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Applications of social networking tools in libraries

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study investigating on the use of social networking tools in academic libraries. The major areas examined include reasons for using or not using social networking tools, length of usage and perceived benefits and costs of using these tools. One hundred and forty universities were selected to complete a survey. Twenty-seven responses were received and the response rate reached 19.3%. Twenty-one (77.8%) used social networking tools for work, one (3.7%) was a potential user who planned to use these tools and 5 (18.5%) did not plan to use at all. Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly adopted tools in university libraries. Despite the fact that costs are incurred in managing social networking profiles, current users found that the benefits outweigh the costs. This study offers insights for academic librarians to make informed decisions in applying social networking tools. Academic libraries should not miss out on the potential of social networking tools in promoting their services.

Keyword(s): social networking, academic libraries, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging

1. Introduction

The World Wide Web enables people to gain access to information, create content and disseminate ideas across more efficiently (Stephens, 2007). Social networking sites first emerged for internet users to find long-lost friends, classmates, and link these users together and share their profiles. Since these sites are free and easy to use, more and more people has become members of one or more social networking sites leading to skyrocketing membership numbers. Later, these social networking sites gained a foothold among companies, organizations and even politicians who wanted to reach out to their target populations (Read, 2006). These tools have been widely applied in different contexts, including companies, universities and libraries (Kroski, 2009). Academic libraries stand the chance of

leveraging these social networking tools to disseminate information and market services and new releases (Burkhardt, 2010).

This exploratory research aims at facilitating academic librarians' decision-making on the application of social networking tools. A brief introduction of social networking websites is given, its advantages, and examples of how it has been applied in various contexts (academic libraries in particular). Interviews by survey and phone were conducted to understand how academic libraries make use of different tools. Implications and suggestions on these applications are drawn from the research findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What are social networking websites?

Various definitions of social networking websites exist. For instance, Boroughs (2010) stated that social networking websites allow users to share interests and communicate with others. Barsky and Purdon (2006), on the other hand, pointed out that social networking websites collect data about members and store user profiles that are meant for sharing. These websites are offered for free and allow users to create personal pages filled with content like images, music and videos easily. These social networks also allow members to share web pages with friends and search for new friends who have similar interests.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) stated that social networking websites allow individuals to: (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. They also noted that these websites vary in terms of features and membership. Some websites allow photo/video sharing, while others allow blogging and messaging. Participation in blogs has been regarded as social networking because blogs support formation of social connection through blog-roll activities (Taylor-Smith & Lindner, 2009). Wikis, blogs, chat rooms, instant messengers, message boards and social bookmarking are technology applications that have been used to facilitate members' interaction, and thus, have been referred to as social networking tools (Jones & Conceicao, 2008). However, sites such as YouTube and Flickr have been identified as primarily for sharing videos and images, rather than social networking (Hoffman, 2009).

2.2 The use of social networking in libraries

Most library directors from the US did not think that libraries have a role in social networking, and they were concerned about funding (De Rosa et al., 2007). However, Chu and Meulemans (2008) demonstrated the potential of using social networking in libraries. Since Facebook or MySpace can display the status of users whether they are online or not, librarians could easily identify colleagues who were available to help. This was also found to be advantageous for library users who wished to communicate with a particular librarian. Users who had questions related to circulation services were to contact the librarians responsible for circulations. The use of such social network was found to facilitate users towards getting answers more efficiently by finding the right person to ask.

Furthermore, Chu and Meulemans (2008) showed that Facebook or MySpace could help librarians enhance their libraries' social visibility, by creating profiles that show a uniform identity to users. MySpace has also been found to allow different librarians to contribute knowledge and information, maintain a profile together and to promote new library collections.

Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007) found that some of the librarians believed Facebook to be a feasible way to deliver library services and communicate with users. As an example, the Kimbel Library of the Coastal Carolina University has used Facebook for providing reference assistance and library tours, and promoting their services (Graham, Faiz, & Hartman, 2009). This library found out that, unexpectedly, Facebook facilitated colleagues to become closer and know each other better.

