

A Review of Social Media in Higher Education: A Case of Australian Higher Education

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Abstract: Despite the widespread adoption of social media across diverse sectors, its role in Australian higher education teaching and learning remains insufficiently explored. This systematic literature review examines the use of social media within Australian universities. Guided by the methodological framework of Kitchenham and Charters (2007) and reported in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), the review synthesises ten years of published research (2014–2024). Twenty-five articles met the inclusion criteria. The findings show that social media plays an increasingly significant role in fostering communication, collaboration and engagement between students and educators. Students use these tools to manage group work, access resources, and maintain peer connections, particularly benefiting online and international learners. For educators, social media extends classroom boundaries, promotes digital literacy and enables authentic, interactive learning experiences. However, challenges persist, including privacy and ethical concerns, limited institutional guidelines, tensions between personal and professional identities, and uneven levels of digital competence. To harness the educational potential of social media, universities should develop clear policies, provide professional development, embed social media meaningfully into curricula and promote inclusive, professional digital engagement. By synthesising a decade of evidence, this review offers a timely contribution to current thinking about social media's use in Australian higher education. It highlights both its transformative potential and the need for more strategic institutional support to ensure its effective and ethical integration into teaching and learning practices.

Keywords: Higher Education, Social Media, Social Networking Sites, Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Despite the widespread use of social media among students, educators have been hesitant to adopt these platforms for teaching purposes (Chugh et al., 2021). Surveys from various countries indicate this reluctance is due to factors such as cultural attitudes, pedagogical concerns, and institutional barriers (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Willems et al., 2018), as well as a lack of awareness, skills, and confidence in using emerging technologies (Chugh et al., 2021). While academics who engage with social media primarily use it for research dissemination, personal reasons, and career and network development (Chugh et al., 2021), integrating these platforms into instructional practices remains a challenge. Nevertheless, platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now known as X) continue to attract scholarly attention for their potential in both formal and informal learning contexts (Bodily et al., 2019).

Although social media's global relevance is undeniable (Greenhow et al., 2019; Perez et al., 2023), research focusing on its use in Australian higher education remains limited. Articles by Perez et al. (2023) and Van Den Beemt et al. (2020) suggest a growing interest in understanding how social media can enhance teaching and learning. However, there is a lack of comprehensive reviews examining both educators' and students' experiences with social media, the most effective platforms for learning, and the challenges academic staff face.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a systematic review of the literature on social media use in Australian higher education. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are social media used to facilitate teaching and learning in higher education?

RQ2: How do higher education students use social media in their studies?

RQ3: What challenges do higher education staff face in using social media for teaching and learning?

2. Methodology/Method

The approach utilised in this study was guided by the systematic literature review principles outlined by Kitchenham and Charters (2007) and reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2021 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed literature was completed in 2024, covering articles published between 2014 and 2024, inclusive. The search strategy employed keywords related to social media, higher

education, and Australia, using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) and wildcards, with active filters applied to refine results.

The literature search was conducted across four major databases: Emerald Insight, ProQuest, Scopus, and Web of Science (WoS). In Emerald Insight, the search string “Social Media Higher Education Australia” was applied across all fields and limited to research articles published between 1 January 2014 and 30 September 2024. In ProQuest, the search string “Social Media AND Use AND in AND Australian Higher Education” was applied to the abstract field, with filters for full-text, peer-reviewed sources and within the same date range; source types included scholarly journals and conference papers/proceedings. In Scopus, the string “social media use for teaching in Australian higher education” was applied to the Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields, with the search limited to journal articles and conference proceedings (2014–2024). Similarly, in WoS, the search “Social Media AND Higher Education AND Australia” was applied to the abstract field and refined by document type and publication years from 1 January 2014 to 30 September 2024.

