



**Maynooth
University**
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Department of Sociology



Time Well Spent?

A survey of student online media usage

Patricia Kettle, Niall Gilmartin, Mary P. Corcoran, Delma Byrne
and TianHang Sun

Department of Sociology,
Maynooth University
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Foreword

In the academic year 2015-2016 the Department of Sociology undertook research on the social media usage of the First Year undergraduate student cohort. The objective was to acquire a better sense of how students' access and use social media during an average college day, and assess the extent to which social media enhances or impacts on student's learning experiences. This report provides a valuable and comprehensive insight into university students' online media use. Moreover, its findings serve as a useful stimulus for developing new pedagogic strategies and innovative learning tools to facilitate and deliver learning.

The report complements the Department of Sociology's earlier study, *Bringing the students back in: a study of first year experience and retention 2013-14*, and data gathered by the Office of the Vice President for Strategy and Quality's Annual Incoming Student Survey (2014). The findings in this report are timely and are of critical relevance as the University navigates the first year of implementation of the Curriculum Initiative. Undertaking this piece of research proved an important reflective exercise for the Department of Sociology, and indeed for our cohort of first year students. We highly recommend that other Departments consider carrying out similar (periodic) reviews of this nature as a way of staying in tune with the student body, and for the purpose of building an archive of data on student learning and experiences at Maynooth University, which can inform pedagogical practices and future curriculum development.

Acknowledgements

The research instrument was constructed and designed by Professor Mary P. Corcoran, Dr. Patricia Kettle and Dr. Niall Gilmartin relying largely on the publicly available survey tools made available through the *EU Kids Online Network Survey* (2014). We received excellent advice and feedback on the survey instrument from Dr. Delma Byrne, Dr. Brian Conway and Dr. Aphra Kerr. The data was gathered by the Department's team of first year tutors to whom we are very grateful: Nigel Connor, Caitriona Fitzgerald, Dr. Kerry Gallagher, Patrick Gallagher, Dr. Adrian Millar and Cristín O'Rourke. Data gathering on the Kilkenny campus was overseen by Ms. Stephanie McDermott. Ms. Tianhang Sun, a sophomore student at Boston College who interned at the Department of Sociology under the mentorship of Dr. Delma Byrne took responsibility for most of the data entry and for the data processing. Maeve Corcoran White also contributed to data entry. We would like to thank the Sociology students on the Maynooth and Kilkenny campuses who took part in the project. Finally, we are grateful to Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Vice President and Registrar of Maynooth University for officially launching this report.

Executive Summary

Levels of online usage have accelerated dramatically over the course of the last ten years, particularly with the advent of the smart phone. For a significant proportion of the population, vast tracts of their working and social lives are now mediated and governed by digital technology. For many of those now entering university, the notion of a world without Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and a host of other digital platforms and applications is simply unthinkable. As online usage and digital technology continue to saturate our working and social worlds, they present both challenges and opportunities for the formal education system. The unprecedented access to online content offers undergraduate students the opportunity to engage with unlimited academic resources. Equally, digital technology can also be a distraction for students from their college work and study. Moreover, the widespread use of hand-held devices can be viewed as a disruptive and intrusive presence in lecture halls and classrooms.

Despite the widespread prevalence of social media use and smart phones within Irish universities, we have not had until now rigorous data examining the extent and levels of usage among university students. This report provides a comprehensive snapshot of social media use and the type of content undergraduate students are accessing.

Key findings include:

- High levels of online usage on a daily basis, with the majority of respondents accessing online content through smart phones throughout a typical college day. More than 60% of students are spending four hours or more on social media a day.
- Levels of usage and types of content accessed mirror international trends. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Spotify are the most popular internet platforms accessed regularly.
- The majority of time spent on social media during an ordinary college day is for social rather than educational purposes.
- Respondents report very low levels of civic and political engagement through social media.
- Only a minority (23%) read or watch current affairs or news programmes on a daily basis.
- There is an emergent pattern of students using social media and the internet as an academic research tool and platform for communication among their peers.
- Although Moodle remains an important tool for students, in the main students do not use it as a platform of communication, debate or discussion on issues pertinent to the modules that it supports. Peer to peer communication seems to mainly occur through instant messaging.
- Respondents are digitally literate and report high levels of competency, proficiency and knowledge about digital technology and online content.
- A significant proportion of students (over 55 per cent) report feeling bothered if they cannot check smartphones while in class.
- A third of students who responded to the survey report that they have spent less time that they should on college work because of the time spent on devices. About one third also believe that this has resulted in them falling behind in college work.
- Overall a significant majority of students (86%) are of the view that social media has helped them socially, with a slightly lower majority (70%) of the view that it has helped them academically.

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Context: ‘Digital Natives’ and the New Media

Sociological research on digital technology falls broadly into two fields, one examining the political economy of ‘new media’ and debates regarding power and control, and the other, exploring the impact of technology on education. The meaning of social media is highly contested: some use the term quite narrowly referring to one-on-one communications through a medium such as Facebook while others use the term to refer to all aspects of Web 2.0 sites (Hunsinger and Senft 2015). While the fast pace of technological change may render the term ‘new media’ somewhat meaningless (newness seems to be intensifying across space and time) many have tended to define ‘new media’ under the broad umbrella of digital media (Flew 2008). Digital media are defined as forms of content that combine and integrate data, text, sound, and images of all kinds. The advent of Web 2.0 which emerged in the aftermath of the ‘dot.com’ crash of the early 2000s radically transformed the ways in which people interacted with online content. Users shifted from the status of ‘consumers’ of online content to becoming participatory actors or prosumers. They did this through, for instance, creative engagement, blogging, offering reviews and critiques, and information sharing.

Some analysts have focused on the power relationship between technology use and society, particularly examining the role of social media as a tool for political organising (Trottier and Fuchs 2015), while others have sought to explore the participatory opportunities of social media and notions of digital democracy (Creeber and Martin 2009; Croteau, Hoynes and Milan 2012). Others continue to assert that despite its newness and participatory aura, the political economy of the internet and new media closely mirrors that of the old media. That is, it is characterised by the domination of multimedia conglomerates and high levels of commercialisation (Curran et al. 2012). Christian Fuchs (2014) adopts a critical approach towards social media, examining issues of power, participation, ideology and exploitation, paying particular attention to Facebook, Google, and Twitter among others. While Fuchs (2014) and Devereux (2014) point to the benefits and opportunities offered by the proliferation of social media, social media remains corporate-owned and corporation-dominated. Social media is fundamentally a mechanism of commodification and corporate ideological expression. It is a business that is profit motivated and market oriented.

Prensky (2001) coined the term ‘digital natives’ to refer to the cohort born after 1980. Prensky asserts that this generation is distinctly different to previous ones: a generation that grew up in a world dominated by the omnipresence of digital technology. Moreover, they(have the skills necessary to use such technologies. These kids are different: they study, work, write, and interact with each other in ways that are different from generations before (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Digital natives are creative and express themselves in ways that are far different from generations before (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). The *EU Kids Online* European wide study of 2014 explored the online activities of these ‘digital natives’ and unequivocally found that more children are going online, at younger ages and in more diverse ways. Unsurprisingly, that research indicates the decline of the laptop in favour of handheld devices as the primary medium for online activity. This EU-wide study (whose survey instrument informed the current study) presents important new insights into children’s use of the internet and smart technology.

More recent research indicates that Irish people are amongst the most prolific internet users globally. Statistics from a Dublin-based research firm Statcounter, show that in 2015 Ireland had some of the highest levels of phone internet users anywhere in Europe, North America or South America. The figures indicate that Irish citizens use their smartphones for internet activity more than any other western country, with a third of all web access occurring through smart phones. At the same time, use of Personal Computers and laptops to access the internet in Ireland

have fallen sharply from 77% to 56% in the last two years. The Ipsos MRBI social messaging tracker reports the following media account ownership figures as of October 2016:

Social messaging platform	Percentage of Irish people who own an account
Facebook	67%
Facebook messenger	55%
WhatsApp	53%
Skype	43%
Viber	38%
Snapchat	28%
Instagram	25%
Twitter	25%

Research conducted in 2015 by the Pew Research Centre reveals that 92% of teens in the US report going online daily, including 24% who divulge that they go online constantly. While all of this research provides comprehensive snapshots of internet usage both nationally and internationally, there is little research on levels of usage among Ireland’s undergraduate university students.