However, the use of social networking tools is not always well-received. A survey among students has shown that they were not particularly eager to communicate with professors or parents on Facebook/MySpace (Chu & Meulemans, 2008). Students did not feel comfortable in communicating with professors or parents through Facebook/MySpace; and they preferred email because it was perceived to be more reliable. Students also reported that they felt more comfortable and interested in using social networking tools to communicate with people whom they treated as friends, and some users indicated that parents and professors were not friends. Connell's survey (2009) suggested that if a library wants to use Facebook effectively, librarians needed to add as many users as their friends. However, to get users to treat librarians as friends is a real challenge that librarians face.

While social networking websites appear to have benefits for libraries, its use has not been pervasive because librarians thought that they did not know how to set up a profile, and neither have time to maintain such (Hendrix, Chiarella, Hasman, Murphy, & Zafron, 2009). Moreover, the unwillingness of public libraries to use Facebook has been noted to be due to the public's lack of interest in using library social networking tools (De Rosa, et al., 2007).

The above review has shown that most studies on social networking tools focused on Facebook and MySpace mainly, but little research has been done on other social networking tools used by libraries. While social networking sites such as Friendster, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter are popular in the US (Hoffman, 2009), little is known outside of this region. For example, Orkut is popular in Asia/Pacific areas and South America, Bebo in Australia and Europe, and QQ in China. This current research investigates academic libraries from both Western and Asian countries, and thus, includes these other social networking websites.

3. Research Method

3.1 Objectives

Recent developments in social networking tools offered potential for libraries to communicate with users more directly. This research aims to provide insights into the benefits and the challenges/difficulties of using social networking tools in academic libraries across the globe. This may help librarians who have not used social networking tools to make informed decisions on whether they should make use of certain social networking tools to enhance services and facilitate information sharing among colleagues. For libraries that are already using social networking tools, this research may help them learn more about the situation of other libraries in using these tools. This study has the potential to help these libraries to utilize library resources more effectively.

Results of this research will also provide a wider picture of the use of social networking tools, going beyond the focus on Facebook and MySpace, which has been the focus of majority of past studies. This study surveyed both Asian and Western universities to pursue the following objectives:

- to examine the application of social networking tools in academic libraries in different countries/regions
- to investigate the effectiveness of the tools for information/knowledge sharing and enhancement of library services
- to identify the reasons for libraries to use (or not to use) social networking tools.

3.2 Instrument

The instrument used was a questionnaire. In designing the instrument, we took the narrower definition of social networking tools given by Barsky and Purdon (2006). Sites such as YouTube and Flickr were not included as these are mainly used to share content, images or videos rather than for social networking purposes (Hoffman, 2009). Besides what we regarded as social networking tools, we invited participants to indicate what else was regarded as social networking tools.

Based on the literature review and the research gap we found, the questionnaire aimed to identify the kinds of social networking tools academic libraries are using, what librarians think of the use of these tools in their libraries, what they consider to be the advantages or disadvantages of social networking tools, and for which reasons they will consider using social networking tools or will stop using them. Also, we investigated what challenges/difficulties librarians currently face when using these tools.

3.3 Sampling

Focusing on university libraries, the sampling was based on the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings. Around 70 Asian universities among the top 600 in the THE rankings were identified and were matched with an equal number of Western universities of similar rankings. We expected a 50% response rate (i.e. about 35 responses from each group), but at the time this paper was written, only 27 libraries have responded.

In each potential university participant, a contact person was identified from the reference department of the university's main library. Reference departments typically have close contact with library users, thus, a reference librarian should be a suitable person to comment on the usefulness of social networking tools to enhance library services. Heads of the reference department were invited through email to participate in an e-survey available via SurveyMonkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/>). They were also invited to sign a consent form if they were willing to participate in the study.

