Buffering against academic loneliness: The benefits of social media-based peer support during postgraduate study

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**Abstract**

Although the support provided by social relationships may be essential to a successful student transition, the transition to postgraduate study has had little consideration from a social support perspective. The study described in this article investigated the role played by social support in postgraduate taught students’ adjustment to university, and how social media contributes to this support. Thematic analysis indicated that participants benefitted most from specialised support from peers dealing with similar academic challenges. Facebook Groups showed potential as a platform for building supportive peer networks. However, the heightened visibility of communications on this platform led some participants towards Facebook Messenger as a medium for peer contact. The study suggested that, in order to meet postgraduates’ needs, institutions could ensure postgraduate students have sufficient opportunity for collaboration within their cohorts. Additionally, while social media may aid this process, students’ individual communication preferences may inevitably influence their engagement with particular platforms.

Keywords

social networks; well-being; postgraduate students; student transitions; qualitative research; social media.

**Loneliness and the role of social support**

Postgraduate study can be a rewarding but highly demanding personal experience, with high levels of stress, poor mental health, and fatigue reported within postgraduate student populations (Matheson et al., 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2018). This is not only limited to research students: postgraduate taught students are also susceptible to such effects (McPherson et al., 2017). Such issues may be linked to the multitude of personal and academic challenges involved in transitioning to postgraduate-level study (Tobbell and O’Donnell, 2013; McPherson et al., 2017). To help with the well-being of postgraduate students, it is important to ensure that they have access to the resources needed to deal with these challenges (Briggs et al., 2012). Research suggests that a person’s network of social relationships provides the resources to deal with many major challenges in life (Ernst and Cacioppo, 1999; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Social support is therefore a valuable factor to consider when examining how students cope with the demands of a university course (Matheson et al., 2016).

The importance of feeling socially supported becomes acutely apparent when such connections are absent, that is, in the experience of loneliness. Loneliness is a negative affective experience arising from an unmet need for particular types of social contact (Ernst and Cacioppo, 1999). Weiss (1982) has described two primary forms of loneliness, which are linked to deficits in specific sources of social support. *Social loneliness* relates to a need for a social identity and a desire to belong (Weiss, 1982). It typically results from a missing sense of social integration, such as a lack of connection with a friendship group or a community. *Emotional loneliness*, in contrast, stems from a need for close, one-to-one relationships in which individuals understand each other at an intimate level and can assist each other in dealing with personal issues (Weiss, 1982). If an individual’s social network contains these types of connections, the individual is more likely to have important supportive resources and is thus effectively ‘buffered’ against loneliness (Ernst and Cacioppo, 1999: 12). In this way, social support has a protective influence on well-being (Ernst and Cacioppo, 1999), and can guard against the detrimental effects on physical and mental health associated with loneliness (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006).

Weiss’ framework (1982) is valuable because it emphasises that there are multiple ways in which an individual may feel alone, and that only certain forms of support may resolve these feelings. It also highlights that relationships are not interchangeable in meeting social support needs (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006; Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). However, an individual’s susceptibility to loneliness also does not remain static throughout life (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006), as certain life events and environments produce new social support needs (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). This is particularly relevant to the experiences of new students, who are presented with a range of new personal challenges on entering university. In an early study on student well-being, Shaver et al. (1985) suggested that such situational changes put students at heightened risk of loneliness, and overcoming such difficulties may depend on how well people develop and maintain new friendship networks at university. Adolescent undergraduates, for example, particularly benefit from networks that extend throughout the wider university community, which provide a broad sense of belonging and assist with the major life transition into adulthood (Briggs et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005). Students who fail to develop the connections they need are more likely to suffer stress and burnout as they progress with their courses (Bewick, 2010; Laidlaw, 2016). They are also more likely to terminate their studies altogether (Xuereb, 2014). Students’ sense of belonging and social integration therefore has an important influence on their long-term satisfaction and ability to cope during their courses (Allen, 2008). As a result, students who are lonely are at increased risk of a range of debilitating effects on their psychological well-being while at university (Lin and Huang, 2012; Nielsen et al., 2017).