With respect to digital technology and education, there is a relatively sizable amount of sociological research examining the impact of technology and digital technology within the curriculum both as a subject and of course as a pedagogical tool for teaching and learning (Austin and Hunter 2012; Beastall 2006; Conway 2000; Gorard and Selwyn 2005; Lawson and Comber 2000; Selwyn 2006). Burn (2009) examined the ways in which digital technologies changed the nature of literacy and literacy as social practice in the classroom setting. Much of this research explores the opportunities and challenges presenting by digital technology for both educators and students. Existing sociological research on schools and universities consistently highlights issues of power, control, and authority (Devine 2000; French and Sumison 2007; Grant 1997; Lodge and Lynch 2000; Wong 2014). The ubiquity of handheld devices and the increasing ‘always connected’ culture presents new challenges for lecturers, teachers and educators in terms of power and control. Some have strongly cautioned against educational institutions seeking to create a sphere completely free from the ‘interference’ of digital technology, given the importance assigned to it by school children and young adults (Sefton-Green and Erstad 2013). In their study of secondary children in Australia, Selwyn and Bulfin (2016) advise against school regulation of social media and digital technology. Equally, Neil Selwyn (2003, 2006) also cautions against the outright ban or restrictive regulation of digital technologies and calls for a more nuanced approach, by examining the ways in which mobile phones are affecting the shaping of student identity. While existing sociological research tends to focus on the pedagogical impacts of technology in the teaching curriculum, very little attention however has been paid to levels of online usage among third-level students. Neil Selwyn poses two key questions: Under what circumstances and for what purposes are students using mobile phones in schools, and how does this compare with their outside-school use? How is mobile phone ownership and use altering student notions of the physical and regulative

boundaries of power and control within the school? This report seeks to address these important questions with respect to undergraduate sociology students at Maynooth University.

Methodology

A quantitative research approach was employed to examine and explore students' access and usage of digital technologies and online media activities, and to assess the opportunities and challenges digital technologies and online usage present for both educators and students. The survey instrument drew heavily on the *EU Kids online survey* and associated web resources which has been made publicly available to researchers. A copy of the survey is appended to this report. The survey was carried out among First Year Sociology students in tutorial groups during the month of April 2016.¹ The data was analysed using SPSS and coded according to access, use (general versus learning purposes), knowledge, competency and skills, impacts, and perceptions and use of the online resources made available by the Department/University.

A total of 327 students participated in the survey and completed questionnaires. This total population represents students from the Maynooth University campus and the MU Kilkenny outreach campus.

Two-thirds of the sample are female (70.64%), with males accounting for 28.4 per cent. Ninety per cent of respondents were aged between 17-22 years, with mature students accounting for 10 per cent of the sample population.

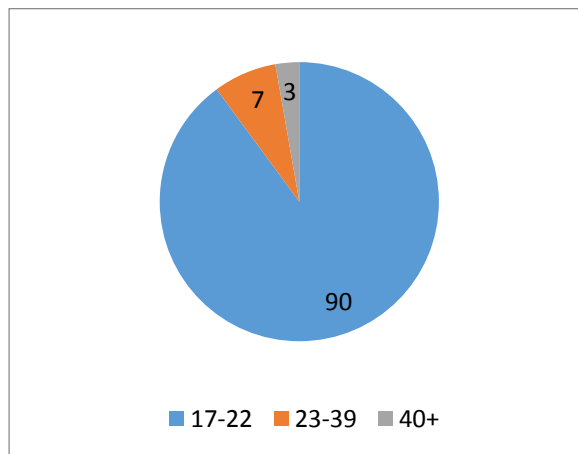


Figure 1. Respondents by Age (q.2)

¹ The data will be further anonymised and the data set will be available as a resource for staff and advanced students interested in carrying out further analysis of student social media usage and the implications for pedagogical innovation and practice.

Access, time spent and connectedness to the Library and the Department

Social media access and use is widespread among first year undergraduate students, and is thoroughly embedded in their daily lives. However, continuing changes in the nature, frequency and quality of access indicate fast-rising standards, skills and expectations, as well as diverse experiences and outcomes. In our survey students were asked specific questions about how they access and use social media for both learning and general purposes (on a daily, weekly and monthly basis), recognising that it is possible that varied access and usage is associated with different objectives, experiences and outcomes. The findings of this survey illustrate that levels and patterns of usage are diverse, but nevertheless provide important data for understanding how social media facilitates, enhances and impacts on learning, learning experiences and student learning experiences.

Students have access to a variety of devices in the course of the average day including Desktop computers, Laptops, Tablets, Smartphones, game consoles, Handheld Gaming Systems, MP3 Players and E-Readers. Just over half of the student population surveyed spend on average, between four and seven hours daily using digital technologies visiting/browsing and/or engaging with various social media sites, with one third spending between one and three hours, and almost 10 per cent spending at least eight hours or more. Less than four per cent of students spend little or no time using technology platforms (Figure 2). These figures show that our respondents are heavy users of social media compared to the statistical average. As of 2016, daily social media usage of global internet users amounted to just under 2 hours per day per day, up from 1.8 hours in the previous year (Statista 2016).

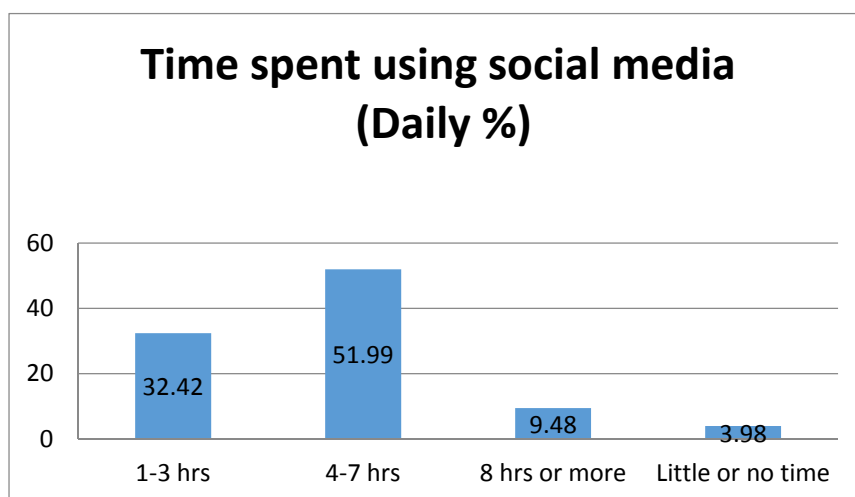


Figure 2. Time spent on social media on average college day (q.3)

How often students use this time for learning and general purposes varies considerably, and posits important pedagogic and sociological questions about how social media is/can be used. In light of this data, it is equally important that we examine how social media facilitates, shapes and impacts on learning, learning experiences and the knowledge gathering process.

The majority of time spent on social media during an ordinary college day *is for social rather than educational purposes*. Less than 20 per cent of students use social media to connect to the library daily, while only 32 per cent do so weekly and less than 10 per cent monthly. A significant proportion of respondents (over 40 per cent) ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ do. This implies that many students are foregoing the option of remote access to library sources even though this is a facility which at least in theory, should make their learning more flexible. Furthermore, less than 5 per cent of students use social media to connect to the Department of Sociology daily, with 22 per cent doing so weekly, and 10 per cent monthly. Over 60 per cent of students ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ do (Figs. 3 & 4). This despite the fact that there are significant teaching resources (handbooks, examples of past student projects) available on the Department website as well as useful information about forthcoming talks and events. The evidence suggests that while the Library and the Department are capturing the attention of some students through social media channels, they are by no means capturing all. However, this has to be set against the significant number of students who visit the library on a regular basis and the numbers who call to the Department in person every day, and who make personal appointments to see staff in their offices.

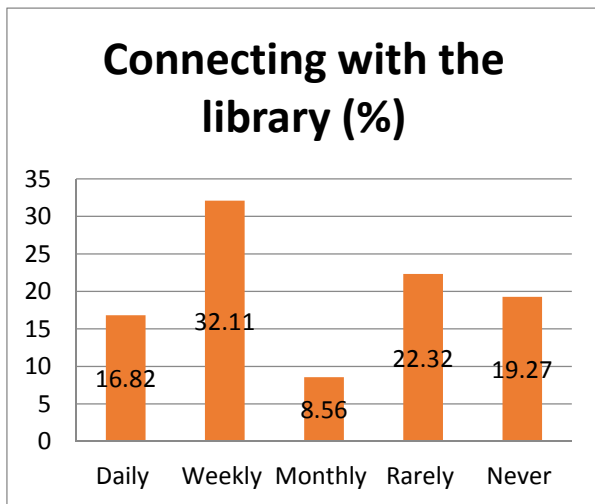


Figure 3 Connect with library (q.4a)

