“Social Media is Their Space”: Student and Teacher Use and Perception of Features of Social Media in Language Education

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Abstract

Social media is seen as a powerful driver of change for language teaching and learning. Many studies have looked at the use and adoption rates of social media in language education, but studies that take a more fine-grained understanding of the differences between individual features of social media and how they are perceived by learners and teachers are rare. We present an analysis of the results of two workshops in a UK university that illustrate disparities between how individual features of social media are used generally, and how they are used for educational purposes between learners and teachers of languages. To understand the underlying perceptions of and attitudes towards features of social media we performed an inductive thematic analysis of discussion data generated at the workshops. From this we surface three themes: social media as distinct language type; navigating appropriateness; and prioritizing authentic communication flow. From these themes, we offer four design recommendations for practitioners and researchers who wish to incorporate social media in language teaching. These recommendations are: pay attention to the specific features of social media, and design to utilise them effectively; prioritise learner-led and learner-owned use of social media; create structured pathways to authentic social media use; and incorporate social media in both traditional and new methods of assessment.

1. Introduction

Social media is increasingly melded into every aspect of modern life. In January 2019, 3.484 billion people globally were classified as active social media users (45% of the world’s population) (Kemp, 2019), and it is becoming commonplace to use communication apps like WeChat and WhatsApp to communicate with employers, colleagues, teachers, friends, businesses, doctors, and more. It is understandable that knowing how to communicate effectively through social media is increasingly acknowledged as being a vital part of linguistic competence. Despite this, the teaching of social media and the incorporation of social media into teaching practice is still in its infancy, even in fields where it may offer significant contributions, such as language learning. Nevertheless, it is clear that students of languages are turning to social media of their own initiative to immerse themselves in the culture and social media communication of their learned language.
As research in computer-assisted language learning has shown, social media potentially offers benefits for language learning when integrated into curricula (Greenhow & Askari, 2017; Stefania Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Toetenel, 2014). Social media could be an excellent platform to complement classroom methods in terms of delivering complex socio-pragmatic knowledge through spontaneous interaction with people of different age and social status. However, different social media sites and applications act as specific socio-technical systems (van Dijck, 2013), offering very different features and services (e.g., text, audio, video messaging, and calls), and offer different possibilities and opportunities for configuration and appropriation. Whilst this means that social media language learning can provide a tailor-made platform to meet individual learners’ needs and fit with individual learners’ preferred style of learning, it also naturally has implications for the effective incorporation of social media into language teaching. This heterogeneity is further compounded by the interrelated issue of how different social medias are perceived and used by learners and teachers. Different applications are associated with different functions (e.g. work, play, socialising), different sets of interpersonal relationships (e.g. professional, familial, peers) (Nouwens, Griggio, & Mackay, 2017) and are informed by different cultural contexts (van Dijck, 2013) which, again, will affect the outcome of attempting to incorporate social media into language teaching.

This paper adds to existing literature on social media and language learning which has primarily sought to understand current patterns of use, by taking a more conceptual and design-oriented approach. This constitutes an initial exploration into a more fine-grained understanding of social media in language learning and teaching, based upon an investigation of the use, implications and perceptions of their specific features and affordances (i.e., the perceived properties of technologies that suggest and indicate possible uses). To do this we examine usage patterns and underlying assumptions and perceptions of individual features of social media technologies, in order to generate design recommendations for its incorporation into language learning. This study took the form of two workshops in a UK university, one workshops with learners of languages and one with teachers. In these workshops participants discussed their use of social media in terms of individual features and services, as well as their assumptions and perceptions regarding their use in language learning, teaching, and generally.

**2. Related Work**

2.1. Social media for language learning and teaching

It is widely reported that social media can have a positive effect within education (Gao, Luo, & Zhang, 2012; S. Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Stefania Manca & Ranieri, 2016, 2017; Rodríguez-Hoyos, Salmón, & Fernández-Díaz, 2015; Tess, 2013). Studies such as (Gao et al., 2012) on the use of Twitter point to potential improvements in participation, engagement, reflection, and collaboration in a variety of learning contexts from using social media. Whilst (Wang, Guo, He, & Wu, 2019) link social-interactive engagements on social media to decreasing drop-out rates in MOOCs. In addition, Manca and Ranieri’s (Stefania Manca & Ranieri, 2016) study on Facebook within education highlights a number of features of the social media platform that could be used to broaden learning contexts and for the creation of rich learning resources,
whilst at the same time highlighting issues preventing adoption, such as institutional resistance to social media and incompatibility with existing pedagogies.

Research into social media use within language learning contexts has similarly pointed to its transformative potential. In particular Sun et al. (Sun et al., 2017), Zou et al. (Zou, Li, & Li, 2018) and Eun-Young et al. (Kim, Park, & Baek, 2011) link social media use to increasing student fluency and competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Özdemir (Özdemir, 2017) connected Facebook to an increase in intercultural communicative effectiveness in students. Similarly Peeters (Peeters, 2018) identifies the importance of social media for students to develop their cognitive, metacognitive, organisational, and social functioning; Lantz-Andersson (Lantz-Andersson, 2018) used Facebook to improve student’s sociopragmatic competence; and Akbari et al. (Akbari, Pilot, & Robert-Jan Simons, 2015) for student autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Many studies (e.g. (Álvarez Valencia, 2016; Lin, Warschauer, & Blake, 2016; Stevenson & Liu, 2010)) have also looked at the use of bespoke language learning applications and websites, identifying how features aimed at sociability create positive peer-led learning experiences.

