

Urban Library Journal

Volume 25
Issue 2 *Selected Proceedings from the 2019
LACUNY Institute: Students Are Evolving, Are
Libraries Adapting?*

Article 1

12-22-2019

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Recommended Citation

Philogene, S. (2019). Twitter Use by Academic Libraries in New York State. *Urban Library Journal*, 25 (2). Retrieved from <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol25/iss2/1>

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Twitter Use by Academic Libraries in New York State

By Sheena Philogene

Abstract

Twitter can be a productive tool for academic libraries to use when sharing information, marketing services, and building relationships with students, yet it is difficult to know whether academic libraries are utilizing this platform by creating an independent library account. Furthermore, if academic libraries do have accounts, it is valuable to understand what academic libraries use Twitter for, and what kinds of media they share. The purpose of this study then is to investigate whether academic libraries in New York State (NYS) use Twitter, and if they do, how and why. Based on a sample of 226 academic libraries of 2- and 4-year institutions with physical locations, the results of the analysis found that approximately 48% of academic libraries in NYS have a Twitter account. A content analysis of a random sample of 21 academic libraries in NYS showed that academic libraries primarily use Twitter as a resource to share information about events in and outside of the institution, by sharing links to other information and content.

Keywords

academic libraries, Twitter, tweets, social media, New York State

Author Biography

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Introduction

Academic libraries are often encouraged to use social media platforms like Twitter to do outreach, marketing, and collaboration with students, faculty, and scholars (Al-Daihani & AlAwadhi, 2015; Kim, Abels, & Yang, 2012; Yep, Brown, Fagliarone, & Shulman, 2017). In 2018, Twitter had over 330 million active users and was considered popular among adults aged 18–29, especially those in college (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Additionally, Twitter was the platform users turned to most commonly to get news and stay updated on trends (Howard, Huber, Carter, & Moore, 2018; Kenchakkanavar, 2015; Yep et al., 2017).

Despite the potential benefits of using Twitter in academic libraries, it has been reported that adoption of the platform is slow (Del Bosque, Leif, & Skarl, 2012). More specifically, several studies have noted a rapid increase of academic libraries

signing up for Twitter in 2009 (Aharony, 2010; Flood, 2009; Stuart, 2010), and the number of accounts created declining sharply after 2009 (Stewart & Walker, 2018).

Objectives

The aims of this study were, first, to reveal the number of academic libraries in New York State (NYS) that have a dedicated Library Twitter page, whether or not the account is being actively maintained; then, to review the tweets posted by 21 of those libraries within a single year. This investigation reviewed how regularly these libraries posted on the platform, what they chose to post, and what trends were common among academic libraries in NYS.

“Best” Practices

Many individuals and institutions have offered recommendations of best practices for academic libraries to use when establishing a Twitter presence. However, despite the abundance of suggestions, there are no established protocols and little general consensus for how academic libraries should post on Twitter to be effective. A review of the literature was used to identify some of the most common recommendations for academic libraries, which include:

- Having a mission and clear goals for the account (Burkhardt, 2010; Fiander, 2012; Library Resources, 2017; Peacemaker, Robinson, & Hurst, 2016);
- Posting regularly (Burkhardt, 2010; Fiander, 2012; Library Resources, 2017; Potter, 2013);
- Assigning a single dedicated staff member to create and post content (Library Resources, 2017);
- Using photos/media and vary content (Library Resources, 2017; Potter, 2013);
- Highlighting information such as library hours or outages (e.g., databases or elevators) (Del Bosque, Leif, Skarl, 2012; Fiander, 2012);
- Linking to content that supports the community’s scholarly goals (Burkhardt, 2010); and
- Posting announcements about events (Burkhardt, 2010; Fiander, 2012; Library Resources, 2017; Milstein, 2009).

It should be noted that it was not a goal of this study to establish best practices for academic libraries when using Twitter. Rather, the purpose in identifying these common practices was to develop examination criteria, which would help in recognizing and evaluating these trends when they appeared in the study.

Methodology

The complete sample of eligible libraries was identified using the 2012 Academic Libraries Survey, published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and inclusion criteria was limited to include only 2- and 4-year academic

libraries with physical locations. Twitter's internal search engine and Google were used to find libraries' official Twitter pages. Ultimately, 226 academic libraries in New York State were selected for review.

A 41-question coding scheme was developed and used to address the research questions and allow for other themes, topics, and patterns to be identified and recorded. This scheme was applied to a random sample of 21 eligible libraries with a Twitter account, chosen from the pool of 226 described above. The analysis period spanned 12 months, from August 2017 through July 2018, and was intended to capture the full spectrum of tweets posted in a single, complete academic year. Descriptive statistical analysis was also conducted to explore similarities and differences among the institutions.