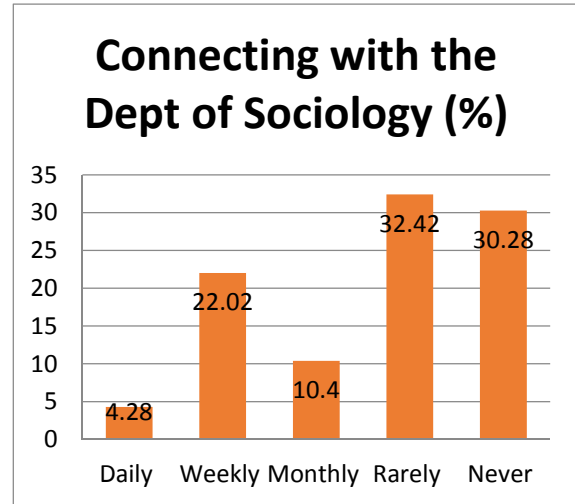


Figure 4. connect with Dept of Sociology (q.4b)

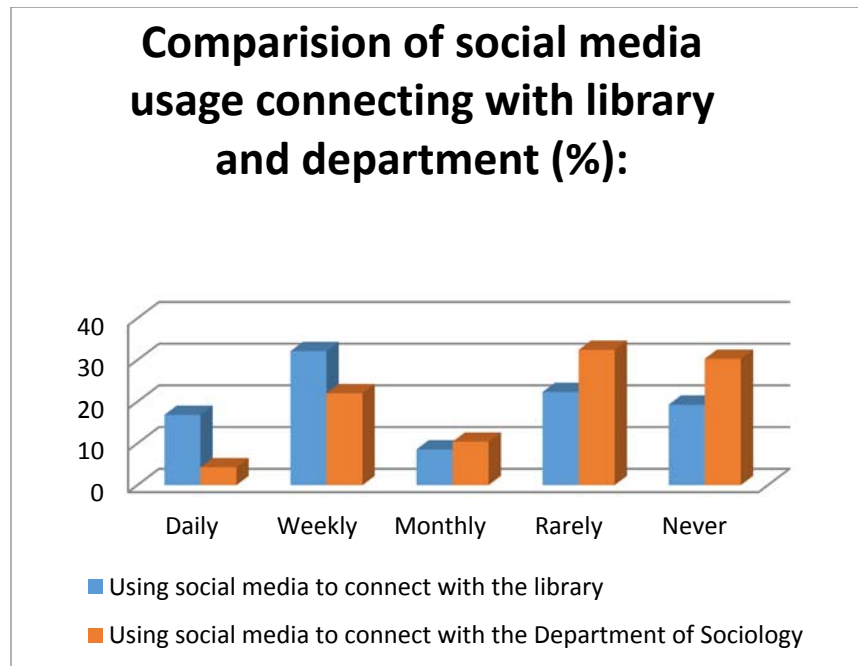


Figure 5. Comparison of social media access for learning (q.4a and 4b)

In contrast, 94 per cent of all respondents use social media to connect with others (via instant messaging) daily. Furthermore, just under forty percent use instant messaging on their smart phones to communicate with others students about college work daily. It is clear then that even when not utilising more conventional information routes, students are actively using social media to seek information and exchange information with others.

It appears that students are not necessarily looking to conventional official channels to learn about their subject, and about current activities and developments in their discipline. There is a real challenge here for working out how services such as a Departmental digital interface (website and twitter feed) can better connect with the student base. When respondents were asked to indicate how often they use social media to connect with the Department only one third of respondents reported that they do, either daily, weekly or monthly while a very significant 60 per cent reported that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ do. Similarly, when asked to indicate how often they checked the Department of Sociology twitter feed, just over 5 per cent indicated that they do daily, weekly or monthly while the overwhelming majority (93 per cent) reported that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ do. Respondents were also asked whether or not the Department of Sociology posts sharable content, and over 50 per cent of the respondents reported that it does not (although in fact the Department does provide a range of shareable resources across its programmes including samples of past students’ work).

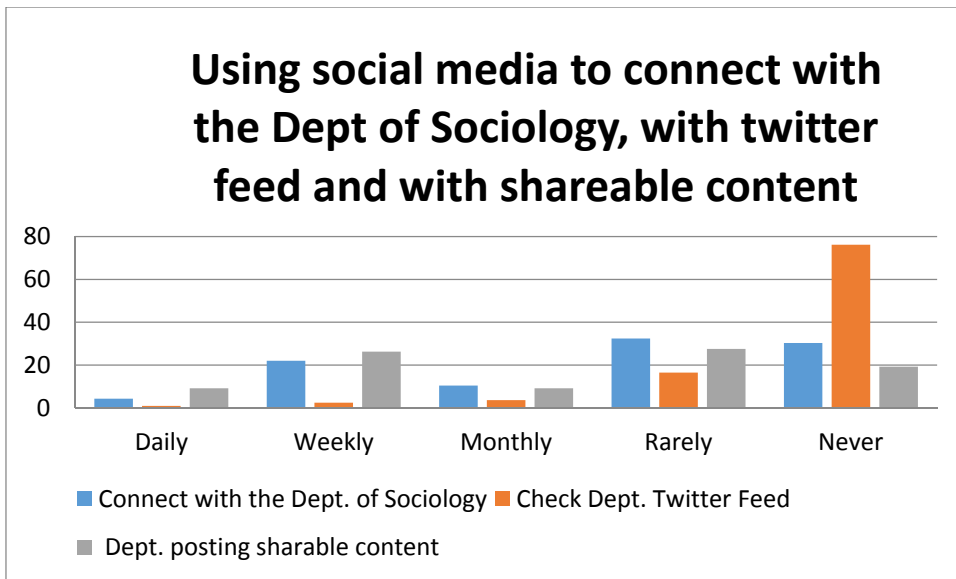


Figure 6. How often do you connect to the Department of Sociology? use Twitter? And does the department post sharable content? Q. 4c, 4d, 5h

Primary uses of social media by students

A great deal of research by the Pew Research Center and the *EU Kids Online 2014* study indicates clearly that the overwhelming majority of online users are accessing social media sites and platforms. Unsurprisingly our research reveals similar distinctive patterns regarding the type of online content accessed. Most of the uses of social media are visual and aural in form, and we might assume, only indirectly relate to the student’s field of study.

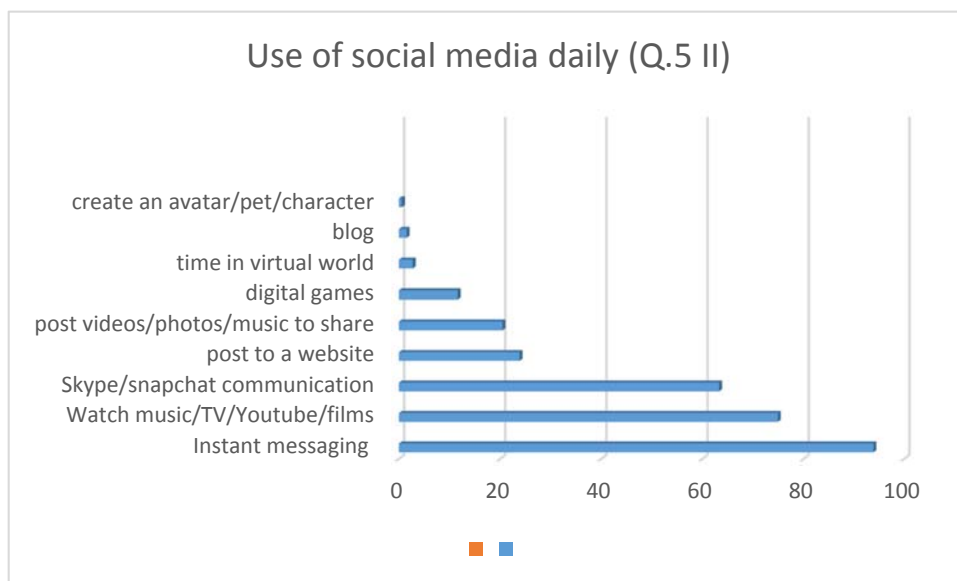


Figure 7: general use of social media (q.5 j-q)

In terms of general usage, three quarters of students use social media to watch music, TV, YouTube of videos online on a daily basis. That figure reaches over 96% for daily or weekly use. Two-thirds (63.3 per cent) engage in video communication (Skype, Snapchat) on a daily basis, with that figure rising to 80% when combining daily and weekly use. For those using smartphones, downloading and listening to music through platforms such as Spotify very popular activity. 76.15 per cent of respondents report that they use online technology to access music on a daily basis. Other activities which students engage in across devices daily include posting music to share with others (20.49%). Students are less likely to engage in general blogging, with more than 40% attesting that they rarely or never post a blog. While 11.62 per cent play digital gaming daily, two-thirds of respondents rarely or never play digital games on their own or against the computer. Only a negligible number are spending time in virtual worlds or creating avatars or pets. More than three quarters report that they never spend time in virtual world, more than 80% have never created a character, avatar or pet. Given that our sample is mainly female there may be a gender bias at work here, as young men generally are more likely than young women, to engage in regular gaming and virtual reality games.