Although many studies have understandably focussed on the potential for social media to improve language learning in terms of competence, fluency, and cultural/social awareness, there have been fewer studies that look at how social media has actually been configured for use within pedagogies. To highlight the importance of this issue, Manca and Grion (Stefania Manca & Grion, 2017) ascribe low participation rates in online spaces to inadequate or unsuitable design principles, such as imbalanced power relations and a lack of authenticity. Paul and Friginal (Paul & Friginal, 2019) identify the differences between asymmetric and symmetric social networks for learners of Chinese in terms of interactions and pedagogical uses; whilst Toetenel (Toetenel, 2014) highlights differences between the features of the major social media platforms and how they can be used as open education resources within the language classroom. More recently, Barrot’s (Barrot, 2018) analysis of uses of Facebook as a learning environment for language teaching and learning identified that despite increasing use, many of its features remain to be unexplored, remarking that research into pedagogical uses of Facebook was still in its ‘infancy’. Similarly, in an analysis of trends in the design and application of mobile language learning (Hwang & Fu, 2019), Hwang et al. suggest that because of the high reported percentage of mixed results in terms of learning outcomes, it would be beneficial to further explore and clarify the promotive factors, constraint conditions, and applied strategies of mobile learning activities. These studies point to the importance of thinking deeply about the individual features of social media and their implications for the design of language learning pedagogies, one of the key objectives of our work.

Notably, Manca (Stefania Manca, 2020) undertook a review of studies to ascertain whether Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat and WhatsApp have become integral to teaching and learning in higher education, paying particular attention to the pedagogical affordances of the platforms. Most of the reviewed studies detail attempts to incorporate social media technologies in ways that replicate the classroom or lecture hall, and where ‘pedagogical affordances like mixing information and learning resources, hybridization of expertise, and
widening the context of learning remain largely undervalued and underexploited’. Further to this, Manca describes the general lack of concern for the unique affordances of individual social media systems, and correspondingly a lack of understanding of student’s perceptions towards them. As they summarise: ‘Indeed, each platform needs to be considered as a specific socio-technical system with a range of user affordances and constraints that demand proper consideration when designing learning experiences that employ social media’. It is precisely this concern that this study seeks to address.

2.2. Attitudes and perceptions of social media for language learning
Studies have looked at student perceptions of and attitudes towards social media’s use for language learning. For example, (Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott, & Kennedy, 2012; Cooke, 2017; Karvounidis, Chimos, Bersimis, & Douligeris, 2014) all examine student attitudes towards social media for learning in higher education, whilst Ko (Ko, 2019) looked specifically at student attitudes towards receiving vocabulary feedback through WeChat, reporting positivity towards the timeliness and quality of feedback, as well as increases in overall engagement. In studies of teachers’ perceptions of and attitudes towards social media, a general positivity is identified as being undermined by pedagogical and institutional incompatibility. For example, Ajjan and Hartshorne (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008) surveyed teachers’ awareness of the pedagogical benefits of social media, noting incompatibility with current practices as being the most significant factor for them not being adopted. Manca and Ranieri (Stefania Manca & Ranieri, 2016) conducted a wide survey of Italian higher education institutions and also identified a general ambivalence to the adoption of social media, despite a widespread acknowledgement of their potential benefits. Basöz (Basöz, 2016) surveyed EFL teachers and found generally positive attitudes towards social media’s potential to develop vocabulary knowledge, create a more relaxed and stress-free language learning environment, and give learners access to more authentic language use.

The above studies into student and teacher attitudes towards social media for learning have primarily focussed on attitudes that affect their adoption and/or perceptions of their utility for education. The findings correspondingly advocate for improvement in support and training in social media for teachers, and increased inclusion of social media in language learning. Whilst this is undoubtedly important, what is missing is direction on how social media should be configured so as to be most effectively incorporated into language learning and teaching. As it is clear that different features of social media have different pedagogical implications (Paul & Friginal, 2019; Toetenel, 2014), it is also true that different social media platforms perform very different roles in the lives of teachers and learners (Nouwens et al., 2017). It is these key areas of enquiry that this paper seeks to address, and from which we build design recommendations for how social media may be effectively incorporated into language learning and teaching.

2.3. Features and Affordances
The discipline of interaction design (Fallman, 2008; Goodman, Stolterman, & Wakkary, 2011; Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004) is uniquely placed to explore the relationship between individual
features of social media, their use within language pedagogies, and how they are perceived by teachers and learners. This is because ‘interaction design takes a holistic view of the relationship between designed artifacts, those that are exposed to these artifacts, and the social, cultural, and business context in which the meeting takes place’ (Fallman, 2008). In this way, the qualitative approach taken in this study is informed by this emphasis on holistic and contextual understanding.

The concept of affordance was introduced to interaction design by Donald Norman. In his book, the Psychology of Everyday Things (Norman, 1988), he states that the term affordance: ‘...refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. A chair affords (‘is for’) support and, therefore, affords sitting. A chair can also be carried.’. In this way, the concept is useful, as it allows us to distinguish between the features of social media technology (e.g. group messaging functionality) and how features could possibly be used within language learning and teaching (e.g. a group roleplay assignment), this is critical for understanding teacher and learner perceptions of social media technologies in terms of pedagogical affordances. Manca et al. established three such affordances based on an investigation of Facebook as a learning environment (Stefania Manca & Ranieri, 2016). These are mixing information and learning resources, hybridization of expertise, and widening the context of learning. This indicates the value of thinking in terms of affordances when evaluating social media technologies within education, but also to the important role of perception in realising these affordances. A key element of Norman’s view of affordances within interaction design is that an affordance must be perceived before it can be actualised.

In order to better understand how social media technologies can be appropriated in ways that maximise their pedagogical affordances, we look to the recent practice of ‘unplatformed design’ (Lambton-Howard, Olivier, Vlachokyriakos, Celina, & Kharrufa, 2020). Unplatformed design is a design model for the appropriation of social media technologies that pays particular attention to the implications of the individual features of social media in respect to coordinating participation. To do this, the model conceptualizes social media as a design material, and draws attention to the qualities of existing social media platforms that may be directly configured (e.g. directly manipulating social media such as setting groups, posting messages etc.) and/or augmented (e.g. by adding additional technologies or processes such as websites, blogs, cloud storage etc.). We consider our use of the unplatformed design model to be complimentary to existing theoretical approaches that frame social media technologies as specific socio-technical systems (van Dijck, 2013), and to those that conceive them as having specific ecosystems of users (Nouwens et al., 2017). This is because the model is primarily productive in focus, acting as a conceptual resource for designing with social media technologies. Specifically, unplatformed design is concerned with the following qualities of social media:

- **Morphology** - the overall form and structure of connections and relationships between users (e.g. groups, friend connections, follows etc.)
• **Role** - the communication, understanding and designation of a user’s identity and understanding of related actions, duties and expectations (e.g. administrative rights, leadership responsibilities etc.)