The systematic search and retrieval were conducted independently by two reviewers using the predefined search strategy and eligibility criteria to minimise selection bias and enhance reliability. Following initial screening, the reviewers met to compare and reconcile results. Discrepancies in study inclusion were resolved through discussion and consensus, resulting in a harmonised list of eligible studies.

To enhance coverage, Elicit, an AI-assisted research tool, was used toward the end of the search process to identify additional studies, which were retrieved via Google Scholar. All articles were screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1). Only English-language studies situated within the Australian higher education context and focused on social media use for teaching and learning were included. A third reviewer contributed primarily to the analysis and synthesis stages, and all three reviewers collaboratively refined interpretations and manuscript development to ensure methodological rigour and analytical robustness. The study selection process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Paper Selection.

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Article attribute	Peer-reviewed journal papers, conference papers/proceedings,	Non-peer-reviewed papers, unpublished works
Language	English	Papers written in other languages
Education setting	Higher education	Any non-higher education institution
Country of study	Australia (including studies conducted jointly in Australia and other countries)	Studies conducted only in countries other than Australia
Research context	Social media in higher education	No social media

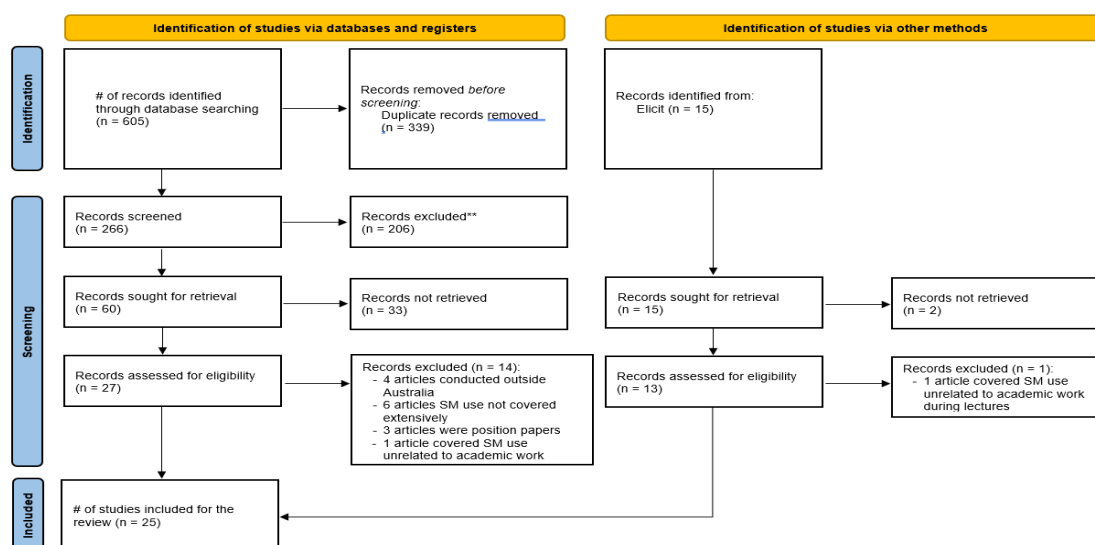


Figure 1: Selection procedure flow chart.

3. Findings

The review identified 25 articles examining social media use in Australian higher education. These were published across 20 peer-reviewed journals, four conference proceedings, and one book chapter. According to SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) classifications, nine articles appeared in Q1 journals and six in Q2 journals, while one was published in a Q3 journal and one in a Q4 journal; three were published in unranked journals. The concentration of articles in Q1 and Q2 outlets indicates strong scholarly engagement and credibility in the field, although the presence of lower-ranked and unranked publications reflects variation in research visibility and impact.

Most studies collected primary data from students, with fewer examining staff or institutional perspectives. Three articles included cross-national comparisons. Survey research dominated the reviewed articles, used exclusively in six studies and in combination with other methods in a further six. These surveys provided insights into adoption, preferences, and perceived benefits of social media in higher education. Qualitative approaches, including interviews and focus groups, were also common (six articles), providing deeper insights into learning transitions, collaboration, and identity construction. Eight studies employed mixed methods, while others adopted design-based approaches or innovative techniques such as online post analysis, social network visualisation, and institutional policy analysis. This methodological diversity reflects the complex role of social media in higher education.