We also asked students specifically about their use of the smart phone as a communicative tool, and it is clear that it is predominantly used for social and entertainment purposes. Many of the functionalities mentioned above are accessed through the smart phone. For instance, about two thirds of students reported watching music broadcast, TV, YouTube or films on their smart phones daily with that figure rising to just under 90% when combining daily and weekly usage. Ninety per cent of students listen to music such as Spotify on a daily or weekly basis. Just under two-thirds spend time checking celebrity or sports information either daily (32%) or weekly (31%).

Sociologists of the 'new media' have focused on the power relationship between technology use and society, particularly examining the role of social media as a tool for political organising (Trottier and Fuchs 2015). Some have sought to explore the participatory opportunities of social media and notions of digital democracy (Creeber and Martin 2009; Croteau, Hoynes and Milan 2012). Much was said about the use of Twitter and Facebook during the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and the global Occupy movement which emerged in the aftermath of the current financial crisis. Given this, our research data provides a rather doleful appraisal of online engagement with political and civic issues. The data indicate, for instance, that a mere 2.14 per cent participated in a political website on a daily basis with just 3 per cent indicating participation on a weekly basis. At the other end of the scale some 56 per cent reported that they never participated in political websites with a further 31.8 per cent indicating that they 'rarely' access a political website.

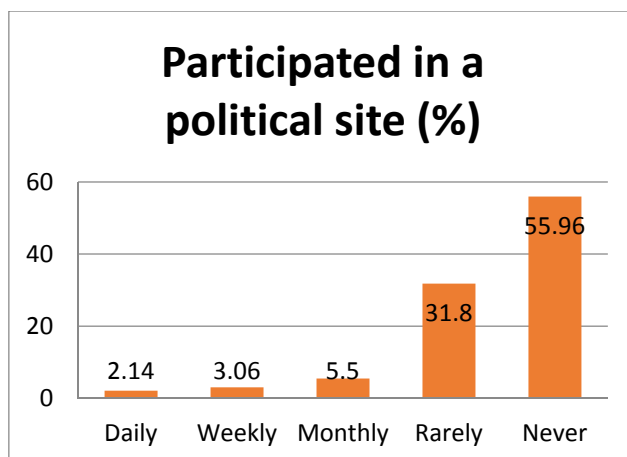


Figure 8. participated in a political site (q.6L)

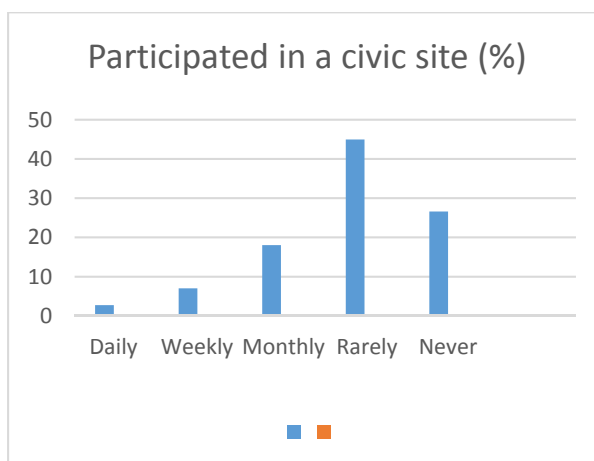


Figure 9. participated in a civic site (q.6k)

Very few respondents reported use of social media (via smartphones) to regularly participate in civic and political sites (2.75% & 2.14% respectively). This seems to indicate a general disengagement from either political or civic causes which one might expect to capture the student imagination. In a similar vein, quite a substantial proportion of students (37 per cent) indicated that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ watch the news or current affairs online, and a further 11% engage with current affairs on a monthly basis only. A little over 25 per cent reported that they do so weekly, and 23 per cent daily. This would seem to suggest that in general, students are not minded to use social media resources as a way of becoming active co-producers in the worlds of politics, civil society or creative innovation. In fact, they are content to adopt a strategy in which much of their usage is for connecting instantly with others, sharing personal content with others and entertaining themselves as consumers. The findings on political apathy and desultory engagement with current affairs are particularly challenging in a Department where a working knowledge of current affairs and an interest in political and social justice agendas are often assumed. Academics frequently post materials from newspaper and current affairs journals on Moodle sites to encourage students to see the real world application of sociological perspectives, but often such material goes unread.

Use of social media for academic purposes

Despite the prolific use of digital technology and online social activities for largely entertainment purposes during the typical college day, our survey found that students are using digital technologies for educational purposes. However, the levels, frequency and types of activities students engage in (on either a daily weekly, or monthly basis) vary considerably compared to general access and use.

The values across daily categories suggest that usage for learning remains relatively low. However, survey results indicate that students do use social media for learning purposes but that they tend to do so more on a weekly rather than on a daily basis. Just over half of students (52 per cent) reported that they read a pdf of an academic journal, book, chapter or ebook weekly, compared to 28 per cent daily and 13 per cent monthly. Similarly, almost 50 per cent of respondents reported that they send/receive emails to do with college work weekly, compared to 29 per cent daily and 15 per cent monthly, while over 37 per cent reported that they do research for an assignment weekly compared to 19 per cent daily, and 10 per cent monthly (Fig 10). While over half of the sample population reported that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ use file sharing sites (such as Dropbox which enables, for instance, sharing of resources and collaborative project work), over 20 per cent reported that they do use them weekly, with 10 per cent using them daily and 14 per cent monthly.

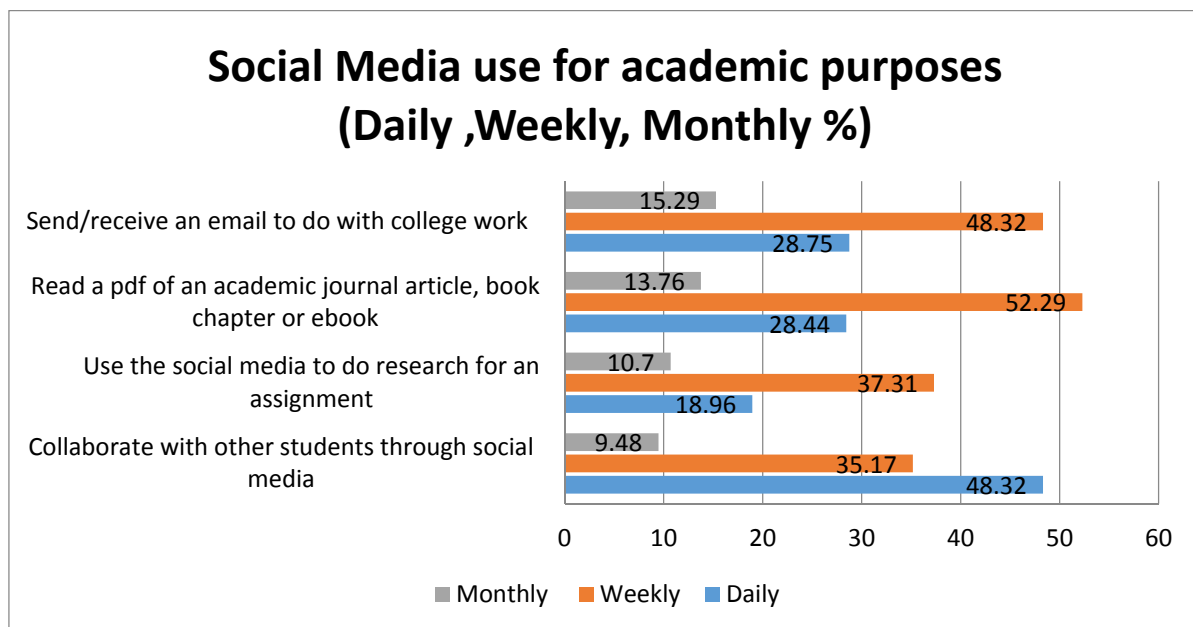


Figure 10. Usage for academic purposes (Q. 5)

Moreover, the survey found that students are employing diverse strategies and engaging in creative and innovative ways to facilitate and enhance learning. This is particularly evident in the percentage of students using social media to collaborate with others about college work, on a daily (48%) or weekly (35%) basis. In fact, a large majority of students (just over 83%) use social media to collaborate with others for learning purposes on a daily *and* weekly basis. Whilst

figure 11 below shows that half of the sample population ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ use social media sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or Instagram) for learning purposes, over one-third reported that they do (either on a daily or weekly). This illuminates the prevalence and significance of social media in students’ everyday lives, and demonstrates the diversity, rapidity *and* extent to which online digital technologies are shaping learning practices, outcomes and experiences. It is likely that as these social media platforms extend their market penetration, their use will increase among the student population.