• **Representation of activity** - the manner and methods by which the activity of users is presented, curated and navigated, either within a social media technology or externally (e.g. image, text, videos, threaded comments, hashtags etc.)

• **Permeability** - the ways by which a system can receive, output and exchange information with users and other systems (input/upload methods, download methods etc.)

Two examples of educational ‘unplatformed design’ can be found with WhatFutures (Lambton-Howard et al., 2019) which used WhatsApp to connect a global network of volunteers in multiple group activities; and Online UWC (Celina, Kharrufa, Preston, Comber, & Olivier, 2016) which employed a loose eco-system of freely available messaging and video call apps to support a peer-led online course. By adopting an ‘unplatformed’ interaction design methodology we hope to surface insights and, correspondingly, design recommendations.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Question

This study explores learners’ and teachers’ perceptions of the use of social media for learning languages, paying special attention to the individual features of social media, as well as to ideas held by learners and teachers surrounding their use. The following research questions were formulated:

- How are the individual features of social media currently used by learners and teachers of languages generally and particularly in learning and teaching?
- What perceptions do learners and teachers of languages have of the individual features of social media, with regards to their general use and their use in language learning and teaching?

#### 3.2. Study design

Two workshops, carried out at a UK university, are presented and analysed in this study. The workshops were held on campus in 2019 in a school of languages. The first workshop was conducted with language learners enrolled at the university, whilst the second was conducted with teaching staff. For both cohorts, we recruited from a wide range of ages and experience levels within the context of the university. As such, our participants included undergraduates and PhD candidates, as well as new teachers and teachers who had been teaching for a number of years. For the learner workshop, participants were internally recruited via email and in person in tutorials and lectures. Learners also received a small cash incentive for attending the workshop. Participants in the learner workshop (N = 10) included learners of English, Malay, Korean, Cantonese, Mandarin, Bengali, Urdu, Japanese, Spanish, and French, and although data was not captured on this, were composed of a variety of nationalities. For the teacher workshop, participants were recruited through face-to-face meetings, as well as through email and posters in staff areas. Participants in the teacher workshop (N = 12) included an even wider range of learned languages, and included staff who had been teaching around 1-2 years up to those who had been teaching ~20 years. Both workshops were audio recorded with consent,
and then transcribed for analysis. Additionally, two researchers present in the workshops took field notes of observations.

Both workshops involved the use of a bespoke set of cards to help frame and guide discussion around the individual features of social media. These ‘feature cards’ were created by the research team to represent the specific features of social media, as well as to provide guidance examples for each. Although existing typologies of Web 2.0 tools do exist, for example in higher education (Conole & Alevizou, 2010), we wanted our categories to be focussed on specific features of social media technologies and to be immediately understandable by participants, requiring little or no further explanation and avoiding confusion or misinterpretation. While some elements between Conole et al.’s typology and ours are shared, others such as ‘media sharing’ and ‘instant messaging’ are too general and do not go into the specific media types as categories (e.g. video, audio, and text) and nature of communication (e.g. video call vs video message), or are beyond the scope of the platforms intended to be covered in this work (e.g. wikis, blogging, recommender systems). Furthermore, they do not go into recent, yet important additions to such platforms such as chatbots. To this end our categories were established by looking at the primary features of the most popular social media networks and applications used globally, as aggregated from statista.com. 10 cards were created in total, consisting of direct text message, audio message, audio call, video message, video call, stories, comments, chatbots, feeds, and game playing. Table 1 includes a summary and description of each. Blank cards were also provided in case participants wished to add their own.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct text message</td>
<td>Asynchronous primarily text-based communication between one or more people. E.g. Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp chats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio message</td>
<td>Asynchronous audio communication between one or more people. E.g. Facebook Messenger record audio, WhatsApp record audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio call</td>
<td>Synchronous audio communication via social media application between one or more people. E.g. WhatsApp call, Skype call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video message</td>
<td>Asynchronous video communication between one or more people. E.g. Instagram/Snapchat video, WhatsApp video record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video call</td>
<td>Synchronous video communication between one or more people. E.g. Skype video call, WhatsApp video call</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. A list of feature cards used in workshops and corresponding descriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stories</th>
<th>Asynchronous presentations of video, image, text and audio vignettes. Typically, with 24-hour life spans and only visible to friends or followers. E.g. Instagram stories, Snapchat stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>Publicly visible text messages related to, and usually positioned beneath, an article of media. E.g. Instagram comments, YouTube comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeds</td>
<td>Asynchronous presentation of public or pseudo public multimedia content generated by users. E.g. Twitter feeds, Facebook feeds, Instagram feeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatbots</td>
<td>Automated conversational agents, typically with natural language inputs. E.g. Bots on Messenger, Slack, Twitter (not Siri/Google Assistant etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game playing</td>
<td>Asynchronous or synchronous game playing with another person, embedded within a social media technology. E.g. Facebook games, WeChat games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Examples of completed feature graphs for learners (left) and teachers (right).

The workshop with language learners included two activities and took around 2 1/2 hours. After an initial icebreaker introduction, the first workshop activity involved using the feature cards to prompt group discussion and reflection on each feature with regards to their usage in everyday life and in language learning. Participants were split into three roughly equal groups, and each were given a full set of 10 cards. Each group was also given a board showing a blank graph with two axes labelled ‘Frequency of use for language learning’ and ‘frequency of general use’. The axes of the graph were not given numerical values to encourage more descriptive discussion of their placement (to avoid discussion along the lines of ‘I think this is a 4... no I think it is a 5’). All participants were told that the top end of each axis represented using a feature every day, whereas the bottom end of the axis represented never or very rarely using a feature for that purpose. Within each group, the cards were dealt out between the participants. Then, taking it in turns, a participant would read aloud the content of their card to the group, after which the group discussed where that card should be placed on the board with respect to the two axes, with higher up the vertical axis representing increased usage of that
feature for language learning, and further along the horizontal axis representing increased usage of that feature in general use (for example, a feature card placed in the top rightmost position on the graph would indicate a daily use both generally and for language learning). Groups were also encouraged to annotate their placement with additional details. Once all cards had been placed, the groups were brought together to discuss differences and similarities between their placements. See Figure 1 for examples of completed feature graphs.