Students were the main focus in most studies (19 articles), particularly regarding how social media supports learning, communication, and belonging. Research involving staff was limited (seven articles) but concentrated on teaching practice, curriculum design, and digital professionalism.

Disciplinary representation varied considerably. Health and Medical Sciences accounted for five articles, suggesting a strong interest in social media as both a pedagogical and professional tool within clinical and allied health programmes. Education and Teaching, Information Technology and Information Systems (IT&IS), and Business, Commerce and Economics each contributed three articles. Arts, Humanities and Design accounted for two articles, and two studies spanned multiple disciplines. Notably, seven articles did not specify a disciplinary context, limiting cross-disciplinary comparison and trend analysis. Interestingly, more studies originated from Health and Medical Sciences than from Computing (IT and IS), challenging assumptions that technology-focused disciplines would dominate this research area.

The reviewed articles indicate sustained scholarly engagement over time (Table 2). Early contributions (2014–2016) framed social media as an innovative but experimental pedagogical tool. Between 2017 and 2019, research shifted towards consolidation and critical reflection, recognising benefits while addressing institutional and cultural constraints. By 2020–2022, the literature reflected a more mature phase of integration, positioning social media within a broader educational ecosystem and emphasising governance, digital professionalism, and strategic alignment, signalling its transition from novelty to necessity.

Although the search period covered 2014–2024, no eligible empirical studies were identified for 2024. In 2023, only one study met the inclusion criteria; it was a systematic literature review rather than an empirical investigation. It should be noted that the search for 2024 publications was conducted up to September 2024; therefore, studies indexed after this date may not have been captured.

Table 2: Categorisation of Themes of Social Media in Higher Education.

Period	Main Theme	Underlying Narrative
2014 – 2016	Exploration and experimentation (Early Adoption)	Social media as an innovative but experimental pedagogical tool
2017 – 2019	Consolidation and Critical Reflection	Recognition of benefits tempered by institutional and cultural concerns
2020 – 2022	Integration and Ecosystem Thinking	Social media moves from novelty to necessity, requiring governance and thoughtful integration.

Many of the reviewed articles did not explicitly identify the theoretical frameworks underpinning their studies. However, several frameworks appeared in more than one article, either explicitly stated or implied by the authors' analysis. These included Personal Learning Environments (PLE), Affordance Theory, Social Capital Theory, Constructivism, Cooperative Learning, and Connectivism. Their presence suggests these frameworks and theories play a significant role in shaping research on learning, collaboration, and technology integration.

4. Discussion/Research Questions

4.1 How are Social Media Used to Facilitate Teaching and Learning in Higher Education?

In Australian higher education, social media serves four key roles: *formal curriculum integration*, *student-led community building*, *professional networking*, and *supplementing learning management systems*. Social media platforms are increasingly recognised as flexible, participatory tools that enhance interaction, support collaborative learning, and cultivate digital capabilities. Educators use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn to extend learning beyond classroom boundaries, often aligning their use with constructivist and experiential pedagogies (Liu, 2018; Kent, 2016; Ostashewski et al.; McCarthy, 2014).

Curriculum-integrated use of social media fosters active participation, peer interaction, and industry engagement. Twitter is used during live lectures for backchannel discussions and real-time polling, encouraging immediate feedback and inclusive discourse (Scott & Stanway, 2015; Liu, 2018). Facebook supports project-based and dispersed cohort learning by providing a familiar space for resource sharing, coordination, and reflective practice (Kent, 2016). YouTube and other media-sharing sites extend asynchronous learning by making complex content accessible on demand (Hay et al., 2017). LinkedIn and blogs enable simulation of professional practice, encouraging portfolio development, reflective writing, and disciplinary communication (Hamadi et al., 2021; Mather et al., 2017; McCarthy, 2014). At a broader level, Willems, Adachi et al. (2016) highlight ongoing debates around the degree of curriculum adoption and institutional hesitancy in Australasia.