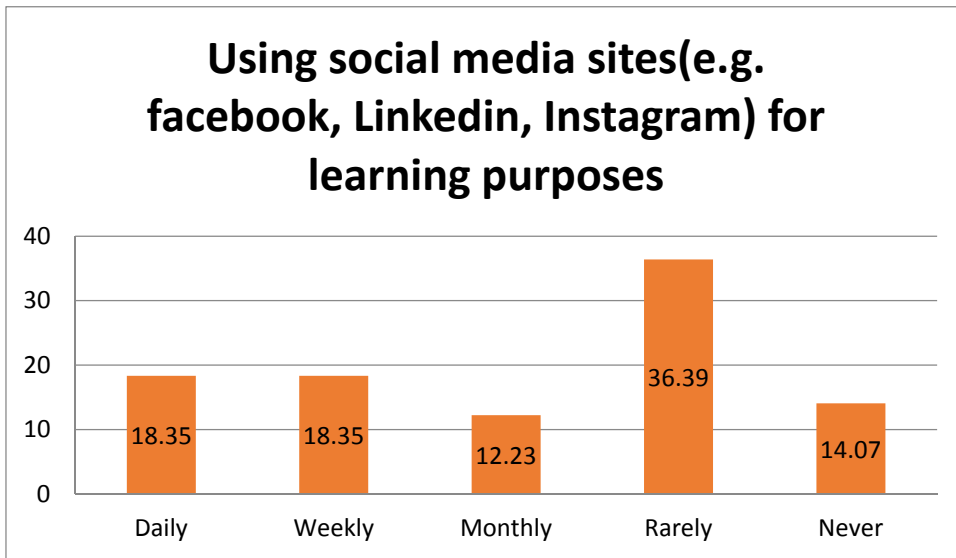


Figure 11 Usage of social media for learning purposes (q.5g)

Indeed, the findings shed much light on the challenges, impacts and opportunities digital technology and online use present. Furthermore, they raise crucial questions about *how* students are engaging with learning and the types of activities they are engaging in when collaborating online. For example, students increasingly use their smart phones for a range of activities including downloading and reading material. But are digital technologies and social media platforms being used as an alternative to traditional learning practices?

Smart Phone as a pedagogical tool?

Our survey indicates that social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Spotify and instant messaging, among many others, dominate students’ everyday usage while they are attending college. Educational and academic sites, while accessed and used remain somewhat peripheral rather than central in the rhythm of the typical college day. Looked at from the point of view of daily and weekly usage the picture is somewhat more positive. While the previous section provides a broad overview of the extent of online engagement among our sample, this section deals specifically with the use of the smartphone as a potential pedagogical tool.

Exploring further the functionality of their smart phones, we asked about downloading free apps for educational use. Almost 50 per cent of respondents reported that they ‘rarely’ did so with only 10.7 per cent indicating that they use apps for educational use on a weekly basis. Students are much less likely to utilise an App if it has to be paid for. (see figures 12 & 13) The frequency of accessing an academic journal, book or book chapter through a smartphone is much higher

(than the use of apps) with 17.13 per cent indicating that they access such academic material online on a daily basis, and a further 47.4 per cent doing so on a weekly basis.

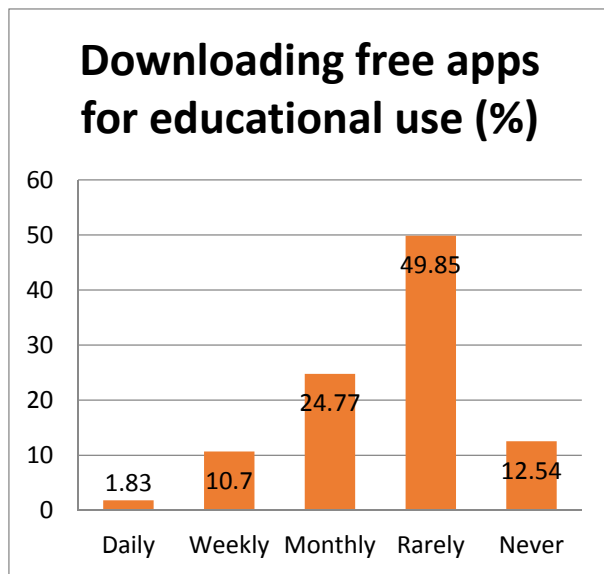


Fig. 12. How often have you downloaded free apps that have an educational use? (q.6a)

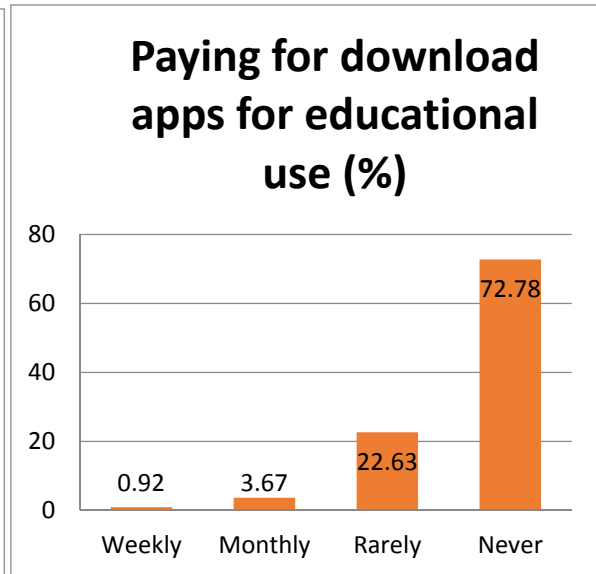


Figure 13. How often have you paid for download apps that have an educational use? (q.6b)

The survey reveals a relatively significant use of academic search engines for university work (See Fig 14). Some 22.63 per cent indicated that they use academic search engines such as Google Scholar or Science Direct on a daily basis while a further 31.08 per cent indicate that they use these tools on a weekly basis. Significantly, only 11.62 per cent indicated that they have never used an online academic search engine. Similarly, when asked about accessing online encyclopaedia or dictionaries, some 16.51 per cent reported daily use while 38.84 indicated they would access such content on a weekly basis. Only 6.73 per cent of the sample have never consulted an online encyclopaedia or dictionary.

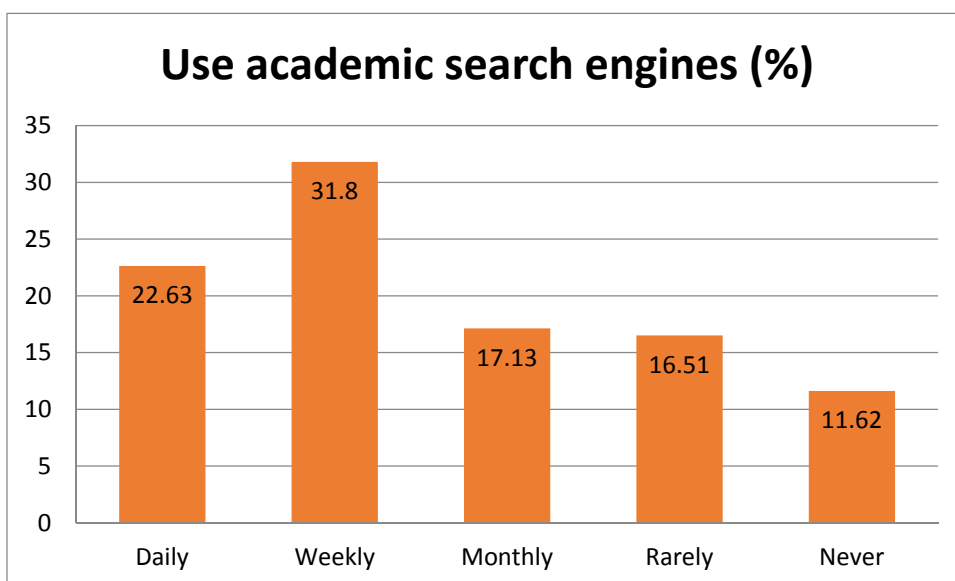


Figure 14. How often have you used an academic search engine? (q.6h)

The increased use of smartphones has diversified the ways in which we now communicate with online messaging an increasingly dominant trend. Our research mirrors these patterns with some 38.84 per cent of respondents indicating that they use instant messaging to communicate with other students about college work on a daily basis, while a further 44.04 per cent reported using instant messaging on a weekly basis. Lecturing staff have noticed that the interactive potential of Moodle (through forums, etc) are not used optimally as a mechanism for communication between students. While Moodle activity logs continue to indicate strong levels of student use of Moodle for accessing readings and other pertinent information, it is clear from our research data that instant messaging or social media like Facebook are the primary mediums for student exchanges regarding university work.

