

Tweeting into the void: Exploring the activities, strategies, and perceptions of success of Australian academic libraries on Twitter

Stacey Larner

Liaison Librarian

University of Southern Queensland

Abstract

The majority of academic libraries use social media however the efficacy of its use is rarely questioned. This paper presents the results of a survey of Australian academic library social media managers, co-ordinators and contributors. Respondents were asked about the ways in which their library uses social media, particularly Twitter, their strategies, and how success is defined and measured. The survey was distributed online and received 22 responses from a sample population of 35 (19 unique libraries). An environmental scan was also undertaken to establish an understanding of the current state of social media in Australian academic libraries. The findings suggest that Australian academic libraries understand the importance of strategies, guidelines and evaluation when using social media, but that perceptions of success are variable. Some libraries define success by growth metrics, while others define success by perceived usefulness, public relations, or internal benchmarking. Australian academic libraries are more likely to use Twitter for marketing purposes than to build community, even though building community is frequently mentioned in strategies. This is the first study to consider how social media managers define success within the Australian academic library context.

Introduction

A critical mass of social media adoption has been achieved in the academic library context, but its efficacy is not clearly supported by scholarly evidence. Social media use by libraries remains inconsistent and ad hoc (Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, p. 0), with many institutions lacking a defined strategy, and failing to evaluate the effectiveness of their social media channels (Peacemaker, Robinson & Hurst, 2016). The desire to be perceived as professionally legitimate may outweigh efficiency, resulting in the homogenisation of library social media (Harrison, Burrell, Velasquez & Schreiner, 2017). Are academic libraries adopting social media out of external pressure rather than actual need?

Libraries who lack social media accounts face increasing pressure to adopt, and those with a social media presence must maintain and update their accounts, or consider adopting new platforms as they arise. Few studies, however, examine whether there is enough evidence to support academic libraries' investment in social media. No studies have yet attempted to understand how social media managers in Australian academic libraries define and measure success. This paper reports on the first phase of a research project to compare whether the self-reported behaviours of Australian academic libraries on Twitter align with actual behaviour and engagement to determine if social media accounts are effective in helping to achieve stated goals.

Literature review

The use of social media as an integral component of communication strategies within academic libraries has become normalised to the extent that its efficacy is rarely questioned. While initially libraries were reluctant to engage with social media, citing concerns with privacy, staff resources, skills and low user interaction

(Vassilakaki & Garoufallou, 2015), adoption of social media by academic libraries is now nearly ubiquitous (Collins & Quan-Haase, 2014). Facebook and Twitter are the primary platforms used by academic libraries (Brookbank, 2015; Chu & Du, 2013; Collins & Quan-Haase, 2014; Yep, Brown, Fagliarone & Shulman, 2017), however some libraries have adopted other platforms, including but not limited to YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and Flickr. Academic libraries report using social media to promote services, events and collections; broadcast news and updates; provide reference services; connect with patrons and create community; and to provide educational instruction (Al-Daihani & AlAwadhi, 2015; Alsuhaibani, 2018; Deodato, 2018; ; Stvilia & Gibradze, 2014; Stvilia & Gibradze, 2017; Vassilakaki & Garoufallou, 2015). Academic libraries are active on social media, but are users interested in what academic libraries are posting?

Lack of user engagement with library social media accounts is a repeated theme in several studies (Al-Daihani & Abrahams, 2016; Chu & Du, 2013; Deodato, 2018; Jones & Harvey, 2016). However it appears that academic libraries, especially in English-speaking countries, are less likely to engage in reciprocal communication with users (Deodato, 2018; Huang et al., 2017). Reciprocal communication generates more positivity and interaction (Huang et al., 2017), so the inability or unwillingness of academic libraries to respond to user comments could be one reason for the minimal engagement evidenced in these studies. Young and Rossmann (2015) demonstrated how shifting their Twitter strategy to focus on community-building increased interaction and enabled them to gain more followers from their target audience. Curiously, although students have been reluctant to use social media for academic purposes (Brookbank, 2015), this attitude is shifting and when asked, have opinions on the social media channels the library should be using.

Purdue University students listed Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube as platforms the library should be using, although the types of content they wanted to see on each platform differed (Howard, Huber, Carter & Moore, 2018). Other than Facebook, Western Oregon University students wanted to see the library on Twitter and Instagram and reported being likely to follow the library there (Brookbank, 2015). Only a small fraction of students, however, follow the library social media accounts compared with the institutional account (Jones & Harvey, 2016), therefore, building a good relationship with this department and mentioning the institution can encourage retweets and shares to improve reach. The home institution's social media account is the most influential account in the academic library's social media network (Yep et al., 2017). Rossmann & Young (2015) attribute the "virality" of their most popular social media post to the fact that the institutional account shared it, thus boosting its visibility, and thus, its success.

Analytics are often mentioned as a way to measure the success of social media accounts. Most social media platforms offer built-in analytics packages, and there are some third-party applications, such as Hootsuite and Google Analytics, that can manage analytics for multiple platforms (Tonyan, 2016). According to King (2015), there are several kinds of metrics that can be measured through analytics: activity (how many posts staff have created and posted); audience (growth or decline in followers); engagement (interactions such as likes, retweets, shares, watching videos); referrals (where a user has come from on the web). It is worth noting that it is difficult to directly compare interactions across platforms (Crumpton & White, 2016). Some actions can superficially resemble actions taken on other platforms, but have very different uses. For example, "likes" on Facebook and "likes" on Twitter might be compared, but whereas a Facebook "like" offers nothing further to the user,

a Twitter “like” saves the post into the user’s Likes list which functions as a way of bookmarking posts to return to later (Stvilia & Gibradze, 2014). Alsuhaibani (2018) argues that Twitter likes should therefore be considered a valid way of measuring user engagement and not considered to be a poorer kind of engagement.

