

Chapter/section title: Getting Started: Social Media and Networks of Support

Title: *Unlocking the Ivory Tower and Navigating its Halls*

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Author Biography: Charlotte Feather (she/her) is an early-career academic, with specialisms in LGBTQ+ inclusive education, identity theory, and critical thinking for social justice. As a programme leader and module tutor, Charlotte teaches and supervises master's students within the Faculty of Education, Social Sciences & Creative Industries at the University of Sunderland. She is also the chair of the Staff Pride Network and creator of the LGBTQ+ Primary Hub.

The Ivory Tower

The ivory tower of academia can feel like an exclusive territory, its gates seemingly locked. Few of us find the key to let ourselves in, yet fewer are granted access to the map needed to navigate this unfamiliar, tradition-bound world. As researchers, growing your network and forming meaningful connections are seen as vital parts of the research journey. Researcher networks can increase our access to resources and present opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange, elevating our visibility and potential as leaders in the field. In academia, it is common for individuals to form connections within their faculty based on mutual research interests. However, in institutions underpinned by heteronormativity and cisnormativity, where we are often alone in exploring LGBTQ+ topics, finding peers with shared interests can feel like an insurmountable challenge.

This chapter provides insight into my personal experience of navigating academia as a queer early-career academic and highlights how the inaccessible can be made accessible through the power of online networking.

Catalysts of Change

A disorienting dilemma is defined as a pivotal moment that disrupts an individual's thinking and prompts them to question their perspectives, often leading to a transformation in understanding (Mezirow, 1978). In 2019, I encountered a disorienting dilemma that brought together two distinct aspects of my identity. My experience of education taught me that openly embracing my queer identity in a professional capacity was forbidden. Unknowingly, I had internalised the notion that queer existence is intimate and therefore inappropriate in education. As a result, I compartmentalised my *queer identity* and *teacher identity*, keeping them segregated rather than allowing them to coexist.

This changed when I learned of the 'No Outsiders' protests, during which members of a school community opposed the teaching of LGBTQ+ rights to primary-aged children. Retrospectively, I recognise this as the catalyst that redirected my research focus and altered my epistemological stance. For the first time, I reflected upon my identity not solely as an educator, but specifically as a *queer educator*.

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The praxis shock of realising that my assumption—that teacher identities and queer identities could not intersect—was a fallacy, sparked a desire for deeper exploration. Like the exhilaration experienced in the initial stages of a friendship or romance, I found myself consumed by a new interest: LGBTQ+ inclusive education. I immersed myself in the literature, devoting my time to expanding my understanding. The prospect of exploring a new field of research excited me, and I eagerly sought out conversations with anyone willing to listen. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm was met with indifference from those around me. I found myself needing to look beyond the boundaries of my institution, but I was unsure where to find a community, or even if such a community existed.

Quest for Connection

In my quest for connection, I turned to social media. If no one was going to hand me the map, I would create one myself. Whilst negative perceptions of social media as a professional development tool permeate academia, some scholars have integrated platforms such as X/Twitter and LinkedIn into their daily work practices, recognising them as invaluable resources for self-development and network expansion (Donelan, 2016). For early-career academics, cultivating an online presence can help promote their professional identity in a realm that has traditionally been difficult to gain recognition in.

But it [social media] also makes a more open, collaborative and interdisciplinary form of scholarship possible by empowering scholarly networks and leaving them less dependent on the traditional gatekeepers of academic life (Carrigan, 2018, p. 105).

As I forged online connections with fellow LGBTQ+ academics, I discovered peers nationally and internationally with shared research interests and experienced a newfound sense of belonging in a world I once felt excluded from. I dedicated time to engaging in quality discussions, accessing resources to enrich my journey, and sharing my research with others. Without realising it, I was accumulating queer capital that would serve me in my academic endeavours. No longer was I wandering the halls of the ivory tower without a clear sense of direction; I had crafted a map that guided me towards upcoming events, conferences, and projects that would have otherwise remained unknown. This very book stands as a testament to the transformative power of online networks.

