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"In it together": Staff-Student Facebook groups promote collaborative learning and formation of a cohort identity.

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Abstract

Facebook has the potential to be used as an educational tool that supports the formation of a cohort identity, improving engagement which can potentially positively impact on retention and performance. An in-house initiative created staff-maintained Facebook groups for each cohort within the Psychology suite of programmes, utilising staff engagement to add an additional learning resource for students during the duration of their course. The groups were positively received by 99% of students, showing that students immensely valued the additional learning resource available to them. Thematic analysis revealed key positive themes sense of community and support, ease of communication and the breaking down of barriers between staff and students; key negative themes involved concern around the potential for students to miss out on a valuable resource. The staff-maintained Facebook groups achieved their aim of creating a socially-oriented learning space that fostered a sense of community and cohort identity; the groups have been integrated into the permanent provision within the School of Psychology. This type of initiative has the potential to improve engagement, performance and retention in a world where blended learning is increasingly utilised.

Keywords

Facebook, collaborative learning, student support, social media, cohort identity

Introduction

In an age of increasing digitisation within Higher Education (HE), finding suitable tools that support the development of collegiate connection and foster a sense of community among students and staff is more important than ever. Facebook is one such commonly used social media tool (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Thai et al, 2019; Statista, 2020), that some have appropriated for use within learning, with mixed results.

While many faculties and academic services already support the use of social media (Dabbagh & Kirsantas, 2012; Hendrix, Chiarella, Hasman, Murphy, & Zafron, 2009), there are limited studies available where staff-maintained Facebook groups have been set up to directly support student learning and integration at University. However, there have been a number of studies which have investigated student opinion towards using social media, specifically Facebook, in learning.

Typically, findings show that Facebook has the potential to positively impact collaborative and cooperative learning (for example: Sánchez, Cortijo, & Javed, 2013; Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012, Thai et al, 2019, Awidi et al, 2019, Moghavemi et al, 2019), but that its potential has not been realised within academia due to a reluctance among academic staff to integrate social media into their teaching (Manca & Ranieri, 2016), potentially due to concern that students would perceive it as reducing credibility of academic staff. While inappropriate self-disclosure is rightly felt to be unprofessional (Mazer, Murphy, Simonds, 2007), appropriately monitored social media use can potentially be beneficial (Irwin et al, 2012; Junco, 2012).

The Mazman and Usluel (2010) model for educational usage of Facebook identified three distinct educational uses of Facebook: communication, collaboration and the sharing of resources, with their findings supporting the idea that these different pedagogical dimensions can occur within social networks simultaneously and the shift to this informal, flexible and comfortable environment is one which students are willing to make. In support of this, Sánchez, Cortijo, & Javed (2014), found Facebook was most effective when students used it to establish or maintain contact with people with shared interests, specifically classmates.

The primary aim of most individuals who use social media is to use it as a purely social resource (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). While social tools are important for connection with fellow students (Alario-Hoyes, Pérez-Sanagustín, Delgado-Kloos, Muñoz-Organero, & Rodríguez-de-las-Heras, 2013), some of the academic concerns regarding social media use comes from perception of it being purely social interactions with no learning benefit (Hew, 2011; Schroeder, Minocha, & Schneider, 2010). However, Facebook has many features which lend themselves well to an online study group (Eid & Al-Jabri, 2006, Moghavemi et al, 2017, Awidi et al, 2019), such as file sharing, announcements, discussion, information-seeking, formation of a cohort identity, plus the potential to provide peer support.

Social interactions are an important factor for UG students (Sánchez et al, 2013). In a world of increasing digitisation of HE, social tools such as Facebook could enhance the learning experience, facilitating the formation of student communities and helping create a cohort identity (Gafni & Deri, 2012; Schroeder et al, 2010; Irwin et al, 2012; Cho et al, 2010) when face-to-face connection is not always possible. Creating a sense of community in students where all students feel they are "in the same boat" (Amador & Amador, 2017, p199) can aid the formation of a cohort identity. Giving students a more informal, socially-oriented, group with which to source support and release "academic emotions" (Amador & Amador, 2017, p199) is an invaluable tool to utilise. Indeed, facilitating a situation whereby interpersonal communication is continuous and supportive can positively impact students feeling a sense of social intimacy (Park & Lee, 2019) that may encourage help-seeking behaviour. Including academics in social media groups can be perceived as adding formality to an informal space, but the evidence suggests that students adapt well to this (Amador & Amador, 2017), and appropriate, educationally-focused help-seeking behaviour increases as a result.