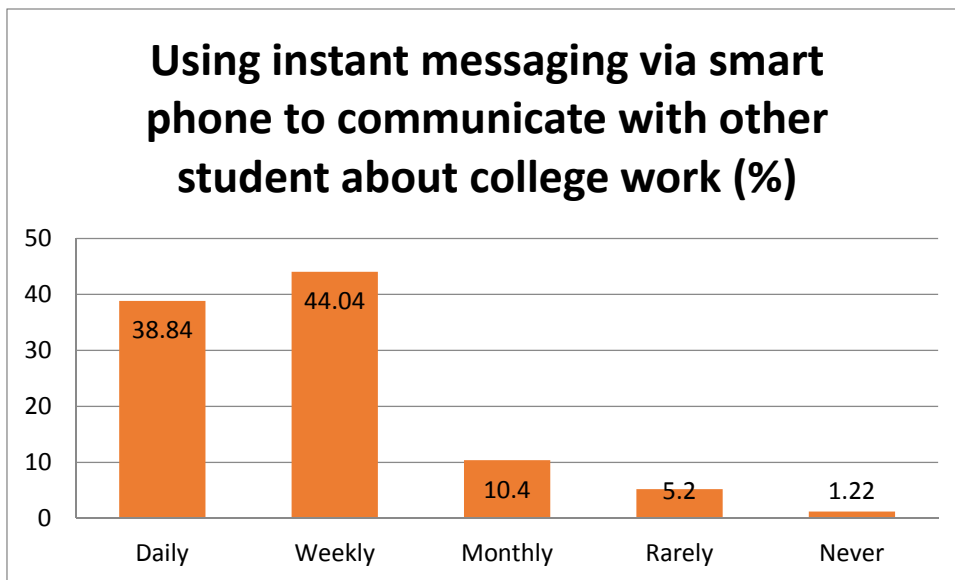


Figure 15. Use of instant messaging to communicate with other student about college work (q. 6m)

The picture emerging from our data sets resonates with existing national and international research. The overwhelming majority of respondents use online platforms and digital technology to access social media such as Facebook, music, films, Instagram, among others, with much less regular interaction with academic sites. There is, nevertheless, evidence that indicates that a significant proportion of respondents are availing of the digital capacity to access academic search engines and encyclopaedias from their phones, and that they are also using their phones continually to communicate with other students on issues related to university work.

Levels of Online Knowledge and Competency

The overwhelming majority of our research respondents are aged between 17-22 years of age, fitting neatly into the category Prensky (2001) termed as ‘digital natives’. This age cohort grew up in a world dominated by digital technology and moreover, have the skills necessary to navigate and use such technologies. These kids are different; they study, work, write, and interact with each other in ways that are different from generations before (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). Unquestionably our research indicates high levels of competency, proficiency and

knowledge about digital technology and online content among our respondents. Some 85.63 per cent know how to compare and bookmark different websites (See Fig 16 and 17). The high levels of smartphone usage however present as many dangers as they do opportunities. The *EU Kids Online 2014* survey revealed a myriad of risks which children may encounter online. Our research data reveals critical levels of awareness regarding these dangers and of course the strategies available to mitigate these risks. Some 92.97 per cent of respondents know how to change and maintain privacy settings on social networking sites and block unwanted messages, while a further 88.69 per cent know how to report online abuse. Overall, the overwhelming majority of respondents (86.54) were satisfied that they could source information on how to use the internet safely.

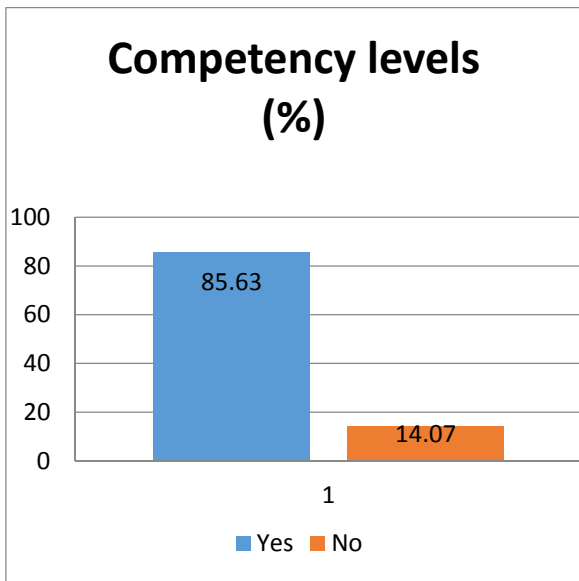


Figure 16 .When using devices, I know how to compare different websites to decide if information is reliable

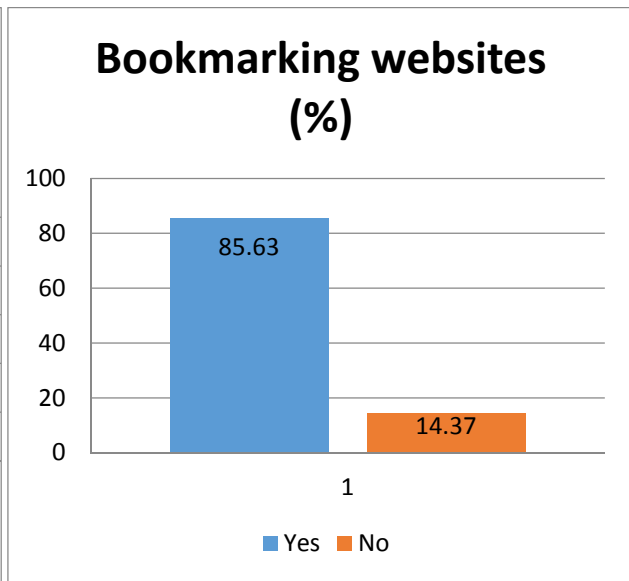


Figure 17. When using devices, I know how to bookmark a website

With a high degree of internet safety evident, it is perhaps unsurprising that respondents are comfortable with posting images (98.17), music (98.17) and blog posts (45.57) on social media. While the figures related to social media use are high, data pertaining to university work and assignments is equally impressive. Some 96.64 per cent of respondents know how to use Moodle to follow the module, complete quizzes and stay up to date, while 84.71 knew how to use Turnitin to check the similarity index and the possibility of plagiarism. (See Fig 18 below).

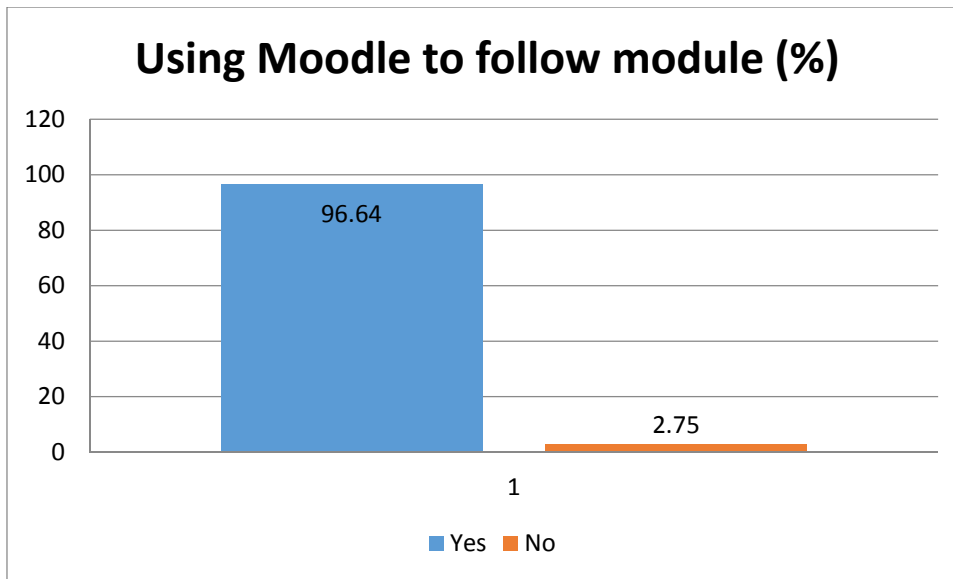


Figure 18. I know how to use Moodle to follow module, complete quizzes, etc (q.7k).

Moreover, the majority of respondents indicated that they are competent in using social media to conduct searches for college work. Some 72.48 per cent reported that they do not end up on websites without knowing how they got there while just fewer than 60 per cent of respondents stated that they use assigned and recommended module readings as the basis for their online searches. That said, just under half of our respondents (45.87) reported that academic websites are designed in a way which confuses them. With that in mind, 61.17 per cent of research participants felt confident in their ability to use the internet to locate reliable academic resources with 56.57 per cent stating that their essay assignments rely significantly on reading material that is library-based as opposed to material generated by generic internet searches. Nevertheless, we need to be cognisant of the fact that almost a quarter of respondents were unable to answer in the affirmative on that question.

