Spanish academics and social networking sites: Use, non-use, and the perceived advantages and drawbacks of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, and Academia.edu

by **Francisco Segado-Boj, Jesús Díaz-Campo, Erika Fernández-Gómez, and María-Ángeles Chaparro-Domínguez**

Abstract

This study examines Spanish academics' motives for using social networking sites (SNS) and their perceptions regarding the limitations of and drawbacks to social media. We analyse 18 in-depth interviews conducted with Spanish university professors chosen according to their disciplines, academic ranks and level of use. Our findings confirm prior research based on the uses and gratifications theory. Thus, we conclude that SNS are used for managing content, identifying experts in a researcher's field of knowledge. In addition, academics need to manage different personal identities in each SNS they use.

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Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) constitute one of the most characteristic elements of the Web 2.0 landscape and one of the most relevant topics in communication research (Montero-Díaz, *et al.*, 2018). SNS are used in higher education (Manasićević, *et al.*, 2016) and are deeply integrated in scholarly communication (Sugimoto, *et al.*, 2017).

Researchers have adopted generic SNS, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, as professional tools (Kjellberg, *et al.*, 2016) and they can also have recourse to academic social networking sites (ASNS) that offer specific features aimed at scholars and researchers (Jeng, *et al.*, 2017) that could further global collaboration among researchers (Bardakci, *et al.*, 2018). Early career researchers make greater use of Web 2.0 tools (Nicholas, *et al.*, 2017).

This rise of social media phenomenon has led social scientists to ask what prompts academics to engage in social networking and become members of online communities.

Social networks sites and academia: Benefits and motives

According to uses and gratifications theory, the uses of social media are driven by the need to fulfil the following needs: *information seeking, entertainment, self expression, social interaction, and impression management* (Gao and Feng, 2016).

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Thus, five main motives for academic engagement with these platforms can be identified (Gruzd and Goertzen, 2013): socialising (making new research contacts and managing one's professional image); collaboration (seeking advice from peers and colleagues); information dissemination (promoting ongoing work, disseminating findings, drawing media attention, etc.), and information gathering (keeping abreast of new research and ideas, looking for funding opportunities, etc.).

SNS offer users a fairly simple and effective means of establishing new contacts (bridging social capital) (Phua, *et al.*, 2017), but these platforms are more often used for strengthening existing relationships (bonding links) (Liu, *et al.*, 2016). It implies that certain groups of scholars are adopting these media as an additional channel of communication with their peers, along with formal and orthodox channels like conferences and journals (Shehata, *et al.*, 2017). Thus social media has altered the idea of 'invisible college' by overlapping different public, professional, and personal spheres (Quan-Haase, *et al.*, 2015). These social bonds have both an informal nature and a professional side to enhance collaboration among researchers (Nentwich and König, 2014). SNS support a wide range of activities ranging from collaborating on content, planning meetings (Nández and Borrego, 2013), and sharing data (Zhu and Purdam, 2017) to the exchange and testing of ideas and collaborative editing of articles prior to submission to academic journals (Darling, *et al.*, 2013). However, although these sites are designed to support bidirectional and multidirectional communications between users, most researchers appear to use them in a unidirectional way (Jia, *et al.*, 2017).

Among other aspects, impression management means that SNS can be used as basic tool for establishing and maintaining professional images and reputations (Jamali *et al.*, 2015). In fact, networking and managing professional images are the scholar's preferred uses of SNS (Dermentzi, *et al.*, 2016).

Similarly, social media aimed specifically at academics have led their own methods and metrics to allow users to monitor their reputation (Nicholas, *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, Academia.edu has been criticised for overemphasizing self-branding among scholars as well as placing too much pressure on self-monitoring (Tenopir, *et al.*, 2017).

Sharing material and works is an integral part of academic life and the research cycle (Dermentzi and Papagiannidis, 2018) and scholars often use social media to this end (Ghazali, *et al.*, 2016), with three quarters of them frequently sharing material online (Elsayed, 2016). An increasing number of academics are honing their profiles on SNS to serve as digital portfolios showcasing their research findings (Segado-Boj, *et al.*, 2015) and to enhance the visibility of their research output (Thelwall and Kousha, 2015) even farther than the traditional readers of academic journals (Knight and Kaye, 2016). This potential advantage is even recognised by scholars who do not use SNS (Watkinson, *et al.*, 2016).