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Without involvement from academic staff, social media is typically a very weak learning resource that could potentially negatively impact educational achievement (Kirschener & Karpinski, 2010; Junco, 2012, Gafni & Deri, 2012) as it can be a distraction from academic engagement (Feng, Wong, Wong, & Hossain, 2019). Social interactions and scrolling can lead to a lack of focus on educational activities which negatively impact engagement in the learning process (Datu, 2019) and, as a result, educational achievement (Gafni & Deri, 2012, Feng 2019). In student-led groups, it is easy to see how social interactions can distract from educational focus, thus negatively impacting learning progress (Feng 2019): the lack of academic moderating presence can lead to inaccurate information transmission, social distractions and an overall lack of focus, which can lead to poor performance when students prioritise social interactions and advice from peers over educationally-relevant interactions with academic tutors (Datu, 2019). The professional and moderating presence of academic staff could significantly impact the educational validity of a Facebook group, resulting in accuracy of information transmission and a group that is a supportive, and educationally sound, resource, that can support learning and performance (Lambić, 2016; Marker, Gnambs, & Appel, 2018).

Zimmerman's model of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) (2009) states that forethought, performance and self-reflection work in a cyclical loop that continues until independent learning goals are successfully completed. Social media fits neatly into the self-reflection aspect of this model (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012) and has the potential to facilitate self-reflection while also providing connections with peers and the formation of a cohort identity that all positive contribute to SRL and a sense of connectedness (Cho et al, 2010, Zimmerman, 2000, Thai et al, 2019); vital elements for performance and retention.

Social media has the potential to be used as a resource enabling students to take ownership for their own learning, facilitating their independent learning abilities (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). Where there is deliberate academic focus within the social media usage, academic performance can be positively impacted (Lambić, 2016; Marker et al, 2018), demonstrating that utilising social media as a learning tool, as part of educational development, can be beneficial to academic performance. Indeed, due to the presence of academic tutors, a high engagement in course-related social media could directly predict an increase in perceived learning and course satisfaction (Richardson & Swan, 2009).

For a digital initiative to be successful, students must perceive it as having added value (Garcia & Silva, 2017). While some students justifiably feel that academics joining these Facebook groups is unprofessional and an invasion of their social territory (Mazer et al, 2007), groups are set up by academics for the sole purpose of facilitating a social learning environment, tend to be perceived as valuable and receive a favourable reaction from students (Irwin et al, 2012; Garcia & Silva, 2017). Indeed, where educators are involved in a specific social media group, set up to facilitate learning, the teaching presence can be high and potentially beneficial to learning (Irwin et al, 2012). This is particularly pertinent, since consistent communication with those at graduate level or higher has been shown to improve performance in UG students (Junco, 2012).

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are typical in all HE establishments, and include a myriad of tools to facilitate learning and interaction. However, these tools are all provided under the watchful eye of the University itself. While Universities are not in the habit of snooping on their students' conversations, this does not dispel the sense of formality that comes with using a VLE. Having social spaces within the University itself is traditionally where interaction occurs, fostering the sense of collegiality and community, alongside classroom interaction, that is so beneficial for creating a cohort identity that can positively impact on retention [Kahu & Nelson, 2018, Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004) and student wellbeing (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2010; McNeill, Kerr, & Mavor, 2014). Fostering this social element in a digital format requires a separate system from the VLE, enabling there to be a perceived digital barrier between the formal university systems and more informal cohort interactions. Adding moderating advice from course-specific academics facilitates accuracy of information transfer, but allows students to interact in a more informal digital space. Course-specific academics are already privy to classroom interaction, so are well-placed to be a moderating, but not formal and overbearing intermediary who can facilitate learning support within a toll that supports development of cohort identity.

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Investigating Facebook as a useful social tool to facilitate learning is beneficial; particularly in an era where retention of UG students is such a challenging feature of academic life, when cohort identity, sense of belonging, and staff support can contribute to positive retention outcomes (McKendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014). Students are faced with ever more demands on their time, such as commuting from home locations, leading to traditional study groups and a sense of community forming more slowly, if at all. This can have a significant impact on retention, particularly in the vulnerable Foundation and Stage 1 cohorts, where students are at higher risk of dropping out of University altogether. Additional resources, particularly those which are readily available and accessible, to facilitate the sense of community within the HE community can only be of benefit to students.