Switched On or Switched Off?

Research in 2015 from the Pew Research Center found that 92 per cent of teens in the United States go online daily with 24 per cent going online ‘almost constantly’. Undoubtedly the advent of the smartphone device offers its users unprecedented access to online content. Over half of our respondents (52.29 per cent) stated a strong need to check their phone regularly to see if anything ‘new’ has happened. Asked if they felt bothered when they could not check their smartphones during lectures and tutorials, 20 per cent stated that this was an ‘often’ occurrence while a further 35.47 indicated that ‘sometimes’ they were frustrated by lack of access to their smartphones in lecture halls. Outside of the formal setting of lecture theatres and tutorial rooms, online access and usage impacted significantly on students’ college work. Some 34.56 per cent of respondents stated that they ‘often’ spent less time on college work because of time spent on devices while a further 41.59 per cent answered ‘sometimes’ for the same question. Only 7 per cent stated that online devices never interfered with their college work. When asked about actually falling behind on college due to online usage, 11.93 per cent reported ‘often’ while a further 34.56 stated ‘sometimes’. Almost 85 per cent of respondents stated that they often or

sometimes caught themselves browsing the internet and social media when should have been working on an assignment.

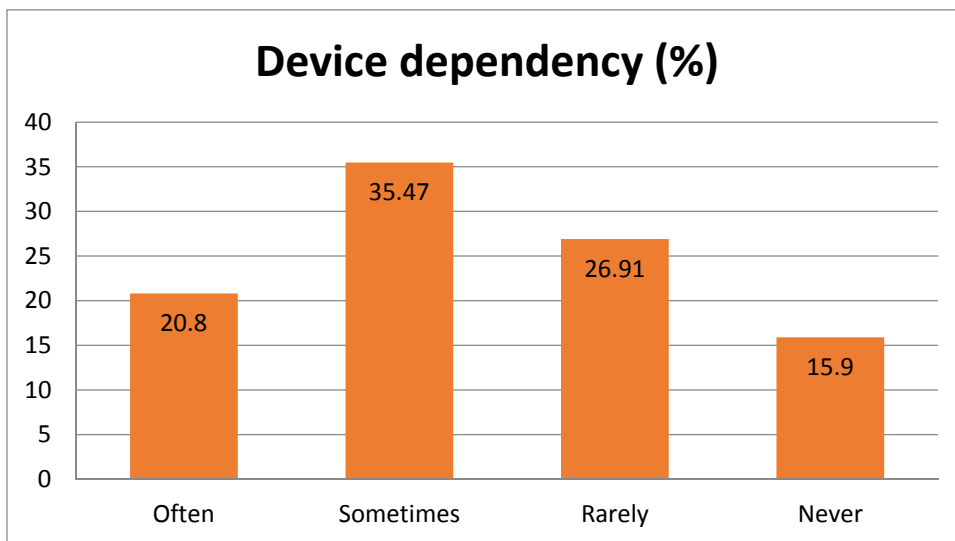


Figure 19. How often have you felt bothered when you could not check your smartphone while sitting in a lecturer/tutorial? (9b)

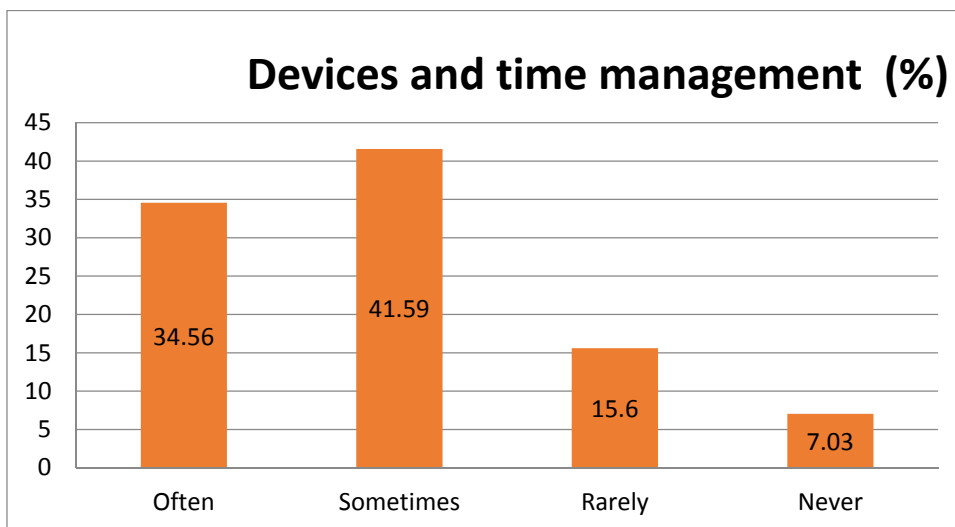


Figure 20. How often have you spent less time than you should on college work because of the time you spent on devices? (q. 9d)

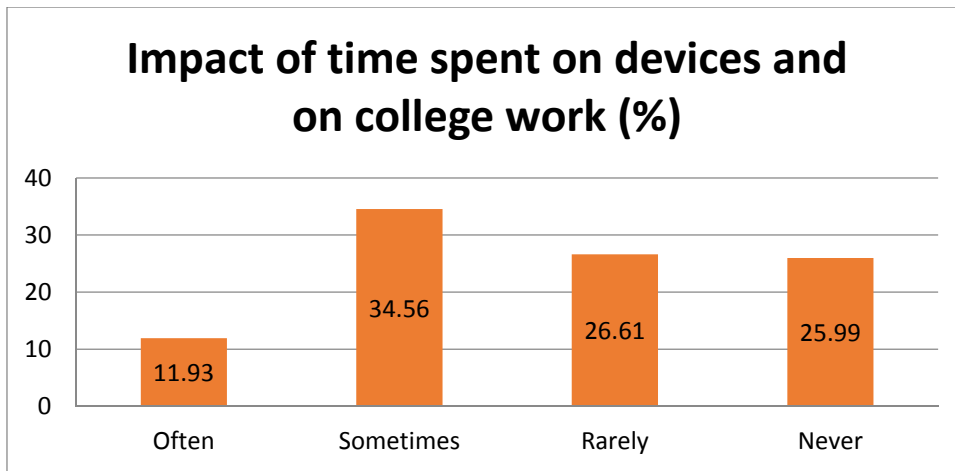


Figure 21. How often have you found yourself falling behind with college work because of the time you spend on devices? (q.9f)

Given these figures it is not surprising to see that just over half of our respondents (53.21) have tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on devices. Despite the desire to limit device use, most students have not sought a solution through a dedicated App. 78 per cent of respondents stated that they have not downloaded any apps which might reduce their rate of distraction, and a similar percentage (76%) have not downloaded an App to help them study. Outside of their own attempts to self-regulate their levels of online usage, the topic of university regulation proved more controversial with somewhat disparate results. When asked if it would be useful to have designated ‘dead zones’ where devices would be disabled, 47.71 per cent stated ‘No’, 39.14 per cent said ‘Yes’ with 11.31 per cent undecided. With regards to the confiscation of mobile devices by lecturers 53.12 answered ‘No’, with 25.38 per cent answering ‘Yes’ with a one fifth of students (20 per cent) undecided.

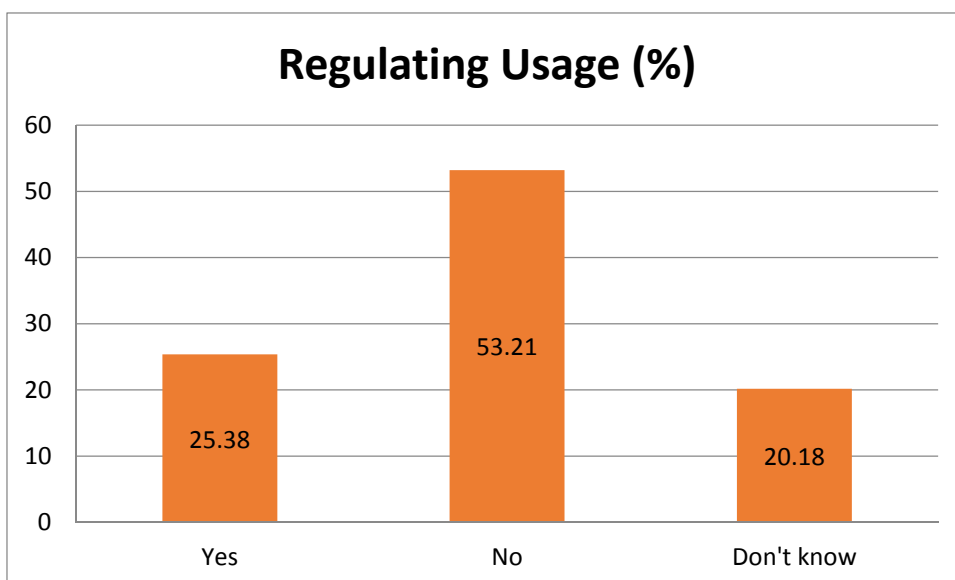


Figure 22. Is it appropriate for a lecturer to confiscate the phone of a student if it is a distraction during a lecture or a tutorial? (q.10a)

Conclusion

To conclude our report findings, it was important to ascertain the levels of satisfaction among respondents with regards to social media and the internet. Over 86 per cent of respondents affirmed their belief that social media has helped them socially, with just over 70 per cent stating that social media has helped them academically. So on the face of it social media usage is a good thing.