Student-led communities on platforms such as Facebook and WeChat play a crucial role in peer support, especially for international students navigating cultural and academic transitions. These informal networks emerge organically as hubs for sharing notes, clarifying expectations, and reducing social isolation (Charteris et al., 2018; Kim & Chang, 2021). However, they can diverge from institutional expectations and raise concerns around misinformation, exclusion, and academic integrity (Sleeman et al., 2019; Charteris et al., 2018; Willems, Adachi et al., 2018, 2016).

Professional networking and digital identity development are increasingly acknowledged as essential learning outcomes. Twitter fosters scholarly engagement and disciplinary visibility, while LinkedIn enables students to craft professional identities and connect with industry partners (Hamadi et al., 2021; Mather et al., 2017; Ferguson et al., 2016). In specialised fields, social media facilitates the integration of professional practice, such as in surgical training communities (Larkins et al., 2020). Despite this potential, such practices remain underutilised due to limited curriculum alignment and academic hesitancy around professional boundaries and ad hoc adoption (Mather et al., 2017; Ferguson et al., 2016).

As a *supplement to institutional learning management systems (LMS)*, social media offers immediacy and flexibility. Articles show that students are more responsive to Facebook groups, Messenger, or WeChat than to LMS announcements or forums, using them for rapid coordination and deadline management (Kent, 2016). During disruptions such as remote or hybrid learning, these tools have provided continuity by sustaining collaboration among international and distributed cohorts (Hamadi et al., 2021). Both Willems et al. (2016) and Willems et al. (2018) describe how social media often functions as a “shadow system” that supplements or replaces the LMS, reflecting ongoing institutional tensions.

4.2 How do Higher Education Students use Social Media in Their Studies?

In Australian higher education, students describe social media as a versatile tool that facilitates both academic and informal engagement (Sleeman et al., 2020). They commonly use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WeChat to communicate with peers, share course-related resources, organise group assignments, and participate in academic discussions. Facebook is the most frequently used platform, valued for its role in coordinating collaborative work, sharing study materials, and supporting peer interaction, especially among online and international students, who benefit from reduced feelings of disconnection (Charteris et al., 2018; Kim & Chang, 2021; Kent, 2016; Tower et al., 2014). It is also worth noting that in Australia, WeChat is predominantly used by Chinese international students extensively for academic activities, group discussions, and resource sharing. However, overuse can negatively impact academic performance, and continued use of Chinese-language SNSs can hinder English development (Kim & Chang, 2021). While LinkedIn is mentioned, its use is less prominent in the studies than Facebook and WeChat, and it is more relevant for professional networking than for day-to-day academic collaboration.

Students often prefer social media over traditional university communication tools due to its ease of use, immediacy, and capacity to centralise conversations in a single platform (Currie et al., 2014; Liu, 2018; Sleeman et al., 2020). Many perceive it as more responsive and accessible than learning management systems (LMS), using it to seek clarification, distribute tasks, and maintain momentum in group projects. While social media is sometimes accessed for non-academic purposes during lectures, students demonstrate awareness of its limitations, drawing boundaries between personal and educational use (Ferguson et al., 2016; Hay et al., 2012; Tower et al., 2014). Students prefer to use social media platforms, which they perceive as offering valuable opportunities to collaborate, communicate, share content, and present themselves (Jayarathna, 2020).