Analytics can be useful to discover whether libraries are meeting their goals, and can be used in a variety of ways, but they can’t tell us everything we need to know.

Perceptions also vary on the platforms considered to be most successful for libraries.

Crumpton and White (2016) found that students were more likely to interact with the Facebook page than Twitter (Instagram was not evaluated). Chatten and Roughley

(2016), conversely, found the student community was far more engaged and

interactive on Twitter than on Facebook. Crumpton and White (2016) sought to

measure the ROI of their university library’s social media accounts through analytics, and determined that the minimal investment in time and money was worth the small

gains in publicity. However, Richey, Ravishankar and Coupland (2016) discuss the

risks involved in situationally inappropriate social media posts. A post may go viral

for all the wrong reasons. There are features unique to social media that increase

the likelihood of inappropriate posts: speed and spontaneity (a pressure to respond quickly); informality; forgetting about the wider audience’s preferences; and the

blurred boundaries between personal posts and organisational posts (this is more of a risk when individuals use their accounts on behalf of the institution). They state that

impression management is extremely important on social media because the

audience is potentially unlimited, and the damage could be difficult to undo. Ensuring

the library has a clear strategy and guidelines for social media can minimise these

risks and increase the likelihood of meeting stated goals.

Academic libraries develop strategies for social media in different ways. Levesque (2016) discusses the importance of a strategy and guidelines in her experience managing social media for an academic library. She further argues that putting new or younger staff members in charge of social media may be counterproductive as they have the “least knowledge of the organization [sic] that they are trying to represent” (Levesque, 2016, p. 75). Starting out with social media without a plan or goals can result in a library overcommitting, as VCU Libraries discovered when its social media presence stretched to twenty-two channels (Peacemaker et al., 2016). Liverpool Library’s initial foray into social media was uncertain and directionless, however the formation of a social media group and adoption of the university’s social media guidelines resulted in a clear plan and an increase in engagement with students (Chatten & Roughley, 2016). Hamersly Library surveyed students to identify which social media platforms to adopt after engagement with its Facebook account declined (Brookbank, 2015). After the formation of a social media group, Montana State University Library clarified its social media strategy to focus on building community rather than marketing, and implemented a social media optimisation principle to ensure content is shareable and engaging (Rossmann & Young, 2015; Young & Rossmann, 2015). Crumpton and White (2016) believe that social media should be used to support the success of the institution’s students and faculty. However it has been difficult historically to determine the extent to which Library support contributes to student success. The quite homogenous way in which academic libraries engage with the social web may enhance the student experience, but is this way optimal?

Deodato (2018) published a review of the history of academic libraries and the social web. He argues that there is a conflict between the principles of traditional

librarianship, with our values of intellectual property, privacy, expertise and authority, and the social web, which exploits user data and allows anyone, regardless of qualifications, to create, remix, share opinions and collaborate. While the ideal is to establish a friendly library presence online, encouraging user participation, most libraries find it difficult to fully exploit the opportunities afforded by social media, and resort to using it mainly as a marketing tool. Harrison et al. (2017) introduce the concept of institutional isomorphism as a driver for the homogenous way in which libraries adopt and use social media. They argue that some libraries have adopted social media out of a fear of being left behind, or seen as irrelevant. As social media use by libraries reached a critical mass, the pressure to conform to a perceived professional norm results in libraries copying each other rather than evaluating the needs of their unique library context. While Harrison et al. (2017) recommend libraries create their own social media accounts, they caution against professional conformism, instead advising libraries to establish a strategy and goals and to consider their unique context.

The literature is replete with case studies and how-to guides for setting up social media accounts. The social media landscape changes so rapidly, however, that scholarly articles become rapidly outdated. Platforms are not static and the evolving nature of social media means that articles published more than a few years ago are contain obsolete information. However there are some excellent examples of university libraries reinvigorating their social media accounts, or working toward specific goals. Montana State University Library has implemented a social media optimisation strategy as well as focusing their social media contributions on building community (Rossmann & Young, 2015; Young & Rossmann, 2015), and has seen a shift in their user demographics, and an increase in engagement. The University of

Liverpool Library has over 12000 followers and has found a way to build an engaged community online (Chatten & Roughley, 2016). These examples have worked because the libraries have considered their unique contexts and worked within a defined strategy with stated goals, as Harrison et al. (2017) advocate.

Method

For the environmental scan, a list of forty academic libraries was obtained from a web directory of public universities in Australia. Each institution's library website was visited to discover whether there were any social icons or embedded feeds. Where social icons were missing or limited a search was conducted to determine whether the institution's library had an account on specific platforms. Platform, usernames, URLs, and whether the accounts were promoted on the website were recorded in a spreadsheet. A note was also made if it seemed as if the account was inactive or had never been used.

The online survey was created using Qualtrics and disseminated via Twitter and email lists. Eligibility was based on the following criteria:

- The respondent was working in an Australian academic library
- The academic library had an active Twitter account
- The respondent was directly involved with social media in their library context, either through one or more functions:
 - oversight of the social media strategy
 - co-ordinating social media accounts
 - responding to social media comments
 - creating social media content
 - scheduling social media content.