Along with news dissemination, given the increasing quantity and speed of scholarly information circulating on these platforms, academics cite seeking and keeping abreast of new information as another benefit of joining social media platforms (Meishar-Tal and Pieterse, 2017; Sullivan, 2017).

Lastly, entertainment gratifications, which might be linked to SNS use as a micro-break, are also described (Ahmad Kharman Shah and Cox, 2017).

Social networks sites and academia: Prejudices and dissuading factors

In spite of their awareness of these potential advantages, most scientists still are reluctant to use social media (Collins, *et al.*, 2016). Academics tend to be sceptical about the quality and credibility of the information found on SNS. Their view of SNS as a non-official channel has led academics to express concerns about the lack of accountability of information in circulation on these platforms (Manca, 2018).

Academics also tend to perceive that social media engagement requires time they should be devoting to their teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. The lack of any institutional recognition for the time and energy they might invest in participating in and contributing to online social networks is another factor that impedes their adoption on a wider scale (Acord and Hartley, 2012). In fact some scholars believe that investing too much time on social media might undermine their reputation (LaPoe, *et al.*, 2017).

Yet another barrier to broader acceptance of Web 2.0 technologies and social networks is their relative technical complexity. Self-efficacy is a key factor influencing the adoption of SNS (Dermentzi, *et al.*, 2016), so that perceived lack of skill might deter academics from using these technologies.

In general, non-users of social media believe that SNSs lead to detached and narcissistic communication (Lüders and Brandtzæg, 2017). In a similar sense, SNS have been perceived as an element alien to academic culture and practices (Greifeneder, *et al.*, 2018).

Concerns about identity theft and phishing figure among the range of factors identified in the literature as impediments to the wider use of social networks (Gruzd, *et al.*, 2012). The fear of having your ideas stolen has likewise been cited as another issue that has slowed the adoption of social media in academic communities (Zhu and Procter, 2015).

Privacy is considered another deterrent to adopting social media, both in general contexts (Walden, 2016) as well in academic and scholarly contexts, (Fan, *et al.*, 2016). Nonetheless, privacy is a complex phenomenon that is understood in different ways by each user, and it is not presented to users in accessible ways (Carmenatí González, *et al.*, 2017). The reluctance regarding privacy responds to three concerns (Gruzd, *et al.*, 2012):

1. Separating private content from public content: 'What is going to be known about me?'
2. Loss of control over content: 'How are my papers or my data to be used?'
3. Changes in terms of use and privacy policies.

Nevertheless, the motivations and deterrents enumerated above do not necessarily reflect the attitudes and concerns of academic social media users across the board.

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A wide range of factors affects the ways in which individual users perceive and use them.

Gender on social media and academia

Gender also influences the uses and expectations related to social media. Thus, women tend to use SNS as a tool for maintaining close ties, whereas men focus instead on obtaining information (Krasnova, *et al.*, 2017). As a consequence, female users place more trust in social media platforms (Warner-Söderholm, *et al.*, 2018) but they engage less in potentially offensive or controversial issues (Bode, 2017).

These factors should be linked with the general inequality women face in academic spaces (Kretschmer and Kretschmer, 2013). Papers by women are less cited (Potthoff and Zimmermann, 2017), their requests for funding are less likely to be positively evaluated (van der Lee and Ellemers, 2015), and they are less often invited to be keynote speakers at conferences (Sardelis and Drew, 2016).

In the specific case of the Spanish higher education system, female researchers have been traditionally a minority. Women account for only 20 percent of full professors (*catedráticos*) and only 40 percent of tenured professors (*titulares*). Women are also minority among scholars aged 60 or above (26 percent), 50 to 59 (37 percent), and 40 to 49 (43 percent) (Gama Cubas, 2017; España Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015).

Justification

The research reported here has a twofold objective: to determine academics' motives for engaging in online social networking and the ways in which they use both generalist and academic networking sites. To this end, we address the gap in the literature on individual practices on SNS (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2016; Schmitt and Jäschke, 2017). We also identify the main motives that deter some academics from using these platforms and, specifically, focus on those factors that dissuade them from using SNS professionally.