Despite these benefits, some students have reservations about using social media for formal learning. Concerns include privacy (Sadowski et al., 2017; Currie et al., 2014), mixing personal and academic identities (Sleeman et al., 2020), and the reliability of peer-generated information (Kim & Chang, 2021). However, when used voluntarily and informally, social media platforms can meaningfully enhance student agency, collaboration, and connectedness, enriching the broader learning experience. For many students, these tools act as essential supplements to institutional systems, helping them bridge communication gaps, maintain motivation, and foster a sense of academic belonging (Sleeman et al., 2020; Hamadi et al., 2021).

4.3 What Challenges do Higher Education Staff Face in Using Social Media for Teaching and Learning?

Integrating social media into higher education teaching presents numerous interrelated challenges, with pedagogical (Charteris et al., 2018), institutional (Willems et al., 2018), technological (O'Brien & Freund, 2018), privacy, and ethical concerns (Sadowski et al., 2017) consistently highlighted in the literature, as summarised in Table 3. These issues not only complicate the effective use of social media as an educational tool but also create significant stress and workload for academic staff.

Educators face *pedagogical constraints* and rising expectations when incorporating social media activities with formal learning outcomes and assessment structures. The informal, conversational character of platforms often conflicts with structured curricular design, creating uncertainty about academic value (Charteris et al., 2018; Hamadi et al., 2021). Staff also report difficulties sustaining student engagement in such activities, particularly when they are perceived as peripheral rather than integral to coursework (Kent, 2016; O'Brien & Freund, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2020). Moreover, students' expectations for rapid responses and staff availability outside traditional working hours exacerbate workload stress and diminish work-life balance (Kivunja, 2015; Sleeman et al., 2019). The planning, implementation, and ongoing moderation of social media initiatives require significant time investment and clarity of purpose, which are not always part of the workload (Sutherland et al., 2020; Velliari et al., 2015; O'Brien & Freund, 2018).

A lack of *institutional clarity* and consistent policy frameworks intensifies staff's hesitation. Without clear guidelines on acceptable practices, privacy management, and risk mitigation, educators are left to navigate professional and ethical dilemmas independently (Willems et al., 2016; Willems et al., 2018). Limited professional development opportunities further restrict capacity for effective adoption (Hammadi et al., 2020; McCarthy, 2014; Sutherland et al., 2020). In addition, cultural and disciplinary contexts create uneven patterns of use: international students may prefer platforms unfamiliar to staff (Kim & Chang, 2021), while professional disciplines such as nursing or medicine may express concern about the appropriateness and professionalism of using social tools for learning (Hay et al., 2017). These mismatches raise further questions of equity and inclusivity in technology-enhanced teaching (Balakrishnan et al., 2017; Sadowski et al., 2017).

Technological challenges further complicate adoption. Many staff experience uneven levels of digital literacy, low confidence, or even technophobia when engaging with new platforms (Hamadi et al., 2021; O'Brien & Freund, 2018). In fast-changing environments such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), scalability issues make it challenging to provide meaningful, personalised interactions through social media (Ostashewski et al., 2016). Time constraints, coupled with the heavy burden of monitoring and moderating online interactions, contribute to staff reluctance (Sutherland et al., 2020). These pressures can lead to fragmented or inconsistent adoption across faculties and disciplines.

Maintaining clear boundaries between personal and professional identities is a major concern for educators, underscoring the importance of *privacy, ethics, and boundary management* in digital interactions. Both staff and students express unease about the exposure of personal information, potential breaches of confidentiality, and the *ethical dilemmas* that arise from blurred social professional lines (Balakrishnan et al., 2017; Hammadi et al., 2020; Sadowski et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2020; Velliari et al., 2015). Educators also contend with the risk of

cyberbullying, harassment, and inappropriate online behaviour, particularly on open, public-facing platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Sutherland et al., 2020; Willems et al., 2018). These risks heighten anxieties about reputational damage and discourage staff from engaging in digital spaces, even when student demand is high.