Respondents were asked a range of questions about which social media platforms their library uses, and then specific questions about how Twitter is used and evaluated.

Results and Discussion

Environmental scan

35 out of 40 libraries (88%) had a Twitter account, with the next most popular being Facebook. Five libraries did not have a social media presence at all. YouTube and Instagram were the third and fourth most common platforms (see Figure 1).

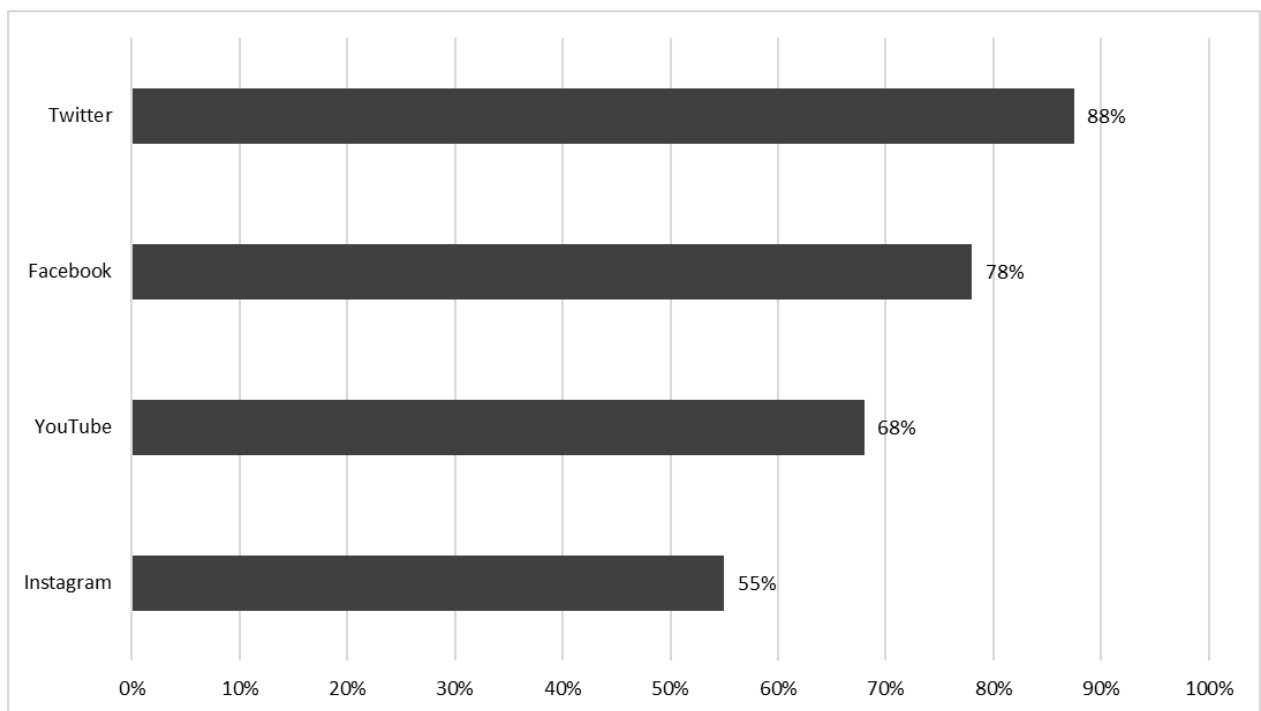


Figure 1. The four most common social media platforms used by Australian academic libraries

Other platforms used include Pinterest, Flickr, Blogs, Soundcloud, and Historypin.

Some libraries hyperlinked to their social media accounts on their library webpage using social media icons. However many libraries only linked to some of their accounts (generally Twitter and Facebook) or did not link to their accounts at all.

Most social media accounts had been updated recently, however a handful of accounts had clearly been set up and never used, or abandoned at some point. YouTube was the most likely account to have not been updated recently.

Survey findings

Out of a sample population of 35, there were 22 complete responses ($n=22$), with 19 unique institutions represented. Therefore 54% of the sample population is represented in the survey.

100% of respondents' libraries have a Twitter and Facebook account that is maintained. As seen in Figure 2, YouTube and Instagram are close behind, with Pinterest, Flickr, Blogs and Soundcloud the least likely to have been adopted.