Results

I. Are academic libraries in NYS on Twitter?

Of the 226 New York State libraries eligible for review in this study, 110 of those academic libraries in NYS (48.6%) had an independent Twitter account. This result showed that there is a higher rate of adoption within academic libraries in NYS than in other states and areas, as reported in previous studies (Del Bosque et al., 2012; Harrison, Burrell, Velasquez, & Schreiner, 2017; McCallum, 2015; Stewart & Walker, 2018). This greater rate of adoption could be linked to a number of factors, including the growth of the platform in the years since previous studies were conducted and various differences in regional adoption (Del Bosque et al., 2012). However, considering Twitter has been viewed as a useful and important resource for academic libraries for about a decade, the rate of adoption is still relatively low.

Based on the 2012 NCES report, private 4-year academic libraries made up approximately half the total number of academic libraries in NYS (50.8%); however, they did not have the highest rate of Twitter adoption in the State. Instead, public 4-year institution libraries, which account for approximately 20% of the academic libraries in the State, are the most represented in terms of Twitter presence. *Table 1* shows the number of academic libraries in NYS by type, the number of those libraries with a Twitter account, and the corresponding rate of adoption.

	Private 4-Year	Public 4-year	Private 2-year	Public 2-year	Total
Number of Libraries	115	45	31	35	226
Number of Libraries with a Twitter Account	63	31	0	16	110
Percentage of Libraries with Twitter	54.8%	68.9%	0.0%	45.7%	48.7%

Table 1. Twitter Adoption Rates by Institution

In terms of account lifespan, the results were consistent with past studies. The majority of libraries in the study sample had a Twitter account for at least nine years (62%). However, the quick decline in account creation after 2009 was observed within this sample group. This suggests that libraries that do not already have a Twitter account are less likely to create one.

II. How much are academic libraries in NYS posting Twitter?

Regardless of the length of time the account has existed and the posting behaviors during the study period, most libraries in the study had fewer than 2,000 total tweets posted across the lifetime of their Twitter account.

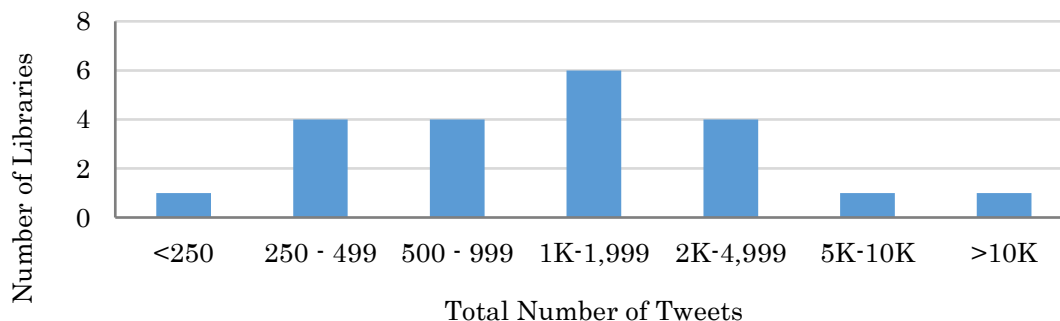


Table 2. Total Number of Tweets by the Number of Libraries

In total, between August 2017 and July 2018, 4,573 tweets were reviewed. During the 12 month study period, 90% of the libraries in the study sample posted content (n=19). The remaining two accounts were completely inactive during the study period, both having no new content since 2015. Consequently, they were excluded from further calculations.

The monthly analysis of tweets showed that there was much variation in the number of tweets posted by libraries. There were consistently more tweets posted in the Spring semester than in the Fall semester. In fact, in two cases, libraries posted fewer than five tweets over the first five months of the study period (Aug.–Dec.

2017). Additionally, private institution libraries consistently posted more tweets during the study period than public institution libraries. This difference in the number of posts by public and private institutions is statistically significant, as determined by two-sample t-test ($p = 0.041$).

	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
Average	16	22	21	18	17	18	19	24	25	26	18	18
Min	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	2	0	0
Max	63	108	115	93	75	80	90	82	95	103	86	69
Total	307	415	394	343	323	336	365	448	498	493	335	346

Table 3. Monthly Tweet Statistics over Study Period

III. What are academic libraries in NYS posting on Twitter?

Tweet Content

The most popular type of message was related to schedule changes; for example daily hours, emergency closures, weather advisories, etc. Most libraries (89.5%) posted these kinds of messages; most often, they were posted during finals or for snow closures, although a few posted hours daily. Events were the second most popular theme in posts. Overall, 84.2% of libraries tweeted about events (either original or retweets). The majority tweeted about events hosted by their parent institution or affiliates in the local neighborhood (78.9%); fewer event posts (63.1%) were about events inside the library (i.e., workshops and book talks).