The exploration of multiple SNS is another aspect that sets this research apart. In line with the recommendations of Williams and Woodacre (2016), our work focuses on the features and characteristics of specific sites. Although academic engagement on social media takes place on a wide range of SNS (Nentwich and König, 2014), most research has focused on a single platform such as Facebook (Sharma, *et al.*, 2016), Twitter (Knight and Kaye, 2016; Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2016), Academia.edu (Thelwall and Kousha, 2014), or ResearchGate (Muscanell and Utz, 2017).

Our research also examines how academics use LinkedIn, one of the most popular SNS among academics, which draws up to 55 percent of users (Tran and Lyon, 2017), or even 60 percent in some disciplines (Manca, 2018) or 67 percent, in the case of certain Spanish universities (Campos-Freire and Rúa-Araújo, 2016). Nevertheless, motivation for and use of SNS has not been previously studied.

Adopting a broader approach to the subject allowed us to compare academics' perceptions of generalist and academic networking sites as well as their opinions about the advantages and drawbacks of each type. This approach also allowed us to test the claim by some authors (Gruzd, *et al.*, 2012) that the emergence of SNS specifically designed to serve academics could fuel researchers' interest in this type of social media.

Academia.edu boasts 47 million users (Bond, 2017) and ResearchGate is used by more than 12 million people (Choi, 2016). In spite of their popularity, the two sites have been already studied as reputation building and alternative ranking systems, yet there remains a gap in the literature on practices and new modes of communication through these channels (Manca, 2018).

Rather than focus exclusively on academics' perceptions and practices of social media in a single field, this study seeks to examine the concerns and opinions of professionals working in a variety of disciplines within the humanities and the social, natural, and experimental sciences.

Objectives

The primary objective of this research has been to establish a clear picture of how Spanish university professors from a range of age groups, disciplines, and levels of social networking experience use generalist (Twitter and Facebook), professional (LinkedIn), and academic (ResearchGate and Academia.edu) SNS. Based on this premise, our study seeks to answer the four main questions of this research:

1. What are the perceived advantages of using each social networking site addressed in this study?
This question was formulated to facilitate the identification of facets and features of each of the SNS under study that academics deemed to be especially useful and productive.
2. What are the inherent drawbacks and limitations of each of these platforms?
This question sought to identify Spanish academics' opinions regarding which aspects and features of the same SNS they considered drawbacks and, where appropriate, potential risk factors.
3. A. How do academics use social network sites in their teaching?
B. How do they use SNS in their research?
These two questions allowed us to elaborate on responses to our initial question and identify which aspects and features of each of the two SNS under study were used most in the teaching environment and which in the research environment.
4. How do academics use other social media tools in their teaching or research work?
This question was meant to ascertain professors' opinions of social media

tools other than SNS (blogs, chats, wikis, etc.) and to determine which they found useful in the teaching environment and which in their research.

Methodology

We conducted this study from a qualitative perspective using the semi-structured in-depth interview format, which significantly reduced the possibility of making prior assumptions regarding user motivations (Pai and Arnott, 2013). In contrast to published studies using mainly quantitative-based approaches (Kjellberg, *et al.*, 2016), our qualitative approach facilitated a different perspective to user experiences than do questionnaires (Schrepp, *et al.*, 2017), since it allowed for a deeper analysis of the effects of social networking tools on patterns in scholarly communication (Al-Aufi and Fulton, 2015).

The following typological criteria, identified in the literature as factors for determining the ways in which people perceive and use SNS, were applied in the sample selection. The first of these criteria was age, which affects platform preferences, credibility issues and other features (Sugimoto, *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the academics were divided into three age groups: under 35 years old, 36–55 years old, and over 55 years old.

Research shows that seniority also influences adoption and frequency of use of SNS among scholars (Manca and Ranieri, 2016). Because junior scholars are still developing their professional networks and professional images, they use SNS much more than their older colleagues (Gruzd, *et al.*, 2012); thus, employment status was also taken into account. Academic ranks were divided into three categories: tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenured positions. Professors holding high-ranking civil service positions were classified as tenured professors. These are *catedráticos* (professors holding the highest rank awarded in the Spanish system and comparable to full professors in the U.S.) and professors who have held the rank of *profesor titular* for at least 10 years. Professors who have achieved the civil-service rank of *profesor titular* but have held that title for less than 10 years (the rough equivalent of associate professors in the U.S.) were classified as tenure-track professors. All other professors holding non-civil service positions were considered non-tenured professors.