The second activity in the learner workshop involved the simulation on social media of a ‘formal’ learning task followed by an informal general task. We chose simulation activities in order to better frame discussions around the specifics of using social media in a language learning context. Inspired by the use of WhatsApp in WhatFutures [2] we designed the first task as taking place on a WhatsApp group containing 3-4 participants, each with a specific role to play in the task. Participants were placed in their learned language and placed in a shared WhatsApp group chat using their own devices (phones were provided for any participants who did not bring theirs). Each participant in the group was then assigned one of the following roles.

- ROLE 1: Choose a topic of your choice and post in your group a short (30sec) audio message in your learned language about your topic.
- ROLE 2: Listen to the audio message in your group, and have a text conversation with role 3, in your learned language, about that topic.
- ROLE 3: Listen to the audio message in your group, and have a text conversation with role 2, in your learned language, about that topic.
- ROLE 4: Read the exchange between roles 2 and 3. Give your feedback on the conversation.

For the informal task, participants were asked within their group to simulate arranging to meet up for a social event (no more specifics were given than this). This simulation took place in the same WhatsApp group chats, but did not include the use of roles or any explicit learning process. Afterwards the groups were brought back together to discuss the activity and reflect upon both the formal and informal simulations.

The workshop with language teachers also contained two activities, and lasted 2 hours. The first activity used the same set of feature cards (Table 1) and blank graph as the first activity in the learner group. The only differences were that the language learning axis was relabelled as ‘language teaching’, and the language teachers were not divided into sub-groups (in the interests of time). This activity was designed to be as similar as possible to the learner workshop so as to give directly comparable results. For the second activity, since participants were teachers and not learners, rather than recreate a simulation of a learning activity, we instead presented the teachers with ‘insights’ generated from the simulation activity in the learner workshop. These insights took the form of quotes taken from transcripts of the first workshop that contained explicit reference to incorporating social media into teaching practices. They were used as prompts to kick start wider discussion on the implications of using social media technologies in language learning education.
3.3. Data and analysis approach

The primary data source from the workshops consisted of audio recordings of the group discussions. Group discussions were held in both workshops after the feature graphing activity, and after the learner simulation or teacher ‘simulation insights’ activity. Audio was transcribed for thematic analysis. Analysis aimed to follow Braun and Clarke’s (Braun, 2006) method for thematic analysis, focusing on both semantic (surface meanings) and latent (underlying ideas or assumptions) aspects of the data. We primarily used an inductive approach, where codes and themes develop from the data content. This meant reading and re-reading the transcripts, then iteratively coding the data, with each pass improving and revising codes throughout the process. Initially coding by two researchers produced codes grouped into five candidate themes. These candidate themes were then collapsed into the three themes presented in the results section below after an initial thematic mapping suggested overlap between two pairs of themes. Extracts of the data are presented to both act as exemplars of data within the themes, but also analytically, where aspects are discussed in more detail.

Additionally, both workshops generated data on the usage of the individual features of social media for both language learning and general use. Three graphs were produced in the learner workshop, and one graph in the teacher workshop, examples of which can be seen in Figure 1. These graphs took the form of cards representing each feature placed in respect to two axes, referring to frequency of use for language learning and frequency of general use. Although the primary utility of this graph data was its role in prompting and framing group discussion, we viewed the data, along with field notes taken by researchers, as useful for making comparisons between the learner and teacher groups and for helping us further understand issues and themes identified in the discussion. To analyse the graph data, we divided each axis into 5 equal segments akin to a Likert scale, and gave each card two scores corresponding to its placement on each axis, with higher scores indicating increased frequency of usage. The scores for the three separate graphs generated in the learner workshop were combined and averaged so as to enable direct comparison with the graph generated in the teacher workshop. These scores were then descriptively analysed to draw comparisons between the two groups and two usage types (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. A comparison of use of social media features generally vs. for language learning/teaching in learners and teachers, where 1 = never or rarely use, and 5 = use every day.

4. Results

4.1. Feature usage graphs

Although the feature usage graphs are considered secondary data, we present them here first as they provide additional context for understanding and interpreting the primary discussion data. From this chart we can see broad similarities between how teachers and learners use social media ‘generally’, with an identical average frequency score. This is different with social media use for language learning, where the trend is that learners reported using social media features for language learning more frequently than teachers reported using them for teaching. This points to language learning on social media being primarily an informal learning experience, which is corroborated by our analysis of the discussion data in the following section. In respect to the individual features of social media, the greatest difference can be seen in learners’ use of video calls, stories, feeds, and game playing for language learning, which were all over 1 point higher than their equivalent use in language teaching. All features were rated as being used for learning more than they were used for teaching, with the exception of text messaging which was reported as slightly more (<1 point) frequently used for teaching than learning, and video messages and chatbots both of which were scored identically as rarely used in either learning or teaching. Once again, we stress that the analysis of this graphical data is not intended to be generalized across populations due to its small sample size and non-use of statistical methods. Instead it is presented to add more description to our participants’ self-
reflection on their own social media usages, and as an accompanying description to the analysis of our primary discussion data source which follows.

4.2. Themes from analysis of discussion data
We generated three salient themes related to use of social media for language learning within the discussion data set: social media as distinct language type; social media requires a navigation of appropriateness; and social media allows for the prioritisation of authentic communication flow.