The importance of university-based social networks has been well-documented in undergraduate contexts (Wilcox et al., 2005; Briggs et al., 2012; Xuereb, 2014; Christie et al., 2016).However, the role of such networks, and the support they can provide, is less well understood in postgraduate settings. There has been a noted tendency in research to overlook postgraduate adjustment issues in general (Tobbell et al., 2010). Tobbell et al. suggest that this is due to an assumption that postgraduate students have a higher level of academic expertise and prior experience of university and that this will make adjustment unproblematic. The limited research on this topic suggests that there are notable transition issues associated with postgraduate study, along with characteristic forms of loneliness. These are primarily related to the increase in academic workload and level of independent study compared to undergraduate courses (Sawir et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2017). For example, Sawir et al. identify the concept of ‘topic-related loneliness’ (Sawir et al., 2008: 163) experienced by doctoral students who, due to working in highly specialised fields, may lack peers with whom to share their academic anxieties and concerns. While doctoral students have received at least some attention, McPherson et al. (2017) suggest that understanding of taught postgraduate student experiences remains particularly low; a group described by Millward (2015) as the ‘forgotten sector’. There are also various modes of study available to taught postgraduate students, with many students opting to study part-time due to family and work commitments (Jamieson et al., 2009); an important factor to account for when studying this group.

**Uses of social media**

Masterman and Shuyska (2012) and Henderson et al. (2016) suggest that digital technologies can facilitate postgraduate students’ sense of integration into their academic environments. It is apparent that one of the key ways that many students connect with others digitally while at university is through Facebook and other forms of social media (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2015). Facebook is a social networking site that allows individuals to interact with contacts through updates shared on individuals’ profiles and through private messages (Ahern et al., 2016). A key feature of Facebook is that it allows users to create spontaneous forum-like spaces (‘groups’) to serve particular communication purposes, such as discussion of a particular topic or event (Ahern et al., 2016). Research on study skills and associated learning processes has suggested that social media may benefit students in a pedagogical sense (Veletsianos and Navarette, 2012; Thompson, 2017). For example, Facebook groups may be effective for supporting student engagement with mass lectures by facilitating discussion of course material (Bowman and Akcaoglu, 2014). However, because Facebook is closely tied to an individual’s social and personal identity (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Zhao et al., 2008), it can also strongly influence the development of relationships between individuals (Burke and Kraut, 2014).

This socially-driven interaction may carry both risks and benefits for well-being (Wang et al., 2011; de Vries and Kühne, 2015; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2015). A common concern about the use of Facebook and similar platforms is its potential to facilitate social comparisons with others (Vogel et al., 2014). It has been suggested that individuals are inherently drawn to compare their abilities, achievements and other signs of status with those of others (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). As Facebook allows individuals to broadcast and view a large amount of social information, it provides ample opportunity for individuals to compare themselves in this way (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2015). Upward social comparisons on Facebook, which are directed at individuals perceived to have higher status, have the potential to negatively affect self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014). Conversely, spending time on Facebook can also increase the strength of ties throughout an individual’s social network (Burke and Kraut, 2014). It also been suggested that direct forms of communication on social media such as one-to-one messaging may encourage greater intimacy than general content browsing (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010; Burke and Kraut, 2014). Social media therefore appears to have a complex relationship with perceived social support and well-being, and its effects appear to vary according to individual usage patterns. This suggests that, while some of the ways that individuals engage with social media may be problematic, these platforms also provide an effective means of building and accessing social resources (Burke and Kraut, 2014).

Virtual learning environments such as Blackboard typically offer some social features and provide opportunities for students to collaborate through discussion boards (Osgerby, 2013; Nolan et al., 2016). However, research with undergraduates demonstrates that students tend to engage extensively with general-use social platforms such as Facebook to connect outside of the VLE (Osgerby, 2013), and this may have long-term benefits for their adjustment to university (DeAndrea et al., 2012). This indicates that there are important university-related social behaviours that occurs on social media. As a result, platforms like Facebook are worthy of investigation in research on the underexplored transitions of postgraduate students. It is also apparent that problematic social comparisons play a role in students’ engagement with their studies. Social comparison concern (specifically, the concern about appearing incompetent to other students) can affect how students engage with classroom-based learning groups (Micari and Pazos, 2014). As social media can exacerbate such issues, it is valuable to also account for any disadvantages of the use of social media during transitions.