The rationale for this study was to clarify the position in the literature about whether Facebook groups are really beneficial for students as a resource for collegiate and cohort identity development during their academic course. Facebook is still the most popular social media site (SNS), with 2.6 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2020). However, there has been a misperception that use of Facebook is declining among the younger generation, but in fact usage is increasing. In 2010, Facebook was the most commonly used social media network, with 73% of all adults holding a profile, dropping slightly to 71% among 18-29 year olds (Lerhart, 2010). However as of May 2020, the rates in the US, which is similar in profile to the UK, showed an increase to 79% of adults aged 18-29% (Statista, 2020), along with 79% and 68% of 30-49 and 50-64 year olds respectively.

However, with the misperception of declining use, academics have been reluctant to engage in developing a resource that students may not use. So, despite the clear potential benefits, the question of whether Facebook is a valid method of support for a current student population remains a pertinent topic for investigation. Facebook is a social network that is capable of forging communities and relationships in an online learning environment (Moghavemi et L, 2017, Thai et al, 2019, Awidi et al, 2019); investigating how well use of SNS options work in an academic context is of continued interest as learning is increasingly situated within a virtual space.

As a trial within the School of Psychology, a series of staff-maintained Facebook groups were set up in 2015/16, one for each Stage of the UG programme. The aim was to use these to disseminate information, encourage discussion and promote a sense of cohort identity, in addition to providing an academic learning space within social media that would be an easy-to-use, but academically beneficial, resource for students. After two academic cohorts of seemingly very successful use, a bespoke feedback questionnaire (collecting both quantitative and qualitative data) was designed to garner opinion and see if the project was worth continuing. During 2017/18 this questionnaire was run and feedback gathered across the UG programme.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the Facebook groups and determine whether they provided a sense of community among students that they considered a valuable resource during their degree. The aim was not to link with performance, but to look at whether sense of community was perceived positively. The hypothesis for the quantitative aspect of the study was that a staff-maintained Facebook group would be received positively among students. This is based on previous research finding that students find interactions with staff via social media beneficial to their studies (Irwin et al, 2012; Junco, 2012; Lambić, 2016; Marker et al, 2018), and the observations over two years of running these groups within the School of Psychology. The research question for the qualitative element of the study was to look at whether students felt the Facebook groups were beneficial to their sense of collective identity and their overall academic experience within the School of Psychology. This question was determined by the plethora of information suggesting that this indeed might be the case (Gafni & Deri, 2012; Schroeder et al, 2010; Irwin et al, 2012; Cho et al, 2010) but also that reframing a social space as an *academic* social space might improve perceptions around the benefits of engaging with academics outside of scheduled time.

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Methods

Participants

A total of 110 students completed the anonymous feedback questionnaire (Stage 1 = 26, Stage 2 = 36, Stage 3 = 48). Students were recruited through a voluntary sample from the existing Facebook groups set up within the School of Psychology, via an advert and questionnaire link posted in the groups. The age range of students was 18-49 years. Broad categorical data was recorded, so no specific mean age is available. However, 79.63% were in 18-25 years category (60.19% 18-21 years). Gender was not recorded.

Materials

The questionnaire was a bespoke questionnaire to garner opinion about the Facebook group, covering their views on the sense of community, sharing a space with academic staff, the perceived benefits of the groups and how they used the groups. Example questions can be found in the results section. The questionnaire for this paper was generated using Qualtrics software during April 2018 (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) and disseminated through the staff-maintained Facebook groups directly.

Design

This was an exploratory study. The design was mixed methods with both qualitative and quantitative, categorical, data being recorded. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Procedure:

The Facebook groups were created as private cohort groups, and willing staff members joined these. Only staff and students within the School of Psychology were permitted to join. The groups were advertised to students at the start of their courses, as a voluntary option, and a snowball effect of uptake then occurred, with increasing uptake over the first few weeks of the academic year. The groups were used for discussion of class topics, announcements and reminders, notifications about assignment returns. Students were encouraged to ask questions about all aspects of the course and discuss with both staff and students. Adverts for Stage 3 projects were permitted, but no external advertising or page links were permitted. Staff with admin access monitored the posts, but there were no significant problems reported. Students often shared class-related jokes and memes, and there was plenty of light-hearted discussion as well as more serious course-related discussion. All course-related material shared on Facebook was shared through normal communication channels, so no student was disadvantaged academically.