For academic libraries that were already using social networking tools, we investigated on the following areas:

- the kinds of social networking tools that the library were using
- the purposes for using them and for how long the library has been using them
- the benefits, difficulties, and cost for using social networking tools
- whether the library offered any in-house training on the use of social networking tools

For libraries that were not using social networking tools, we investigated on the following areas:

- The library's plan of using (or not using) social networking tools in the future
- The motivation and the reasons leading to the use (or non-use) of social networking tools

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Location and application of social networking tools

Among the 27 library responses, 21 (77.8%) of them were using social networking tools for academic library work; 1 (3.7%) was a potential user who planned to use these tools and 5 (18.5%) did not plan to use these at all. As shown in Figure 1, libraries who have been using social networking tools are located in the United Kingdom (40%), United States (15%), Hong Kong (20%), China (10%), Singapore (5%), Taiwan (5%), and Japan (5%).

Table 1 shows that libraries used the following networking tools: Twitter (67%), Facebook (62%), instant messaging like MSN and QQ (43%), and LinkedIn (5%). The respondents were asked to mention in the survey other tools they were using. Some of those tools do not fit into our narrower definition of social networking tools. For identification purposes, we separated the tools that fit into our narrower definition and marked them with an asterisk. Other social networking tools they adopted include: blogs (29%), wikis (24%), Youtube (19%), Flickr (19%), Slideshare (10%), Issuu (5%) and Delicious (5%). Twitter which came later than Facebook, appeared to be slightly more popular among the libraries.

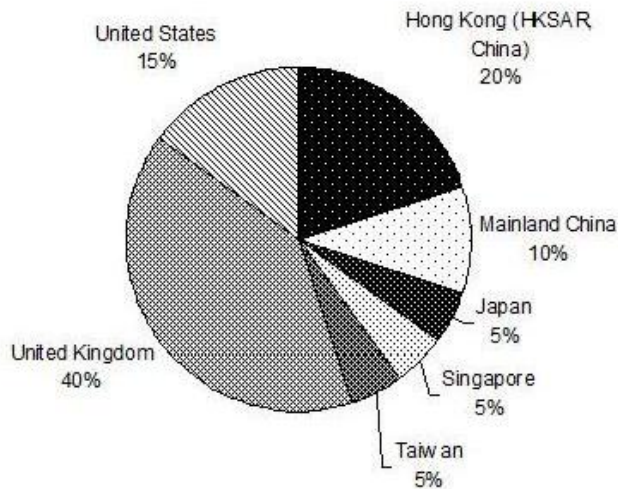
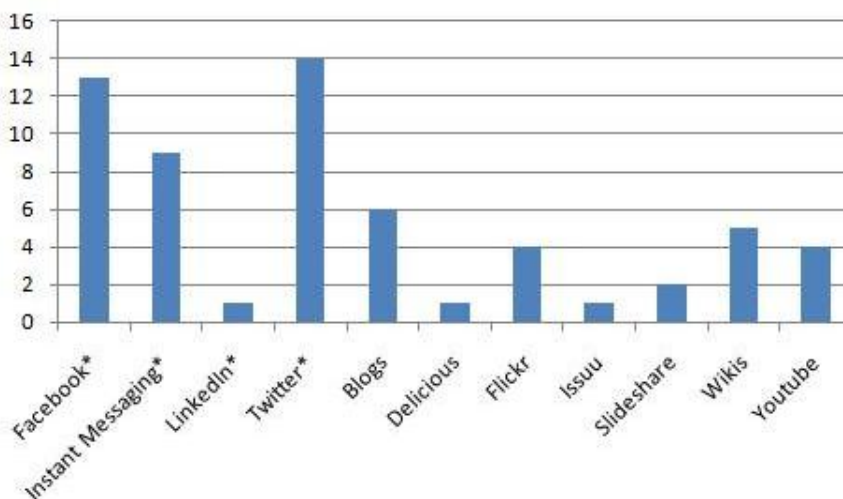


Figure 1. Location of libraries who have been using social networking tools (n=21).

Table 1. Social networking tools used by various libraries.



Note: Items marked with an asterisk (*) fall into the narrower definition of social networking tools used in this study.