Sawir et al. (2008) were unable to investigate how postgraduates use social media due to low levels of social media use in their participants’ home countries. Social media adoption is now at record levels: seven in ten Americans use social media and 78% of over 18s in the UK use Facebook (Pew Research, 2017; Rose McGrory Social Media Ltd., 2017, 2018; WeareFlint, 2016). The range of services offered by SNSs such as Facebook is also becoming increasingly diverse. Facebook Messenger, or simply Messenger, is a cross-platform instant messaging (IM) service that allows individuals to send direct messages to individuals or small groups within their Facebook contact list (Anderson and Kesselman, 2016). Released in 2011, it is a widely used addition to Facebook’s services which, unlike the original Facebook chat interface, is promoted as a fully featured communication platform within the Facebook network (Anderson and Kesselman, 2016). While other messaging services exist, Messenger is distinct in that it automatically and easily connects users with new Facebook friends; in contrast, WhatsApp, an otherwise popular messaging interface, lacks an overlying social networking service and relies on direct exchange of mobile numbers (Anderson and Kesselman, 2016). Because of the availability of these rich and accessible social platforms, there is a need to re-evaluate the role that social media plays during postgraduate students’ studies.

As a result of the observed gaps in research in this area, there is a need to investigate the role social support plays in how or in what ways postgraduate students make the transition to postgraduate level study and how social media use contributes to the development of this support. Additionally, because undergraduate and postgraduate courses offer distinct academic experiences (McPherson et al., 2017), it is also important to be sensitive to whether social support plays a different role in the lives of postgraduates compared to their time as undergraduates. This needs to be addressed by not only considering which relationships are most critical to postgraduate students, but also to investigate how this may have changed since their time as undergraduates. As students’ experiences may also differ depending on whether they study full-time or part-time (Jamieson et al., 2009), it is important to consider whether postgraduate students’ mode of study affects the types of social support they develop and maintain at university, and how they may differ in their ability to benefit from such resources.

**Method**

The study used a qualitative design informed by a thematic analysis strategy, and adopted a contextualist epistemological position (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The study collected data through semi-structured, individual interviews. In this study, postgraduate students were recruited who had spent at least one year outside of higher education following completion of their original undergraduate degree. This criterion was used in order for participants to be able to see the move to postgraduate study as a distinct transition.

Nine people, two males and seven females with an age range 24-53 years, participated in the study. All participants were UK students attending Masters-level courses in psychology-related subjects at a university in North East England and were all social media users. Participants’ courses had an average of 14 hours face-to-face contact time (for full-time students) per week during term time. All participants had access to a virtual learning environment (Blackboard). Six participants also had access to Facebook groups created and managed by their peers within their cohorts. These groups were student-led, were not accessible to university staff, were available throughout participants’ courses, were not limited to certain modules, and students’ participation in these groups was voluntary (see Table 1 for further demographic information and details of Facebook group availability).

[insert Table 1 near here]

*Procedure*

The interviews and transcriptions were completed by the lead author. The researchers received ethical approval to conduct the study from the ethics committee of the university where the study was conducted.

Students were approached via an email which contained key information about the study. As the study was concerned with the emotional issue of loneliness, it was considered that participants could potentially become upset or uncomfortable during the interviews. The researchers addressed this by carefully detailing the potential content of the interview in the pre-study documents, and highlighting the opportunity to have a break or end the interview if needed.

Confidentiality was ensured by anonymising raw data at the earliest opportunity (e.g. using pseudonyms).

Participants were asked about their decision to return to university as a postgraduate student, how their social network had developed at university, issues pertaining to loneliness, and how they used social media during their studies. The interviews lasted between 45-70 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

*Analysis*

The transcripts were read, re-read and analysed following the thematic analysis framework, (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this case, a theme was considered to be any pattern that occurred across most participants’ interviews and related to a social aspect of participants’ experiences of postgraduate study.

