UWO Students' Use of Social Media to Navigate Accessibility

Authors: Anika Sebudde, Kate Mahoney, and Sam Schneider
Supervisors: Kim Clark and Andrew Walsh

Introduction

Students increasingly use social media for self-expression, communication, and as a platform to discuss issues. The accessibility of social media allows people to connect over a common interest.

In UWO's 2021-22 Equity Census, almost 10% of respondents identified as having some kind of disability. Our research group explored Western University students' use of social media to navigate issues and experiences with accessibility and disabilities.

Our goal was to determine how students are using social media platforms to discuss access issues and uncover common trends of student experiences with accessibility at UWO.

Methodology

Our research examined the most popular social media platforms to determine how students utilized them to discuss accessibility. We used the search functions of each platform to find relevant materials from 2019-present, and expanded our search to other resources such as blogs and podcasts, following the trail of what we found.

The most used platform for these purposes was Reddit, and the podcast Accessibili-tea stood out for the qualitative depth of the materials.

How Students are Using Different Platforms

Most UWO clubs have an Instagram presence, where they advertise their events. This platform does not elicit much dialogue amongst students about their experiences, instead it is used to seek information or promote various resources that could accommodate them.

TikTok is a platform where students can state their grievances about workload, depression, anxiety, accessibility, etc. It is rarely used to offer solutions to these issues. Instead, Tiktok is an outlet that allows students to feel validated in the comment section by their peers who have had similar experiences.

"The Tea on Disability" is a student-run podcast hosted on Spotify where UWO students and alumni are interviewed about living with a disability within the university experience. Find them on Spotify and Western University's "Thrive Online" blog.

There are several Facebook pages that deal with disability at UWO. These pages are used to coordinate events and to share links and resources. However, there are very few student experiences communicated in them.

Reddit is often used to obtain advice on how to access services. There were several posts made by incoming students with various disabilities concerned about what the actual lived experience may be like for them and looking for advice.

The detail provided in Reddit threads is in line with our initial research. Researchers at Waterloo University examined Reddit posts to determine how the stress of COVID-19 affected students (Callaghan et al., 2020). At both UWO and Waterloo, students seem to find Reddit useful since it is publicly available, users posted anonymously, and posts generate a broader conversation.

We found that Reddit posts were more often used proactively to solve problems in advance than reactively after problems occurred, demonstrating students' active attempts to crowd-source accessibility strategies.

60% 60 percent of students using Reddit for proactive coping engagement to resolve potential concerns

Example: those with essential tremors looking for writing accommodation advice

40% 40 percent of students using Reddit for retrospective coping engagement

Example: students posting retrospectively to vent or request problem-solving recommendations, particularly with proctortrack

Trends

- Students like to deal with their professors directly about accessibility needs. There were cases where professors ignored accommodations recommended by accessibility services.
- Students do not identify mental health issues as eligible for accessibility services.
- Wait times and limitations on the number of sessions can restrict access to mental health services.
- There is a lack of awareness among students of what accessibility services can do and how to access them.
- The accessibility service's website has dead links; students seeking accommodation may have trouble navigating.
- Using accessibility services properly can be time-consuming and may not seem worth the effort for some students.
- Students are frustrated with the removal of Self-Reported Absences (SRAs).

Solutions

As the discussions on Reddit shows, students are unaware of accessibility services, how to access them, what accommodations are available, and who is eligible. For instance, there is a lack of awareness that students with mental health disorders are eligible for accommodations. These accessibility barriers should be removed, by fixing dead links, making the websites easier to access and navigate, and simplifying the process of seeking accommodations.

More flexibility on the part of instructors would give students a chance for more autonomy and agency in how they navigate their coursework and accommodations. Also, professors could offer alternative assignments and quiz options in their classes, allowing students to handle accommodations as needed on their own terms.

Finally, students are seeking a mechanism like Self-Reported Absences or an alternative to meet their needs; this would help mitigate students' stress during the semester.

References
Callaghan, S., Drysdale, M. T. B., & Lee, J. (2021). Wellness, blaming and coping during a pandemic: An analysis of perceptions on reddit. Mental Health and Social Inclusion, 25(3), 267–278. https://doi.org/10.1108/mhsi-05-2021-0021

Vyas, A., Bressette, C., Huner, E., Noorani, M., McQuaid, T., Tomchick-Condon, T., Oloya, O., Stewart, N., Highgate, L., & Lambier, J. (2022). (rep.). Western Equity Census: Report (pp. 1–36). London, ON: Western University.

Link to research team website

Link to audio recording of poster