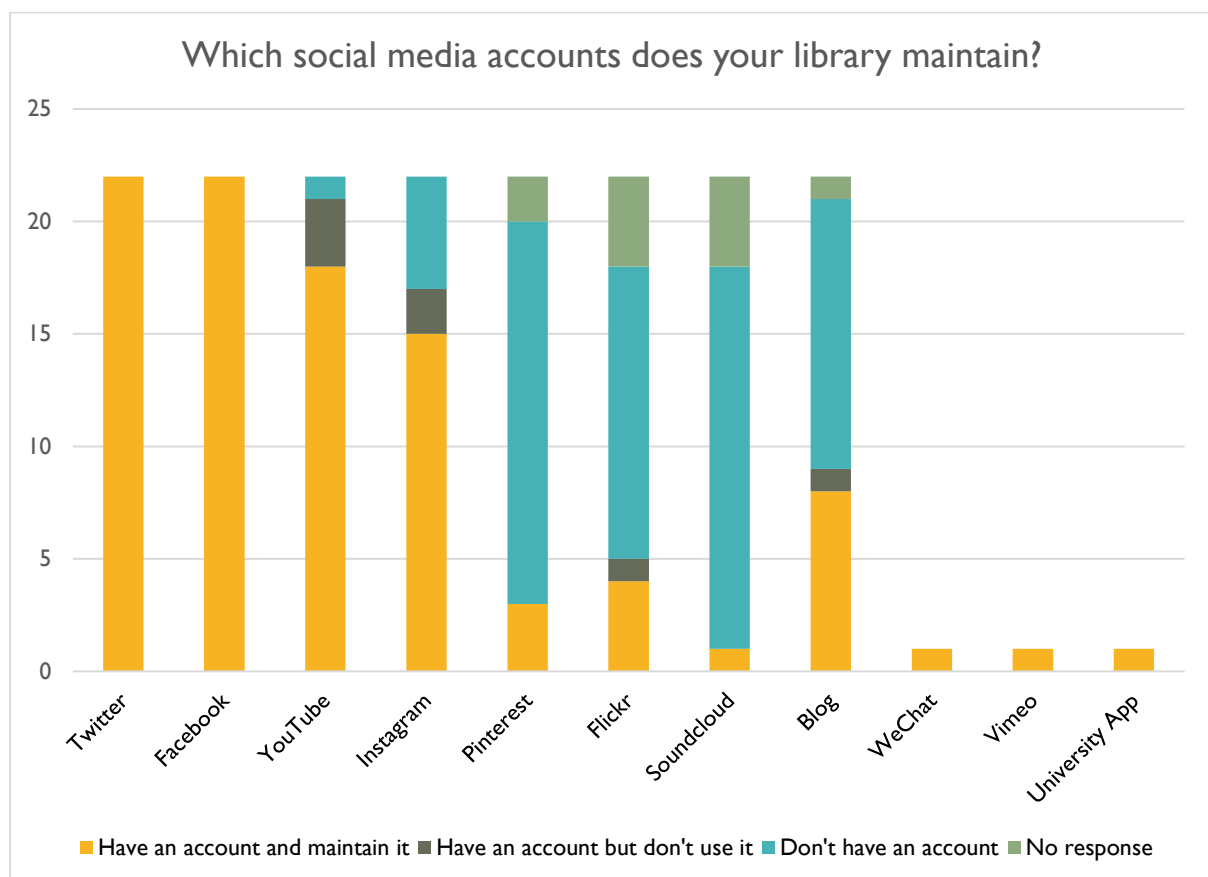


Figure 2. Which social media accounts does your library maintain?

The qualitative responses acknowledge that the social web is a fast-changing environment resulting in a need to be open to new platforms, to ensure the library presence is established where users are active. Respondents believe that academic libraries should be monitoring the social media landscape to see which platforms are maturing and gaining more users, as it's possible users may migrate from older platforms (such as Facebook) to newer platforms (such as Instagram). Four respondents mentioned the possibility of adopting Snapchat in the future.

Social media strategies

16 respondents (73%) have a social media strategy, and 15 respondents described their strategy. The most common responses were:

- Promoting library services, resources and events
- Establishing a positive online library presence
- Improving the student experience, build community and relationships

Some libraries tailor their content to target specific audiences through different social media platforms: all of the respondents who mentioned tailoring content said researchers were their primary audience on Twitter.

Some respondents gave details of guidelines, such as tailoring content to the academic calendar, posting a set number of times per week, or checking details before sharing.

Likewise 16 respondents said their library Twitter account has a specific goal or purpose. These included engaging with the university community, particularly staff, academics, researchers and HDRs, providing timely updates, and promoting events, services and resources. Engaging with academic staff and researchers was considered more important on Twitter than engaging with undergraduate students.

Activities undertaken on Twitter

Academic libraries are least likely to be using Twitter to provide reference services (see Figure 4). One reason for this could be that many Australian academic libraries use a chat service that is integrated with university systems. Duplication of services across different platforms would create additional pressure on staffing.

