

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE ON LINKEDIN: A STUDY ON SELF-DIRECTED, WORK-RELATED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

As a career network, LinkedIn offers access to a wide range of job-related information and a low-threshold opportunity for exchange among experts in various fields. The purpose of this study was to find out which LinkedIn functions are particularly useful for self-directed professional development and to what extent users' motivation to learn is influenced by their virtual community of practice (VCoP) on LinkedIn. Two approaches were taken to answer this question. First, a literature review on four different learning theories was conducted: self-directed learning, situated learning, social learning and connectivism. The learning mechanisms on social media were then put into the context of those four learning theories. Additionally, the specific potential of learning via social media and especially via LinkedIn was considered. Second, a qualitative interview study with LinkedIn users who were categorised as digital learning experts based on their education and/or profession was conducted. According to the results of the study, LinkedIn offers excellent conditions for professional development. Various functions such as consuming others' posts, writing own posts, comments or private messages and subscribing to hashtags or newsletters support work-related learning processes. The value of the LinkedIn Learning course platform is controversial. The results also show that VCoP activities can influence users' motivation to learn both positively and negatively. The LinkedIn activities of others can inspire users, but they can also cause social pressure. The results of the interview study represent an addition to the research field of "learning with social media" and can be used as recommendations for dealing with LinkedIn in order to broaden or deepen one's professional knowledge. This study especially highlights the use of LinkedIn for lifelong learning with the goal of professional development.

Keywords: learning with social media, LinkedIn, connectivism, self-directed learning, professional development, virtual community of practice



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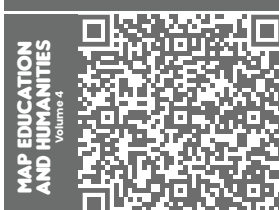
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Introduction

In the 21st century, technological developments are progressing at an unprecedented pace. As a result, new occupational fields are emerging every year and the requirements in existing professions are changing rapidly. For employees, this means that they must continuously develop their expertise and professional skills in order to survive in the labour market (Jacobs et al., 2017). Jacobs et al. (2017) cite three trends in lifelong learning: flexibility, participation and learning in networks. They point out that independence of time and place, co-operation with other learners and exchange with peers are decisive factors for learning processes in the 21st century. As social media platforms offer all of this, they represent suitable digital learning spaces for such learning processes.

According to an analysis by DataReportal, there were 7.37 million social media users in Austria in 2022, who spent an average of 91 minutes per day on 5–6 different social media platforms (Kemp, 2022). Analyses by NapoleonCat (2022) with regard to LinkedIn show that this platform was used by 1.9 million people in Austria and 14.4 million users in Germany in 2022. In both countries, around 60 per cent of LinkedIn users are between 25 and 34 years old (Napoleon Cat, 2022) and therefore belong to Generation Y. Generation Y is the successor generation to Generation X and was born towards the end of the 20th century. Depending on the author, there is a slightly different demarcation by year. It roughly summarises the birth cohorts between 1977 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Klaffke, 2014; Williams et al., 2010). LinkedIn, being a career network, offers a wealth of information on professionally relevant topics as well as access to expert knowledge. Therefore, many people use LinkedIn for self-directed, professional development, some of them deliberately, but many also without realising it (Dron & Anderson, 2021). Although there are already studies on other social networks, little research has been conducted into the learning potential of LinkedIn. The interview study conducted aimed to investigate the mechanisms of work-related learning on LinkedIn in order to enable users to make more conscious decisions when using the platform as a learning tool, so that they can specifically expand their skills with the help of LinkedIn.

Theoretical Background

Self-directed learning has become increasingly important in the 21st century, as the half-life of job-related knowledge is decreasing at an ev-

er-faster rate (Friedrich, n.d.). In self-directed learning processes, the learners themselves decide on the learning content, learning objectives, necessary resources, learning methods, time frame and the method(s) with which they check the achievement of their learning objectives (Friedrich, n.d.). Social media offer an enormous amount of information that learners can utilise independently in their various learning projects. Due to the non-linear information character of social media, it is necessary for users to control their own learning process, e.g. the choice of learning content and learning paths (Iske & Meder, 2010). According to Guglielmino et al. (2009), self-directed learners are not only interested in their own further development, but also like to share their knowledge with others. Social media offer perfect opportunities for this. Looking at Oswalt's (2003) model for self-directed learning, it is clear that social media provide the necessary context to enable self-directed learning.