Questionnaire data was gathered in line with normal feedback procedures. An advert was placed in each Facebook group, telling students that their views were sought about the use of the Facebook groups. Students were directed, through the advert, to a Qualtrics site (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). All students voluntarily completed the anonymous feedback questionnaire. As many students have now graduated, in line with ethical procedures, an advert was placed in each of the relevant Facebook group to notify students their anonymous feedback was forming part of a paper, students were given a month to respond with objections, but none were received. Quantitative results are be reported in descriptive form, and the qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis.

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Results

The aim of this project was to evaluate whether the Facebook groups provided a sense of community among students that they considered a valuable resource during their degree. The hypothesis for the quantitative aspect of the study was that a staff-maintained Facebook group would be received positively among students and the research question for the qualitative element of the study was to look at whether students felt the Facebook groups were beneficial to their sense of collective identity and their overall academic experience within the School of Psychology. The overwhelmingly positive feedback, both quantitative (Table 1) and qualitative (Tables 2 and 3), received confirmed that this was a successful project which should be continued.

Table 1: Quantitative responses

Question Topic	% students agreeing with statement
The groups were a good idea and should continue	94.46%
Sharing a social media space with lecturers was a positive experience	99.05%
Sharing a Facebook space with staff made them more approachable	52.38% *
The Facebook group facilitated positive discussion with students	89.52%
The Facebook group was a positive source of support	91.43%
Already had a Facebook account	93.58%
Joined Facebook to specifically be part of the groups	6.42%
Checked the Facebook group more than once a day	86.36%**
Were happy with how the Facebook groups were managed	95.24%
The response time on the Facebook groups from staff was good	92.31%
Notifications helped stay up to date with group activity	88.46%***

Notes:

* For 47.61% Use of Facebook did not make a difference with their level of comfort around staff, because they already felt comfortable with staff.
** 12.75% checked the Facebook group more than once an hour
*** 2.88% around deadlines only

Students saw the benefit and found the space to be beneficial to their academic experience (see Table 1). Reassuringly 79.34% of students still felt the VLE was the core source of information during their course, showing that the Facebook was seen as an additional resource by the vast majority of students. Only 13.08% relied on the Facebook group for information, 70.09% used the Facebook group as one of the many resources available to them. Students were split by where they asked their questions, with 45.98% opting to go straight to the Facebook group, where there were a greater number of staff in a single location, while 54.02% preferred to email or see staff face-to-face.

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Only one person (0.91%) thought the groups were a bad idea. Two students (1.82%) thought they were good, but just not for them; this is very positive as students visibly saw the benefit to the staff-maintained Facebook groups, even if they felt they did not want to take part.

The qualitative data came from two questions relating to the positive and negative aspects of the Facebook groups, and one question where students could share any additional views. Thematic analysis was conducted to look at the semantic themes evident in the data. The authors used the reflexive approach, and combined identified clusters of responses into larger themes using inductive reasoning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initially themes were constructed in line with semantic information, then latent meaning was identified within the semantic information to clearly differentiate between the themes. These were then split into positive and negative themes (see Tables 2 and 3), although the predominant message in the responses was one of positivity for the use of Facebook groups.

Overall, there were 120 positive comments provided (69.77% of all comments provided), and only 29 negative ones (16.8%). There were 11 comments (6.4%) that related to FOMO (fear of missing out), with students wanting to see more staff involved, and 12 comments (6.97%) related to complaints that other students were relying on Facebook instead of the VLE first, or leaving their work until the last minute.

