Social media in sport management education: Introducing LinkedIn

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ABSTRACT

Social media provide innovative teaching and learning pedagogical frameworks that change means of communication within academic institutions and enable students to develop digital skills that are helpful for a successful professional career. LinkedIn, a social media tool that focuses on professional networking and career development, has become the most popular professional social network, used by all stakeholders of the sport industry, and can therefore be used by students to stay in touch with experts and the latest trends in the sports industry. The purpose of this article is to define the main features and functionalities of LinkedIn from a sport management perspective and share guidelines to embrace and introduce it effectively into sport management courses.

1. Introduction

Technology has opened the path for many educational reforms and innovations (Tayag, 2020). For instance, the Internet has reshaped the way students, teachers and universities interact (Scott & Stanway, 2015), enabling the emergence of new learning models, such as online learning, which, since the beginning of the century, started to experience high growth (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001). The expansion of these new pedagogies in the educational field – which include the use of digital technologies and new communication channels, such as social media – experienced a boom during the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted the whole educational community.

Social media platforms and applications have become widely popular across all industries, for a variety of purposes (Malik, Heyman-Schrum, & Johri, 2019). In university environment, however, integration of social media either in the teaching-learning process or as a communication tool to connect with stakeholders, happens rather slowly compared to the wider industry benchmarks (O'Boyle, 2014). This can be mainly attributed to the fact that social media platforms were not designed with the explicit purpose of supporting educational or other learning-related activities (Tess, 2013). Furthermore, faculty are naturally reticent to change their teaching and learning methods, and there is often an issue regarding why, how, and what impact the pedagogical change may have concerning the quality of the teaching-learning process and its resulting benefits (Salmon, 2005). Therefore, current research has shown that the educational possibilities of the social media are still only partially exploited (Manca, 2020).

However, the inherent characteristics of social media in terms of networking and content sharing have been noticed by the

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academic community, and their use in the educational landscape is also on the rise (Malik et al., 2019). Indeed, there is a need and desire to rethink models for teaching and learning and introduce pedagogical innovations in the classroom (Manning, Keiper, & Jenny, 2017). Pedagogical innovation can be viewed as the attitude and process of investigating new ideas, conceptions, proposals, and contributions (Imbernón, 1996), aiming to transform and improve the teaching and learning processes. In this sense, social media offer the opportunity to create learning contexts as well as positive and engaged educational experiences for students (Manning et al., 2017).

Social media can offer a number of advantages to students, such as providing meaningful experiences related to strategic social media use that will be helpful after graduation (Sanderson & Browning, 2015), preparing them for impactful networking in their professional career or business purposes (Tess, 2013) and helping them to connect with professionals and follow new trends in the sector (Marr & Dewaele, 2015). With particular regard to networking and job-related information seeking, one social media tool – LinkedIn – seems to be an ideal fit.

LinkedIn focuses on professional networking and career development. Unlike most social networks, LinkedIn has been designed to help people make business connections, share their experiences and resumes, and find jobs (LinkedIn, 2019). With over 650 million users spread across the world, LinkedIn is the most important channel to distribute business-related information and the preferred tool for marketing and management executives to find relevant quality content. At the time of writing, over 30 million companies are listed on LinkedIn and over 20 million jobs are offered (LinkedIn, 2019). Due to such peculiar characteristics, LinkedIn fits perfectly in the sport management course dynamic as it fosters the connections between the university and the professional industry, being a first step for the development of students' professional careers.

Despite the huge industry interest, there is a clear need for academic literature with a specific focus on LinkedIn. Within the sport management education literature, with the exception of the work of Brown and Pederson (2019), Twitter is the social media that has generated the most interest (e.g., Brown & Pederson, 2019; Feito & Brown, 2018; Manning et al., 2017; Marr & Dewaele, 2015; O'Boyle, 2014; Sanderson & Browning, 2015). While these studies have focused mainly on providing conceptual frameworks as well as rules and benefits on how and why to use social media in sport management courses, researchers have been asking for additional social media research to establish methodological standards and best practices, as well as with regard to pedagogical experiences (Lebel, Danylchuk, & Millar, 2015; Mayr & Weller, 2017).