4.2. Purposes of using social networking tools by different departments

The reported purposes for using social networking tools are summarized in Table 2. Facebook and Twitter appears to have been used for similar purposes: publicity, marketing, interaction with students and news dissemination. Facebook, instant messaging and wikis have all been used for enquiry services. In addition, instant messaging was also used for online help and online reference services. Wikis, blogs and Flickr were used mostly for information sharing both externally and internally.

Table 2: The purposes of using social networking tools

Social networking tools	Facebook	Instant Messaging (e.g. MSN, QQ)	LinkedIn	Twitter	Blogs	Flickr	Wikis	Youtube
Purposes								
Calendar								
Connection with other librarians								
Course information								
Enquiry services								
FAQ								
Information sharing								
Interaction with students								
Library notices								
Links sharing								
List of current and new library collections								
Marketing								
Monitoring publications and conferences								
News dissemination								
Online reference services								
Online help services								
Photo sharing								
Publicity								
Public Relations								
Staff communication								
Sharing of library videos (instructions/guides)								
Video sharing								

Note: Items marked with an asterisk (*) fall into the narrower definition of social networking tools used in this study.

Table 3 shows that social networking tools which fall into our narrower definition in this study such as Facebook, Twitter, and instant messaging, have been used by public services departments of the libraries, ranging from Information Services to Archives. Twitter was especially used by nearly all public services departments. On the other hand, the technical and I.T. services of libraries concentrated on using social networking tools that fall out of our narrower definition, such as blogs, Flickr, wikis and Youtube. Those departments included cataloging, equipment management and technical/I.T. services.

Table 3: Tools used by various departments

Departments	Facebook*	Instant Messaging*	Social networking tools				Youtube
			Twitter*	Blogs	Flickr	Wikis	
Public Services							
Academic Liaison	✓		✓				✓
Academic Support		✓	✓				
Audio-visual			✓				
Archives				✓	✓	✓	
Circulations			✓	✓			
Communications	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Customer Services	✓		✓				
General Service			✓				
Information Services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Public Relations			✓				
References	✓	✓	✓	✓			
User Education	✓	✓		✓			✓
Technical Services							
Cataloging				✓			
Equipment Management							✓
Technical/ I.T. Services				✓	✓	✓	

Note: Items marked with an asterisk (*) fall into the narrower definition of social networking tools.

4.3 Length of time in use

Facebook and blogs have been used for the longest time (4 years); Youtube and instant messaging came next (3 years); wikis and Slideshare came third (2.5 years), Twitter and Flickr the fourth (1.5 years). Although Twitter has been used by libraries for the shortest period of time, but as shown in Table 1, Twitter was the most popular tool used among libraries.

