Type of Contribution: PAPER

**Social Media Use: Implications for Information Literacy Training**

**Keywords: Social media; Information seeking; Information evaluation; information sources**

# Introduction

# Social media are increasingly being used as information sources among various user groups. Recent research shows that the majority of U.S. adults use Facebook and YouTube (68% and 73%, respectively), while young adults, especially those between the ages of 18 - 24 stand out for embracing a variety of platforms and using them more frequently (Pew 2018). In recent years, some types of social media such as Wikipedia and YouTube have emerged as important information sources (Pew 2012; Head and Eisenberg 2010). These studies also found that about 50% of online teens (Pew 2009) and over 80% of college students (Head & Eisenberg 2009, 2010) used social media for their academic as well as everyday life information sources.

# While such social media are increasingly popular as information sources, the quality of information available through them is often questionable and difficult to assess. The prevalent usage of social media despite quality concerns has triggered a discussion that the critical evaluation of social media sources should be an important aspect of information literacy (IL) or new literacies/IL 2.0 (Farkas 2011; Pew 2011). Focusing on undergraduate students, the study aims at understanding the current usage of social media as information sources and identifying commonly used and effective strategies for evaluating these social media sources. Suggestions are made to help improve IL education and also information systems design including system features/tools and metadata elements/facets for better retrieval and evaluation of information from social media sources.

**Theoretical Framework and Research Questions**

This study employs a Uses and Gratification approach (Palmgreen 1984; Rubin 1994) as a theoretical framework in investigating why and how college students use various social media platforms as their information sources in everyday life and academic contexts. The Uses and Gratification theory has its roots in the mass communication research and has recently been applied to new communication technologies including social media (Gan and Wang 2015; Yoo and Robbins 2008).

The study has three research questions: (1) In what contexts do undergraduates use different social media as information sources? (2) Which types of social media do they use to satisfy different kinds of information needs? and (3) What actions do they take for evaluating the information provided by different social media?

The goal of the study is two‐fold. First, the study aims at illuminating the current trend of using social media as information sources and evaluating information from social media sources. Second, it attempts to identify IL strategies that can be used to effectively evaluate information retrieved from social media sources. Nine social media platforms listed below are included in this study: Wikis, SNS, Media Sharing, User Reviews, Q & A Sites, Social Bookmarking, Blogs, Micro-blogs, Internet Forums.

**Methods**

A Web survey was used to collect data from undergraduate students. All the data were collected in 2013 and also in 2019. In 2013, the survey collected 1,355 responses. About 60% of them were female and 40% were male. 67% of the respondents were aged 20-24 and 31% of the respondents were under 20 years old. In 2019, the survey collected 928 responses. About 68% of the respondents were women and 32% were men. Students aged 20-24 constituted the largest share of the sample (58%), followed by those under 20 years old (40%).

**Results**

At this point, we have just completed the preliminary descriptive data analyses. This section reports some basic findings for the three research questions.

*Research question 1: In what contexts do undergraduates use different social media as information sources?*

The respondents were asked how often they used social media as information sources in the academic and the everyday contexts. In academic contexts, there seems to have been little changes over the last 5 years. In 2013, the top three most frequently used sources were: Wikis, Q&A sites, and Media sharing services. In 2019, the top three most frequently used sources were: Wikis, Media sharing services, and Q&A sites. The same social media platforms have remained as top three, although Media sharing services seem to have gained more popularity.

The usage information of social media was collected separately in everyday-life information seeking (ELIS) contexts and in academic contexts. In 2013, Wikis and Media-sharing services were among the top three sources in both academic and ELIS contexts. A difference was that Q&A sites were among the top three sources in the academic context, and Social networking sites in ELIS. This pattern remained the same in 2019.

*Research question 2: What types of social media do they use for different purposes?*

The respondents were asked whether they used each of the nine platforms for different purposes, at least several times a month. Summing across all nine platforms, the top three purposes (out of eleven purposes) in 2013 and 2019 were: *Obtain opinions*, *Get background info*, and *Follow popular trends*. Again, no significant changes are observed over the five year period since 2013.

When the purposes for using each platform were examined, the responses were quite diverse. For Wikis, the top purpose was *Get background info*. For SNS, *Maintain relations* was the most frequently cited purpose. For Media-sharing sites, Social bookmarking/Scrapbooking, and Microblogs, all three had *Follow popular trends* as the top purpose. For User reviews and Blogs, *Obtaining opinions* was the top purpose. For Q&A sites and Internet forums, *Finding solutions* was the top purpose.

*Research question 3: What actions do they take for evaluating the information provided by different social media?*

The results show how frequently respondents took different actions when evaluating the information obtained from each of the nine platforms. Thirteen evaluative actions were analyzed in the academic and ELIS contexts separately, and the changes between 2013 and 2019 were examined. Although there were slight changes in evaluative actions over the study period, ‘*Compare the content with external/official sources’* and ‘*Check the posting date’* were top two actions taken in academic contexts in both 2013 and 2019. In ELIS contexts, the top evaluative actions were ‘*Check other users’ reactions to a posting’* and ‘*Check the posting dates*.’

Overall, the 2019 respondents were more vigorous in evaluating the quality of information than the 2013 respondents. In academic contexts, Wikis, Q&A sites, Media sharing services and blogs are the top platforms where respondents took evaluative actions most. In ELIS, SNS sites were the most frequently evaluated platform in both 2013 and 2019. Blogs and User reviews were the 2nd and 3rd in 2013 and Microblogs and Media-sharing services were the second and third top platform in 2019. The evaluative strategies were further broken down by platforms to show the respondents’ patterns of evaluative actions in academic and ELIS contexts across platforms over the study period.

**Discussion**

Regarding the social media platforms frequently used in two different contexts, findings from 2013 and 2019 showed a similar trend in terms of highly ranked platforms in academic and ELIS contexts. As Wikis and Media-sharing services were frequently used both in academic and ELIS contexts, it might be important to include them in the information literacy (IL) program. It was also found that Q&A sites were frequently used in academic contexts. This would be another social media platform that needs to be covered in the IL program. As students use the platforms frequently, librarians would need to be more proactive in helping them learn how to use such platforms effectively for information seeking purposes.

In terms of the purposes of using social media in general, the results from 2013 and 2019 were similar. Among the top five purposes, four of them were the same: *Get background info*, *Find solutions*, *Obtain opinions*, and *Follow popular trends*. The purposes of using individual platforms were also similar in both years. The results suggest that Wikis and Q&A sites are important sources as they help find background information and also solutions. This finding indicates the necessity to include Wikis and Q&A sites in the IL program. With the knowledge of the top purposes of social media usage, librarians can also identify and recommend quality social media platforms and other resources that can help students achieve these purposes.

The findings about various evaluative actions show that there have been slight changes in students’ evaluative actions in two different information seeking contexts (i.e., academic vs. ELIS) over time (i.e., 2013 and 2019). Given the ever-increasing amount of online information, findings also show that students spend more time to evaluate information in certain social media such as Wikis and Q&A sites in academic settings and SNS sites and User reviews in ELIS. IL training programs may need to identify and develop effective evaluative tools and strategies tailored to various social media to enhance the quality of online information, which will help users fully achieve their information seeking purposes.

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