There were also a number of libraries (78.9%) that posted tweets focused on information literacy (e.g., finding, managing, and evaluating sources; fake news; selecting databases) and materials from the circulating collection (73.7%), including works written by faculty and alums, community reads, and textbooks.

Types of Media Content

Almost all of the libraries in the study included external links in tweets (94.7%). While they varied across accounts, some of the most common were links to the college/university’s website (89.5%), posts on other social media (Facebook or Instagram) and blogs (63.2%), news media (57.9%), and direct links to subject specific academic journal articles, databases, and research guides (52.6%). Most libraries also used hashtags and retweets (78.9%).

Pictures were another commonly used form of media, with 84.2% of libraries including them in tweets. Photos on Twitter were very diverse, spanning from digital event fliers, images of students participating in library events, to photos of

students in various library spaces like group study rooms, reading in armchairs, 'shelfies,' library contest entries, photos of staff, and photos from the archive. Other commonly used media were memes, emojis, and gifs (68.4%) and videos (47.4%), most often from YouTube.

Emergent Trends

A number of unexpected trends emerged from the data. The first of which was the number of libraries that tweeted about the academic term (89.5%), including welcome messages, congratulations to graduates, and motivational tweets during midterms and finals (84.2%). In complement to these tweets, libraries also posted tweets about "de-stressing" activities for coping, especially during midterms and finals (67%). Library tweets also focused on promoting activities in the library such as crafts (e.g., coloring; knitting) or games (57.1%) and visits by therapy animals in the library (37%). Some libraries (52.4%) also highlighted particular library spaces (e.g., quiet spaces; collaborative spaces).

Another trend was seen in the way that 14 of the 19 libraries (74%) promoted some variation of "Meet the Staff" events or series in their library. These posts generally included the name of the librarian being highlighted for the week, a photo, and a brief description of their subject expertise.

Another common trend was the abundance of posts throughout all the libraries focusing on holidays and annual events. Seventy-nine percent of the libraries in the study explicitly mentioned at least one religious or national holiday, with Thanksgiving being the most frequently acknowledged (73%). In some cases, libraries also tweeted messages of "Happy Everything" or "Happy Holidays" during the winter holidays; however, those instances where libraries did not explicitly name a holiday were not considered. This trend was also reflected in non-holiday annual events, with 68% of libraries mentioning at least one, including Archives Month, Banned Books Week, National Novel Writing Month, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, National Coming Out Day, and Open Access Week.

The final major trend that emerged during this analysis suggests that the libraries are not only focused on current students and faculty. Thirty-eight percent of the libraries in the study tweeted to promote services, privileges, and events specifically to alums. Related to this, 24% of libraries also mentioned the New York Public Library as a resource students could utilize to access scholarship and materials when they were off campus or no longer enrolled and able to access resources.

Discussion & Recommendations

The assessment showed that many libraries posted tweets that aligned with the recommended practices outlined earlier in this paper. This is most noticeable by the high number of tweets that include media, highlight information about closures and outages, promote events, and introduce students to scholarly resources. However, it

was less common to see libraries posting on regular schedules, as evidenced by the months where libraries posted no tweets (*Table 3*). This may indicate that having several librarians schedule and share social media posting responsibilities can be more beneficial for keeping the account from going dormant.

Community engagement activities are popular in academic libraries and with students. By sharing photos of student engagement during library-hosted activities such as crafting events, book clubs, therapy animal visits, and contests, libraries can increase visibility, bring attention to uncommon functions of the library, and encourage more meaningful interaction with the library staff.

The analysis also showed that most libraries on Twitter are mindful of the academic term, as supported by timely posts during various points in the semester. One way to build on this engagement is to pair encouraging messages with reminders that librarians can help and support students during those stressful points in the semester.

Conclusion

The primary findings of this study underscored a rising issue related to the use of social media, which is that many libraries that have social media accounts rarely use them. While this study showed that Twitter adoption in NYS is higher than anticipated based on previous studies, it also showed that those accounts are not being used to their maximum benefit. While this is an issue when considering the best approaches to interacting with social media, it may be foreshadowing a greater issue specific to Twitter.

It is important to remember that social media is an ever-changing landscape, so libraries must continuously assess which platforms are the best to use when engaging with patrons, and be open to changing to other alternatives when they are more appropriate. Shortly after the end of the review period, one of the analyzed libraries deactivated their Twitter account, reflecting a recent Twitter exodus between 2018 and 2019. As users decide to leave this and other social media platforms, due to concerns about security and privacy, chronic hostility/bullying, mental health impacts, and declining interest (Powazek, 2018; West, 2018; MacPhail, 2018), libraries will want to look for alternatives. One option will be to consider migrating to an image-based platform, like Instagram, as visual media is on the rise (McCallum, 2015; Sahu, 2016) and the majority of the accounts in the study already incorporate images in tweets.

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