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Social Media in Scholarly Communication According to Early Career Researchers in the Humanities, Theology, and the Arts

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the use of social media in selected aspects of scholarly communication, such as sharing ideas, networking and gaining visibility to build academic reputation. The study draws on longitudinal interviews with early-career researchers in the humanities, theology, and the arts in Poland. Two rounds of interviews were conducted, one in spring 2023 and a follow-up in 2024. The studies (as part of NCN grant No. 2022/45/B/HS2/00041) are closely linked to the *Harbingers* international projects. It was found that scholarly communication on social media within the scope of the analysis in the respondent group is uncommon and remains limited. Because the study employed the standardised *Harbingers* interview protocol, the findings from the Polish group of researchers across three fields can be compared internationally and across various areas and disciplines.

KEYWORDS: scholarly communication, social media, early career researchers, humanities, theology, arts

STRESZCZENIE

Media społecznościowe w komunikacji naukowej – według początkujących badaczy z humanistyki, teologii i sztuki

W artykule przedstawiono korzystanie z mediów społecznościowych w wybranych elementach komunikacji naukowej, takich jak dzielenie się pomysłami, nawiązywanie kontaktów oraz osiąganie widzialności w budowaniu reputacji. Respondentami byli polscy humaniści, teolodzy i artyści na wczesnym etapie kariery; przeprowadzono z nimi wywiady podłużne, czyli dwa w odstępie roku, wiosną 2023 i 2024 roku. Badania te (w ramach grantu NCN nr 2022/45/B/HS2/00041) są ściśle powiązane z międzynarodowymi projektami *Harbingers*. Zaangażowanie w komunikację naukową w analizowanym zakresie w mediach społecznościowych okazało się niezbyt powszechne w badanej grupie respondentów i cieszy się raczej umiarkowanym zainteresowaniem. Wyniki uzyskane

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w polskiej grupie badaczy z trzech dziedzin mogą być porównane – dzięki ustrukturyzowanemu kwestionariuszowi wywiadu – w skali międzynarodowej oraz pomiędzy różnymi dziedzinami i dyscyplinami..

SŁOWA KLUCZE: komunikacja naukowa, media społecznościowe, badacze na wczesnym etapie kariery, humanistyka, teologia, sztuka

Introduction

Studies of scholarly communication have shown that social media (with 5 billion users all over the world, Statista, 2025a) had already become an integral part even before the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, during its course (Rieger & Schonfeld, 2023; Herman et al., 2021; Nicholas et al., 2019; Jamali et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2024; Thiele & Luethje, 2022). Social media and other digital technologies continue to play an important role in the post-pandemic world, especially by the generation of early-career researchers, who often are digital natives.

The impact of social media on various aspects of scholarly communication has attracted considerable attention, for example, of the international research team led by David Nicholas, which has been conducting the *Harbingers* projects for a decade. with the project has investigated researchers in the early stages of their careers in countries such as the USA, the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Russia, China, Malaysia, and Poland (<https://ciber-research.com/harbingers.html>). An important role of social media in scholarly communication was confirmed in the first project of the cycle in the years 2016–2019 (Nicholas et al., 2019) and in the second, carried out during the pandemic in 2020–2022 (Clark et al., 2024).

This paper examines the role of social media in selected aspects of scholarly communication, focusing only on Polish respondents, across three areas: humanities, theology, and arts (NSC grant No. 2022/45/B/HS2/00041). Particular attention is paid to sharing ideas, establishing contacts and building online visibility. This analysis adopts a broad understanding of social media, mainly public platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube), as well as communication apps (Messenger, WhatsApp) and academic social networking sites (ResearchGate, Academia.edu). These social media were selected because, following the completion of the *Harbingers 1* and *Harbingers 2* projects, they were among the most widely used platforms among researchers in the early stages of their careers in eight countries. Other information exchange services (Discord, Slack, Zoom, Teams), blogging services (WordPress, Blogger, etc.), and e-mail, which remains a traditional means of communication in the academic world were also mentioned in all *Harbingers* projects.

Literature Review

A review of the literature from 2014 to 2019 (Chugh et al., 2021) shows that early-career researchers mainly use social media to establish professional networks. Social media are also used in teaching and learning (Ziemba & Eisenhardt, 2022). Moreover, they play an important role in the academic publishing system, serving as a means of promoting monographs, papers, conference presentations, and other academic activities. In other words, social media help disseminate messages about published scientific papers, which is of particular importance in a world where the online environment is saturated with low-quality and low cognitive-value content. By increasing the visibility of research outputs and academic activities, which can help them build their scientific reputation (Clark et al., 2024).