Together, these challenges suggest that while social media offers promising opportunities for enhancing teaching and learning, its effective integration into higher education requires sustained institutional support, comprehensive training, clear and enforceable policies, and sensitivity to the diverse needs of both staff and students. Without such systemic support, adoption is likely to remain fragmented, contingent, and risky (Willems et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2020; Hamadi et al., 2021; Kivunja, 2015).

Table 3: Summary of Challenges Faced by Staff in Using Social Media

Theme	Description of Challenge
Privacy, Ethics, and Boundary Management	Blurred personal–professional boundaries; exposure of private information; risk of harassment or reputational damage.
Pedagogical Constraints and Expectations	Difficulty aligning activities with learning outcomes; sustaining student engagement; increased workload and 24/7 availability pressures.
Technological and Competency Barriers	Uneven digital literacy, lack of training, scalability and moderation difficulties, and heavy time burden.
Institutional and Cultural Constraints	Lack of clear policies and institutional support; limited professional development; cultural mismatches (international students, disciplinary contexts); equity concerns.

5. Conclusion/Implications and Recommendations

The findings highlight the increasingly significant role of social media in Australian higher education, where it supports formal teaching, informal learning, professional networking, and student wellbeing. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WeChat offer dynamic and versatile environments that enhance communication, engagement, and collaboration. Students appreciate the immediacy and accessibility of these tools, often preferring them over traditional methods. They use social media to manage group work, access resources, connect with peers, and reduce feelings of isolation, especially among online and international students. For educators, social media platforms provide opportunities to extend classroom boundaries, promote digital literacy, and foster authentic learning experiences through real-time and multimedia interaction.

However, the integration of social media is not without its limitations. Students and staff face ongoing challenges, including navigating privacy and ethical concerns, unclear institutional guidelines, and the need to separate professional and personal identities. Technological barriers, inconsistent digital competencies, and time constraints further limit its effective use. Additionally, while platforms like LinkedIn and WordPress hold promise for professional identity formation and reflective learning, they remain underutilised.

Addressing the challenges and unlocking the full educational potential of social media requires a deliberate and structured approach. Table 4 presents key strategies that institutions can adopt to integrate social media ethically, inclusively, and effectively within academic contexts. These actions aim to strengthen digital literacy, foster meaningful engagement, and support students in developing professional identities aligned with their future careers.

Table 4: Guidelines for Strategic and Inclusive Social Media Practices in Higher Education

Strategy	Description
Develop clear policies and guidelines	Define ethical, pedagogical, and professional boundaries for social media use in academic contexts.
Provide ongoing professional development	Enhance digital literacy among staff and students, including training in reflective and collaborative digital practices.
Embed social media meaningfully into curricula	Align its use with intended learning outcomes and foster deeper student engagement.
Promote inclusive practices	Recognise cultural and socioeconomic differences in digital access and comfort.
Encourage the use of professional platforms	Support students in building digital identities and networks aligned with career development through platforms like LinkedIn and WordPress.

In conclusion, when thoughtfully integrated, social media can enrich teaching and learning, bridge gaps in access and engagement, and equip students with the digital competencies required for contemporary academic and professional environments. Future efforts should focus on purposeful design, institutional alignment, and support mechanisms that enhance its educational value while mitigating associated risks.

Ethical Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for this research.

AI Declaration

Several potentially relevant articles were identified using Elicit, an AI-assisted research tool, toward the end of the article searching and retrieval phase to supplement previously identified studies. These articles were subsequently retrieved from Google Scholar for full-text screening and analysis. During the initial review stage, AI was used to support the summarisation of articles prior to in-depth reading, including identifying each study's focus, data collection methods, and the types of social media platforms examined.

During manuscript preparation, ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) and Grammarly were used to assist with language editing and manuscript refinement. In the final stages of writing and formatting, Copilot was used to support the checking and formatting of in-text citations.

All outputs generated by these AI tools were carefully reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy, validity, and scholarly integrity. The authors take full responsibility for the content, originality, and quality of the final manuscript.

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