**Results**

*Being in it together vs. doing it alone – the problem of academic loneliness*

The participants found the postgraduate environment challenging, primarily because of their demanding academic workloads. They found that their main focus was on academic development, and not on social opportunities that were available to them at university. This contrasted with their undergraduate days, as illustrated by Jane and Leah below.

I thought ‘I don't know whether I'd manage a Masters degree’ to be honest so I did think 'you're gonna have to really stick in and you're gonna have to work hard', so the social side of it wasn't something that I really thought about (Jane)

the reason I was going in the first place was to progress, it wasn't to get another experience of undergrad […] so I went into it with a different mind-set (Leah)

Participants found that their workloads required them to engage in a high level of independent study. Because of this, some participants perceived their postgraduate studies as an isolated academic experience which they dealt with separately from their peers; a feeling referred to here as *academic loneliness*.

Sophie believed she experienced such feelings because of a lack of on-going collaboration with her peers during her course:

I do my assignments on my own obviously, but I think just bouncing ideas around I think I would have liked more opportunity to do that, and I think it's in that sense that I felt isolated, I didn't feel like we were working together particularly (Sophie)

Notably, this meant that participants were likely to find they were missing a source of emotional support when dealing with anxieties about their academic progress:

I get an assignment back that I didn't do that great on or I got feedback back that I thought 'oh god' […] it’s things like that I feel really kind of alone […] in a way that's sort of like, 'oh god' you know ‘I have to deal with this myself’ (Leah)

It was apparent that some participants felt vulnerable to this form of loneliness despite having strong sources of support outside of university*.* Leah, for example, had a close social circle of friends outside of the course, but felt that they were unable to offer the support she needed during her postgraduate studies as they were not going through the same experience. As a result, Leah had a persistent unmet need for a source of reassurance about her academic development:

it does make me feel like, oh god I wish someone could just sort of let me know that, you know, it's okay and I am gonna be fine (Leah)

However, other participants were more successful in building social connections on their courses, and formed a small core network of friends within their degree cohorts. These peer networks appeared to buffer against academic loneliness. These networks were primarily based on a system of mutual support with academic work; a group dynamic described by Jane as a ‘little team’. Individuals within these groups would assist each other with assignments and understanding course material. Participants often noted that these small peer networks, rather than academic staff, were the best resource for assistance with academic issues during their studies:

we help each other out with all the assignments […] we work really closely together, so I think that group has been the best resource out of anything (Fran)

These peer networks appeared to offer more to participants than simply a means of improving their academic performance. By supporting each other through the academic challenges presented by their degree courses, it appeared that participants developed a valuable sense of connection with their fellow students. Overall, this collaborative atmosphere encouraged many participants to feel that they had progressed through their courses as part of a group:

it's a journey that we've been through together isn't it, and it's been, it's been really hard, but we've stuck together. And I think, you know, it does help that we've had that support system (Jill)

Crucially, participants indicated that these close peer networks could provide an important form of emotional support related to their studies. Jane was continually re-assured by her peers that that they had similar anxieties about academic work. This led Jane to feel that she was not alone in dealing with these issues:

you don't feel like you're in it by yourself, there's not been any point when I've thought 'nobody else is feeling like this so I feel alone', it's always been the case of hearing people say, 'I feel exactly the same, we're all in it together' (Jane)

These peer connections therefore provided the type of support that Sophie and Leah lacked as a result of not having a strong friendship network within their cohorts.