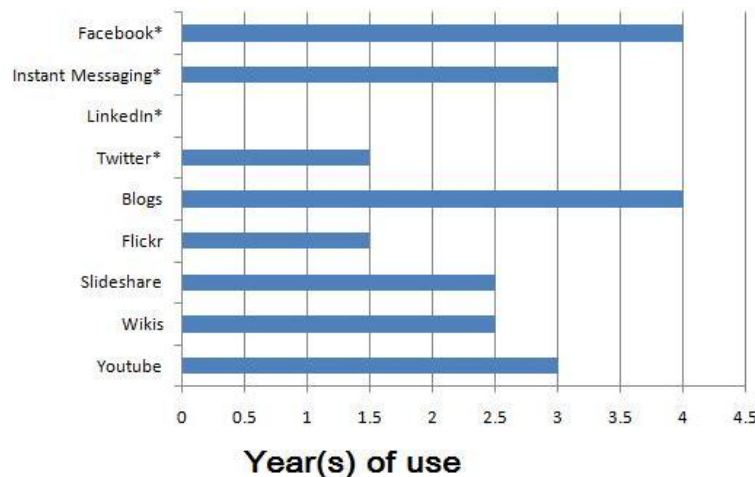


Figure 2. Length of time of use of social networking tools

4.4 Views of librarians towards the definition of social networking tools

Apart from the social networking tools mentioned in the survey question, respondents were asked to indicate if there are any other social networking tools that they were using. Responses included blogs, Delicious, Flickr, Issuu, Slideshare, wikis and Youtube. When asked why these tools should belong to social networking tools, responses were contradictory. R4 (respondent number 4) and R7 answered that blogs updated users about new library collections, newest resources, staff news and allowed commenting. On the other hand, R9 said that ‘social networking was about (people) being able to talk’. Blogs did not allow chatting, but since people commented on the messages posted on blogs, so they thought blogs should be included in social networking tools. Four other respondents (R4, R7, R16 and R19) answered that wikis provided students a platform to participate in editing and discussion. Others (R4, R7 and R18) who used Youtube explained that this tool allowed students to view videos about library instructions and guides. R7 reported that Flickr was a platform to share photos and RSS to provide library news, acquisitions and web resources.

A number of respondents also perceived some of the tools mentioned in the survey as not belonging to social networking tools. R3, R11 and R18 suggested that instant messaging should not belong to social networking tools since this kind of communication involved only two persons, and like email, did not allow other users to participate in the conversation. R18 mentioned that instant messaging is ‘more of a communication tool than a social networking tool’, and that Youtube provided little opportunity for interaction between members. Other general reasons given were that these tools ‘served as a collaborative spaces which are jointly maintained and authorized by a community’ (R16); they allowed sharing, cross-promotion of content among users and commenting; and lastly they allowed internal communication among staff such as announcements and incident logging.

A number of tools mentioned by the respondents also did not fit into the narrow definition we adopted in this study. Blogs, Flickr and Youtube are information-sharing tools and therefore were not considered by the authors as social networking tools in this study. RSS (also known as Real Simple Syndication) provides standardized ‘feeds’ from blogs, news, and others. According to our definition mentioned earlier, RSS was not considered as a social networking tool. R4 even answered Wikipedia – an online encyclopedia, which was far from a social networking tool. The above answers highlight that there were misconceptions towards the definition of social networking tools among library staff, and clarification on its definition was clearly needed.

4.5 Reasons/benefits for using social networking tools in the library

A number of respondents reported that the use of social networking tools in library was very helpful in facilitating information sharing and (7/21) promoting library services (10/21). These tools were also found to be helpful in facilitating knowledge sharing (3/21) and enhancing reference services (3/21). R21 and R9 also pointed out that these tools encouraged engagement and feedback from library users, while R12 indicated these tools helped the library to understand the students’ ideas and suggestions. R14 mentioned that these tools kept them updated with resources and activities in the library profession; R6 thought these tools had a role in public relations as they allowed the transmission of ‘quick and direct information’. However, R9 rated these tools to be not helpful and not beneficial at all.

Table 4: Reasons/benefits for using social networking tools in library

	Not helpful at all (1) \leftrightarrow Very helpful (5)	
To facilitate information sharing	1*	7**
To facilitate knowledge sharing	1*	3**
To enhance reference services	1*	3**
To help promote library services	1*	10**

Note: respondents were asked to give a rating on a scale from 1 (not helpful at all) to 5 (very helpful). All of them rated either 1 or 5. Items marked with an asterisk (*) denote no. of respondents who rated 1. Items marked with a double asterisk (**) denote no. of respondents who rated 5.

4.6 Services and activities promoted and provided by libraries through social networking tools

Figure 3 shows that two of the popular services/activities promoted by libraries through social networking tools are promotion of library events (e.g. exhibitions, competitions, talks, seminars, workshops, tutorials, training courses) and dissemination of news (e.g. events alert, library updates). The libraries also used social networking tools to promote library resources, and other general information; other libraries also used it to answer enquiries. Some libraries also promoted things that did not fall under these categories, such as catalogue search, new book list, library videos, user surveys/polls, and links to useful websites.