Theme 1: “it’s quite a vital skill nowadays” - social media as a distinct language type
The first theme captures the perceived importance of social media as a crucial skill in language learning and language development. This sentiment was expressed by both learners and teachers alike, frequently in reference to the ubiquity of social media in modern life, and to the unique modes of communication that are afforded by it. A number of learners made statements similar to the following:

“... I think that messaging is a skill in its own in the same way that when you’re learning a language, you might have a letter-writing class where the task is ‘Write a letter to your friend.’. I think it could be useful to, like... cause you never get taught how to text in your target language, that might be quite interesting to be like, ‘Okay, today’s class, we are going to use WhatsApp, and we are going to pretend that we are organising something.’...” (L5)

Here the participant expresses two key points. The first is that communicating via social media is conceived as a distinct form of communication, different from other forms of communication (e.g. letter writing). Learners referred to the use of slang words, emojis, and stickers specific to social media in certain languages and cultures. Social media was also described as having a unique etiquette associated with it: “what is the ‘etiquette’, in, in, communicating in texts?” (L1). This further emphasises the uniqueness of social media as a particular form of communication. Secondly, for our participants at least, social media was a communication form that was not currently being taught, with learners expressing a desire for this to be otherwise. Although the primary motivation for this was the prevalence and primacy of social media communication in everyday life, there was also a particular emphasis on avoiding embarrassment or social awkwardness with peers and speakers of that language.

“I think it’s quite a, it’s quite a vital skill nowadays. Like, especially, if, if you are going to Japan and trying to make Japanese friends, they’re going to want to add you on one of the messaging things, and then it’s feels, it feels, it would feel really embarrassing if you could talk to them very well, but then you don’t really know how to communicate with them...” (L1)

“Yeah, sounding really dumb cause you only learned formal form, and your friends are like, ‘Why are you talking to me like we’ve never met before?’ And your boyfriend’s like, ‘Why are you being so cold?’ I just can’t use any other forms. ‘You sound like my professor.’” (L2)
This desire to learn how to use social media properly was recognized by the teaching participants. A few teachers gave examples of the types of questions their students had asked them around social media, particularly in reference to learning slang terms, which all teachers agreed was important to learn.

“...there was this lovely girl in the classroom saying, ‘can I prepare a list of swear words?’... [Laughter] ... So basically, the student initiated that and I had a quick look and, wow! Yes. But they wanted to have that input, so yeah, I let it happen and I told them, ‘promise me not to tell anyone’. So ... maybe it is important because they want to know if people say bad things to them...” (T8)

“They need to. They need to know yeah. They need to know.” (T9)

“How they think is a part of their lives. So maybe we have to learn. Yeah, these Japanese people are using it all, then Japanese students should understand how to use them right to write like a native.” (T4)

These examples illustrate how teachers acknowledged the importance of their students knowing how to communicate properly with speakers of a language through social media. This is particularly important as social media is incorporated into work and life more generally. For example, WeChat is a common part of business in China with many small businesses operating exclusively through it. It is increasingly clear that if you cannot use social media, you are not considered fully competent in many languages. However, in respect to informal social media use, there is an uncertainty expressed by teachers as to whether this is something they should be teaching (‘promise me not to tell anyone!’). Also, before being able to properly teach social media, teachers would have to learn it as well. This sentiment ties into a perception by some of the teachers of social media as being something that is outside their knowledge and/or their remit as educators, which we discuss in more detail in the next theme.

Theme 2: “Social media is their space” – social media requiring a navigation of appropriateness
The second theme captured the idea of social media as belonging to, or being owned by, younger people, and the corresponding need to navigate appropriateness. In the context of these workshops, the term ‘younger people’ was conflated with the term ‘learners’, as students are typically younger than teachers within the university the study took place in. The identification of this generation gap was expressed by both learners and teachers, particularly in the context of inhabiting the same social media space for the purposes of language learning. Many learners made statements similar to the following:

“Normally with a tutor, you would use very formal language and that [speaking informally] might not be [comfortable]” (L8)

Overall, communicating with teachers on social media was seen as awkward and unusual. This was primarily attributed to the nature of social media conversations as generally being much
more informal than the ways in which learners felt they would be comfortable addressing their teachers. In this way, we can see that learners perceived the introduction of teachers into social media as bringing an unusual dynamic which would disrupt the comfortable flow of communication. This mismatch of formalities was more pronounced in learners of languages with more explicit formal registers (e.g. Chinese, Korean, Japanese). As suggested by a learner, one solution to eliminate this source of awkwardness could be the use of role-play activities:

“In, in languages like Japanese or Korean where there’s register, it would probably have to be a more kind of role-playing situation where you are allowed to use slightly less formal language.” (L7)

Though this suggestion was also seen as a source of potential awkwardness.

“Yeah, but if it, but if it was in kind of more role-playing, like, ‘Imagine we’re the same age. Let’s have a conversation about this,’ that might be slightly better, but also a little funny. Well, maybe a little bit awkward as well.” (L8)

Clearly the idea of communicating with teachers through social media is considered counter to the natural ways in which learners use social media. In this way, learners are stating (or inferring) the existence of a natural comfortable space that they inhabit in social media, and that teachers, or language learning, exist outside of this. This is in line with Nouwens et al.’s [5] work on communication places in app ecosystems. Communication places refers to the ways in which users create specific membership rules (who they communicate with), perceived purposes (the functions of communication), and emotional connotations around their use of communication apps. Here we can see that teachers are perceived as standing outside of learners’ typical existing understanding of social media as a communication place.

This sentiment was echoed by the teachers, most of whom affirmed that communication between learners and teachers via social media can feel unusual, with some participants stating that the difference in formalities was likely impossible to surpass:

“I think this is a problem for languages that are hierarchical, in the sense that, if that’s a certain culture that requires a respect of elders and people with authority than it becomes very difficult to implement this in the classroom because you’ll be so confused as to how you’re going to address your teacher after that…I really doubt it’s… it could be put into practice. At least, not for the languages that I know… but the casual bit is something that it’s probably a no-no…”

(T2)

“The only way that I could actually see this being implemented in real life is if they have people of the same age and they could communicate with them and maybe that’s something that can be facilitated but other than that I don’t know if it is possible for you to have that sort of interaction with your teacher…” (T3)
This issue was further mixed with the complexities of professionalism and appropriate behaviour with some teachers raising uncertainties around what was and what was not acceptable in communication with learners through social media. One teacher raised an example of a colleague who had, in their opinion, crossed this boundary by being Facebook friends with all their students. However not all teachers agreed with this, with one expressing delight at being included in a social media group by their students.