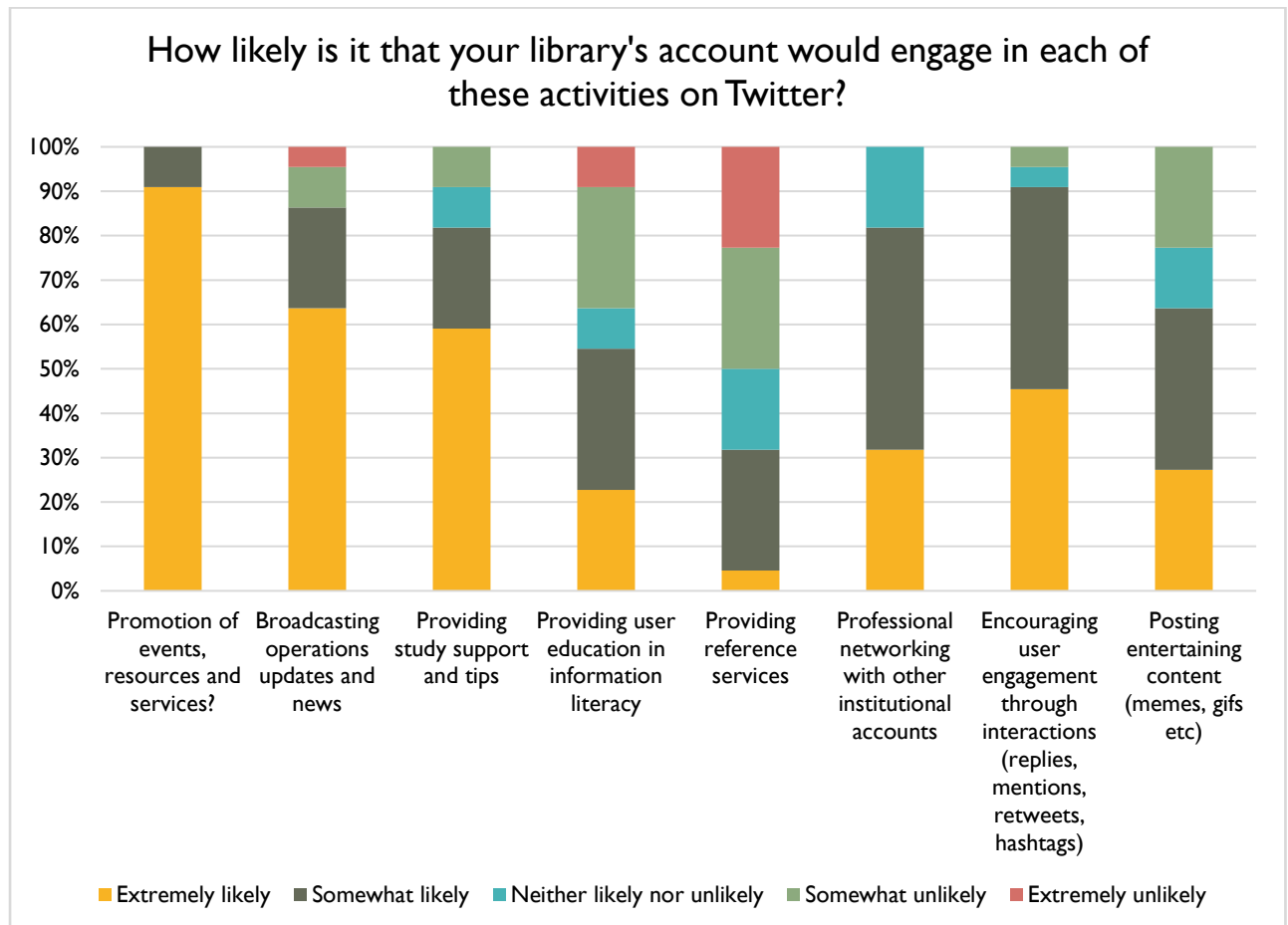


Figure 3. Likelihood of engaging in activities on Twitter

Australian academic libraries are most likely to be using Twitter to promote events, resources and services; broadcast updates and news; and provide study support and tips. Respondents also reported encouraging user engagement through the use of replies, mentions, retweets and hashtags and networking with other institutional accounts as activities that are likely to be undertaken. 59% of respondents reported

that their library has a policy or guidelines for responding to Twitter comments.

Frequency of posts was also reported (see Figure 4), with over half posting a few times per week, and a third posting daily.

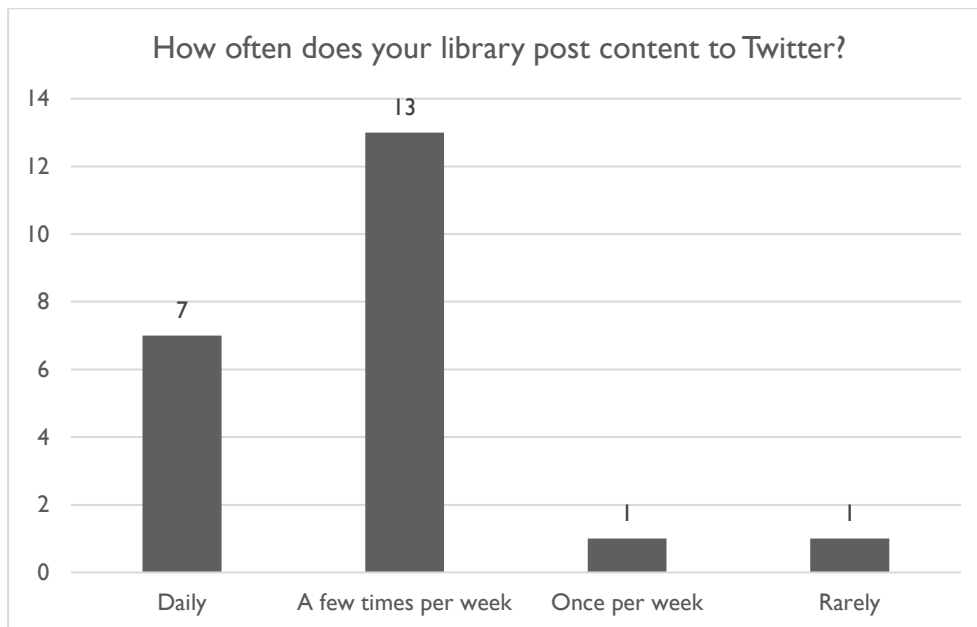


Figure 4. Frequency of posting on Twitter

Interactions with specific groups

Over 90% of respondents were either extremely or somewhat likely to be interacting with students at their institution, staff members at their institution (not including Library staff members but including the institutional account) or Library staff members at other institutions (see Figure 5). Respondents reported being unlikely to interact with members of the public.