Protecting Yourself

Using social media platforms for academic purposes presents a plethora of opportunities, but it also necessitates an awareness of potential risks such as intellectual property theft, plagiarism, and cybersecurity threats to avoid compromising the integrity of your work and the security of personal data. However, when engaging with socially contentious topics online, it is also crucial to consider the less-discussed factors of politics and well-being.

Social media offers users an often-unregulated platform to voice opinions and engage in debate, which can become politically charged. Whilst I contend that disruption and challenge are integral to an academic's role, it is essential to carefully consider the content and tone of our engagements to uphold professionalism and safeguard our reputation. When navigating online discussions, academics must strike a balance between authenticity and responsibly mitigating potential harm.

Furthermore, it is crucial to engage with diverse perspectives and avoid online echo-chambers to help amplify underrepresented voices. That said, as our networks grow, we must carefully assess those granted access. Unlike genuine differences in opinion, posts or comments that constitute personal attacks and negatively impact mental well-being should not be tolerated. Despite my effort to curate online spaces that both serve and affirm, complete avoidance of negativity appears unattainable. While most of my interactions have been positive, I have been targeted on several occasions for speaking out in support of marginalised groups. In such cases, prioritising your well-being and seeking support from the community is paramount.

Strong and Weak Ties

Anyone who has embarked on academic research can attest to the crucial support received from their inner circle. It is typical to find expressions of gratitude to the author's closest friends and family, included within thesis dedications, acknowledging their indispensable role. These inner circle connections, typically characterised by frequent interactions, emotional intimacy, and mutual support, are recognised as 'strong ties' (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1362). Strong ties offer essential emotional support as we traverse the various highs and lows of academic life, providing encouragement, empathy, and understanding during challenges, setbacks, and stressors.

While friends and family may offer emotional backing, those beyond our inner circle are believed to provide unique opportunities, information, and resources. Granovetter (1973, p. 1362) refers to these connections as 'weak ties' yet posits that despite their name, they do have considerable strengths. When applied to academia and professional networking, the weak ties theory highlights the significance of social media platforms. Building an online network allows researchers to connect with a diverse array of individuals with a range of knowledge and skills. While interactions with weak ties often occur at a micro-level, through them, macro-level insights can be revealed. For example, they can prove invaluable in navigating career transitions such as job searches and postdoctoral positions. Through online connections with colleagues, mentors, and potential employers, academics can gain access to information regarding vacancies, networking events, and professional development opportunities.

Paying it Forward

As I navigate the ivory tower of academia, I remain indebted to my so-called weak ties for the opportunities they have afforded me as an early career academic and researcher. Having experienced first-hand the profound benefits of social media connections, I am committed to using my voice to support and amplify fellow LGBTQ+ academics. When first creating professional online accounts, I recommend connecting with well-known academics in the field and seeking out established research groups. However, I also encourage reaching out to lesser-known academics whose interests align with yours, and perhaps even setting up your own network. Engaging with a diverse range of scholars, regardless of their prominence, can help foster a rich academic environment conducive to personal and professional growth. In my view, fostering a culture of collaboration is essential for meaningful change. Therefore, I consider it our duty as LGBTQ+ academics to bolster each other, issuing personalised 'maps' of support to contribute to the cultivation of a more interconnected, supportive, and vibrant ivory tower.

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Key Takeaways:

1. **Curate Networks that Serve and Affirm:** Mindfully develop social networks that validate your experiences and perspectives, while avoiding echo chambers that lack diverse voices.
2. **Draw on Strong Ties and Weak Ties:** Lean on those in your inner circle for emotional support as you navigate the highs and lows of academia. Simultaneously, utilise the power of your weak ties to help tap into new opportunities, resources, and collaborations for professional development.
3. **Make the Inaccessible Accessible:** Support fellow LGBTQ+ researchers by championing their voices, amplifying their achievements, and being a supportive 'weak tie'.

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