



Engaging men aged 18-24 in Learning Development through social media

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Abstract

Our usage data demonstrates that men aged 18-24 have lower rates of engagement with Learning Development. Furthermore, statistics show that men are more likely to drop out of university than their female counterparts (Hillman and Robinson, 2016). A possible reason for this could be the social stigma around seeking help that generally affects men. In contrast, evidence suggests men aged 18-24 engage with social media readily; the most popular sites being Instagram, with around 14 million users in 2023, and TikTok, which has around 9.1 million users. Data from January 2023 suggests that the number of men engaging with social media is significantly increasing (Kemp, 2023). Learning Development Student Mentors at the University of Northampton have been exploring how social media use can be harnessed to increase engagement with our services. Holding a unique position to be change agents as they are active both as students and staff members, they enable Learning Development to create links with 'hard to reach' students such as men aged 18-24. This talk will discuss the interview findings in relation to men's use of, and engagement with, social media and the types of content with which men engage, and considers how Learning Development might use these insights to improve engagement with our services. This session would be of interest to Learning Developers who wish to discuss and explore engaging men aged 18-24 using social media.

Keywords: social media; inclusion; access; equality.

Introduction

In the session, Elliot Lake set the context for the work of the Learning Development Mentors at the University of Northampton. They are in a unique position, being both staff and students, and their work enables the institution to bridge gaps and engage with students in different ways. Elliott carried out desk research into social media and found that the literature was focused on marketing for business. The project saw three interviews carried out and a researcher self-interview. They were semi-structured interviews which took place online and in person. It was challenging to recruit volunteers due to the shortened timeframe as it took a long time to go through the ethical approval process. The interview included showing participants three assets that had been previously shared online. The responses were mixed and did not point to a single type of post, content or channel that would reach all men. However, certain tendencies were identified. Firstly, a lack of awareness around the work of Learning Development, and the need for social media content to be brief. Elliot reflected that there needs to be more advertisement of LD services, and LD needs to be more active on social media. He also argued that embedded sessions should focus more on precise areas and on awareness that LD is available.

Community response

How to get a generation of university students who grew up during the COVID-19 pandemic to engage has been a topic of conversation at numerous educational conferences and in the educational press and social media since a return to traditional sessions (in-person lectures, seminars and workshops). The lack on engagement in traditional education has been shown to be more prevalent in young men than in young women, and the presentation identified that there was a potential link between the lack of support requested and the dropout rates within this group.

Anecdotally, academics have complained about the current student population's low attention span and their constant attachment to social media content on their smart phones interrupting student learning. Yet social media approaches could provide learning development staff with an opportunity to provide material in a format that is short, catchy and targeted at specific demographic groups, including young men. The use of YouTube

could be particularly beneficial due to the number of young male university students who access the site. The advice on framing and language use such as highlighting self-improvement rather than labelling content as 'help' showed a good take on tackling young men's tendency to avoid seeking anything they perceive as identifying weakness and would be particularly useful when trying to focus support for this specific demographic group.

Some students may consider their social media as a space outside university and would not want to see an overlap, especially when there is potential for algorithms to identify and share university-focused content in their 'down time'. However, the opportunity to develop specific social media content has worked successfully for other university services, such as careers, so it could be an opportunity for learning developers.

Authors' reflection

Although the findings were brief, there were some clear actionable suggestions which can be fed into our mentoring programme for next year and inform our social media output.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Cherlene Brand and Melanie Kinchant from Glasgow Caledonian University and Ebba Brooks from the University of Salford.

The authors and/or contributors used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: DALLE-3. DALLE-3 was used to create images used in the presentation. The authors have complied with JLDHE's [editorial statement on the use of AI](#).

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