Another criterion used was media attendance theory, according to which media habits affect — among others — the way in which people use and perceive social networking services (Choi, 2016). For example, studies on privacy behaviour have revealed that users and non-users of Facebook and other SNS express varying degrees of concern about privacy issues (Chang and Heo, 2014). Another innovative aspect of our study was to apply intensity of use as a criterion in the sample selection, which gave us a deeper understanding of the ways in which participants' familiarity with SNS might influence the way in which they used these platforms in academic environments. This involved noting whether each potential interviewee was a 'high level' or 'low level' user of these sites. Participants who maintained active accounts on an academically focused networking site and a generalist networking site and used both frequently were considered high-level users. Those at the other end of the spectrum, who did not have accounts on the two types of platform, maintained only one account on either ResearchGate or Academia.edu, or had an inactive account on a generalist networking site, were considered low-level users.

Discipline has been claimed to be another relevant factor that influences scholars' social media uses and habits (Kjellberg, *et al.*, 2016), therefore we included it as an additional criterion. For example, academics linked to pure and experimental sciences appear more inclined to use these platforms than are their counterparts in the social sciences and humanities (Arcila, *et al.*, 2013). Also, academics from different fields prefer different SNS (Ortega, 2017). Thus distinctions were drawn between the natural sciences, experimental science, and engineering, and the social sciences and humanities.

At any rate, regardless of gender as an influencing factor in social media use, the dearth of female professors among the highest ranks of the Spanish higher education system (España Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2015) implied a reduction in the female representation in the final study sample to five. Notwithstanding, females were represented for every age, position, and field.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the professional profiles of the 16 professors selected for the sample.

Field	Age	Position	Intensity of use	Discipline	Gender
Natural Sciences & Engineering	Under 35	Non-tenured	High	Construction & Building Engineering	Female
	Under 35	Non-tenured	Low	Veterinary Sciences	Male
	35 to 55	Tenure-track	High	Agricultural Engineering	Male
	35 to 55	Tenure-track	Low	Astronomy & Astrophysics	Male
	56 and over	Tenured	High	Computer Science	Male
	56 and over	Tenured	Low	Medicine	Male

Social sciences	Under 35	Non-tenured	High	Marketing	Female
	Under 35	Non-tenured	Low	Social Work	Male
	35 to 55	Tenure-track	High	Communication	Male
	35 to 55	Tenure-track	Low	Law	Male
	56 and over	Tenured	High	Library & Information Sciences	Female
	56 and over	Tenured	Low	Sociology	Male
Humanities	Under 35	Non-tenured	High	Archaeology	Male
	Under 35	Non-tenured	Low	History of Art	Female
	35 to 55	Tenure-track	High	Philosophy	Male
	35 to 55	Tenure-track	Low	History	Male
	56 and over	Tenured	High	Literature	Male
	56 and over	Tenured	Low	History of Art	Female

Besides applying the criteria noted above, an effort was made to ensure that the sample adequately represented the broadest possible spectrum of specialisations within each of the three general areas of knowledge.

Each of the 16 professors interviewed was affiliated with one of 14 different universities in Spain [1]. Although three were affiliated to the same university, they worked in different fields of research. The inclusion of multiple interviewees from a single university in the study sample was justified by the fact that it ranks amongst Spain's three largest higher-education institutions, in terms of faculty size. The university affiliations of individual participants have been withheld to ensure anonymity.

The authors conducted the interviews between September 2014 and July 2015. At the beginning of each session, participants were asked a series of questions designed to sound out their opinions about social networks in general, their functions, and their strengths and weaknesses. The interviewees were then asked for their general opinion of each of the SNS under study (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Academia.edu, and ResearchGate).

These sessions were divided into sections to gain a better understanding of the participants' perceptions and use of each platform. Because the term 'use' can imply reading, contributing, or both (Kjellbertg, *et al.*, 2016) we specifically asked the interviewees whether they used each platform as a research tool, a means to publish their work, or a vehicle for social contact. Whenever they replied affirmatively, they were asked to describe their activity in that area. In instances in which they indicated they had not used the site for such a purpose, they were requested to describe their motives for not having done so.