The literature identifies several key motivations for researchers' use of popular platforms and services, as reported in the literature (Sugimoto et al., 2017; Jordan, 2019; Chugh et al., 2021; Francke & Hammarfelt, 2022; Clark et al., 2024). In particular, scientists use social media to promote research outputs, which is beneficial for building their reputation. Moreover, they establish professional networks and communicate across geographic barriers. They share knowledge and information, consult with experts worldwide, and disseminate research beyond academia. Depending on the scientific discipline, this can apply to industry, services, health, and entertainment (Rieger & Schonfeld, 2023; Herman et al., 2021; Nicholas et al., 2019; Jamali et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2024). Various social media platforms can also be used for these purposes to varying degrees. Some serve primarily as professional profiles, updated with new information, e.g. publication records (e.g. ORCID, Research Gate, Academia.edu), whereas others are used as platforms for sharing views and opinions (e.g. X/Twitter, Reddit, groups on Facebook).

Researchers' use of social media is shaped by... various individual and contextual factors (Puhlinger & Wolfmayr, 2023; True Anthem, 2022; Wu, 2022). What is significant are the scientists' individual preferences. For example, increase their visibility is important for some, whereas others prefer to focus on their research without maintain an active presence. Moreover, the career stage also determines the way one's accounts on social media are used. Early-career researchers appear to use them more intensively than previous generations.

Findings from the *Harbingers* projects show (Jamali et al., 2020; 2023) that early-career researchers tend to use social media in ways that can directly benefit their academic careers, for example, by establishing contacts with scientists worldwide and developing international collaborations. However, these studies also show that scientists in the early stages of their careers struggle obtaining research grants, for their papers to be published in renowned international journals, and for permanent academic positions, and that this can be achieved

without maintaining active presence on social media. These conclusions are based on the *Harbingers'* interviews (since 2016), including the Polish project. In general, more respondents have been highly or moderately active on social media than those who use it rarely or never. The latter group was relatively small, and they were scientists from various disciplines and countries.

According to data collected in the *Harbingers 2* project during COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), the most popular social media among respondents from eight countries were Twitter (70% of respondents mentioned it across the three interview waves) and LinkedIn (50%). These were followed by Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram (approx. 40% of the respondents each) and YouTube (over 20%). Interestingly, Messenger was referred to much less frequently than WhatsApp and had a similar rate to WeChat and Telegram (less than 10%). The following services appeared only once across the entire international dataset: TikTok, VKontakte, Discord, Weibo, Reddit and Pinterest. Polish respondents mentioned Facebook most frequently, followed by LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. Compared to respondents in other countries, they differed in that they mentioned Messenger (there were no mentions in the other seven countries). It is noteworthy that the study analysed not the number of occurrences but rather such mentions in the broader context of each interview. Comparisons between the eight participating countries were also interesting: Malaysians and Russians were the most active in social media, whereas the French and the Chinese were the least so (Clark et al., 2024).

This paper provides a more detailed analysis of Polish respondents in selected areas, i.e., the humanities, theology and the arts. They have received relatively little attention in the *Harbingers* projects, which generally focused on natural sciences, engineering and technology, and related STEM discipline.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this and other *Harbingers* projects comprises a literature review, focus groups, longitudinal in-depth structured interviews, and questionnaires. However, the interviews constitute the core component of both the international and Polish parts of the projects.

An interview protocol in *Harbingers* projects comprises several main parts, unchanged since 2016, that address components of scholarly communication, including information seeking, evaluation, peer review, reputation, collaboration, ethics, informal communication, and the impact and dissemination of research findings. The Polish questionnaire (2023 and 2024) contained additional questions about external (international) conditions, such as the impact of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and generative AI (GenAI) tools on the research and teaching done by the respondents, but also about internal

conditions, such as the impact of higher education and research reforms on early-career researchers. that the project received ethical approval from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn on 16 January 2023.

The interviews conducted online via Skype, are recorded and subsequently transcribed, and the missing or unclear information is supplemented in e-mail correspondence. In the next step, these data are entered into a coding template. This template combines quantitative and qualitative data, i.e., close-ended responses (yes/no/don't know) responses, quotations from respondents, and, sometimes, the researcher's analytical notes (for joint international analyses). Some questions produced all three types of information, while others generated only some. The respondents' open-ended responses were analysed using thematic coding based on recurring themes in all respondents' answers.

