

# “The views expressed here are my own and in no way reflect the views of the University”: An analysis of social media policies in UK Higher Education institutions

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## ABSTRACT

While academics are now expected to engage with the use of social media as part of their professional roles – to support teaching and learning, research activities and scholarly communication beyond the academy, for example - it is typically done so through the use of personal accounts. As an increasing number of studies show, this places individual academics in a position of personal risk, being potentially exposed to threats of online abuse, trolling and harassment. This raises a question of institutional responsibility and duty of care. In this paper, we present a systematic survey of the availability of social media policy documents in the context of the UK higher education sector. Furthermore, we examine the content and features of policies to explore how personal and professional identities are navigated, and the extent to which policies address risks to staff.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing → Collaborative and social computing → Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms → Social media

## KEYWORDS

Higher education, online identity, policy, social media

## 1 Introduction

The use of social media has become an established part of academic labour. While still not essential, academics’ use of social media has shifted from a fringe activity or personal choice, to expectations of use fuelled by institutional pressures such as the impact agenda. While institutions increasingly expect - and in the case of research impact, benefit from - academics’ use of social media, this is not risk-free. This raises a question of to what extent institutions help protect their employees; or whether academics, whose personal identities are highly exposed through social media, are left to shoulder the risks themselves. Social media is also a notably vague term, encompassing a very wide range of platforms and services – and the ways in which it is used and the extent of personal or professional identity exposure may vary.

In the United Kingdom the impact agenda has played a crucial role in mainstreaming the use of social media through the expectation that these platforms can make a significant contribution to research impact. Social media is perceived to provide immediate, multimodal communication with vast potential audiences outside the academy, even if the realisation of this potential with identifiable end users of research is more difficult to establish in practice (Carrigan & Fatsis, 2021). For example, through analysis of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 impact case studies Carrigan and Jordan (2021) argued we must analyse the institutional factors driving the uptake of social media within higher education.

While a body of research has explored academic identity online from the academic users' perspective, there is a key actor whose role remains under-examined: the institution (McNeil, 2012; Pasquini & Evangelopoulos, 2015). Institutional staff social media policies act as formal mediators between academics and their use of social media whether explicitly for work-based purposes or not, with potentially career-threatening consequences if contravened and enforced. It is crucial we understand this role because of the increasing centrality which institutions play in how academics approach their use of social media.

There has been a tendency to see the use of social media by academics in terms of individual choice, reflecting a wider tendency to approach social media in terms of the role of the individual user. The problem with this approach is that they struggle with how those choices are shaped by the context in which they are made, particularly how the use of social media is coming to be an expected part of the role. When individual expectations and institutional priorities are linked through formal and informal assessment procedures in this way, the question of how institutions can adequately support academic staff in their use becomes a critical one. As such, there is a need to examine institutional social media policies as key mediating documents in this regard.

## 2 Objectives and research questions

The primary focus of this study is to examine the prevalence of social media Institutional staff social media policies act as formal mediators between academics and their use of social media. McNeill (2012) focused upon the UK Higher Education sector, applying critical discourse analysis to a sample of 14 policy documents. Lees (2018) identified 110 (of 169) UK Higher Education institutions having social media policy documents, which were analysed according to readability and content. Pasquini and Evangelopoulos (2015; 2016) applied latent semantic analysis to a sample of 250 institutional policies spanning ten countries. Given the time that has passed, and the rapidly changing social media landscape, the primary goal of the study is to provide an up-to-date account of the extent of use of social media policies in the UK Higher Education sector. However, some time has passed since these studies were undertaken, and the social media landscape for academics has shifted during recent years. Incidences of trolling and abuse have become more frequent (Kamola, 2019; Massanari, 2018; Pritchard, 2022; Veletsianos et al., 2018). Risks are likely to increase further, for example following the neglect of community standards and safeguards at X (formerly known as Twitter) – which underscores the need for institutions to provide a duty of care to their staff, which could be included at the policy level.

Conversely, there have also been concerns raised about academic freedom and the potential for institutional social media policies to act as a form of censorship (Veletsianos, 2016). This reflects the need for careful consideration of the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional aspects of academic identity online. Academic identity online consists of multiple 'acceptable identity fragments' (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014), from personal to professional, which are further refracted across the range of platforms which an individual chooses to use (or not) (Jordan, 2019; Tusting et al., 2019; Veletsianos & Shaw, 2018). Expression of academic identity through different platforms is highly nuanced, and aligns with a spectrum from personal to professional (Jordan, 2019). As shown by the use of social media in the context of the UK Research Excellence Framework, it is often academics' personal accounts and identities which are used for institutional gain as a mechanism to demonstrate research impact (Carrigan & Jordan, 2021).

For these reasons, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the characteristics of social media policies at UK Higher Education institutions?

- Which platforms do institutions include in their definition of social media in this context?
- To what extent do institutional staff social media policies address abuse and trolling of staff?
- How are the concepts of ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ online identities being utilised in this context?

### 3 Methods

Social media policy documents were collected by systematic searching across UK-based Higher Education institutional websites, and analysed using descriptive statistics and corpus linguistics tools. Data collected during November 2022, by Google searches across primary domains of public and private Higher Education institutions in the UK.

First, a comprehensive list of UK Higher Education institutions was compiled, including their primary website address. This comprised a total of 160 institutions. Second, a series of Google searches were undertaken, restricted to each domain in turn, for the terms “‘social media’ policy”; if no results were found, the website was also visited and searched using its own search facility. Policies were only included if relevant to staff; those which were aimed at students were excluded. If a social media policy was found, the web address, title, length in terms of number of words, and date last updated (if applicable) were recorded, and a text document version saved offline for further analysis.