According to the theory of situated learning, learning opportunities arise from a situation. This means that the acquisition of new competences in learning processes is strongly context-bound (Köring, 2012). Renkl (2020) describes knowledge acquisition according to the rules of situated learning as results from the relation or interaction between a person and a situation. For example, knowledge is constituted in cooperation with other learners, whereby the type of interaction determines which knowledge is created. Situated learning therefore takes place in an exchange between learners and always includes the context in which the discourse takes place.

Schmohl (2021) also refers to situated learning as experiential learning and shows that it can be initiated not only in analogue but also digital environments. Smart et al. (2017) describe the internet as “an increasingly important part of the material environment in which an ever-expanding array of human cognitive and epistemic activities unfold” (p. 253). As the internet is now a large part of everyday life, it can also be categorised as one of many contexts in which people move around. Social media and networks have the potential to create the necessary context for collaborative, situated learning to take place across boundaries of time and place. The members of VCoPs in social networks can communicate and collaborate with each other synchronously or asynchronously and gain context-bound knowledge in the process of cooperation.

Generally speaking, social learning takes place where people exchange ideas and collaboratively develop products (Wenger, 2000). Interaction with others enables the confirmation of one's own knowledge, supplemented by new interpretations and contexts (Dron & Anderson, 2021). Wenger (2000) describes communities of practice (CoPs) as the "basic building blocks of a social learning system" (p. 229). If these communities do not meet in physical but in digital space to exchange ideas, they are referred to as virtual communities of practice, or VCoPs for short (Bourhis et al., 2005). Learning processes are triggered by the exchange of knowledge itself. Reed et al. (2010) name three criteria that must be met in order to be able to speak of a social learning process: Firstly, the learner's understanding of a particular topic must change; secondly, this change must be visible to others, such as the members of the learner's CoP; and thirdly, the learning process must have taken place in social interaction with other people. For the latter, it is irrelevant whether the social interaction takes place online or offline.

Social learning takes place in social media through casual exchange among the network contacts. It happens incidentally through informal communication via social media (Kerres et al., 2017). Mutual interest serves as a catalyst for these learning processes (Kerres & Rehm, 2014). According to Kerres and Rehm (2014), the willingness to share knowledge on social media is increased by the following factors: users hope to gain broader access to the knowledge of others, recognition, a better position within their social media community and a boost of their social capital.

The theory of connectivism places social learning in the context of online networks (Duke et al., 2013). It was founded by George Siemens and Stephen Downes at the beginning of the 21st century and states that learning takes place through networking with others. Through joint participation in a network, knowledge and experience is shared among the respective members (Downes, 2006). However, networking in the sense of connectivism not only refers to the connection of individual learners, but also to the linking of information that is found in different places on the Internet, resulting in new insights. Thus, the theory of connectivism deals with connections on two levels: the neuronal link of concepts and ideas that is built when consuming and engaging with different information, and the social connection between people that arises through communication in social networks (Dunaway, 2011).

According to Siemens (2008), learning takes place online in networks in which individuals move around. The ideas jointly generated in the network, which are based on the connection of a wide variety of information, are the product of connectivist learning activities (Sîrghiea, 2020). Exploring the information provided by others can lead to the acquisition of valuable knowledge and to a change in one's own way of thinking and acting (Iske & Meder, 2010). Networks enrich the learning process by allowing different people to express different points of views on topics and issues, thus enabling the acquisition of a diverse perspective that an individual cannot develop alone (Duke et al., 2013).

Literature review

Social media, including social networks, now offer a huge circle of users the opportunity to participate in social knowledge communication (Kerres et al., 2011). They have revolutionised the dissemination of information and knowledge by enabling a balance between producers and consumers, in contrast to traditional media (Chu, 2020). On the one hand, learning with social media consists of searching for, sorting out and combining incomplete information units (Dede, 2005). On the other hand, exchanging information with other users offers the opportunity to learn from and with each other. Spanhel (2017) therefore describes social media as spaces of opportunity for situated educational processes in which learning takes place through communication.

According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), expertise does not only mean the development of expert knowledge through learning processes within one's own boundaries, but especially beyond these boundaries. The virtual space creates independence from the usual spatial and temporal limitations of offline learning settings and enables people and organisations to generate and share content (Duong-Trung, 2017). In addition, social media has an immersive and omnipresent character (Deaton, 2015). By ongoing notifications, users are repeatedly prompted to visit the respective social media platform and continue interacting with other users (Deaton, 2015). As a result, they regularly engage in exchanges that offer a high learning potential. It is interesting to note that the learning processes in social media often take place unnoticed, without the participants describing it as a learning activity (Kerres & Rehm, 2014).