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Table 2: The benefits of having a staff-maintained online space
directly linked with degree and cohort.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Examples
Ease of Communication	Using a social media platform to create quick responses on Facebook	*'Fast and Efficient'* *'quick replies'* *'a lot quicker than emails'* *'seems to be a quicker way of contact'*
	Students enjoyment of using a social media platform as a way of communication	*'It's nice to have multiple platforms of contact when I need help'* *'Most people check Facebook more frequently'* *'It's a lot easier and faster to contact lecturers… through the Facebook group'* *'Makes it a much more enjoyable learning environment'* *'Good place to get info'*
Efficient resource for discussion and clarity	Increasing productivity within a group setting on Facebook	*'questions are answered I sometimes wouldn't even think to ask'* *'more efficient on Facebook'* *'Fast and Efficient'*
	Facebook as a means of providing information to students	*'Quick source of information'* *'available information and discussions between students'* *'up to date information such as returned work or something to do with timetables'*
	Facebook as a means of explaining points further	*'is great to clarify any points'* *'I can find the answer to a question I was going to ask myself'*
	The Facebook group as a platform for unit discussion	*'allows for question and discussion'* *'lecturers are there to clarify things during a discussion'*
	Prevention of Issue Development	*'it's easier to avoid misunderstandings between students'* *'Prevented the spread of rumours'*
Promoting sense of community and connection	Facebook connecting both students and lecturers together	*'a more relaxed setting to interact with lecturers'* *'close contact with lecturers'* *'direct responses from other students and lecturers'* *'shared student knowledge'* *'available information and discussion between students'*
	Facebook providing a sense of community with both students and lecturers	*'shared student knowledge'* *'able to discuss with lecturers and other students in a shared social space'*
	Facebook group providing an informal atmosphere	*'approachable space'* *'less formal'* *'you feel more comfortable with staff'*
	Facebook highlighting the approachability to staff and fellow students	*'interaction beneficial…who would perhaps not approach staff otherwise'* *'building a relationship with the staff'*
	The Facebook group creating togetherness	*'it has made me feel more involved and included'*
	Staff and students interacting harmoniously on Facebook	*'eased communication between members of staff and students, as well as between students in the same stage'* *'Easy to contact lecturers'* *'Able to talk to staff and other students more openly about subjects'* *'Quick wide/spread communication with people and lecturers on course'*
Support	Facebook providing online support to individuals	*'Fab if confused or need support'* *'being in constant contact with staff members and students'*

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Table 3: Concerns of the use of Facebook as an educational resource

Theme	Description	Example
No apparent negative	No negative aspect of Staff-maintained Stage Facebook group	*'No negatives'* *'I don't see any negatives'* *'Don't have any issue with the Facebook group'*
	Positive feedback instead of negative on the Facebook group	*'it's extremely helpful in a crisis'* *'anything that shouldn't be on the page was immediately deleted'*
Barrier of Facebook	The Facebook group creating issue with those who don't already have Facebook	*'some people don't use Facebook'* *'people who don't have Facebook are missing out'*
Potential for neglect of course materials	The Facebook group becoming relied upon	*'silly questions that can be answered using Sunspace or Module Guide'*
		'students make pointless questions' *'It can appear students are lazy'*
Lack of clarity	The Facebook group creating issue between students	*'Conflicting answers from students'*
	The Facebook group still not completely clear on information	*'some of the posts were a bit vague'* *'sometimes don't get exact answers you want'* *'think we all just like a bit of clarification'*
	The Facebook group not providing accurate information	*'Contradicting answers given in comparison with sunspace or guides'*
Notifications	The Facebook group overwhelming individuals	*'Having notifications on constantly even for information that wasn't relevant'*
	The Facebook group confusing individuals	*'Every time I get a notification I think oh god what have I missed'*
Exclusion	The Facebook group creating exclusion within the year	*'some people may be too scared to ask questions in front of the whole group'* *'they should answer questions with the counselling side too'*
	Lack of staff presence on the Facebook group	*'Not all staff are on there'* *'Not all lecturers use it'*
Expectation of 24/7 contact with tutors	The Facebook group not as immediate as intended	*'Sometimes slow responses from the tutors'* *'weren't always answered quickly'*
Inappropriate relationship between staff and students	Staff being inappropriate on the Facebook group	*'Staff came across rude on discussions'* *'Not appropriate relationship'*
	The Facebook group allowing inappropriate comments on the page	*'I feel that students may pass the border between lecturers'* *'Inappropriate comments'*

Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate if the Facebook groups created a sense of community among students. We hypothesised that the groups would be positively received and that students would find these groups beneficial for their sense of collective identity and overall academic experience within the School of Psychology. The results show that students overwhelming found being part of the Facebook groups a positive experience, both social and academic. The groups achieved the aim of creating a sense of community and cohort identity among the students. A positive additional finding was that the Facebook groups help foster positive communication between both staff and students.