During the final stage of the interviews, participants were asked if they had used SNS and other Web 2.0 tools in their teaching and research work and, if so, which they had found most useful in each context.

Results

Social networks in general

The professors participating in this study viewed social networks as promising communications tools that they could be using more but whose potential they had not yet fully exploited. A number of participants said they preferred to use other options available to them, such as e-mail, virtual campus platforms, and alternative types of communications systems developed by the universities to which they were affiliated.

Based on what they perceived to be the main strengths of SNS, one in particular stood out during the interviews: their usefulness in establishing and maintaining contact with other researchers working at geographically distant institutions. The participants also highly valued the opportunity that these platforms offered to access the published work of others, bring their own research accomplishments to the attention of a wider audience, and share resources that they considered to be of interest.

The interviewees also valued the vast amount of information available on these sites and the fact that it was constantly updated and could be accessed much faster than with traditional methods. They also stressed the reliability of information that these sites offered:

[They offer] information that has been filtered by people you consider trustworthy, which is very important. Following a pool of people whose integrity and common sense you respect saves you a lot of time. You can locate documents [you know will be of interest] right away instead of wasting a lot of time. (Female, over 55, tenured professor, Humanities)

Another aspect of SNS that particularly interested the participants was the opportunity that they provided to establish direct contacts with students, respond to their questions, share resources with them, and carry out ongoing academic tutoring, although they conceded that conducting such activities via these platforms was not always easy:

The interaction possible with students via these channels is rather basic and can be somewhat troublesome when students don't manage to keep their messages concise and to the point. There are certain downsides such as immediacy and interaction. On the other hand, these platforms allow me to incorporate a lot of content into courses that I wouldn't normally be able to share in a traditional classroom situation. (Female, under 35, non-tenured professor, Exact sciences — Health and engineering)

From the viewpoint of the professors interviewed, the main drawbacks to using SNS were the risk of depersonalisation and privacy, security, and anonymity issues inherent to them. To a lesser extent, some complained that information disseminated and shared via SNS was relatively unfiltered, whereas others pointed out that this problem was by no means exclusive to these platforms.

Participants thought that a lack of expertise and the time required to harness the full potential of SNS often deterred academics from using these platforms, and several participants who had refrained from using SNS for these very reasons said that universities should offer training in this area.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of what the interviewed professors perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of each social networking site examined during this study.

Table 2: The perceived strengths and weaknesses of each social networking site under study.			
SNS		Strengths	Weaknesses
General	Facebook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports the creation of focused research groups • Allows professors to reach more students • Facilitates information sharing • Boosts visibility of personal Webs and blogs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often ends up combining personal and professional use • Privacy issues
	Twitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediacy • Offers access to a broad range of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming • Bombards users with information
Professional	LinkedIn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates contact with former students • Facilitates contact with others working in the same discipline • Facilitates access to difficult-to-find publications • Facilitates contact with experts in one's field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not suitable for academic use • Does not provide university job listings

Academic	ResearchGate Academia.edu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialised focus • Contains job listings • Provides a means of disseminating and promoting one's own work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishes unreliable information
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Generalist social network sites — Facebook

Beyond the few rare instances in which the interviewees had used generalist SNS for a special purpose, such as communication between members of a focused research group, the professors tended to use this type of platform primarily for personal, non-academic purposes, such as keeping in touch with friends and family members.

The strongest reservations expressed by those who considered Facebook unsuitable for professional purposes were related to privacy management. Keywords and phrases used by this group to explain what they considered to be the downside of this site, particularly regarding its use in teaching or research, included 'gossip', 'the control of personal data', and 'a total lack of criteria for what gets published'.

The personal experience of one of the participants served to underline the importance of this issue:

If you want to work and not go insane as well, you need to limit other users' access to your profile. [Data] privacy is also an important issue in the area I work in. Someone opened a false Facebook account in my name using data available on my university profile page. Since I had nothing to do with it, I contacted Facebook, who closed the account. It turned out that the false account belonged to a former student who had opened it without any malicious intent. (Male, 35–50, tenure-track professor, Humanities)

However, other participants in the survey who had used Facebook in their teaching and research claimed that the massive appeal of this platform made it an ideal vehicle for collecting class assignments, sharing information with students and other researchers, classifying content, and promoting blogs and Web sites on which they had posted their study findings.