Social media as learning media have a variety of positive effects on learners. Among other

things, they promote autonomy, personal responsibility for the learning process, self-confidence in the role as a learner, curiosity, collaborative problem-solving skills, critical thinking, a multi-layered perspective on learning topics and the freedom to choose learning activities that suit the individual (Sirghea, 2020). By sharing their knowledge, users deepen it, because first, it requires a profound understanding to convey one's knowledge in an understandable and concise way, and second, other users can provide new contexts in which the knowledge can be applied (Dron & Anderson, 2021).

Representatives of the Generation Y make particularly frequent use of the internet and especially social media for continuing education (Göbli & Rami, 2017). This is not surprising, as social media fulfil many of the needs of this generation: Practical relevance, exchange with peers, direct communication and low-threshold access to information. However, learning with social media does not only offer advantages. Gkotsis and Tsirakis (2010) warn that the enormous amount of information found on social media can lead to learners being overwhelmed if, for example, they find it difficult to separate relevant from irrelevant content. Dinath (2021) also writes about a possible "information overload" (p. 1) that makes it difficult for users to find the bits of information they are looking for.

The social network LinkedIn is a business network. Users have different access to information depending on whether they have a paid premium membership or not (Unterschied zwischen kostenlosen LinkedIn Konten und Premium LinkedIn Konten, 2023). LinkedIn users usually network with people who have similar interests. They exchange information and comment on each other's published posts (Oyarzun et al., 2011). When social contacts are established through bridging, i.e. entering into loose connections with other users, it is assumed that individuals have the greatest potential to gather new information, acquire social capital and initiate informal learning processes (Rehm, 2018). LinkedIn can be used to post, read and comment on text, image and video posts, exchange private messages, create or join public and private groups, attend or host live online events and send newsletters, among other things. Some users also use LinkedIn for blogging in order to share their expertise in certain professional fields (Sharma, 2022).

As a career network, LinkedIn provides the perfect basis for the creation of diverse VCoPs that exchange information on current professional

topics and challenges. Hara (2010) sees the great learning potential of CoPs in the fact that they favour informal learning processes and thus disseminate three types of knowledge: cultural, practical and theoretical knowledge. People from all over the world network on LinkedIn and form VCoPs, which makes it possible to achieve a high degree of diversity. According to Dron and Anderson (2021), this diversity increases the likelihood of users being confronted with different perspectives on topics, which challenges their own attitudes and stimulates a discourse that leads to a broader understanding of the respective topics.

In addition to the network of contacts, LinkedIn also integrates a paid training platform known as LinkedIn Learning (LIL). LIL is a digital learning platform that offers over 16,000 online courses on a wide range of job-related topics (Pomykalski, 2022). Trained experts with practical experience from the business world create the online courses on offer, most of which are provided in video format (Olson & Segovia, 2021). There are also courses in audio format. One advantage of the LIL offer is the possibility of strongly individualising the learning path according to one's own needs and preferences. Since it is a learning offer of a social network platform, social elements must not be missing. Users can therefore see which courses other users like. They can also recommend LIL courses to their contacts or share their own collections of different LIL courses with their network (Kennedy, 2019). Furthermore, the description of the respective courses includes information on how many LinkedIn users have already consumed them and in which professional fields they work (Grotlüschen, 2018).

Current study

Aim and research questions

There are numerous studies on learning mechanisms in social media. These deal with both platform-related and user-related characteristics (Wang & Xie, 2022), with different social media platforms such as LinkedIn (Li et al., 2018; Angadi, 2019), YouTube and Twitter (Burchert & Burchert, 2018), with age-specific learning preferences (Göbli & Rami, 2017) and the formation of learning communities in social networks (Castillo-de Mesa & Gómez-Jacinto, 2020). Shwartz-Asher et al. (2020) researched user behaviour and intentions when sharing knowledge on social media. However, very little research has been conducted concerning the learning mechanisms on LinkedIn. Therefore, the

present study investigated the use of LinkedIn for self-directed, work-related learning. The aim was to raise awareness of the learning opportunities offered by social media.