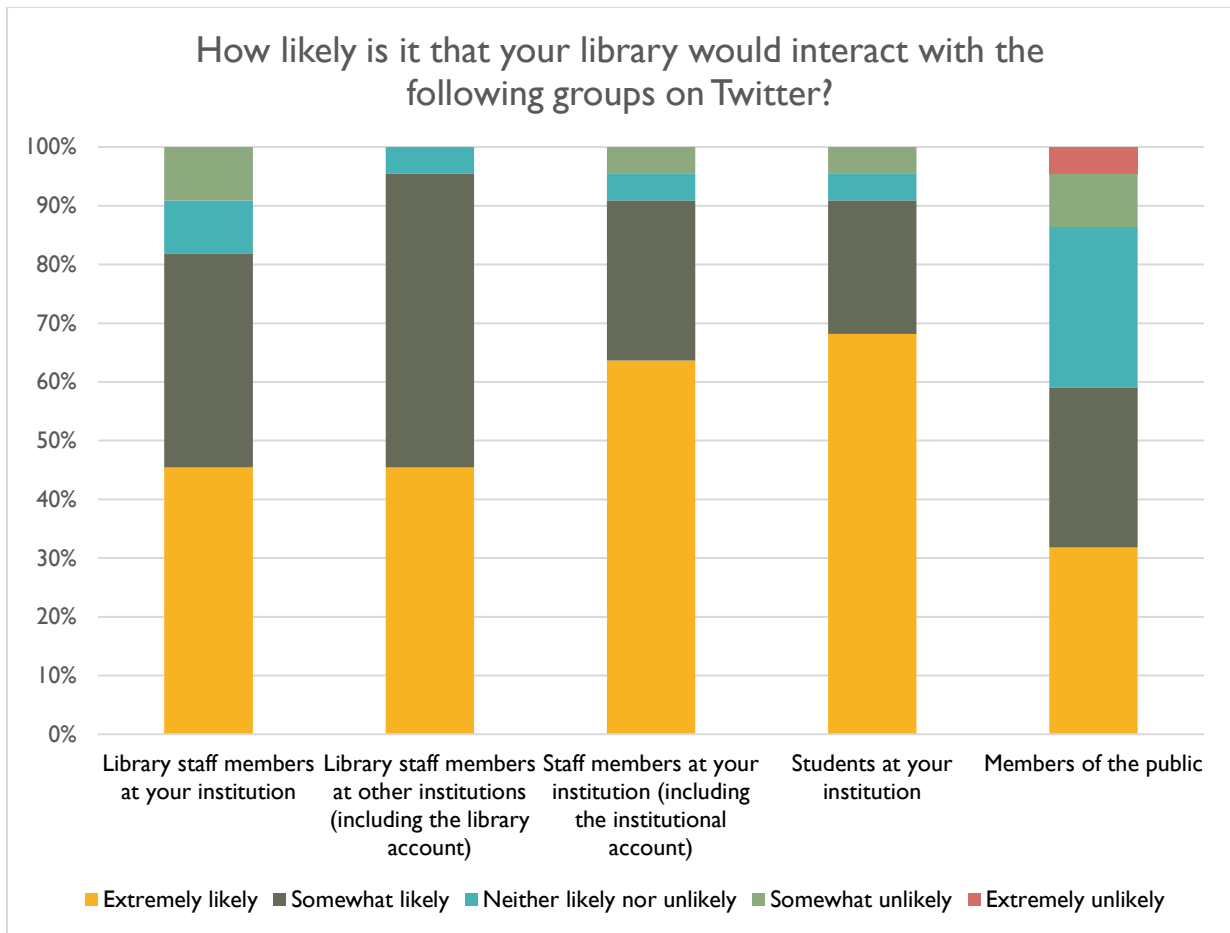


Figure 5. Interaction with specific audiences on Twitter

How success is defined and measured

The success of a Twitter account as defined by respondents varies, however there are overarching themes. Multiple respondents mentioned increases in followers, impressions, mentions, and tweets as denoting success. Multiple respondents also mentioned “engagement”, however this was either undefined or tied to growth in interactions. Other definitions included meeting client needs; contributing to a good public image for the library; or meeting set targets such as responding to comments within a specific timeframe or posting content regularly. This latter approach situates success within the library’s control, rather than basing success on the often unknown impact on, and actions of, the end-user. Only two respondents said that success for

the Twitter account had not been defined, and one said their library was re-assessing goals and success definitions for 2019.

Although Peacemaker et al. (2016) found that analytics are not consistently used, most respondents say their libraries use analytics to measure metrics. 16 respondents say their library uses built-in-analytics, and 6 use third-party analytics. Only 2 respondents say their library doesn't use analytics. Meeting targets or increasing on previous figures is the primary measure of success for all libraries who evaluate their accounts. Only one respondent mentioned "other feedback received", which implies that qualitative measures do not play a part in evaluating Twitter accounts.

Perceptions of the success of the library's Twitter account

These two questions yielded some contradictory results worth exploring further. Only 14% of respondents considered that their Twitter account was not very successful (see Figure 6), however when asked "which account is your least successful", 32% selected Twitter (see Figure 7). A closer examination of the data revealed that 5 of the 7 respondents who listed Twitter as their least successful account, still consider their Twitter account to be successful, or somewhat successful. This contradiction could imply that perception of success remains arbitrary, even in the presence of a definition of success, and possibly in comparison with other social media channels the return on investment may seem minimal. The two respondents who consider their account unsuccessful, as well as being their library's least successful social media account, have no social media strategy, no policy or guideline on responding to comments, no purpose or goal for Twitter, and one of them posts rarely to Twitter.