This paper examines how Polish early-career researcher in the humanities, theology and the arts use social media, including both general-purpose platforms such as Facebook and X and academic social networking platforms, e.g., ResearchGate and Academia.edu. The analysis is based on longitudinal interviews conducted with the same respondents in spring 2023 and one year later, in 2024.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- Which social media platforms are most commonly used by the respondents?
- For which purposes associated with scholarly communication are the social media used. In particular, are they used for:
 - establishing and maintaining contacts within the academic community;
 - sharing research ideas;
 - increasing online visibility to build an academic reputation?
- Does the use of social media change as early-career researchers progress in their academic careers progress?

The study sample comprised Polish researchers in the early stages of their careers who were actively engaged in research, including scientific projects, regardless of the their employment status or type of contract. The respondents included doctoral candidates and PhD holders. The early-career researchers were usually young, i.e. under 40 years old. However, their short research experience was a more important criterion of respondent selection than age. In line with the *Harbingers* methodology, respondents were eligible if they were within seven years of completing their PhD, with career interruptions such as parental leave taken into account.

The respondents represented a range of disciplines within three broad fields: archaeology, philosophy, history, linguistics, literary studies, cultural studies, religious studies, Polish studies, theology, while the arts comprised

film and theatre, music, and visual arts and conservation. Twenty-five respondents (15 women and 10 males) took part in the first round of interviews, and 23 in the second. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, which was anonymous and voluntary; respondents were free to withdraw at any stage (two respondents chose not to take part in the second round of longitudinal interviews). More information about the respondents and the sampling procedure can be found in other publications (Świgoń & Nicholas, 2023; Świgoń, 2023).

Results and discussion

Social media accounts

The analysis began by examining the respondents’ social media accounts. The research focused on the eight most popular platforms identified in previous *Harbingers* studies (Clark et al., 2024). The results of this quantitative analysis based on the spring 2024 interview are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Social media accounts held by respondents in the humanities, theology and arts (2024)

	Social medium (2024)	Yes Total 23	No Total 23
1	Facebook (Messenger, WhatsApp)	22	1
2	YouTube	18	5
3	Instagram	17	6
4	Academia.edu	15	8
5	LinkedIn	12	11
6	ResearchGate	12	11
7	X (former Twitter)	7	16
8	TikTok	4	19

Source: own study.

These data show that Facebook was the most widely used platform among the group of respondents, followed by Meta’s messaging applications, i.e., Messenger and WhatsApp. Nearly all the interviewees (22 out of 23) who took part in the second round of interviews had Facebook accounts and used one or both of the communicators. The ways in which these platforms were used, as well as the intensity of their use obviously varied within the group across the sample. Some respondents admitted to being very active in Facebook groups, while

others talked about limiting the time spent on social media during working hours and using it more frequently in their private time.

Facebook was followed by YouTube in terms of the number of respondents using it (18 out of 23). It was used by the interviewees for various purposes: some used it as a source of knowledge, others as a platform to promote their work, and sometimes for science communication and public engagement. Individual respondents mentioned producing video content regularly and running their own YouTube channels.

Instagram was used by a similar number of respondents as YouTube (17 out of 23). Its popularity was particularly evident among the artists, as this is an image-based medium. Respondents from other disciplinary fields, not only in the arts, emphasised the growing popularity of Instagram in their communities and that it was increasingly preferred to Facebook.

The three most used social media platforms by popularity among the surveyed respondents are consistent with global usage trends from Statista (Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram had the highest numbers of users in 2024) (Statista, 2025b).

The study participants were also asked about two academic networking platforms: Academia.edu and ResearchGate. It was found that about half of the humanists and artists had an account on one or both services. At the same time, they admitted that they were not very engaged in maintaining their profiles, e.g. they did not update them with their latest academic achievements and publications. A large majority of users of both platforms said they did not participate in the discussion forums. Academia.edu is slightly more popular among researchers in the humanities and arts (15 respondents) than ResearchGate (12). These are completely different observations from representatives of the natural sciences and STEM disciplines, who were the subjects of earlier studies (Nicholas et al., 2019) and who valued ResearchGate more and used Academia.edu rarely or not at all.

X (formerly Twitter) was used by relatively few respondents (7) than the platforms discussed above. This contrasts with the findings of the international *Harbingers* study, in which X was among the most widely used social media platforms across the world, as shown by the recent study conducted across eight countries (Clark et al., 2024).