This study was guided by the research question of how LinkedIn is used by Generation Y digital learning experts in Austria and Germany for self-directed, work-related learning. Two sub-questions provided the necessary focus to further delimit the research topic. Sub-question one focussed on the suitability of various LinkedIn functions for work-related learning: How are the different LinkedIn functions used by digital learning experts for self-directed, work-based learning? The second sub-question dealt with the influence of the Virtual Community of Practice on users' motivation to learn: To what extent do the activities of the VCoP of digital learning experts on LinkedIn influence their work-related motivation to learn?

The interview study was intended to make the learning mechanisms on LinkedIn more transparent. The results should help LinkedIn users to make conscious learning decisions to continuously expand their professional expertise with the help of LinkedIn.

Methodology

To address the questions posed, the study employed a qualitative research methodology to gain insights into the experiences of LinkedIn users. This research was exploratory in nature, an approach particularly effective for examining phenomena that are not yet fully understood. Opting for a qualitative over a quantitative method was intentional, as the former is more adept at providing a nuanced understanding of complex social interactions (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The activities of Generation Y users while navigating the social media platform LinkedIn demonstrate such social interactions. The interpretation of data analysis results differs based on the underlying philosophical perspective of the researcher. Hence, comprehending the study's outcomes necessitates recognition and clarity regarding the researcher's foundational philosophical position, a notion emphasised by Biedenbach and Müller (2011). The researcher's intrinsic philosophical viewpoint aligns with phenomenalist principles. This led to the research effort focusing on developing insights into the personal experiences of digital learners.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was chosen for the selection of participants. "The [purposive] sampling design is based on the judgement of the researcher as to who will provide the best information to succeed for the objectives study" (Etikan & Bala, 2017, p. 215). Specifically, the homogeneous sampling procedure was used: "[Homogenous sampling] focuses on candidates who share similar traits or specific characteristics" (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 3). The following criteria were prerequisites for the permission to participate in the interview study:

The LinkedIn users needed to

- be born between 1977 and 2000 and therefore belong to the Generation Y
- live and work in Austria or Germany
- have, for at least one year in the last five years, worked in a profession in which they have been centrally involved with digital learning and/or have completed at least 1 year of training in the field of digital learning
- have been regularly (= several times a month, ideally several times a week) active on LinkedIn. "Active" meant: reading/reacting to posts and comments from others, posting own posts, sending private messages or consuming LinkedIn Learning content. Not everything had to be given.

Suitable participants were sought exclusively via LinkedIn. The size of the sample was set at twelve people, and the detailed information on their qualification can be found in Table 1.

Instrument and Data collection

The method chosen to collect the required data was a qualitative study using expert interviews with LinkedIn users who could be categorised as digital learning experts based on their education and/or professional experience. The interviews were conducted according to the method of Bogner et al. (2014) and are of a theory-generating nature.

The preparation for the qualitative interviews was based on the theory of Bogner et al. (2014) and was carried out with the support of the interview manual by Helfferich (2011). The interviews focussed on the experts' interpretive knowledge of the learning potential of LinkedIn.

Table 1.
Information on the interviewed experts

Person	Residence & workplace	Year of birth	Professional experience	Education
1	Germany	1988	2019 work in personnel development with a focus on digital education, then e-learning and blended learning consultant at an agency, since 2022 designing learning experiences in the metaverse at a 3D company	2020 completion of a certificate programme in e-learning with a duration of 3 semesters
2	Germany	1985	Working in the in the field of „digital education“ since 2008, primarily employed at universities, also in a professorship, additionally employed as well as self-employed activities in the private sector, e.g. training, LMS consulting, learning process support	2010 master's degree in education, psychology and linguistics with an additional focus on „virtual learning“
3	Austria	1980	Working in Learning & Development since 2018, supporting employees with questions about e-learning, and creating e-learning courses as an employee since 2020	
4	Germany	1981	Creating e-learning courses for private companies since 2009, lecturer for e-learning at an online university from 2015-2017	2021 Completion of the master's programme „Educational Leadership“ with a focus on e-learning
5	Germany	1978	Working with digital learning formats in the school context since 2006, as a (digital) learning consultant & trainer in the private sector since 2018	
6	Austria	1984	Working as an e-learning specialist since 2018, primarily creating and designing e-learning courses in the private sector, but also working as an e-learning project manager	
7	Germany	1980	2013-2021 work in the field of digital learning at a university, management consultancy in relation to digital learning solutions since 2021	
8	Germany	1988	Independent consultant in the areas of coaching, learning culture development and digital learning in the corporate context since 2018	
9	Germany	1986	2018-2023 work as an instructional designer in the private sector, media educator in education since February 2023	2020 Completion of the master's degree programme „Media and Education“ with a focus on digital learning
10	Germany	1986	Consultancy in the field of digital learning, work as an instructional designer and creator of story-driven e-learning since 2017, teaching assignments at various universities on the topics of social media, storytelling & AI since 2019	
11	Austria	1986		2022 Completion of the master's programme „Applied Knowledge Management“, which focused on e-learning
12	Austria	1979	Working in training and instructional design since 2010, responsible for the implementation and support of LMS as well as creation of digital learning content in various private companies	2015 Completion of the master's programme „E-Education“

