

# 52 Platforming Employability: Exploring the experiences of graduates using social media for their post-university career transitions

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## Research Domains

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

## Abstract

This paper will focus on the role of digital platforms as sites for employability in the context of higher education. It will draw on empirical data from a longitudinal study exploring how university graduates make use of digital platforms as part of their career transitions. In a higher education context platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram are increasingly presented to students and graduates as part of a strategy for bringing about a positive career transition. This paper will critique dominant notions of digital career literacy as central to understanding how graduates interact with social media and instead aim to use theorisations of social media as a platform as the starting point for how best to theorise this relationship.

## Full paper

Career development, over the last two decades, has increasingly become entangled with digital technologies such as social media. (Hooley and Staunton, 2021) this trend has also been growing in the higher education sector as well (Benson and Morgan, 2016; Bridgstock, 2016). This has created theoretical challenges for career and higher education researchers alike about how to theorise this relationship.

A key response to these developments is seen through the concept of digital literacies in general (Belshaw, 2012; Reddy, Sharma and Chaudhary, 2020) and more specifically digital career literacy (Hooley, 2012). These approaches often argue that students need to develop a certain set of attributes to respond to changes and possibilities that social media has brought about. In this paper, I am going to respond to this claim both theoretically and empirically.

From a theoretical position, I argue that this narrative fails to properly understand the nature of digital platforms. Digital literacy tends to focus on technology as an instrumental tool. Though social media sites do allow for various forms of agency they can be better conceptualised as digital platforms. This brings into view digital platforms as based on a particular business model (Srnicsek, 2017) which works around a particular logic of participation designed by the platform.

I will also explore these questions empirically through data from a longitudinal study. I collected data from students and graduates over a two period spanning the final year of their degree through to 12-18 months after their graduation. This data explored the lived experiences of graduates using social media as part of their transition to their future careers after finishing their degrees.

I found that three themes emerged about the impact that digital platforms had on students' career development.

1. Graduates' agency was heavily shaped by their university and by the sector, they were applying to.
2. Subjectively, graduates often fetishised technology.
3. Graduates reported significant experiences of surveillance.

Firstly then, students' agency was significantly shaped by the university and the sector they were moving into. Students started using digital platforms as sites for career development almost entirely because a member of the university staff (most commonly a lecturer) told them it was a good idea. Graduates took on narratives, especially about digital platforms allowing them to build up personal connections and that digital platforms are used by recruiters to search for and find candidates. Alongside this, the exact practices graduates employed were often shaped by the sector they were applying for. I found significant differences between graduates looking at careers in professional public sector settings (e.g. teaching, allied healthcare), creative industries and more traditional graduate schemes. This can be explained in terms of how education and recruitment increasingly are situated on platforms but in different ways.

Secondly, graduates often fetishised technology. In this context, we are looking at fetishism as placing unrealistic confidence in the practical power of technology. Graduates often felt that technology would make them better connected or would lead to them becoming more employable or actually finding work just by nature of being online. This was often because they believed that by being more connected online they could increase their social capital and recruiters would find them and potentially just offer them work. My data showed that over time graduates became disillusioned by this and stated they felt they had wasted their time or that they themselves were not good at using technology.

Thirdly, graduates were very aware of the impact of surveillance on them. This is obviously a key feature of digital platforms and how they extract data from individuals (Van Dijck, 2013; Feher, 2021). Graduates were particularly aware of the negative aspects of losing out on employment because of their digital footprints. This, in turn, led to them attempting to present themselves as being 'professional' online, though being professional was often vaguely defined and could be seen as anything between avoiding lude behaviour online though to appearing politically neutral. Despite these attempts to manage their digital footprints graduates still experienced various scams and forms of harassment online. Often these were exacerbated by their precarity in relation to the labour market.

These themes raise questions about the centrality of digital career literacy. Instead starting from considering the nature of digital platforms helps us to understand the practices, possibilities but also structures and dangers that may occur on digital platforms.

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