Of the 160 institutional websites searched, a social media policy could be located and accessed for 60 institutions (37.5%). Of the remaining 100 institutions, 18 (11.3%) appeared to have a policy but it was not accessible (typically behind an institutional log-in), while no policy or reference to a policy could be located for the remaining 82 (51.3%). 46 of the sampled documents were dated, and 14 were undated. Dates ranged from 2011 to 2023, with a median average of 2018. The length of the documents ranged from 498 to 5119 words, and the mean average length of a document was 2,142 words (n=60).

In addition to considering the overall characteristics of the sample, further analysis of the texts was undertaken using corpus linguistics. Corpus linguistics was chosen as a methodological approach as it offers a systematic, computational approach to analyzing the relationships between words and components of large-scale texts (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). The collected documents were mainly PDF documents, with a minority being Word documents or web pages. To prepare the documents for analysis, all were saved as plain text documents and checked for consistency. The collection of plain text documents was then imported into the corpus linguistics package ‘Lancsbox’ for analysis (Brezina, Timperley & McEnery, 2018).

When imported into Lancsbox, the corpus of social media policies comprised 60 files, 135,790 tokens, 5,912 types and 5,220 lemmas. Using Lancsbox, the corpus of texts was examined by looking at the incidence of particular terms of relevance to the research questions (‘personal’ and ‘professional’, trolling, and particular platform names, for example). Once identified, trends were then explored in further detail by close reading of related policy texts.

### 4 Results and discussion

The first, over-arching research question the study sought to address was ‘What are the characteristics of social media policies at UK Higher Education institutions?’. This was a fundamental question, to establish a baseline of the prevalence of policies within the sector, through the overview presented in the Methods section. The definition of social media in this context was further unpacked through the second research question, with a specific focus on platforms referred to in policy documents. This was addressed through querying the corpus of policies using Lancsbox. A core of six main platforms were most consistently referred to and mentioned in at least half of the policies: Twitter (52), Facebook (49), LinkedIn (45), Blogs (42), YouTube (42) and Instagram (34). Seventeen other platforms were referred to to a lesser extent, including a range of social networking services and image and video content-sharing sites. Note that there were some instances of including internal communications platforms (such as Teams and Yammer) but these were rare. Further insight was gained through visualisation of co-located terms which revealed assumptions linked to how different platforms are referred to within the policies and will be presented visually in the session.

The third and fourth research questions turned to the relationship between staff and the content of policies. The third research question asked how the concepts of ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ identities are utilised in this context. This was examined by querying the corpus for the terms personal and professional, and looking at the words which are most frequently co-located with each term. This is illustrated through a network of collocations, which demonstrates that the words collocated with ‘professional’ are more limited and illustrate a cautious approach to identity expression – maintaining a professional and respectful tone and standards, avoiding negative impacts and upholding reputation. ‘Personal’ is collocated with a wider range of terms. It is also subject to caution: the need to be reasonable, sensitive; particularly telling is disclaimer. It is acknowledged that identities online are blurred, but separate and with defined boundaries. Notably, no platforms are particularly collocated with either keyword, although ‘personal’ is collocated with particular media – videos, photograph – which suggests a legal focus, on participants’ consent and copyright issues, for example. Finally, the fourth question explored to what extent do the policies address abuse and trolling of staff. This was examined through querying the corpus for relevant terms, such as trolling, harassment, and illegal. This showed that there is a strong bias towards risk in terms of protecting the institution rather than the individual. Harassment was much more frequently addressed in terms of academic staff as perpetrators and the disciplinary consequences of this, rather than protecting staff from external harassment.

## 5 Future work

The study revealed that a substantial proportion of UK HE institutions still appear to lack social media policies; policies were located publicly for 37.5% of institutions, while a further 11.3% referred or linked to having a social media policy (non-public). No policy, or references to a policy, could be found for the remaining 51.3%. This is a greater proportion than reported in earlier work by Lees (2018), which found no documents for 39% of the UK HE sector. However, it is not clear whether this represents a decrease, as Lees (2018) included a wider range of documents related to guidance for staff in relation to social media, whereas the present study focused in particular on policy documents. Nonetheless, the figures do not suggest that there has been a significant increase in recent years. The first main implication from the study is that there is a gap here and a need for policies to be put in place, to protect both institutions and their staff. The range of dates suggests that a substantial proportion of policies are quite dated and may not reflect the current social media or legislative landscape (e.g. the Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act 2023). A social media policy template provided by the organisation JISC Legal was referred to and may have formed a starting point in many cases, however the JISC Legal website is now defunct. Many of the issues in social media policies – such as harassment – may be covered by other university policies, such as dignity at work, however this tends to focus upon internal organisational issues. Staff remain highly exposed to external risks and trolling.

The analysis suggests that social media policies make a clear distinction between personal and professional identities. However, in practice this is blurred and the platforms which are arguably most helpful to academics in order to communicate their research and enhance impact sit at the intersection of both (Jordan, 2019). The analysis also suggests that the policies do not address platform-specific issues in detail, but refer to social media as an umbrella term. There is also a question of for whom the policies do ‘work’; the theme of legal issues and disclaimers strongly suggests their purpose is to protect the institution, rather than academics. This also aligns with reports of institutional surveillance of academics’ social media (Reidy, 2020). Academics are increasingly encouraged to promote their work through social media as part of the so-called ‘impact agenda’ (Carrigan & Jordan, 2021); institutions stand to benefit from academics’ social media use, while individuals are exposed to risks of online abuse (Moriarty, 2018). Institutional social media policies may therefore require reframing in terms of how institutions protect not just their reputations, but their staff. Further research would be valuable in relation to staff experiences of these issues in instances where social media policies are put to the test in practice.

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