The report highlights the opportunities and challenges digital technologies and online usage present for both educators and students, and raises important questions regarding the ways in which university educators might better match student's use of digital technology and social media with educational objectives and learning experiences.

This report provides a tentative step in exploring the online activities of undergraduate university students and offers a comprehensive insight into levels of usage and content accessed by university undergraduates. We present a robust and comprehensive snapshot of online usage among university undergraduates. The report finds high levels of online usage on a daily basis particularly for social and entertainment purposes. The majority of respondents are accessing online content through smart phones on a regular basis throughout a typical college day. The behemoth social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube emerge as the most popular internet platforms accessed. Levels of usage and types of content accessed mirror international trends. Social and entertainment functions dominate social media use.

Nevertheless, the report does uncover the possibility of online platforms becoming pedagogical tools for university students. The report finds a significant (and hopefully emergent) pattern of social media usage related to collaborative work with peers, downloading reading materials and using academic search tools for research purposes. Although Moodle remains an important tool for our students, students are not using it as a primary platform of communication, debate or discussion on issues pertinent to the modules. It is clear that student communications are occurring elsewhere, and mostly through instant messaging. Students are digitally literate and believe themselves to be competent and proficient users of social media. On the other hand, significant proportions of the study body are concerned about their capacity to balance time spent on college work with time on devices.

Our findings are suggestive of new pathways for future research (both quantitative and qualitative) regarding the ways in which Irish universities can meet new challenges posed, tap into new opportunities, and utilise social media as an important tool for education.

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Appendix

As you know social media is ever more present in our lives. We are interested in gathering information on your use of social media and how we might better match that usage with our educational objectives and your learning experiences. Please take the time to complete this confidential questionnaire. We will be happy to let you know the survey results in due course. Thank you.

Q1. Gender

Please circle: Male Female Other (please specify)

Q.2 Age Group

Please circle 17-22 years 23 – 39 40+

Q.3 Think about your use of social media on devices such as Desktop computer/Laptop computer/Tablet/Smartphone/Video game console/ Handheld Gaming System/MP3 Player/E-Reader, etc . About how long do you spend on social media on an ordinary college day? (Please make your best estimate)

Little or no time	Between 1-3 hours	Between 4-7 hours	8 hours or more	Don't know

Q.4 We are interested in how often you use social media to connect with learning on campus. Please tick the box which best expresses your personal usage

		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
4a	How often do you use social media to connect with the library?					
4b	How often do you use social media to connect with the Department of Sociology?					
4c	How often does the Department of Sociology use social media to connect with students?					
4d	The Department of Sociology uses shareable content					

4e. Which social media accounts would you like to use to connect with the Department of Sociology? Please list.

Q. 5 About how often do you tend to engage in the following activities? (Tick the box which best expresses your personal usage for each item listed)

		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
	THE FIRST SET OF ISSUES ARE MOSTLY TO DO WITH YOUR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COLLEGE PURPOSES					
5a	Collaborate with other students through social media					
5b	Use social media to do research for an assignment					
5c	Read a pdf of an academic journal article, book chapter or ebook					
5d	Send/receive an email to do with college work					
5e	Use file sharing sites (e.g. dropbox)					
5f	Read/watch the news or current affairs programmes online					
5g	Use a social media site (e.g. facebook, linkedin, Instagram) for learning purposes					
5h	Check the Sociology Department twitter feed @MU_Sociology					
	THE NEXT SET OF ISSUES ARE MOSTLY TO DO WITH YOUR GENERAL USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA					
5i	Play digital games on your own or against the computer					
5j	Spend time in a virtual world (e.g. World of Warcraft, Second Life)					
5k	Use a camera for video communication (e.g Skype, snap chat)					
5l	Post a message on a website					
5m	Write a blog or diary entry					
5n	Put or post photos, videos or music to share with others					
5o	Create a character, pet or avatar					
5p	Watch music, broadcast TV, You Tube or films online					
5q	Use instant messaging					

PLEASE ANSWER THIS QUESTION IF YOU HAVE ACCESS TO A SMART PHONE, OTHERWISE SKIP TO Q. 7

Q. 6 Thinking in terms of your use of your smartphone during the college term about how often are you likely to do have done the following?

		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
6a	Downloaded free apps that have an educational use					
6b	Paid for downloaded apps that have an educational use					
6c	Read a pdf of an academic journal article, book chapter or ebook					
6d	Watched music, broadcast TV, You Tube or films online					
6e	Looked up maps/timetables					
6f	Listened to music (e.g. spotify)					
6g	Registered my geographical location					
6h	Used an academic search engine (e.g. Google Scholar, ScienceDirect)					
6i	Used online encyclopaedia or dictionary					
6j	Checked out celebrity or sports information online					
6k	Participated in a civic site (e.g to support a good cause)					
6l	Participated in a political site					
6m	Used instant messaging to communicate with others students about college work					
6n	Completed an assignment for college					

Q.7 When using devices I know how to:

		Yes	No
7a	Compare different websites to decide if information is reliable		
7b	Bookmark a website		
7c	Change privacy settings on a social networking site		
7d	Use "report abuse" buttons		
7e	Block messages from someone from whom you don't want to hear		
7f	Block pop ups		
7g	Publish a comment on a blog, Moodle forum, website		
7h	Upload images, videos, music onto social media		
		Yes	NO
7i	Find information on how to use the internet safely		
7j	Create a blog		
7k	Use Moodle to follow module, complete quizzes, etc and stay up to date on module		
7l	Use Turnitin on assignments to check for similarity		

Q.8 When using social media for my college work:

		Not at all true of me	Not very true of me	Neither true nor untrue of me	Mostly true of me	Very true of me
8a	I find it hard to decide what the best key words are to use for online searches when researching an assignment					
8b	Sometimes I end up on websites without knowing how I got there					
8c	I tend to Google topics rather than start my assignment research with readings recommended by the lecturer					
8d	I find the way in which many academic websites are designed confusing					
8e	I feel confident in my ability to use the internet to locate reliable academic sources					
8f	I am confident that in my essays I rely significantly more on reading material that is library-based or provided by the lecturer, than on general searches (such as Google).					

Q.9 Thinking about the past month, how often have you experienced the following:

		Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
9a	I have caught myself doing things while browsing that I was not really interested in				
9b	I have felt bothered when I could not check my smartphone while sitting in a lecture/tutorial				
9c	I have spent less time than I should with family/ friends because of the time I spent on devices				
9d	I have spent less time than I should on college work because of the time I spent on devices				
9e	I have tried unsuccessfully to spend less time on devices				
9f	I have found myself falling behind with college work because of the time I spend on devices				
9g	I have caught myself browsing when I should be working on an assignment				
		Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
9h	I have felt a strong need to check my phone to see if anything new has happened				
9i	I have found that it is difficult to concentrate in the library because I am distracted by devices				
9j	I find it distracting when other students use mobile devices in lectures /tutorials				

Q. 10 Thinking about how to manage your college work please answer the following:

		Yes	No	Don't know
10a	Is it appropriate for a lecturer to confiscate the phone of a student if it is a distraction during a lecture or a tutorial?			
10b	It would be useful to have designated "dead zones" on campus where devices would be temporarily disabled			
10c	I have downloaded an app (e.g. Offtime, Stay on Task) to my phone or other device which reduces my rate of distraction and keeps me focused			
10d	I have downloaded an app (e.g. Quizlet) to my phone or other device which helps me to study			
10e	I regularly read and take study notes on articles sourced from an e-journals/ chapters from ebooks.			

Q.11 We are interested in whether or not you feel social media has supported you in your first academic year at Maynooth University.

	Yes	No	Please give a brief example
Social media has helped me academically			
Social media has helped me socially			
Social media has helped me personally			

Additional comments can be made overleaf

Many thanks!!!