Therefore, the objective of the current paper is twofold:

a) To provide sport management lecturers with guidelines and working methodologies to successfully introduce LinkedIn in sport management courses, while inspiring them to develop new pedagogical innovations in the field.
b) To strengthen the connection between the academic environment and the professional industry using LinkedIn as a first step towards the development of student's professional careers.

2. Guidelines for effective application of LinkedIn in sport management courses

2.1. Introducing basic features of LinkedIn

A pedagogical innovation through LinkedIn should ideally start with an introduction to the history and evolution of LinkedIn, providing current statistics of users, describing the main functions that the platform offers, emphasizing similarities and differences with other social media and selectively showing real examples of usage by various stakeholders of the sport industry (clubs, federations, sport brands, athletes, etc.).

2.2. Creating a LinkedIn profile

The next step for students would then be to create a LinkedIn account and learn how to complete the basic functionalities that configure their LinkedIn's user profile:

1. Profile basic aspects
   1.1. Profile picture
   1.2. Background photo
   1.3. Headline
   1.4. Current position
   1.5. Contact info
2. LinkedIn summary or "about" section
3. Experience
4. Education
5. Licenses and certifications
6. Skills and endorsements
7. Recommendations
8. Accomplishments
9. Interest

The profile is probably the most important section for any LinkedIn user, as it is the image that they project towards the wider

LinkedIn community. A LinkedIn profile should be updated regularly and in line with the advances in the student's professional career.

However, in order to develop a harmonious and coherent profile that will help the students achieve their professional objective and before starting to complete their profile, students should reflect on the following points:

1. Academic and professional achievements
2. Hard and soft skills
3. Field/s of interest within the sport industry (such as sports marketing, coaching, sports psychology, sports facilities management, etc.)
4. Job aspirations
5. What they can already offer the LinkedIn community

Answering the above points will also allow students to design a content strategy that develops a strong personal brand that draws the attention of other LinkedIn users and related stakeholders.

2.3. Participating in LinkedIn's public community

Once the profile is developed, students will be ready to start interacting with the LinkedIn community. However, given the characteristics of the tool, students should first ask themselves the following question, prior to making a public action in LinkedIn: Do my actions provide value to the community? If the answer is "no", it is advisable not to publish anything to avoid doing any harm to the individual's personal brand. A positive response to this question leads to the considerations of content and network creation, which are described next.

2.3.1. Content creation

Students have to know that they should be active in LinkedIn if they want to become known and gain higher status in their field of interest. There are different types of content a student can publish. In the sport management context and for the purpose of this article, we focus on those that are most relevant and most easily realizable by students (Table 1).

2.3.2. Creating a strong network of contacts

Creating a strong network of contacts is one of the main objectives of LinkedIn as this is the core of the professional relationships with different stakeholders. Sport management faculty should help students identify their target users according to their professional goals. Students should also be aware that, according to LinkedIn's contact system, their professional contact network will be composed of:

- First-level contacts: the core of the LinkedIn network. These are the contacts that accepted the student's invitations to connect or those who sent them invitations that the students have accepted.
- Second-level contacts: the first-level contacts of the students' first-level contacts automatically the students' second-level contacts.

Table 1
Content themes that sport management students could develop for their profile content strategy.

