need to be acknowledged: first, we focused our review on academics in higher education only, which means we did not consider literature on teachers of other educational levels, although this body of literature may provide useful information about the uses, benefits and challenges of social media specifically in the context of learning and teaching. Second, it is possible that literature exists, which does not clearly specify that their participants were working as academics in higher education – such papers would not have been shortlisted in this study. Finally, we intended to carry out a broad scoping review and therefore considered all the various forms of social media together, even though these are diverse and may differ according to their uses, benefits and challenges.

In order to address these limitations, future research should make a deliberate effort to further explore the current and possible uses of social media for academics, which should also include exploration of the student perspective and attitude towards the use of social media in learning and teaching. Moreover, research should attempt to establish the specific uses, benefits and challenges of the diverse social media outlets, not only for research and career development, but also for student learning. These large gaps in current knowledge need to be filled because social media is a growing worldwide phenomenon that has infiltrated personal and professional interactions and should therefore be considered a key opportunity also for communication within and beyond academic circles.

**Data availability** Details of reviewed literature are available in the paper itself.

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