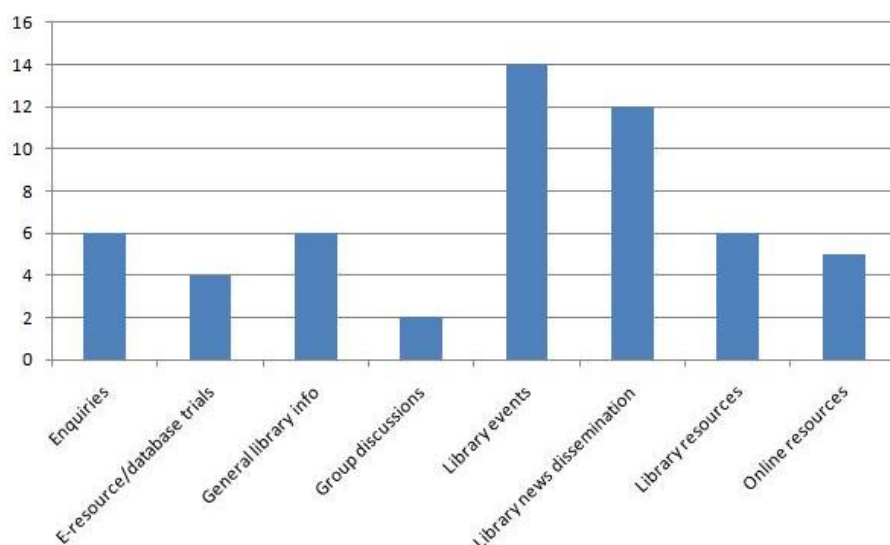


Figure 3. Services and activities promoted by libraries through social networking tools.

4.7 Challenges and difficulties in implementing social networking tools in library

Mastering the technology

R12 mentioned the social networking tools are developing too quickly, and it has become challenging to catch up. R13 mentioned the new tools are challenging for a library with ‘aging and shrinking staff to keep up with’. R14 and R17 both mentioned that social media keeps on evolving and it can be difficult to know which tool is popular among users. R18 and R19 stated that time was a concern – additional time had to be spent on learning, while R21 responded that keeping these tools updated regularly in order to stay relevant can be time-consuming.

Engaging users (staff and students) in using social networking tools

One problem about social networking tools is that hardly any staffs were interested in participating, as mentioned by R1. This was echoed by another participant (R2) who noted that staff were not always interested in the tools and found them difficult to understand. R4 also reported that it has been difficult to attract users in participating in different social networking platforms. Students were also noted to hardly contribute to social networking tools and did not like using them (R7, R8). Furthermore, R16 reported that getting staff and student to engage was difficult. There was no consensus among staff and departments regarding the use of social networking tools (R20) such that some were willing and interested to use these tools for their own departments while others were not. Breaking down these barriers is a major challenge (R21).

Inadequacy of resources (time, staff training, manpower)

R10 reported that time is inadequate, so the use of these tools has not been given first priority among their work. There has been some amount of difficulty in administration as well, since the threads and newsfeeds on Twitter needed personal care (R6). R11 mentioned that extra time and manpower had to be spent on monitoring those tools, while R13 noted that time was very limited to allow them to learn, explore and implement these technical tools. R18 and R19 added that time is a challenge they have to face, concerning extra time had to be spent on implementing, monitoring and learning - how not to let these tools use up too much time was a concern. Besides the above difficulties, some others mentioned that attaining a balance in tone when communicating with students (informal yet presentable) was difficult (R14).

4.9 Costs and benefits involved in using social networking tools

Out of twenty-one positive responses, 17 respondents (81%) indicated that the costs of using the social networking tools ranged from minimal to almost none, where the only cost is staff time. While staff has to spend extra time on administering social networking tools, the training cost and time cost was minimal, as these tools are free to set up. R3 further clarified that considerable ‘time had to be spent on monitoring during the initial launch’ of the social networking services, but in the long run, management required little time.