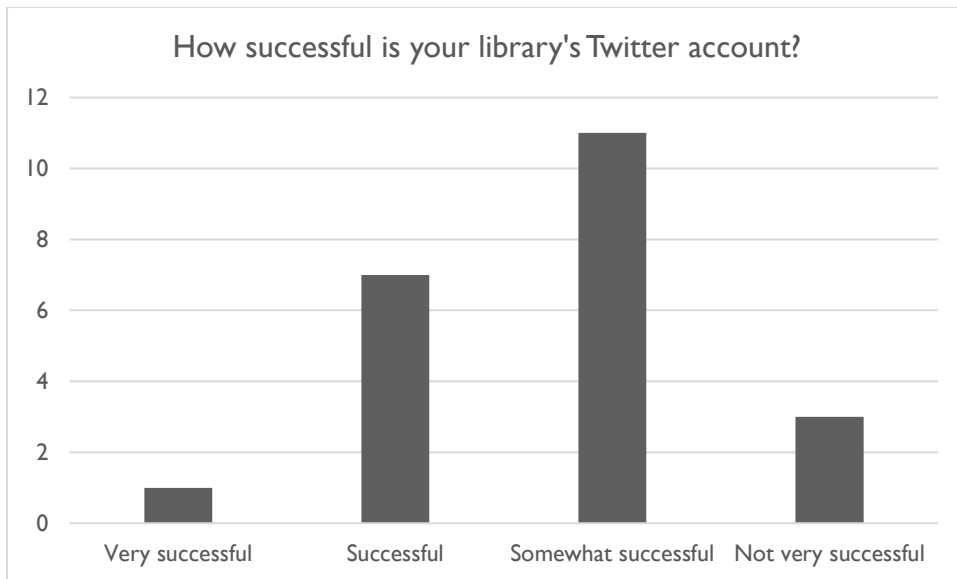


Figure 6. Perceived success of Twitter account

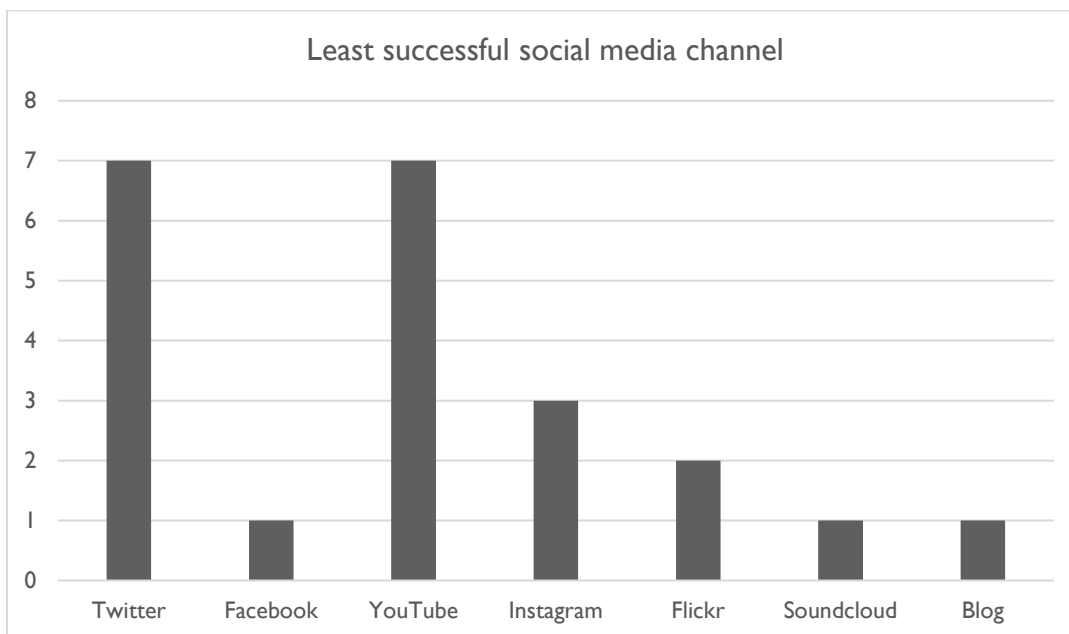


Figure 7. Least successful social media channel

YouTube's inclusion also highlights some of the difficulties involved in academic libraries' approach to social media use. According to Collins and Quan-Haase (2015), YouTube is a silent contender for being a useful social media platform, because it doesn't require frequent updates, reaches a wide audience, content may be revisited and users are engaged without being required to add, like or follow

libraries. Likewise Howard et al. (2018) found that students regarded YouTube as an effective resource for library service information and tutorials. Three of the seven respondent libraries who listed YouTube as least successful do not link to their YouTube channel from their library homepage. It's also possible their definition of success is skewed toward platforms that require regularly posted content, followers and interaction. Consider, too, the difference between platforms that are primarily content delivery platforms, and platforms that are primarily social networks. It is counterproductive to evaluate social media accounts using the same criteria, when the functions and uses of each are so different. It is likely in order to fully exploit the benefits of YouTube academic libraries need to embed videos where users are most likely to encounter them, rather than expecting users to subscribe to their channels.

Facebook was listed as the most successful channel for the majority of respondents' libraries. The literature makes it clear, especially in recent years, that Facebook is becoming fairly hostile to organisational pages. The changes to its algorithm mean organic reach is declining (Brookbank, 2015; Chatten & Roughley, 2016; King, 2015), and the cost of boosting posts is rising sharply. An academic library Facebook page will only receive a tiny fraction of the number of likes and followers the university's institutional account will receive. While the event listing functionality of Facebook is incredibly useful, it would be interesting to discover how much the Facebook page impacts on library event attendance.