Note. The experts have signed a consent form and have agreed to the use of the anonymised data.

As recommended by Helfferich (2019), a semi-structured interview guide was therefore created. Based on the research questions and the literature review, the following three thematic categories emerged:

- 1) Self-directed, work-related learning with the LinkedIn network
- 2) Influence of the VCoP on work-related learning motivation
- 3) Self-directed, work-related learning with LinkedIn Learning

One to five main questions, including some more detailed sub-questions, were developed for each of the three identified topics, as shown in Table 2.

The expert interviews were conducted between the end of March and the beginning of May 2023. A total of twelve experts were interviewed, with the shortest interview lasting 23 minutes and the longest 44 minutes. As the interviewees live all over Austria and Germany, the interviews were held online via MS Teams for economic reasons and recorded using the same tool.

The aim of the first thematic category of the guided expert interviews was to find out how various LinkedIn functions are used by the interviewees for self-directed learning. The second thematic category was used to talk to the interviewees about the influence that other LinkedIn contacts from similar professional fields have on their motivation to learn. The third thematic category was dedicated to the digital training platform LinkedIn Learning.

Table 2.
Interview guide

1. Information phase
Brief introduction to the study, purpose of the interview
2. Demographic data
Residence & workplace, year of birth, education and professional experience
3. Theme 1: Self-directed, work-related learning with the LinkedIn network
- o Which LinkedIn functions do you use frequently and why? - o In your opinion, which LinkedIn functions offer the greatest learning potential and why? - o How do your activities on LinkedIn influence the further development of your professional expertise? - o How do you gain new job-related information and insights through your LinkedIn network? - o Have you already used LinkedIn specifically to pursue a specific learning goal? - If YES: What was your learning objective and how did you go about it? - If NO: What could be a learning objective and how would you proceed?
4. Theme 2: Influence of the VCoP on work-related learning motivation
- o How do the activities of your LinkedIn contacts with similar professions and shared interest in digital learning motivate you to acquire more know-how about job-related topics? - o How do the activities of your LinkedIn contacts with similar professions and shared interest in digital learning motivate you to share your expertise on LinkedIn? - o How does the mutual exchange on LinkedIn positively influence your career-related learning motivation? - o How do the activities of your LinkedIn contacts negatively influence your work-related learning motivation?
5. Theme 3: Self-directed, work-related learning with LinkedIn Learning
- o Do you use LinkedIn Learning offers for your professional development? - If YES: - How and how often do you use these offers? - How would you rate the usefulness of LinkedIn Learning offers for your professional development? - If NO: - Are you aware of the LinkedIn Learning offers? - Why have you decided not to use them? - Can you imagine using them in the future? - If yes, why and how? - If no, why not?
6. Fade Out
Is there anything else you would like to add?

Note. During the interviews, the guide served mainly as a memory aid rather than as a script to be read verbatim.

The interviewees were asked about the reasons for and against using this service and their ratings of the overall quality of LinkedIn Learning courses. All interviews were transcribed by the interviewer herself with the help of the AI tool “Whisper”. The transcription rules recommended by Kuckartz (2018) were followed.

Data analysis

The next step was a structuring content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). A deductive-inductive categorisation was chosen for the structured analysis of the interviews (Kuckartz, 2018). The computer-aided analysis was carried out using the MAXQDA software, which was developed by Kuckartz (2010).

Before the first review of the generated material, four main deductive categories were formed based on the literature section, the current state of research and the topics of the interview guideline: LinkedIn functions, LinkedIn Learning, learning motivation and learning through the network. During the first coding process, several subcategories crystallised for each of the four main categories, which enabled further differentiation of the data obtained. The corresponding material was assigned to the inductively formed subcategories in a second run. Before analysing the generated data material, the categories were described in detail, including anchor examples.