Generalist networks — Twitter

The response was similar regarding Twitter, another site upon which opinion was divided. Those who had chosen not to use this platform cited the time it required and the constant stream of notifications received as its two greatest drawbacks.

Interviewees who used Twitter considered its greatest virtue to be immediacy — the opportunity it offered users to make spontaneous comments about something of general or specific professional interest in real time. These participants regarded Twitter as a first point of contact from which they could search for additional information on a subject via embedded links or specific sources.

In my opinion, Twitter has the same aura of immediacy that radio once had: when a lot of people retweet something or use a hashtag ... I feel a sense of immediacy. (Female, under 35, non-tenured professor, Humanities)

LinkedIn

The majority of the professors interviewed for this study used LinkedIn less than any other social networking site for one specific motive: they considered it to be geared towards the needs and interests of business professionals rather than those of academics. While they thought that LinkedIn might be a good tool for people seeking work in the general labour market, they agreed that it did not serve academics searching for teaching positions at the university level and suggested that a listing of teaching positions and research opportunities would be a feature of interest to professors across the board.

The interviewees cited two advantages to using this particular site. The first was its viability as a channel through which former students could contact them to request recommendations related to job applications. The second was the opportunity it offers for keeping current with activities of other institutions and professionals in their particular disciplines.

I use this site because people in my circle of contacts share a lot of information of interest to me on it. [...] Being able to access the information these individuals post is sometimes more important than maintaining direct contact with them and I believe that is their objective — bringing interesting things to the attention of other colleagues. (Male, over 55, tenure-track professor, Exact sciences — Health and engineering)

Academic SNS

Most participants viewed academic SNS (ResearchGate and Academia.edu) more positively than the generalist sites. They considered the academic focus of these platforms to be a definite plus. Researchers interviewed used this type of platform for two main purposes: to keep current with what their counterparts elsewhere were working on and promoting and disseminating the results of their own studies.

In the first instance, they valued the ease with which they could keep track of what colleagues were doing and the possibility of reading posted conference proceedings,

book chapters, and other types of documents, not available elsewhere. The interviewees also considered these sites especially useful tools for identifying the most outstanding researchers in their fields and following the work of colleagues and lines of investigation in which they were particularly interested.

Fewer interviewees used academic SNS as a means of disseminating their own work, citing time constraints as the main reason for not pursuing this option. The participants stated that they would like to see these platforms automatically incorporate authors' most recent work, akin to Google Scholar, but acknowledged that it is being done gradually. They also suggested that universities regard academics' involvement in social networking as a merit activity.

Interviewees considered embedded features, such as bookmarking and following, to be the least appealing features of academic SNS. They particularly disliked the fact that everyone on a user's list of contacts was privy to their personal bookmarking decisions, a function they thought made this option too similar to Facebook's 'like' button. Some participants thought that academic networking sites were useful but were not the best sources of information. They pointed out that, as was the case with SNS in general, communication on these platforms was often stilted due to a lack of trust amongst users.

[Table 3](#) provides a breakdown of participants' views regarding the advantages and drawbacks of using SNS' teaching and research environments.

Table 3: Perceptions regarding the advantages and drawbacks of using SNS in teaching and research environments.		
	Teaching	Research
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate rapid communication and feedback. • Allow users to share a range of resources. • Students feel comfortable using these sites. • Facilitate communication with colleagues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate contact with experts in one's field. • Facilitate the publication and the dissemination of findings.
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers have the disadvantage of being digital immigrants. • Teachers cannot be 'on call' on a 24-hour basis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SNS lack the rigour of established journals. • Researchers lack the technical expertise needed to fully exploit these sites.

The use of SNS in teaching environments

When asked what features of SNS they found most useful in their teaching, most professors interviewed stated that they provided very good channels for communicating rapidly with students, generating feedback, sharing a wide range of materials, answering questions about class work and activities, and disseminating last-minute messages. They gave other reasons as well:

First off, the immediacy with which support, including visual materials, can be provided to students who may have questions or problems. They offer a means of exposing students to multimedia content that wouldn't otherwise be able to share. I think it's really important to be able to respond students and figure out whether or not they like the content you're tossing out to them. (Female, under 35, non-tenured, Exact sciences — Health and engineering)

