

Twitter making students a bit witless, study suggests

The social media site not only fails to enhance intellectual attainment but substantially undermines it, economists said in a working paper.

By Isaac Stanley-Becker Washington Post | JUNE 29, 2019 — 12:34AM

Twitter, used by 126 million people daily and now ubiquitous in some industries, has vowed to reform itself after being enlisted as a tool of misinformation and hate.

But new evidence shows that the platform may be inflicting harm at an even more basic level. It could be making its users, well, a bit witless.

The finding by a team of Italian researchers is not necessarily that the crush of hashtags, likes and retweets destroys brain cells; that's a question for neuroscientists, they said.

Rather, Twitter not only fails to enhance intellectual attainment but substantially undermines it, the economists said in a working paper published by the economics and finance department at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan.

"It's quite detrimental," said Gian Paolo Barbetta, a professor of economic policy at the private research university and the paper's lead author. "I can't say whether something is changing in the mind, but I can say that something is definitely changing in the behavior and the performance."

To the best of his knowledge, Barbetta's study is the largest and most rigorous examination of Twitter's effect on student achievement, with applications to learning and information retention in other areas of life.

The investigation drew on a sample of roughly 1,500 students attending 70 Italian high schools. Half of the students used Twitter to analyze “The Late Mattia Pascal,” the 1904 novel by Nobel laureate Luigi Pirandello, which satirizes issues of self-knowledge and self-destruction. They posted quotes and their reflections, commenting on classmates’ tweets.

The other half relied on traditional classroom teaching methods. Performance was assessed based on a test measuring understanding, comprehension and memorization. Using Twitter reduced performance on the test by 25 to 40 percent of a standard deviation from the average result, the paper said. Notably, the decline was sharpest among higher-achieving students and those who had scored higher on a baseline test. This finding bolsters the conclusion that blogs and social networking sites actively impair performance, rather than simply failing to augment learning.

A spokeswoman for Twitter declined to comment. The company’s mission statement sets forth goals “to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers.” And Twitter’s chief executive, Jack Dorsey, said the standard to which the company should be held is “building a systemic framework to help encourage more healthy debate, conversations, and critical thinking.”



SOEREN STACHE – ASSOCIATED PRESS - AP

In this Feb. 2, 2013, file photo, a smartphone display shows the Twitter logo in Berlin, Germany.