Results

The following findings regarding the suitability of various LinkedIn functions for professional development were obtained: Consuming and commenting on the LinkedIn posts of others as well as writing your own posts offers a high learning potential. The passive consumption of posts often comes along with inspiration for new learning topics, offering concise summaries of current trends and tool tips. Active posting requires even more activity, as it requires conscious topic identification, target group-orientated formulation, publication and follow-up. The following statement from an interview illustrates this: “When I post myself, I naturally give it some thought. What do I want to post, what do I want to get across and content and then I try to post something with added value. [...] Because I deal with the topic more intensively when I write an article or a post like this, I learn more or, let’s say, deepen my knowledge in the specific area a bit, or repeat it again” (Participant 9, pos. 65). Actively cre-

ating your own posts deepens existing knowledge and breaks it down to the essential elements. In addition, the publication of a post is accompanied by the opening of a learning space in the form of the comments column, where other users can share opinions, information and experiences. The private message function of LinkedIn primarily serves three purposes: distributing information found on LinkedIn, targeting questions to one particular person or just a few people and initiating a more in-depth, professional exchange. Thematic LinkedIn groups also offer a good opportunity for more intensive exchange, but are used relatively rarely by the interviewees. The main benefit of hashtags for the further development of professional expertise is that the radius for obtaining information is expanded by its usage. In two interviews, it was emphasised positively that hashtags are a way of consuming posts from people outside the network, as the following two excerpts show: “So I also follow these hashtags [...] that I also get the topics displayed by complete strangers. That’s how I discover new things” (Participant 9, pos. 129). “They expand the people a bit. The topics remain the same, of course, as does my algorithm, but that helps me to get other people in the feed than the ones I follow” (Participant 5, pos. 147). This opens up access to more diverse perspectives than can be found in one’s own limited network of LinkedIn contacts or in conventional LinkedIn groups. Furthermore, LinkedIn newsletters are also a suitable source of information.

Half of the interviewees had already used the LinkedIn Learning training programme. One participant emphasised that they build in reflection times during the courses in order to process what they have learned and transfer it to their own work context. This means that a LinkedIn Learning course is also consumed in several stages: “You also need time to process things, so to speak, and perhaps also to think, okay, what have I just heard, how can I somehow implement and realise the whole thing for myself” (SH, pos. 49). LinkedIn Learning tends to be used to deal more extensively with larger subject areas that are currently needed in the work context: “Where I learnt the most in LinkedIn was when I dealt with it for a longer period of time, i.e. in these LinkedIn Learning courses” (ND, pos. 102). During the interviews, a number of reasons were given both for and against its use. For the participants, the following aspects were decisive for using LinkedIn Learning: the perceived high-quality implementation of the courses, trust in the expertise of the lecturers and thus in the quality of the content offered and the receipt of certificates for completed courses.

Among the dissenting voices, there were the following reasons that prevented users from taking advantage of the training offer: the amount of the costs and the payment model in subscription form, lack of topicality of the content, insufficient trust in the expertise of the lecturers, a poor assessment of the video quality, the passivity of the dominant video format, lack of variety and the length of the courses. It is important to note that the respondents are digital learning experts who, due to their profession, probably have a more critical view of LinkedIn Learning than other LinkedIn users.

All participants were also asked what influence the activities of their LinkedIn contacts had on their own career-related motivation to learn. In particular, they were asked to what extent the activities of their VCoPs, consisting of people with similar professional backgrounds, influence their motivation to further develop their own knowledge. Participant 2 referred to the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2022) in the course of the question about how the use of LinkedIn influences their own motivation to learn, whereby one of the motivational factors is social integration: "I'll now briefly refer to Deci and Ryan and self-determination theory and thus also the topic of learning motivation, of course. Yes, I am assuming three basic needs, the experience of competence, the need for autonomy and social integration. And in the end, LinkedIn offers everything here. In other words, if I post something or comment or do something else, I can feel competent if everyone agrees with me and likes me. [...] At the same time ... it's up to me whether I read something, whether it interests me and whether I follow the whole thing And of course, the social autonomy, I mean, it's a community, people comment on it, there's discussion, it's actually like that too, which can be very motivating" (pos. 105). According to the interviewed digital learning experts, following factors can have a favourable effect on the learning motivation of LinkedIn users:

- Trust in the expertise of other users and in the quality of the content they provide
 - Insights into the perspectives of other LinkedIn contacts
 - Thought leadership from prominent users who regularly present their views on current topics
 - Positive competitive thinking
 - Practical relevance in the contributions of other users
 - Positive reactions to one's own posts
 - Social inclusion and the desire to make a contribution to the community to help others
 - Experience of autonomy and competence
- The following factors that can have a negative effect on LinkedIn users' motivation to learn were mentioned:
- Mental overload due to information overload
 - The "endlessness" of content in the feed
 - Social pressure
 - Difficult retrieval of content
- Thus, only half as many negative as positive aspects influencing users' career-related learning motivation could be found during the analysis of the interviews.
- Furthermore, in the various interviews, both the positive and negative effects of LinkedIn's underlying algorithm were discussed. Overall, there was a consensus that the LinkedIn algorithm has a lot of influence and that it is challenging to manipulate it according to individual needs. This is made clear by the following statement: "On the one hand, this biased and also very often condensed content tailored to your own preferences on social networks is good, because you usually get the content that interests you, but at the same time it also narrows your horizons to a certain extent. And in the end, you have to actively counteract this if you don't want to" (Participant 11, pos. 102). While some appreciate that it facilitates network building and curates posts according to prevailing interests, others feel restricted as the algorithm contributes to a lack of diversity in the network and feed and pushes polarising and superficial posts more than detailed, in-depth posts.
- In general, LinkedIn offers users the opportunity to build a targeted network of people working in similar professional fields and create a virtual community of practice in which knowledge is shared, new perspectives are opened up and collaborations are initiated. The majority of interview-

ees emphasised the pronounced learning potential that results from a network of experts tailored to their own needs. One of the strengths of building a network via LinkedIn is that users have the opportunity to exchange ideas with a large number of experts and thus gain access to a wide range of opinions and experiences. This allows users to actively broaden their horizons. Many of the respondents described LinkedIn as a source of inspiration for current, career-related topics. According to the interviewees, regular use of LinkedIn supports the expansion of their own knowledge by providing insights into the working realities of others and by presenting and discussing different perspectives. One participant emphasised that, in her opinion, the exchange between experts on LinkedIn offers the greatest learning potential: "The real peer-to-peer exchange. In other words, with people who are either in my field or in neighbouring fields and then really take the time to talk to you, whether it's in the comments or in personal messages or in a meeting. I think that helps you the most" (Participant 10, pos. 41). In the feed, users also repeatedly come across concrete tips on new tools and methods and how to use them, which are transferable to their own work context. As a result, users repeatedly reflect on their own level of knowledge, examine different perspectives on familiar as well as new tools or topics and, if necessary, adapt their behaviour. Thus, by regularly using LinkedIn, users constantly encounter new trends, tools, methods, etc., which they can subsequently analyse in more detail if they are relevant to their own field of work.

Discussion

Kerres et al. (2011) already emphasised the high degree of self-control of learning processes in social networks. The fact that this applies to LinkedIn was confirmed by the present study. LinkedIn offers all the core components that are important for self-directed learning according to Oswalt (2003). These include the possibility of self-directed learning processes through the various functions offered, the integration into a virtual learning community, mechanisms that stimulate the intrinsic learning motivation of the users, and a rich context of learning content and the people who provide this content.

Many situations mentioned in the interviews also combine the characteristics of situated learning by Herrington and Oliver (2000): authentic context, observation of experts, collaborative knowledge construction, changing roles and perspectives

as well as explication of implicit knowledge through articulation. Spanhel's (2017) thesis that social media enable situated educational processes in which learning takes place through communication could therefore be confirmed too.

The theory of social learning is also about the exchange between people and the resulting learning experiences or products (Wenger, 2000). All of the people who took part in this interview study consciously network with people on LinkedIn who have similar areas of interest in order to learn from them. Through their activities on LinkedIn, the interviewees are repeatedly involved in processes of social learning, in which they contribute information and experiences from which others can learn. Moreover, they use the contributions of their network contacts and the interaction with other users to expand their own expertise.

The theory of connectivism deals with two central aspects that favour learning processes: the networking of individual learners and the linking of information (Dunaway, 2011). LinkedIn is a digital place where, according to the participants, it is easy to network with people and gather information from a wide range of sources. Links to articles, podcast episodes, websites, contributions by others, etc. are shared and complemented with one's own thoughts or additional information. This networking of information represents products of connectivist learning activities (Sirghea, 2020). All interviewees appreciated the fact that they are constantly confronted with new topics and perspectives through LinkedIn. They consistently showed a willingness to reflect on their knowledge based on this and update it if necessary, a central ability for successful learning in networks according to Duke et al. (2013).