The fewest respondents (four) admitted to having a TikTok account, which may be attributed to this medium being rather popular among younger age groups.

In addition to the platforms included in Table 1, several respondents mentioned other online services used by the academic community, including Discord, Reddit, Telegram, VKontakte, and Spotify.

Visibility

The interview protocol contained a question about the role of online visibility achieved, *inter alia*, through social media, particularly in building academic reputation. This issue has been discussed in other publications (Świgoń, 2023; Clark et al., 2024), but some of those findings merit further attention, particularly the divided opinions of respondents in the humanities, theology and the arts on the role of online visibility in building reputation, including by using the services mentioned in Table 1.

The numbers of respondents (in both rounds of interviews) that confirmed actively seeking to increase the online visibility, including the use of social media, in order to achieve the maximum visibility of one's scientific and artistic achievements, and those who reported not pursuing such visibility, were nearly equal.

Notably, the second round of interviews revealed that the respondents' views to the issue had not changed over the one-year interval between the two interview rounds. Only one participant reported a change in attitude after creating an account on an academic networking platform before the follow-up interview.

Researchers who recognised the importance of online visibility in building one's academic reputation pointed to various benefits generated by it, as shown by the following excerpts:

This is how you can reach a larger audience to present your research and build your reputation, which in the future can bring tangible benefits (...) (Literary Studies).

The more of such activities [you undertake], the more recognisable you become as an artist and scholar, and this translates into external funding (Visual Arts).

In addition to their social media accounts, the interviewees mentioned their ORCID and Google Scholar profiles, as well as other forms of online academic presence, such as institutional profile pages and entries in international researcher databases, which they regarded as contributing to their online visibility.

By contrast, respondents who attached little importance to their online visibility often argued that they focused more on publishing in renowned periodicals, including open-access ones, than those whose presence on social media was not important for building their reputation.

I'm not going to do anything about it except do my best to publish in prestigious journals, especially with publishers that have strong distribution networks (...) (Polish Studies).

Like many respondents in the humanities, who relied on the reputation of journals and publishers who disseminate their work, respondents in the arts often entrusted the promotion of their achievements and skills to publishers, distributors and other professionals.

I left everything related to the promotion [of my album] to the publisher and simply shared it on streaming platforms (Music).

Other respondents argued that public engagements activities such as writing for non-specialist audiences were more effective ways of increasing their visibility, building their academic reputation than being active on social media.

(...) writing popular science articles, which I do regularly, is the only meaningful way of increasing my visibility. I also deliver lectures for children, adolescents and adults (...) in schools, community youth centres and other venues. I'm not interested in social media at all. I don't think it contributes anything to my academic career (Theology).

Some respondents also explained that they did not like or actively use social media because they did not feel the need to do so, lacked the time, or had concerns about privacy and data protection.

The impact of generative AI on scholarly communication has been examined in separate studies within the *Harbingers* projects (Świgoń, 2024; Nicholas et al., 2024).

The protocol also referred to other means of increasing the visibility of one's outputs apart from social media, e.g. video abstracts, virtual posters, newsletter articles and blogs. However, these forms attracted relatively little interest in both rounds of the interviews.

However, the interviewees were unanimous in emphasising the importance of actively participating in conferences, both online and in person, as a means of increasing their visibility. This confirms the findings of an earlier study conducted by the author a decade ago in the Polish academic community (Świgoń, 2015). According to that study, conference presentations delivered are important, but not as much as informal conversations.

Forming ties

Data collected during the two rounds of interviews (in 2023 and 2024) indicated that new professional contacts are often established through informal conversations at scientific conferences, as well as during research visits, fellowships, and artistic events (exhibitions, festivals). Respondents from all three disciplinary highlighted this. Some respondents talked about contacts initiated by

supervisors, doctoral advisers, and senior colleagues. The respondents often expressed a need to expand their academic networks both nationally and internationally, which is natural in the early stages of one's career.

It is noteworthy that many respondents mentioned e-mail correspondence as an important method of establishing and maintaining professional relationships. Interestingly, this has been the primary channel of scholarly communication for many years, as this author's study showed (Świgoń, 2015), despite the development of many other technological methods. It seems that for many years now it has been a formal, unobtrusive, and convenient means of communication, as one of the respondents, a humanist, described it.

Moreover, the interviewees reported frequent using of online meeting platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Teams, which are effective for maintaining contacts within the academic community during the post-pandemic period.