Participants’ mode of study may have affected their ability to develop supportive friendships at university. Sophie and Leah both considered their part-time mode of study to be a barrier to their ability to form a strong academic peer network on their courses. Leah suggested that her paid employment, which was the source of her decision to study part-time, caused her to miss out on the casual interaction in university spaces that would have made her feel part of a supportive peer group:

it's just like the kind of takeback that I've had to deal with because, I can't go to the postgrad room the same time as everyone can because I'll be at work (Leah)

It also appeared that part-time students’ relatively reduced academic workload could lead to a diminished sense of a shared experience. Due to their less intense schedule, part-time students were likely to view their experience as separate from that of full-time students:

the full-timers are great but they're here and gone in no time […] they've been very sort of friendly but they're just full-on, they live it and breathe it for a year […] and then they're gone aren't they (Sophie)

Because they were less immersed in their university environment than their full-time counterparts, part-time students were at risk of not feeling part of the intense postgraduate ‘journey’ that encouraged many participants to bond with their peers. In some cases, these students appeared to have greater difficulty in building the social support resources that buffer against academic loneliness at university.

*Feeling apart vs. feeling connected on Facebook*

As well as having regular contact with a small, core friendship network on their courses, most participants also drew on support from a wider group of peers within their cohorts. This support was delivered primarily through large, programme-specific Facebook groups created and managed by students. Engagement with Facebook was a complex and not entirely positive process, and this theme illustrates the issues that were apparent in using Facebook’s services to help buffer against academic loneliness.

Facebook groups did seem to be able to foster connections between students, and were valued because they allowed peers to connect despite their variety of backgrounds, locations and external commitments:

it gave people a platform to communicate which we would never have had otherwise (John)

One part-time participant found she was rarely able to spend time in university spaces outside of lectures because of external commitments. However, accessing her cohort’s Facebook group helped her to feel ‘collegiate’. Teghan found that browsing the content on this group helped to prevent her from feeling alone in her concerns about academic progress:

I was really disappointed with that mark, but it made me feel better to see it in a context of actually loads of other people are disappointed […] and that's not just me (Teghan)

Unfortunately, in some circumstances the opportunities for comparison with a large group of peers proved detrimental to students’ wellbeing, and promoted feelings of academic inadequacy:

we've had our Facebook group […] when they put things and they say 'I've got a question about this' and I'm behind, I find that quite like, you know, that's quite upsetting (Geoff)

These feelings were enough to discourage some participants from engaging with their cohorts’ Facebook groups, as viewers, contributors, or both:

I don't want them to know that I'm struggling and I don't want to feel like I'm struggling, and that's what I fear from interaction from that group (Geoff)

Because of knowing that they were likely to engage in these problematic social comparisons, some participants decided to avoid their cohort’s Facebook groups as a source of peer support. Some students avoided social media altogether and relied on face-to-face contact or email for peer contact. However, others found that Facebook Messenger offered an avenue for digital connection without the risks associated with Facebook’s other services. This platform provided an instant, safe way of communicating within small, cohesive peer groups:

we're on Messenger we've got a group […] if there's problems people message each other all the time within our little group (Fran)

these Messenger things, they're the most supportive things that I've found (Geoff)

Geoff suggested that he was more comfortable using Messenger because it allowed him to communicate with his peers ‘in a way that [he] could control’. Control over personal communications appeared important for several participants:

I feel like this if I’m just commenting on someone’s post, it feels to me like I’m standing on a chair in a room shouting something out […] I'm much more comfortable messaging, you know, PM-ing somebody than I am, you know, posting something (Teghan)

Although Teghan saw the benefits of browsing her cohort’s Facebook Group, she felt uncomfortable contributing her own content to the page. Instead she preferred using Messenger to contact her peers because it limited how many individuals could see her queries or concerns, and therefore minimized her sense of being judged by others. Messenger therefore appeared to offer participants a suitable alternative to Facebook Groups as a medium for peer support, with greater control being an important factor that differentiated it from more public spaces.

**Discussion**

This study indicated that postgraduate students are primarily concerned with the academic demands of postgraduate life. The students managed on-going anxieties about their assessment outcomes and their ability to cope with their demanding workloads. Although the taught component of their courses provided them with more contact time than their doctoral-level student counterparts, participants still found themselves engaging in considerable levels of isolated and challenging independent study. As a result, they were particularly vulnerable to academic loneliness. Participants did not appear to possess the social support needs that are characteristic of undergraduates, as they were not seeking extensive friendship groups outside of their studies. The transition to postgraduate level study may instead carry a risk of loneliness tied to the process of managing a postgraduate academic workload; a process Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013) suggest is the main source of postgraduate transition difficulties. It may be suggested that the topic-related loneliness described by Sawir et al. (2008) is one of several incarnations of this type of loneliness. Based on Weiss’s frameworks (1982), this *academic loneliness* appeared to be primarily a form of social loneliness, as it arose from a missing sense of connection with a group. It also involved some elements of emotional loneliness, as it was characterised by an unmet need for emotional support in dealing with personal difficulties (Weiss, 1982).