“I use a lot of WeChat because you can’t use Facebook in China... and [my students] even created a group called ‘___ Gang’ with my name.” (T8)

This illustrates that the appropriateness of social media communication between learners and teachers is a grey area without clear agreed-upon boundaries. However, the differences expressed in these two examples further reinforce the idea of social media being seen as a space owned more by learners. The example of the group on WeChat was seen as acceptable as it was initiated by the students themselves; in this way the teacher was ‘brought in’ by the students. This stands in contrast to the Facebook example, where the teacher sought entry to a space which was perceived as not belonging to them.

On the topic of teaching social media itself, (e.g. lessons on how to communicate on social media in a learned language) many teachers expressed that there was no need, or that it was not their job to teach it:

“But would you feel that you need to teach them in a classroom or you could just leave students to, kind of, learn [social media] on their own? They can just do it by themselves.” (T5)

“But as a teacher, I don’t really need to teach them.” (T2)

Here the view expressed is that students will learn how to use social media without teacher guidance, as it is an ingrained part of being a young person: “because that’s what they do in their private life anyway” (T2). We can see that these statements are underpinned by the assumption that social media is a space owned by learners; that it is not a teacher’s place to teach social media. This view stands in contrast to the theme reported above where both teachers and learners acknowledged the importance of knowing and understanding social media for language learning.

Theme 3: “Like, it’s more like an immersion than, like, structured learning” – social media allowing for the prioritisation of authentic communication flow

The third theme captures a perception of social media as valuable for facilitating a natural and authentic ‘flow’ of communication. By flow, we are referring to the speed and ease with which communication occurs between users. Individual features of social media were perceived as supporting learners’ abilities to take part in a natural flow of communication in their learned languages, by giving the option to take part in conversations in low risk and low effort ways. Data within this theme operated at various levels, with some participants articulating positive learning experiences from engaging with the flow of social media communication, with others
citing it as being ‘overwhelming’ and ‘too much’ to constructively incorporate into learning. One feature of social media that was regularly referred to as key in constructing this flow was the use of emojis and stickers:

“I’ll resort just to, more, emojis and stuff because it was a lot easier to, like, put out there without actually, like, saying anything because (a) I didn’t know what to say, and (b) it was a lot easier to just have a sticker out there saying, ‘Yeah, I’m seeing what’s happening, it’s just that I’m not really in this...’, if that makes any sense?” (L8)

“I would definitely agree with that. If you can’t quite think of how to respond, you could just put a sticker... And then there can still, the conversation can continue on and you’re not always having to go, like, ‘sorry, what was that?’ or like, ‘can you say that in a different way?’” (L7)

The value of emojis and stickers in these examples is seen to be the role they play in facilitating conversation flow. They allowed the learners to participate in a conversation in a low effort and low risk manner that still enabled the conversations to continue. Furthermore, one participant highlighted that emojis and stickers can help with language learning as “things like emojis help because it relates a sort of, like, visual, sort of, learning aspect” (L5) referring to the emotional cues that emojis provide as important information that can help in understanding what was meant by an unclear message. This is in line with theory around emoji use generally (Hogenboom et al., 2013; Tauch & Kanjo, 2016) which show that they are often used to provide emotional context to help understanding and to facilitate conversation flow. In contrast to this, some learners felt that simply maintaining a flow of communication was not that useful for learning in a strict sense, for example when discussing using emojis: “…that makes it easier, whether that means your language gets better or not is completely different” (L8) and “Like, it’s more like an immersion than, like, structured learning” (L5). So, although social media was valued as making it easier to maintain a flow of communication, this was not necessarily seen as valuable in terms of learning the language itself, or as one teacher put it: “continuing the conversation, if not necessarily grasping or learning words” (T5). This can be compared with the difference between fluid and accurate learning, where social media immersion may help a learner respond fluently but may not help with accuracy; whereas structured learning can improve accuracy but stunt fluency.

A crucially important feature of social media that emerged through discussion was the ability for learners to choose the communication mode (e.g. text, audio, video) that most closely matched their comfort and ability. When referring to the simulated WhatsApp activity in the workshop: “…I would, I would, like, if I was recording the messages, I think it would be easier” (L1) and “I feel easier via text just because my written Chinese is better than my spoken Chinese.” (L4) Though similar to the previous point, learners acknowledged that although focussing on their strengths would enable a smoother communication flow, it would be less likely to help them improve their language knowledge. Again, this belies a latent priority for communication in social media to be natural and authentic.
Social media was also praised as being a place where learners could dwell without feeling the pressure to contribute. Allowing them to learn and communicate at their own pace. This was largely attributed to being members of large chat groups, or following lots of speakers of that language on Twitter or Facebook feeds.

“...one of the most useful things that I use for my practising my Japanese is I have, I am part of a group chat of about, maybe, seventy people... who move between Japanese, English, and French... And it does, it does genuinely work because if you have that many people, there’s no pressure to really be in or out... So, I’ve been there since my Japanese was really crap to now, where, like, I can respond relatively okay. Umm... You can allow other people to carry the conversation, but as you also get more confidence and understand more of what’s going on, you can add more in and put more stuff into the group.” (L1)

This experience was echoed by many others in the learner workshop, some of whom were members of similar groups. However, the usefulness of large groups for language learning was contested, particularly when groups get too large:

“I would feel overwhelmed, and I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t want to scroll through and read everyone else’s conversation.” (L4)

“I think, over, over twenty it just becomes almost overwhelm... like, as overwhelming, and you’d just, you’re psychologically, kind of, just, switch off.” (L8)

“I’m in one group that is four hundred, then I’m in, like, two hundred, three hundred... you get all the notifications, eventually you mute them. And, like, if you want to scroll up and see what people have been saying, you can do that, but then, by the time you’d done that, like, there’s a new... ten new conversations would have begun, so there’s really no point.” (L8)