According to the academics interviewed for this study, students feel closer to professors who answer their questions rapidly via platforms that they are comfortable using, such as SNS, than they do to professors who communicate with them by other means. When asked how she viewed colleagues who used SNS in their courses, one interviewee stated:

I think it gives them a big advantage, especially in terms of relating to students. [Students] see professors who use them as being more up-to-date and feel that they are teaching them things they are really interested in. (Female, over 55, tenure-track professor, Humanities)

Most of the professors interviewed recognised that they would need more experience and training to be able to use SNS as effortlessly and completely as students and stressed the importance of drawing a firm line between their personal and professional online identities. They viewed themselves as digital immigrants separated by age from their digital native students:

We need to use a range of SNS and create a different profile for each site we maintain: [it's important for me], to express my thoughts as Marina the individual as well as a professor teaching a group of students because there are a lot of different facets to my personality; I'm many different Marinas. Who am I in a particular context? Whereas we professors haven't yet grasped the importance of that question, students know perfectly well that a given site is for communicating with their peers, not for spouting off about you or me or whoever. This is harder for us than it is for them. The technology we've adopted only to a limited degree is an integral fixture of their daily lives. (Female, under 35, non-tenured professor, Social and legal sciences)

Some professors, on the other hand, stressed how useful social networks — particularly Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn — were for maintaining contact with former students and communicating with other faculty members, and students at foreign universities.

In terms of the drawbacks to using SNS in teaching environments mentioned by these professors, two in particular stood out: students sometimes fail to understand that professors cannot spend 24 hours a day responding to their questions via these platforms, and there is lack of clear guidelines concerning their use during a course.

The use of SNS in research environments

Opinion was divided concerning the value of SNS to researchers. Some had used them to disseminate their own research findings and to maximize their reach but others, however, claimed that the lack of rigour that characterises SNS made them poor platforms for the dissemination of scientific studies:

I believe that you should disseminate your findings through the right channels, by which I mean high-impact journals whose reputation hopefully rests on the mechanisms they've put in place to ensure the quality of what is published rather than on the whims of authors anxious to upload anything they please. (Male, over 55, tenure-track professor, Exact sciences — Health and engineering)

Interviewee opinion was also divided regarding the practice of using social networks to establish new contacts within the academic community. Some thought that they were well suited to this purpose and were especially useful as a means of establishing initial contact with experts in their own or related disciplines. Others, in contrast, felt that SNS were not appropriate channels for making this type of contact.

Conclusion, limitations, and further research

Many of the results reported here concerning professors' motivations for using or not using SNS confirm findings of prior studies. Although this research underscores a number of previously identified factors affecting academics' interest in SNS, it also offers new insights into their perceptions regarding these tools.

The participants in this study repeatedly expressed doubts about the quality of information published on SNS. Nevertheless, the interviews revealed that they have begun to use them (both generalist and academic) as a means of finding documents of potential interest to them and filtering information relevant to the fields in which they work.

These findings might be explained through Bourdieu's (1980) concept of '*la sens pratique*' [the logic of practice], which has been used to explain the adoption of social media by other collectives, such as journalists (Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2018). This theory posits that technological features and uses of a medium that users find helpful in their daily, regular, routine tasks are more likely to be adopted. In this case, we find that positive attitudes among the interviewees were related to information gathering. The need to keep abreast of the latest developments in each academic field is part of the researcher's everyday life, and SNS are viewed as useful resources in this purpose.

The professors interviewed used all kinds of SNS to keep abreast of new developments in their disciplines and especially appreciated being able to peruse documents that other colleagues had directly uploaded to these platforms. Participants not only praised the immediacy of these sites and speed with which they could access information on them but also stressed their growing value as a tool for content curation.

Findings also indicate that academics use SNS as a virtual Who's Who when searching for other experts in their fields as well as a means of requesting notification of these authors' future publications. Many mentioned that SNS not only allowed them to discover new and interesting studies, but also learn more about their authors.

The pace of acceptance and adoption of these tools within the academic community in Spain is hampered by a lack of technical expertise. However, the professors interviewed for this study were clearly aware of social networking's potential and some thought universities and other institutions should provide training in this area; a suggestion that points to an interest in overcoming technical barriers and reducing a generational digital divide. The interviewees believed that this type of training should cover the usefulness of SNS as sources and research tools as well as technical basics.