Content that could be developed by students	Explanation and guidelines
Ideas, advice, or guidelines	LinkedIn is a suitable platform to share ideas, advice, or guidelines related to with a field of interest. Thus, one of the basic types of content can be related to topics directly linked to the sport industry, shared in an easy and understandable way (quotes, a brief overview of a topic, etc.).
Content curing	In an increasingly over-informed society, it is valuable to be able to filter the highest quality content and share it with our network of contacts, adding a personal view about the selected topic. It is this personal view that will add extra value to the post.
News and trends	People like to know the latest trends in the sport industry. Being on top of such content is well appreciated by the LinkedIn's community, proving that the student is proactive and up-to-date with advances in the industry.
Creating "How to…" Video tutorials	Students can make "how to" videos related to the sports industry. These should be clear and short in order to engage quickly with the audience.
Debates	Students could demonstrate their knowledge and ability to communicate their views about a specific topic (even controversial ones), leading to a debate in the online community
Event conclusions or outcomes	This include sharing personal conclusions after attending diverse kind of events (conferences, course lessons, workshops, sport matches, etc.) related to sport. This will demonstrate their learning skills as well as their capacity for synthesis.
Sharing experiences of internship or work	This type of content consists of posting information regarding a business relationship that students experience with a sport entity or with a LinkedIn individual contact. This enables them to demonstrate their professional experience with success, validating it in public.
Job/internship open call position	Students can share information regarding a job opening or internship position related to their field of interest and thereby gain value by benefiting others in their online community.
Statistics	A very popular content type in LinkedIn as it captures the interest of professionals and scholars in their respective field of interest while their shareability positively impacts the visibility of the students' profile.
Launch of products or services	LinkedIn is a perfect window to showcase professional skills looking for potential clients. Students should be aware of this and exploit it during the student stage by disseminating news on product or service launches.

- Third-level contacts: first-level contacts of the students' second-level contacts automatically the students' third-level contacts

Students should strategically send invitations to users that add value to their network, considering LinkedIn's contacts structure. Thus, both quantity and quality are important. Quantity is an important factor because the larger the network of first contacts, the larger the network of second- and third-level contacts. Quality is also important because having influential people or field experts at the first level of contacts will add to the network of second- and third-level contacts people who are equally interesting to their professional field. In this sense, students should focus on adding contacts specialized in their professional fields as they will generate content that will probably be of more interest to them compared with the content that will probably generate a person that works in a completely different sector. At this point, it is essential to advise students not to send a blank connection request to LinkedIn users they want to connect with, as there will be more chances of being ignored. The advisable idea is to teach them how to create attractive and personalised introductory messages that will be appealing to the potential new contact, providing some justification/context regarding why they are asking to connect to that particular sport industry professional. By proceeding in this way, students will have more options to connect with industry professionals who may be unfamiliar at first.

In addition to three levels of contacts, there are also group contacts. A LinkedIn private group is a group of LinkedIn users who gather to discuss, share, debate, inform, etc., about a specific topic. The topic could be broad, but the aim is specified in the description of the group as well a set of rules that all the group users must follow. It is important that students identify and aim to belong to groups of a thematic interest to them, as they will then find users who probably belong to a specific professional niche; that is, people worth networking with. For example, for a student interested in fitness centers, it is advisable to identify a group of fitness center owners or fitness trainers, as both will add value to the student's education and networking.

Apart from sending and receiving contact requests, LinkedIn offers the option to follow profiles. By following another user, the content produced by that user can be accessed, but not vice-versa. To follow another user, the "follow" option must be clicked in the user's respective profile. This option is very interesting for students because it allows them to access content of even high-profile people who might not otherwise accept a student's contact request.

The final step should then be to focus on the creation of a strategy for short, medium, and long-term growth in LinkedIn. Faculty should drive this conversation by giving advice in person, thorough private messages in LinkedIn, or by making video tutorials explaining more features and possibilities not detailed in this article.

2.4. Creating private groups

As stated before, LinkedIn allows users to create private groups. A classroom-specific LinkedIn group can be created that will be a meeting point for developing a pedagogical innovation. Students should join the group while the group rules can be set by the sport management faculty or commonly agreed with the class. The following usage possibilities exist:

1. Become a more informal medium (compared to email or Moodle) to reach and interact with students and make class announcements.
2. Publish different type of content by faculty members (see Table 1) deciding on the timing of publications and adapting it to the course objectives (for example, sharing class material, facilitating resources to expand what is taught in class, create debates, etc.).
3. Publish different type of content by students. This allows students to show creativity and take ownership and responsibility. However, especially in larger groups, it is important to clarify a set of rules in order to avoid creating too many posts, which prevents content tracking.