The speed of communication in large groups was also seen as being particularly unsuitable for beginners of a language, who would likely be overwhelmed by the “ping, ping, ping” (L8) of notifications and messages. Another potential barrier for new language learners was access to an existing network of speakers of that language to connect with: “...unless you have an ‘in’ into those systems, there’s no point having those apps if you don’t know anyone you could connect with” (L6) and “generally with things like Facebook or Instagram Feeds, again, it’s maybe for the more advanced learner because you would have to know some people to be able to follow their stuff” (L1). Overall, immersing yourself into large chat groups and filling your social media feed with speakers of your target language is seen as a way of providing low risk access to genuine authentic communication flow at a pace that is determined by the learner. However, these benefits are tempered by being perceived as not being ‘real’ learning and by problems that emerge from potentially overwhelming amounts of information, such as ‘switching off’ and disengaging. We have also seen that access to such groups is perceived as requiring a corresponding access to speakers of that language who can bring you into their network, or at least a certain level of language ability before opportunities to engage with target language social media can be identified usefully.
5. Discussion

Our analysis of the workshop data has surfaced three themes around how learners and teachers perceive the use of social media in language learning: social media as distinct language type; social media requiring a navigation of appropriateness; and social media allowing for the prioritisation of authentic communication flow. We intended our approach to ‘look past’ surface descriptions of social media use and instead focus on latent ideas and understandings of social media. Because of this, we argue that these three themes capture fundamental conceptions of social media use for language learning. This is useful as it allows us to understand the ways in which incorporating social media into language learning can be more (or less) appropriate to the attitudes and needs of both learners and teachers, and more (or less) appropriate to the strengths of social media as a communication medium.

One consistent commonality between the three themes is that of negotiating and navigating the boundaries of formality, acceptability, and appropriateness on social media. Not just in language use, but in how teachers and learners should interact on social media, and through which features. The constant negotiation of these boundaries could be seen as an inevitable consequence of social media encroaching into more areas of everyday life. As this happens, rules for formality and for what is acceptable and appropriate solidify and become understood. This is exemplified by the widespread and accepted use of WeChat for communication between students and teachers in China. It is important that teachers of languages embrace this change, and embrace the use of social media in teaching and learning.

As an initial step towards formalising this understanding into useful guidance, we have formulated four design recommendations for incorporating the features of social media into the language learning classroom. These are based upon an application of the material qualities of social media technologies proposed by the unplatformed design model (morphology, role, representation of activity, permeability) discussed in the related work section (Lambton-Howard et al., 2020). Furthermore they are informed from lessons learned by successful examples of the appropriation of social media for education, as reported in related work, including WhatFutures (Lambton-Howard et al., 2019) and Online UWC (Celina et al., 2016; Celina, Lee, Olivier, & Kharrufa, 2018). Both of these examples conceptualise the individual features of social media as design material that may be configured and/or augmented towards the creation of new forms of interaction. The following recommendations address each of these material qualities in turn and discusses them in terms of pedagogical affordances. We suggest that these recommendations will help the design of learning interactions that incorporate social media to be more successful, relevant, and engaging.

**Design Recommendation 1 – Pay attention to the specific features of social media, and prioritise and model authentic use (Representation of Activity)**

The results of the graphing activities in both workshops show that the individual features of social media are used at different frequencies, and even more so between general use and use for language learning. For example, the learners in the workshops responded much more positively to the simulation of arranging to meet a friend through group text conversation on
WhatsApp, than they did using the same modality for engaging with a set discussion topic (theme 3). One possible explanation is that the way text conversations are represented in WhatsApp make it more suited to informal chat, than engaging with discussion topics.

We recommend paying particular attention to the different ways that activity may be represented within social media technologies (e.g. group text, images, video, etc) and modelling the types of learning activities that suit those modes of communication (e.g. short-form informal communication on instant messaging applications). This is so that the activity more closely maps to real life usage of those platforms, creating opportunities for natural and authentic communication (theme 3) and more closely to actual language use (theme 1). For example, Celina et al. extensively configured the group video call feature on Facebook and Google Hangouts (Celina et al., 2016) to successfully simulate a tutorial or seminar style environment, appropriate to the needs of the course, which would not have worked as well using text based communication. In comparison, Lambton-Howard et al. allowed their learners to contribute in any communication mode they felt comfortable (theme 3), in order to encourage a higher quantity of contributions (Lambton-Howard et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the insight that social media communication is a distinct language type (theme 1) requires an additional consideration of how activity is represented in respect to authenticity and learning. Communication on social media technologies needs to be demonstrated before it can be modelled and learned. Therefore, activities should be configured so as to be visible to other learners, at least in the earlier stages of learning, so that they may learn from each other and tutors. This may require augmentation, in terms of extracting examples of ‘good’ communication to make them more visible (e.g. classes posting extracts of conversations on a shared document, or a tutor starting with some pre-prepared samples in a group chat). Naturally requiring learners to post their work in places visible to peers or wider audiences, or for teachers to repost content generated by learners, has an implications for learner’s comfort levels with sharing (Waycott, Thompson, Sheard, & Clerehan, 2017) that will need to be handled sensitively.

**Design Recommendation 2 – Create learner-led and learner-owned spaces on social media (Role)**

The perception of social media as being a space that primarily belongs to (or at least is best understood by) young people was evident within both learner and teacher data (theme 2). Rather than seeing this as a reason not to incorporate social media into teaching practices, we recommend instead configuring roles in social media for language learning in a way that prioritises learner ownership and learner-led processes. There are many positive reasons for doing this. Firstly, minimising teacher presence helps ensure that communication is more natural and authentic between peers and reduces ambiguity as to how to address teachers and people in authority (themes 2 and 3). Secondly, positioning learners as leaders of social media usage in the classroom recognises and gains maximum benefit from the skills and experience learners already have that can be shared with peers (and teachers). Thirdly, it reduces the burden of teachers needing to be completely knowledgeable about how to use social media, and which platforms to use in learning, and lessens the burden of negotiating acceptable
professional boundaries for communication with learners (theme 2). In a practical sense this means configuring social media so that administrative and authorship rights (how social media typically recognizes authority) are genuinely owned by students, and minimizing teacher presence within social media spaces. This is in line with research on student-led environments where learners, through peer to peer interaction, become capable of solving problems of their own (Garrison, 2015).