Conclusion

The ways in which Australian academic libraries are using and evaluating social media align broadly with the literature, however there is evidence to suggest a greater understanding of the importance of strategies and evaluation than seen

previously in the literature. Social media strategies focused on marketing, public relations and community-building. However marketing is the most common activity undertaken on Twitter, with fewer activities dedicated to community-building. Twitter was seen as a useful tool to engage with the institution's researchers and academics. Most libraries were evaluating the success of their accounts using analytics, with some focused on growth in followers and interactions, and others focused on meeting internal benchmarks. Facebook was considered to be the most successful platform by the majority of respondents. Perceptions of Twitter's success were mixed, with most respondents considering their Twitter account to be successful or somewhat successful, while listing Twitter along with YouTube as their least successful account. The libraries with the most negative perception of their Twitter account have no formalised strategy or purpose for Twitter, and no guidelines for responding to comments.

A limitation of the study was that respondents were not given the opportunity to discuss whether the library was using social media in innovative ways. The survey also focused primarily on Twitter, and it would be useful to compare how other social media platforms are being used. The results of this study imply that in order to effectively use social media, the library should develop a strategy that incorporates guidelines for different platforms, outlines the criteria for success and the ways in which platforms will be evaluated. The importance of the institutional account should not be ignored, thus building relationships with this department is an important part of any social media strategy. Future research could explore other social media platforms in the Australian academic library context, such as seeking to understand why Facebook is considered to be so successful, or discovering how libraries are using Instagram.

References

- Al-Daihani, S. M., & Abrahams, A. (2016). A text mining analysis of academic libraries' tweets. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 42, 135-143. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2015.12.014
- Alsuhaibani, R. A. (2018). One hundred tweets from library land: A case study of RMIT University Library (academic library) and State Library of Victoria (public state library) in Australia. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*. doi:10.1177/0961000618792367
- Brookbank, E. (2015). So much social media, so little time: Using student feedback to guide academic library social media strategy. *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship*, 27(4), 232-247. doi:10.1080/1941126X.2015.1092344
- Chu, S. K. W., & Du, H. S. (2013). Social networking tools for academic libraries. *Journal of Librarianship & Information Science*, 45(1), 64-75. doi:10.1177/0961000611434361
- Collins, G., & Quan-Haase, A. (2014). Are social media ubiquitous in academic libraries? A longitudinal study of adoption and usage patterns. *Journal of Web Librarianship*, 8(1), 48-68. doi:10.1080/19322909.2014.873663
- Crumpton, M. A., & White, P. B. (2016). Connecting real learning with social media ROI. *The Bottom Line*, 29(1), 2-11. doi:10.1108/BL-10-2015-0020
- Deodato, J. (2018). Overhyped fad or missed opportunity? A history of academic libraries and the social web. *Journal of Web Librarianship*, 12(1), 1-27. doi:10.1080/19322909.2017.1390424

- Harrison, A., Burrell, R., Velasquez, S., & Schreiner, L. (2017). Social media use in academic libraries: A phenomenological study. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43, 248-256. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2017.02.014
- Howard, H., Huber, S., Carter, L., & Moore, E. (2018). Academic libraries on social media: Finding the students and the information they want. *Information Technology & Libraries*, 37(1), 8-18. doi:10.6017/ital.v37i1.10160
- Huang, H., Chu, S. K. W., Liu, L. Y., & Zheng, P. Y. (2017). Understanding user-librarian interaction types in academic library microblogging: A comparison study in Twitter and Weibo. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(4), 329-336. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2017.06.002
- Jones, M. J., & Harvey, M. (2016). Library 2.0: The effectiveness of social media as a marketing tool for libraries in educational institutions. *Journal of Librarianship & information Science*. doi:10.1177/0961000616668959
- Peacemaker, B., Robinson, S., & Hurst, E. J. (2016). Connecting best practices in public relations to social media strategies for academic libraries. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 23(1), 101-108. doi:10.1080/10691316.2016.1134244
- Richey, M., Ravishankar, M. N., & Coupland, C. (2016). Exploring situationally inappropriate social media posts. *Information Technology & People*, 29(3), 597-617. doi:10.1108/ITP-03-2015-0045
- Rossmann, D., & Young, S. W. H. (2015). Social media optimization: making library content shareable and engaging. *Library Hi Tech*, 33(4), 526-544. doi:10.1108/LHT-05-2015-0053

- Stvilia, B., & Gibradze, L. (2014). What do academic libraries tweet about, and what makes a library tweet useful? *Library & Information Science Research*, 36(3), 136-141. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2014.07.001
- Stvilia, B., & Gibradze, L. (2017). Examining Undergraduate Students' Priorities for Academic Library Services and Social Media Communication. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(3), 257-262. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2017.02.013
- Tonyan, J. (2016). Measuring the Success of Your Social Media Presence with Google Analytics. *Library Technology Reports*, 52(7), 38-42.
- Vassilakaki, E., & Garoufallou, E. (2015). Library Facebook practices for creating and promoting a professional profile. *Program*, 49(3), 343-359.
doi:10.1108/PROG-10-2014-0073
- Yep, J., Brown, M., Fagliarone, G., & Shulman, J. (2017). Influential players in Twitter networks of libraries at primarily undergraduate institutions. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 43(3), 193-200.
doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2017.03.005
- Young, S. W. H., & Rossmann, D. (2015). Building library community through social media. *Information Technology & Libraries*, 34(1), 20-37.