In this particular institution and School, almost half (47.61%) of our students reported being comfortable interacting with staff. The current, collegiate, environment within the School of Psychology at this institution is clearly one which lent itself to integrating social media spaces into academic support provided. While we may want to interact with our students to the best of our ability, there is still a perceived barrier between tutor and student, that can negatively impact a sense of collegiality. The results show that we did break down this barrier, with almost all the remaining students (52.38%) finding the Facebook group removed perceived barriers to communication with staff.

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> *"[I] love the page overall, it has meant that I have learnt that lecturers are*
> *not scary to talk to and are in fact very friendly, helpful and approachable*
> *people"*

Students found Facebook a straightforward resource to use, facilitating communication between students and staff, highlighting that it was a useful, and enjoyable, central resource that they were already in the habit of checking. Students often set notifications (88.46%) to ensure they gained full advantage from what the group had to offer, ensuring they were fully immersed in the experience. While there are pros and cons to the use of notifications, this is evidence that students felt part of the community of learners in their cohort, seeing this as a positive experience overall.

Electronic propinquity (Walther & Bazorova, 2008)] states that increased contact and communication between individuals, via computer-mediated communication (CMC), fosters emotional closeness and formation of interpersonal bonds; sense of community can foster cohort identity that is beneficial to students' sense of engagement (Gafni & Deri, 2012; Schroeder et al, 2010; Irwin et al, 2012; Cho et al, 2010, Thai et al, 2019, Datu, 2019). This increased engagement through sense of community and cohort identity facilitates SRL and independent learning (Cho et al, 2010; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012; Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Zimmerman, 2000), proving beneficial to performance and retention. Academically-focused Facebook groups can add an extra level of CMC to students' educational arsenal, which in our study facilitated electronic propinquity and fostered a sense of community within the cohort, helping to establish a cohort identity.

Social media, like VLEs, has the capacity to support synchronous and asynchronous CMC (Hrastinski, 2008) in addition to being in a format which students are familiar with prior to attending university. The speed of information transmission afforded by Facebook was seen as beneficial for clarity of communication, preventing inaccurate information spread from rumours unsubstantiated by academic staff. Students also highlighted that the shared question-answer experience was a beneficial learning resource, and one that aided them in their studies, along with creating a sense of community encompassing students and academic staff.

> *"It's like a community of people who have the same thoughts and worries as*
> *me that I can't really talk to anyone outside of Uni about."*

The sense of community and connection came out very strongly in the data, in line with previous studies (Amador & Amador, 2017, Thai et al, 2019) and theories (Mazman & Usluel, 2010), with students viewing the shared tutor-student interactions as beneficial, reducing the perceived barriers typically in place in an educational setting. The lack of formality provided through Facebook ensured students reported feeling comfortable with the staff they interacted with; enabling them to ask questions they might not have done in traditional settings, facilitating their learning experience (Irwin et al, 2012; Junco, 2012; Lambić, 2016; Marker et al, 2018).

The sense of 'togetherness' was evident throughout the analysis, with students viewing the building of collegiate relationships with staff as extremely beneficial and supportive for their learning experience (Awidi et al, 2019,Thai et al, 2019). However, this was not universal, with a tiny proportion of students (0.91%) feeling that a more formal relationship should be held with staff, and the group, despite being clearly marketed as being maintained by staff, overstepped the traditional academic relationship boundaries. Providing a less formal digital environment where students and staff can communicate about academic-related material can be a positive initiative, providing both staff and students engage with the space (Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Sánchez et al, 2014; Amador & Amador, 2017; Park & Lee, 2019, Thai et al, 2019). Clarity of purpose, and maintenance of boundaries are clearly a vital part of marketing Facebook groups as a supportive and educational resource to students who may be more wary of interacting with staff in a social space.

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When properly implemented, social media, specifically Facebook, clearly has the potential to positive facilitate collaborative learning, which can have a positive impact on formal learning outcomes (Lucas & Moreira, 2009). Collaborative learning combined with autonomy and the potential for asynchronous and synchronous learning, provides a distributed learning environment which can support knowledge building (Hrastinski, 2008; Lucas & Moreira, 2009). When combined with academic oversight and the social aspect providing cohort identity and a sense of community (Amador & Amador, 2017; Mazman & Usluel, 2010), it is clear that social media, and in particular Facebook, has the potential to support formal learning activities and have a positive impact on the student experience.