In contrast to many undergraduates (Briggs et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005), the postgraduates in the study described here were not overly concerned with the opportunities university could offer as a social environment. This makes sense because postgraduates have had prior experience of university life, and have already moved past the transition into adulthood and its association with independence and new social connections, which is not the case with most new undergraduates (Briggs et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005). As a result, interventions that may work for meeting the social support needs of undergraduates may not necessarily be as effective for postgraduate students. The needs of postgraduate students may be better addressed through relationships that help them face the challenge of working at a higher academic level. Because participants’ course peers were dealing with the same academic challenges, they could provide specialised support that could not be obtained from other, existing relationships. To these ends, it appeared that a course-based peer network was effective in meeting the social support needs of postgraduates, as it buffered against academic loneliness.

The peer groups’ participants developed often formed organically in the face-to-face context of classes. However, because of the demands of their postgraduate course, especially for those students studying part-time, participants were just as likely to struggle to develop these networks. The primary benefit of Facebook Groups was therefore that it increased the opportunities for students to develop a sense of a shared academic experience and provided connection amongst otherwise disparate cohorts of students. This may particularly benefit part-time students who find they struggle to achieve such integration. The fact that Facebook provides a basis for comparison with others (Vogel et al., 2014) was therefore beneficial to students in some cases. This is because the content on course-based Facebook Groups could reassure students that they are not alone in their concerns, therefore helping to limit academic loneliness.

However, these platforms may also inevitably lead students to engage in the same detrimental social comparisons with their peers that Micari and Pazos (2014) observed. Whilst this phenomenon has been studied on social media in relation to established connections such as former school friends (de Vries and Kühne, 2015; Lee, 2014; Vogel et al., 2014), it appears that these comparisons can negatively impact upon nascent academic support groups as well, and that issues associated with general Facebook use can limit the effectiveness of these services in education contexts. Messenger emerged as an alternative platform for peer support, with the control it offered appearing key to its appeal to students concerned about their well-being. It appeared to offer students two valuable forms of control over their communications. First, because Messenger involved the direct exchange of messages between selected recipients, it allowed participants to closely control the audience of their communications. This meant they could seek support from specific course friends without feeling self-conscious or fearful of being judged. Second, Messenger allowed participants to control which information they were exposed to during their studies. This is because it allowed them to see only the academic discussions that they chose to be involved in directly. As a result, using Messenger also lessened the opportunity for the type of social comparisons that could trigger feelings of academic inadequacy.

The degree to which postgraduates feel either apart or connected when using Facebook’s services may therefore be influenced by how information is shared on particular platforms. As shown, the open, forum-like format of course-based Facebook groups may allow students to find common ground with their peers. However, this inevitably exposes them to content that highlights discrepancies between students’ experiences. Students may therefore avoid communicating on these platforms in order to preserve their wellbeing at university, particularly if they have previous negative experiences of Facebook in other contexts. Although Messenger is part of the Facebook ecosystem, it offered participants a communication experience that contrasted considerably with that of Facebook Groups. By providing a less exposed space for collaboration, Facebook Messenger and similar services may provide a more reliable platform for postgraduate students to develop supportive peer networks that can buffer against academic loneliness. This supports the conclusion by Quan-Haase and Young (2010) that, while Facebook groups are most effective for broadcasting information, instant-messaging services may be most suitable for building strong relationships. It is also noteworthy that students did not report engaging with a university-managed virtual learning environment (VLE) as a source of support. While this certainly does not discount the value of the VLE, it reflects the findings reported by Osgerby (2013) that students are drawn to general-purpose social platforms as sources of peer support and further indicates that these can be similarly effective spaces to support student transitions.