Out of twenty-one responses, 15 respondents (71.4%) were very certain that the benefits outweigh the costs, given that they invested almost next to nothing in using and maintaining these tools. The benefits accrued included the quick spread of information with simple steps, communication and promotion, interaction between library and students was enhanced, comments from grateful students, enquiries, suggestions and complaints were made. It was further noted that students who seldom visit the library benefited from social networking tools such that it allowed them to remain in touch (R11). While these tools posed a great opportunity for staff to learn new technology (R17), they were also useful in reaching out to users (R18). R20 also reported that although Twitter’s impact was small among students, it was still worthy to maintain updates for students who are active Twitter users, and little time was required to do so. R10 reported ‘students trusted the library more’ because the latter was keeping up with the pace of technology.

Only one respondent denied any benefits accrued from using social networking tools because students did not use the tools. Two respondents were doubtful about the benefits. One respondent said no major benefits were accrued, but was hopeful and optimistic that once a large number of students were attracted to use it, considerable benefits would naturally entail.

4.10 Training offered by the libraries on the use of social networking tools and their content

Libraries that offered no training was twice (14) as many as those which offered training (7) as shown in Table 5. Out of the seven libraries which offered training, six indicated the training was given to library staff, the remaining library mentioned that training to staff would be offered if needed but so far the staffs that were using it intuitively learned how the tools work. Varied responses were obtained as far as the responsibility for training provision. On some occasions, staff that had social networking website accounts was asked to deliver the training (R1, R9). On other situations, IT staffs were responsible for training provision (R8). Communication officers have also been involved in training provision (R21, R23).

Table 5. In-house training on the use of social networking tools (n=21)

	No. of responses	Percentage
No	14	66.7%
Yes	7	33.3%

Training contents included Web 2.0 and social networking tools in general (R9, R16, R21), and raising the awareness for social networking tools (R23). Training on specific tools was also given such as in the use of Twitter (R1).

4.11 Adopting other and/or abandoning social networking tools

Six respondents are relatively open in welcoming any new tools that would be useful to the library to promote and enhance services, especially tools that are becoming developed and more popular. Other responses were more specific. R2 and R6 mentioned weblogs would be adopted but a concern was raised on the shortage in personnel. R11 indicated they would be interested to use Renren.com (a Chinese equivalent of Facebook) to promote library resources, services and updates, gather feedback, and communicate with students. Meebo was also identified as a chat tool to be integrated into the library website and to help answer enquiries.

Three respondents noted that some tools have been, or would be abandoned in the future. One library used Second Life for some time, but it was too time-consuming to be continuing (R5). R9 also reported that a library blog was stopped because students did not like using the blog and they wanted to concentrate resources on using the university portal. Another library intended to stop using Facebook and Twitter because student interest in them was low (R10).

4.12 Libraries which were not using any social networking tools

There were seven respondent libraries that were not using any social networking tools at the time of the survey, and five of them indicated they planned to use social networking tools in the future. One of them indicated they would use Facebook and Twitter in less than 6 months mainly for disseminating updates on library information. They envisioned more and more students would use social networking tools, but they were uncertain whether students would like to see the library use these tools. Hence, they might conduct a survey among students to gather feedback about the plan. Time and manpower costs have been considered in order to update information and monitor incoming messages. Whether the benefits of using these tools would outweigh the costs were perceived to be dependent on students' responses and participation. However, no reports of planned staff training have been noted.

5. Conclusion

As 71.4% of respondents agreed that the benefits outweigh the costs and 81% indicated that cost was minimal, or even none. It appears that social networking tools are perceived to be effective in promoting library services and interacting with students. Libraries which have been using these tools reported different levels of success in facilitating a heightened interaction and engagement among library users. Majority of libraries which have not been using social networking tools indicated plans of adopting these tools in the future. The findings of this study shed light on the details of implementation, including challenges and consequent plans among users.

Although social networking tools hold great promises for academic libraries, it may take time for these tools to be fully utilized by libraries. As this study has shown, different librarians hold different views on the definition of social networking tools. Perhaps the idea of social networking tools may still be new for some libraries, as a result, it may take time for libraries to establish consistent views of these tools and their functions, and be able to make the most out of the potential benefits.

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