One of the novelties of this study was its exploration of academics' opinions of LinkedIn. Although the professors interviewed expressed much interest in using this platform, they thought that the features and options it offered duplicated those available via academically oriented sites and other online communities.

The possibility of academic SNS listing teaching and research opportunities in much the same way that LinkedIn features job notices was only one of several interesting

ideas that emerged during the exploration of academics' opinions of this site.

The inclusion of LinkedIn in this study also prompted a number of constructive commentaries concerning that platform's usefulness as a channel for maintaining contact with former students, a function that interviewees thought academic SNS should try to emulate.

Nonetheless, interviewees did not think that academic SNS should embrace all the features and aesthetics of their generalist counterparts, drawing a negative comparison between the 'frivolous' public exposure of users' bookmarking decisions on academic SNS (a function that reminded them too much of Facebook) and the total privacy of personal libraries created by users via Google Scholar.

As mentioned earlier, many interviewees thought that the automatic public notification of users' decisions to bookmark specific documents or follow specific people reduced these otherwise useful functions of academic networking sites to the level of 'liking' via Facebook. While they appreciated the 'serious' and 'formal' aspects of academic social networks, they found others, such as the option to seek and grant endorsements, less interesting or even undesirable.

This study has revealed that the slow pace of institutional adoption is impeding Spanish academics from fully exploiting the potential of SNS in the area of research. Professors tend to interpret the refusal of entities and organisations they deal with on a regular basis to use SNS as censure that lowers the quality and impact of these platforms.

The data provided also indicates that scholars are aware that different strategies and patterns of use should be applied in the different SNS in which they are involved. Further research is needed to deep in how these different strategies are defined and applied.

Female academics expressed particular concerns about how to manage different features of professional and personal life. This could be a consequence of the inequality and discrimination faced by these scholars in their professional environment. This scenario might prompt special caution among these academics that a badly managed professional image through SNS might imply an additional obstacle in their perception by their male peers. Something similar was found among the younger scholars, who also find their position as more insecure and perceive that using social media sites might damage their careers (Greifeneder, *et al.*, 2018).

The interviewees cited privacy, data security, and anonymity concerns as being the greatest drawbacks to SNS. The combined weight of these issues was thought to have created a climate of distrust that hindered fluid communication between users. The absence of criteria regarding what could be uploaded to these platforms had made some participants in the study sceptical about the quality of content they contained and discouraged a few from using them for any purpose whatsoever.

Limitations and further research

Although the subjects interviewed for this study were drawn from a wide range of disciplines and universities, as Spaniards they responded to a homogenous social and cultural environment. Academics working in other countries and contexts might have other opinions and make different value judgements regarding the usefulness of SNS in academic environments. It should also be noted that this research did not address all the variables shown to have an effect on the way individuals use and perceive these communications tools. For example, it did not consider user personality factors.

Although the qualitative methodology used in this research did not allow for any quantitative measurement of the advantages and drawbacks enumerated by the participants, it could nevertheless serve as a starting point for future studies of the topic based on surveys or analyses of the content posted on academic Web sites.

The findings of this study indicate that academics in Spain are becoming increasingly aware of the need to develop different strategies and user habits for every SNS on which they have a presence. Future research focusing on the ways in which professors are differentiating their online identities could provide deeper insight into this issue.

In terms of the utility of SNS in teaching situations, professors interviewed remarked that students not only felt comfortable using them in learning environments but also had a higher opinion of teachers who used these tools in their courses. This observation points to the desirability of conducting further research on the relationship between professors' use of SNS and the ratings they receive in student evaluations. Such studies could verify whether the assertion that students value teachers committed to using these tools more highly than teachers who shy away from these technologies has a basis in fact.

Finally, this study has shed light on the ways in which SNS can facilitate communication in the context of teaching collaborations between universities in different countries and promote virtual mobility. Exploratory and case studies in this area would be very useful in helping all involved to make the most out of this sort of educational initiative.

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Note

1. Interviewees were affiliated with one of the following universities (all names given in Spanish): Universidad de Barcelona, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Universidad de Córdoba, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, Universidad Jaime I, Universidad de Málaga, Universidad de Murcia, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, and Universidad de Vigo.

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Spanish academics and social networking sites: Use, non-use, and the perceived advantages and drawbacks of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, and Academia.edu

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