Limitations of the study described here include that the students were from only one discipline – psychology – and it may be that postgraduates in other disciplines face different challenges, especially those undertaking professional work experience placements (Fernandez et al., 2014). The participants were also predominantly female, from the UK, and within a fairly narrow age range, and age, gender and culture are each factors that may show variation in terms of how individuals use social media and how they experience loneliness. Because of the small number of students used, the conclusions are seen as exploratory and indicative. As well as looking at postgraduate transitions in other contexts, future research may also benefit from a longitudinal approach, following students throughout the course of their studies. This would allow more nuanced monitoring of the efficacy of both self-generated and institution-led social media platforms for postgraduates.

Universities should be aware that postgraduate students may hold a set of personal priorities that differ from those of undergraduates, and therefore require different forms of social support. Whereas undergraduates may benefit from help in forming social connections at university that extend beyond their academic work, a positive postgraduate experience for participants may depend on their ability to develop peer networks that can provide specialised support as they deal with their challenging independent workloads. This means that postgraduate students may benefit from more opportunities to collaborate with students within their degree cohorts as part of their studies.

Institutions should also consider that students may differ in their preferences for communication when engaging with their peers online. Not all students who are provided with an online space for collaboration, such as course-specific Facebook groups will necessarily benefit from these opportunities. In the study described here, Facebook Messenger emerged as a potential alternative to Facebook Groups as a platform for peer support. It will therefore be important to consider how this type of instant messaging service may be used alongside other platforms to encourage connection between students. Facebook’s services overall may be of particular benefit to part-time students who have limited opportunity to interact with their peers in physical university-based spaces. However, it is important to temper this conclusion by noting that a key characteristic of the Facebook and Messenger groups in the study was that they were self-generated and self-selected, with no institutional involvement. Because of the organic, unforced nature of these platforms, and the social connections they facilitate, it cannot be guaranteed that institution-promoted versions of these groups would have the same efficacy. There are also inevitable limitations to how institutions can ensure parity of experience in this area, because relationships are not interchangeable, and friendships (and personalities) cannot be forced to fit in order to meet social support needs (Weiss, 1982). An alternative form of institutional assistance may be to ‘check in’ with postgraduate students about their sense of integration, possibly during pastoral tuition sessions if appropriate, to ensure they are connecting with other students through their own means and discuss any barriers they may face in doing so. This would allow universities to play a responsible role in postgraduate students’ wellbeing while accounting for the fact that loneliness develops and dissipates through more organic, person-specific processes.

The results of the study described in this article capture a number of interesting phenomena and areas for concern that warrant further investigation and which are particularly pertinent to the ‘forgotten sector’ (Millward, 2015) of taught postgraduate students (McPherson et al., 2017). The study indicates that social support still plays an important role in students’ lives as they progress to postgraduate study. Postgraduate students are at risk of an academic-related form of loneliness that mirrors their heightened focus on academic achievement as they return to university. Social media carries an inevitably complex range of options for building social support resources, but this study demonstrates that a technology-focused approach will be a positive step forward in working to understand and resolve academic loneliness in the transition to postgraduate study.

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Table 1

Table of Participant Characteristics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Postgraduate study timeframe | Student-led Facebook group available on course? | Undergraduate degree discipline |
| Jane | 25 | Female | Full-time | Yes | Social sciences |
| Jill | 26 | Female | Full-time | Yes | Life sciences |
| Carol | 53 | Female | Full-time | No | Healthcare |
| Geoff | 34 | Male | Full-time | Yes | Arts |
| Sophie | 48 | Female | Part-time (2nd year) | No | Healthcare |
| Leah | 24 | Female | Part-time (2nd year) | No | Life sciences |
| John | 29 | Male | Part-time (1st year) | Yes | Humanities |
| Fran | 42 | Female | Part-time (2nd year) | Yes | Physical sciences |
| Teghan | 38 | Female | Part-time (1st year) | Yes | Humanities |