Messaging applications, particularly Messenger and WhatsApp, were also widely used. As shown in Table 1, nearly all interviewees reported using at least one.

By contrast, academic networking platforms such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu were mentioned less frequently in the context of maintaining professional relationships, despite offering discussion forums and private messaging functions.

Telephone calls, including voice calls by Skype and WhatsApp, were mentioned only occasionally.

The above list is not exhaustive. Individual respondents also referred to other means of establishing and maintaining professional relationships online, including Facebook groups and platforms such as X and Discord.

This section concludes with a quotation that illustrates the advantages of face-to-face interactions over online ones:

I meet the most interesting people at scientific conferences and symposia in my field. I find it difficult to establish similar relationships in the virtual environment (Theology).

Sharing ideas

The interview protocol also contained questions about how respondents share research ideas, understood as research plans, preliminary findings, and works in progress rather than formal publications. Most respondents reported that they did not use social media for these purposes. In other words, although maintaining accounts on various social media was common among respondents in the humanities, theology, and arts (see Table 1), these platforms were not used for sharing ideas.

Instead, the interviewees identified academic conferences and small-group meetings as the most appropriate settings for discussing research ideas and sharing preliminary findings. These interactions took place in face-to-face, hybrid, or online formats, with Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams being the most frequently mentioned online platforms. Across both rounds of interviews, respondents consistently indicated all three formats were regularly used for discussing unpublished knowledge.

When respondents used social media to disseminate their work, they shared links on social media to the final versions of their work, monographs or articles and preprints of publications accepted for publication. Respondents in the arts also used social media to promote exhibitions, festivals and other artistic events. The respondents also mentioned using Instagram or Facebook Stories to share their activities and events with the academic or artistic communities. Moreover, the interviewees used social media to follow news and updates from the scientific and artistic world.

The interviewee responses show that the exchange of research ideas through social media was generally limited to small, specialist groups or channels on Discord, Mastodon, Telegram, Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp.

Some respondents also described recording lectures and tutorials for students and wider audiences and making them available on YouTube. In their view, this represented another way to increase their online visibility as experts in their respective fields.

The respondents also mentioned giving interviews to the press or online media in which they discussed their research. Several suggested that presenting preliminary ideas in this manner could help establish authorship and reduce the risk of appropriating ideas.

Approximately half of the respondents reported depositing full texts of their publications on academic platforms such as Research Gate and Academia.edu (Table 1). Across both rounds of interviews, participants indicated that uploading texts to these platforms was often their only activity on these platforms. Most did not take part in the discussion forums there. Instead, they often used the platforms' private messaging functions to contact individual researchers, seeking advice or requesting a copy of a paper which could not be shared publicly for copyright reasons. One respondent described little response after posting a question on a discussion forum, which may suggest that researchers are generally reluctant to use these platforms for exchanging ideas. More commonly, respondents preferred to discuss research ideas through direct conversations. ResearchGate and Academia.edu profiles are researchers' professional academic profiles. Only one respondent reported that a research project had originated through Research Gate, suggesting that such cases were exceptional among researchers under study.

Respondents in the arts also mentioned the following platforms, in addition to Instagram, that they used to share creative ideas and look for inspiration: Behance, Coroflot, Creativpool, and Shotdeck.

Some respondents, however, expressed reservations about sharing their ideas publicly, because of concerns about protecting their intellectual property:

It is difficult to protect copyright, e.g. for a screenplay, so I would rather not share my ideas. Even submitting my work to competitions involves a degree of risk (Film).

Conclusion

The results of the empirical study can be summarised as follows: Polish early-career researchers in the humanities, theology, and the arts are present on various online platforms, both general-purpose and specialist for researchers and creative professionals. They make only moderate use of social media, at least with respect to the aspects of scholarly communication examined in this study, i.e. sharing ideas, establishing contacts and enhancing online visibility.

The interviews show that traditional forms of scholarly communication and sharing ideas play a significant role. These include informal face-to-face-conversations at academic conferences, exhibitions, and festivals, as well as e-mail, one of the oldest and most widely used forms of online information exchange.

The findings suggest that, although social media play an important role in contemporary scholarly communication, they are used to disseminate information about publications or artistic achievements rather than to share ideas or establish professional contacts. Respondents were also divided in their opinions on the contribution of social media to building academic reputation. These differences appear to reflect individual preferences rather than disciplinary affiliation or artistic field.

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Open Data

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