In short, the LinkedIn class group can play a central role of a LinkedIn pedagogical innovation and the corresponding assignment, as faculty could launch activities that will be assessed, as described next.

2.5. Example of LinkedIn assignment proposal

Faculty members should think about the working objectives they want to develop with an educational innovation that uses LinkedIn as a pedagogical resource rather than introducing LinkedIn just because it is fun or topical.

For the practical proposal described below, the two main objectives are to assist students in:

a) developing their personal brand and identifying people and stakeholders related with their desired professional career; and
b) creating valuable content that is in line with the course syllabus.

The assignment, written specifically in this article addressed to students, is designed to be carried out over a period of roughly three months. In terms of grading, the proposal is divided into two blocks:

A. Compulsory work, graded with seven out of 10 possible points, consisting of:
  1. Development of basic aspects of your LinkedIn profile. Note that your entire profile must be in harmony with your professional interest.
    1.1. Upload a profile and cover photo.
    1.2. Develop the headline and the "about" (summary).

     1.3. Complete the Experience, Education and Licenses & Certifications.

     1.4. Add at least five personal or professional Skills & Endorsements that you consider you have.

2. Aspects related to the development of your professional network.

     2.1. Add 20 classmates and five lecturers to your network.

     2.2. Endorse the skills to at least five classmates or lecturers (students must only endorse for skills they are absolutely sure the other person possesses).

     2.3. Join the LinkedIn class private group.

     2.4. Find and join three LinkedIn groups related to your professional interest.

     2.5. Connect/follow at least five experts related to your professional interest.

     2.6. Follow at least five LinkedIn business profiles of stakeholders of your desired professional field (companies, clubs, federations, etc.).

3. Activity in the LinkedIn classroom group.

     3.1. Participate in at least seven activities created by the faculty.

B. Non-compulsory work, consisting of six tasks and graded with three out of 10 possible points, if completed (0.5 points per task).

1. Participate in at least 12 activities in the LinkedIn classroom group.

2. Create and publish in public (not in the class group) at least three posts made by you. It is not enough to copy and paste a link to some material (video, news, etc.) or share a publication already created by others. It is mandatory to elaborate your own content.

3. Comment on at least five posts created by classmates.

4. Comment on three posts created by people of the corresponding contact list or list of followers (not classmates).

5. Write recommendations to three of your contacts accepted by the receiver.

6. Subjective evaluation of all the work done by the student assessed by the lecturer.

All tasks should be easily verifiable and clearly assessed by the faculty. The only qualitative aspect is Point 6 of voluntary block, where teachers make a global qualitative evaluation of the work done by the students, rewarding factors such as having achieved true harmony between the corresponding field of interest and their developed profile and content aspects. In addition, aspects such as participation and interaction with other students/teachers, the quality of contributions (post or comments), or providing additional input than required by the proposal (such as attaching a CV to the LinkedIn summary, having a multilingual profile, etc.) can also be assessed.

The above proposal is only one example of a possible assignment. Faculty members should adapt their proposal to the specific context of their course, adjusting it to the main theme of the course (sport marketing, sport business, management of sport facilities, etc.) as well as to the characteristics of the students (age, number, level of knowledge, etc.).

3. Final reflections

The higher education sector should be aware of the industry shifts and popular culture trends, and sport management faculty should train students in media literacy to enable them to be better qualified to pursue their professional aspirations. Social media has a relevant role in the current sports industry and are increasingly popular among students. LinkedIn has a lot of potential and educational value due its own special characteristics, which enhance the development of students' professional academic career, entrepreneurship, and innovation. In addition, LinkedIn facilitates the development of the sport management curriculum from an engaging and innovative approach. Although concerns about the social media introduction in sport management pedagogies could discourage faculty from conducting new pedagogical experiences based on social media (Marr & Dewaele, 2015), the benefits and learning opportunities discussed herein outweigh any possible limitations.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Samuel López-Carril: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft. **Christos Anagnostopoulos:** Supervision. **Petros Parganas:** Writing - review & editing.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2020.100262.

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