Kerres et al. (2011) postulate that learning in social networks takes place primarily through the transfer of knowledge between peers. This was confirmed many times in the interviews. According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), expert knowledge is created through learning processes beyond one's own boundaries. They describe how boundary crossing can lead to an exchange between different worlds with people from diverse realities. In the interviews, it was emphasised several times that LinkedIn makes it easier to network with experts across analogue borders. All in all, many of the existing theories on the learning potential of social media were substantiated by this interview study.

Conclusions

The interview study with Generation Y digital learning experts from Austria and Germany shows that although LinkedIn is used differently for learning purposes, certain patterns can be recognised. The following functions proved to be particularly useful: consuming and commenting on posts, creating posts, exchanging private messages and subscribing to hashtags or newsletters. While passive activities such as consuming posts or newsletters provide inspiration and an overview of new trends, activities such as writing posts, comments or private messages promote the exchange and deepening of knowledge and can therefore lead to new insights. The use of LinkedIn Learning is controversial, with more arguments being put forward against its use than in favour of it. The lack of quality and currency of the content, the poor technical implementation and the high costs were criticised by some, while other users rated the quality of the content and the receipt of certificates positively.

LinkedIn offers low-threshold access to practical insights and information about the professional world. The network of LinkedIn contacts, especially the users from similar professional fields, represents a VCoP for users and promotes the exchange of knowledge. The content on LinkedIn serves as inspiration and impetus for further reflection and engagement with various topics. LinkedIn is used by the experts surveyed to follow trends in their professional field and to further their professional development.

The effects of the VCoP on learning motivation were considered in a differentiated manner by the participants, with twice as many positive as negative influencing factors being mentioned. Positive factors include trust in the expertise of the VCoP members, insights into other perspectives, positive competitive thinking and high practical relevance. These lead to an increased motivation regarding the engagement with the content on LinkedIn. Positive reactions to one's own contributions, social inclusion and a sense of competence increase the willingness to actively participate in the discourse. Negative factors include social pressure, information overload and difficulties in retrieving content. These can reduce the users' motivation to learn.

The results of this study are that the content on LinkedIn often serves as a starting point for deeper reflection and exploration of the issues at hand. In the feed, users regularly come across

concrete tips on new methods, tools or how to use them that are transferable to their own work context. When asked about the use of specific LinkedIn features for professional development purposes, the following basic features were found to be particularly useful: reading, commenting and posting posts, exchanging private messages and subscribing to hashtags and newsletters. These implications can already help users to consciously use LinkedIn as a learning tool according to their personal preferences. Different LinkedIn functions, which require different learning processes, can be used to develop professional expertise. Among the active functions, posting one's own contributions seems to hold a great learning potential, as existing knowledge can be deepened and new perspectives can be gained through comments.

Limitations and future directions

When conducting the interviews, the researcher's blind spots became apparent time and again when talking about the various options offered by LinkedIn. This potentially falsifies the results of the study because there was an unconscious focus on certain LinkedIn functions. More intensive preparation would have allowed the interviewer to ask even more specific questions about a wider range of existing LinkedIn functions and their use for professional development.

In addition, the fact that the researcher herself prepared, conducted and transcribed the interviews led to a high degree of familiarity with the material. The absence of another person in the coding process is limiting in that there was no discussion about the definition of suitable subcategories or the appropriate assignment of statements to certain categories, and the decisions were therefore based solely on the subjective judgement of the researcher.

Due to limited time resources and the specifications regarding the scope of the work on the part of the university at which this study was supervised, no more than twelve interviews could be conducted and analysed. Thus, it was not possible to achieve theoretical saturation.

Moreover, the group selected for the study consists of experts in digital learning and therefore of people who already had a certain amount of prior knowledge of learning theories and the learning possibilities of the digital space at the time of the interviews. This certainly had an impact on their pre-

sented usage patterns and perspectives on LinkedIn as a learning tool. For the reasons mentioned above, the insights gained from the interview study cannot be applied in full to all LinkedIn users.

In order to strengthen the validity of the findings obtained, additional qualitative and quantitative studies on the research subject of this work are recommended. A quantitative survey with a larger group of people on the LinkedIn functions used for the purposes of continuing professional development would be just as conceivable to verify the findings obtained here as further qualitative interview studies with other target groups on the question of the influence of VCoP on work-related learning motivation.

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