The inclusion of roles in assigning particular duties and functions to learners, is a well-established method within group work (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). This is no different here, where ‘role-playing’ on social media was met largely with positive responses by learners. As long as the learning activity in which roleplay is used is relatively authentic to the representation of activity (see previous recommendation), it could be an effective learning tool, again with an emphasis on learner led interactions.

4.3. Design Recommendation 3 – Create structured pathways to authentic social media use through group structures and sizes (Morphology)

Both learners and teachers agreed that understanding how to communicate on social media is an important skill for language learning (theme 1), and that one of the most educationally rewarding aspects of engaging with social media for language learning is the way it can connect learners directly with speakers of that language and to a constantly evolving source of authentic language learning material (theme 3). As such we recommend connecting learners as quickly as possible with speakers of that language and with learning material. However, there was also an acknowledgement of the high barrier to entry for learners to properly engage with the quality, quantity, and frequency of communication typically found on social media (theme 2). Clearly, the overall form and structure of connections and relationships between users of social media technologies (morphology), has implications on a learner’s comprehension and capacity to learn. As such we recommend the creation of structured pathways of social media use that begin with safe spaces to practice, using peer-sourced and peer-generated learning material from social media (i.e. student led spaces in recommendation 2), moving through to genuine interaction with speakers of that language on social media. In practical terms, this may involve the creation of a dynamic groupings of different learners. For example, an initial set of smaller interconnected groups that connect beginners with advanced learners, and the sharing of content from social media. Activity wise, this could take the form of a rotating discussion of found articles, interesting threads or media to watch. At a later stage, the morphology could be adjusted so that learners naturally graduate to larger and more organic groups, such as the large ones described by participants in theme 3. Here they could communicate in a manner comfortable to them (theme 1) with speakers of that language.

In general terms, the configuration of morphology (e.g. size and interconnectedness of groups) has a direct impact on the quantity and quality of communication, and correspondingly on the level of challenge, of engaging with others. It is likely that different group structures will be required for different levels of learners. Similarly, the type of connection between people within the morphology (e.g. reciprocal friendship, one-way follow etc.) also affects the expectation of communication. Following someone on Twitter for example, has a much lower
expectation of communication than being within a WhatsApp group, or even friends on Facebook, and may therefore be more suitable to early learners.

**Design Recommendation 4 – Incorporate social media in both traditional and new methods of assessment (Permeability)**

The perception of social media as being incompatible with traditional teaching methods came across clearly in the related work (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Stefania Manca & Ranieri, 2016), and throughout the workshop with teachers. Despite this, there is strong evidence in the data (theme 1) that social media is perceived by both learners and teachers as crucially important for modern competency. As such, we argue that social media should be included in assessments, which may also alleviate some teachers’ concerns that if something is not assessed it will not be engaged with. Incorporating social media into assessment has a natural tie to the ways by which a social media technology can receive, output and exchange information with users and other systems (permeability). This is because being able to input and output information (possibly at scale) will likely play a part in the setting of and evidencing of assessment. Within smaller cohorts of learners, it may be feasible for assessors to use the general methods for inputting and outputting of a social media technology, such as typing text, uploading images, or by copying and pasting information into and out of an app, however this is clearly impractical at scale. Therefore, we recommend the creation of tools that interface programmatically with social media technologies (through application programming interfaces where possible) to automate and make consistent the posting and retrieving of information. One solution may be the creation of bots or ‘botplications’ (Klopfenstein, Delpriori, Malatini, & Bogliolo, 2017) which act as consistent conversational agents within a social media technology, and can also automate and process data for assessment.

In terms of the activity to be assessed, these could be as simple as including elements that directly address the use of social media (e.g. correct ways of ordering products from a shop using WeChat or arranging to meet friends at a restaurant). However, we also recommend looking at alternative ways of assessing social media learning. One possibility is the incorporation of peer assessment, this is in line with design recommendations 1 and 2. The many other benefits of engaging with social media (beyond academic credit) also need to be highlighted and strengthened (if they are not already evident). These strengths include, as evidenced by the data, meeting and interacting with speakers of that language, interacting with real source learning material (as opposed to textbook material), and learning how speakers of that language authentically use the language informally. Creating ways for learners to discover and share these insights with each other may work to encourage learner engagement with social media.

6. Limitations and Future work

Although this study has surfaced a number of latent perceptions towards the use of social media in learning and teaching languages, it does present a number of limitations. Firstly, the small sample size (10 learners, 12 teachers) along with the homogeneity of all belonging to the same higher education institution does present a challenge in terms of the generalisation of these
results. Although the results yielded by thematic analysis required an in-depth analysis of discussion data (a process that does not scale well), we acknowledge that similar studies with alternative populations may yield differences in perception. Future work with different educational contexts, sample sizes, and cultural/societal backgrounds will help to alleviate the difficulty in generalising these results, whilst increasing the depth of knowledge of perceptions of teaching and learning languages with social media. Furthermore, our design recommendations, although informed from successful uses of social media appropriation in education, require testing and validating. This is the intention of the authors going forward.

7. Conclusion
This study utilised an interaction design methodology to surface usage patterns and perceptions of social media in teaching and learning languages in a UK university. Our analysis of usage patterns identified that despite there being almost no difference between teachers and learners in their general use of social media, learners reported more often using the features of social media for language learning than teachers reported using it for language teaching. To better understand the perceptions of social media that underlie this disparity, we performed a thematic analysis of discussions data generated from two workshops. The analysis surfaced three themes: social media as distinct language type; social media requiring a navigation of appropriateness; and social media allowing for the prioritisation of authentic communication flow. Based upon these three themes, we offered four design recommendations for practitioners and researchers who wish to design social media for language teaching. These recommendations prioritise using the features of social media as effectively as possible; the creation of learner-led and learner-owned spaces on social media; structuring pathways toward authentic use of social media; and incorporating social media in both traditional and new methods of assessment.

The authors hope that the contributions of this paper will support a more fine-grained understanding of the role of social media in learning and teaching languages than that which existed previously, and point productively to ways in which they can be more effectively incorporated into teaching practice. It is our intention going forward to test and validate these initial design recommendations with empirical case studies of social media use for language teaching and assessment. Our hope is that these findings will offer some direction for closing the gap between social media use in the real world and in the classroom.

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References