In the current trial there were no particular problems encountered, and no complaints took place, however a small minority of students found there were some negative aspects to the use of Facebook as a support tool. The negative themes typically arose mainly around how others might perceive and behave on Facebook. Students expressed concern for those who might feel excluded if they do not use Facebook; while all course-related information was provided via formal channels, students felt that those not accessing Facebook were missing out on the whole experience, showing that they clearly perceived the benefits of the group.

Concern was also raised that some individuals might rely on the Facebook groups at the expense of reading the educational and informational provision through formal channels, a visible indication that students perceived social-loafing to be taking place. While students perceived this as a negative, it can be argued that the Facebook groups are therefore a potential benefit in terms of student retention. While we may wish students to use official channels, if a small minority of students rely on staff-maintained Facebook groups rather than the VLE, they are potentially getting information they would not otherwise have read, and therefore this is reducing their risk of disengagement and poor performance impacting their educational experience. This is a powerful argument for having staff-maintained Facebook groups, where information accuracy can be controlled, unlike student-led groups where there is no academic oversight.

However, it was clear that students perceived there to be an occasional mismatch between information on the VLE and the Facebook group, something that was not observed from a staff perspective. This may simply be that students did not always get the answer they wanted, something that is true of all platforms and situations where questions are asked in educational settings, so not unique to the Facebook groups. It is also possible that this perception of mismatch is due to timing, whereby information was in the process of being updated, so announcements via the Facebook groups predated changes on the VLE.

It was gratifying to see a theme of 'nothing negative' emerge, with the vast majority of students perceiving that the groups were a good resource and should continue (94.46%), and almost all students feeling that sharing a social space with staff was a beneficial experience (99.05%). Given previous studies (e.g. Mazer et al, 2007) have found that students do not wish to share a social space with staff, it is clear that given the right circumstances and formatting of the social space, students are very willing to engage with such groups, providing they feel it is a positive addition to their learning experience in HE.

Within our results we received multiple requests for the groups to continue, and as a result of this initial trial, these Facebook groups are now a permanent part of the School of Psychology support network provided to students, and in 2019/20 it was expanded to incorporate Foundation students. These Facebook groups had such a positive impact on both staff and students, that they been added into the new programme specifications for the Psychology suite of programmes, demonstrating the value staff have placed on this platform as a positive resource to support our community of learners. From an administrative perspective, a new group is now created for each new cohort, and the Stage 3 group is deleted following the winter graduation. The vast majority of our cohorts go on to join our Alumni Facebook group (created in 2015 just prior to the undergraduate Facebook groups), where the sense of community continues. The current membership of the Alumni group stands at 449 (as of June, 2020).

> *"I felt more included and more connected and comfortable with everyone."*

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One thing that was not looked at within this study, was the direct impact on performance and retention. A key area to investigate in the future is looking at how immersion and cohort identity impacts retention and performance within this social media setting. Social media is increasingly being utilised by HE providers, so using it to provide maximum benefit is a logical focus of future studies.

Despite anecdotal misperceptions about declining Facebook use, this study confirms that students still utilise Facebook as a social resource which they are willing to utilise in a learning context. Those that do not already use SNS are often willing to join in order engage with their fellow students. Where staff, and students, maintain boundaries and work as a team the results of this study suggests that Facebook groups are a great source of support for students that facilitates a sense of community within the department of study. Students tend to not adopt what they perceive as a gimmick, they wish to learn during their time in HE (Knill, 2007; Author A & Author, 2017), so staff buy-in is, we believe, an important feature of this resource, ensuring that a sense of purpose and validity is attached to the space, ensuring that students engage in a goal-driven manner.

> *"I think it's an excellent idea that improves channels of communication between staff and students and breaks down some of the traditional barriers social convention tends to impose."*

Conclusion

The staff-maintained Facebook groups created a sense of academic community within the School of Psychology, providing a space separate from the VLE that facilitated collegiate interaction and the development of cohort identity. Facebook is a potentially invaluable tool in an increasingly digital educational world; facilitating the connections between staff and students and fostering a sense of community that has the potential to improve retention and benefit the student experience both online and offline. It will be interesting to see how beneficial initiatives like this are, in a world where blended/online learning has an increasing prominence.

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