CASE STUDY

Students' Attitudes Towards Facebook and Online Professionalism: Subject Discipline, Age and Gender Differences

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes towards the use of Facebook and online professionalism among students studying three health and social care courses at a UK university. The increasing popularity of social networking sites (SNS) has changed the way people manage information about their personal and professional lives. Previous studies have considered how medical students use Facebook, but there is a paucity of research looking at other professional disciplines; either individually or exploring whether there are inter-professional differences. An anonymous online survey was completed by 595 students at one UK university; pharmacy (n = 91, 15%), social work (n = 166, 28%) and nursing students (n = 338, 57%) across all years of the courses. Significant differences were found with regard to attitudes towards Facebook and online professionalism between the subject disciplines, year of study, age and gender of the students. Findings suggest more education and guidance is needed to provide students with the appropriate knowledge of how to maintain professionalism in an online context.

Keywords: Facebook, online professionalism, subject discipline, university students

Introduction

SNS are a popular means of communication especially amongst younger generations and students (Jones & Fox 2009). Facebook is the most popular SNS, the provider reporting 800 million active users worldwide (Facebook 2012). The

popularity of Facebook, especially among students, emphasises the need for researchers to consider their use of SNS in terms of online professionalism and their future employability. Indeed, it has been has found that employers are increasingly using Facebook as a screening tool when considering potential candidates (Vicknair *et al*. 2010, de la Llama *et al*. 2012). Research also suggests there is a need for professional students to be more aware of the potential consequences of making information accessible online (Gross & Acquisti 2005). Many students who use Facebook have been found to show little concern about privacy despite knowledge of the privacy settings available (Jones & Soltren 2005).

Much of the research on students' use of Facebook in terms of online professionalism has focused on medical students (Guseh *et al*. 2009, Finn *et al*. 2010, Garner & O'Sullivan 2010, Moubarak *et al*. 2011). Medical students' use of SNS tends to suggests that students do not alter their default privacy settings leaving them accessible to the public. Finn *et al*. (2010) suggested that medical students struggle with negotiating their personal and professional identities both on and offline.

It has been argued that there is the need for clearer guidelines on online professional behaviour and more education for student professionals with regards to e-professionalism and the impact images and information (student-posted content) placed on SNS, can have on their professional reputation and identity.

With regards to pharmacy students, Cain (2008) suggests that pharmacy schools in the USA should be educating students on the issue of online professionalism. Indeed, recent research found that pharmacy students at a UK university would like more guidelines on online professionalism (Prescott *et al*. 2012). A recent article in the Guardian highlights the need for more guidelines and increased awareness among students, stating that a number of incidences of professionals in careers such as teaching, police and health care lost their jobs due to unprofessional behaviour and postings made online (Osborne 2012). With regards to health professionals the Nursing and Midwifery Council is mentioned within the article as witnessing an increasing number of cases brought before fitness to practise panels due to the use of SNS. Much of the focus tends to be on the consequence of unprofessional online postings to the student or professional, however it must not be overlooked that unprofessional online content could have consequences for the professional patient–client relationship and the profession generally (Greysen *et al*. 2010). Due to the potentially damaging implications of posting

unprofessional online content and the fact that online content is archived, leaving a digital footprint, it could be argued that the appropriate and professional use of SNS is as important, if not more so, than self-presentation offline. Indeed, developing online persona is viewed as being much more purposeful and a more conscious act than offline persona (Stearn 2002).

Aims

Despite the increasing interest in Facebook use among students, there is a paucity of research exploring differences in attitude towards Facebook and online professionalism according to subject discipline, and the impact and implications that that this may have for different professions and student groups. Research has found that students from different subject disciplines differ in the amount of time spent and engagement with SNS, with a significantly higher proportion of students from the humanities and social science faculties engaging in social networking activities compared to students from the science facilities (Corrin *et al*. 2010). While medical students are the focus of much the research on SNS use and online professionalism, there are a number of other disciplines with a patient–client focus in which unprofessional student-posted online content is of equal concern.

Methods

An online survey was devised and emailed to pharmacy, social work and nursing students at a UK university. Students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with ten statements measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale looking at their attitudes towards Facebook and online professionalism. Four of the statements were adapted from Garner & O'Sullivan's (2010) study on medical students (Table 1) – questions were worded appropriately for each discipline. Six questions were adapted from the study by Moubarak *et al*. (2011) on medical students; again these were worded according to subject discipline (Table 2). Results were analysed by SPSS (v19).

Results

In total, 595 students completed the survey, an overall response rate of 29% (n = 595/2056). 60% (n = 338) were nursing students, 28% (n = 166) social work and 15% (n = 91) pharmacy students. 85% of participants were female (n = 504) which reflects the general population of the disciplines. Age ranges varied; 25% (n = 146) aged 18–20, 30% (n = 175) aged 21–24, 14% (n = 81) aged 25–28, 15% (n = 91) aged 29–34 and 17% (n = 100) aged 35 and over. With regard to ethnic origin, the majority described

Table 1

1-From Garner & O'Sullivan (2010)	What happens on sites such as Facebook is separate from what happens in university
2-From Garner & O'Sullivan (2010)	Pharmacy students behaviour outside the university environment could impact on fitness to practise
3-From Garner & O'Sullivan (2010)	I understand what the pharmacy school would classify as unacceptable behaviour
4-From Garner & O'Sullivan (2010)	I am aware of the RPS Fitness to Practise guidance on personal and professional behaviour

themselves as white British (82%, n = 470). Students who completed the survey were from all years of study (1st year 37% (n = 215), 2nd year 36% (n = 205), 3rd year 22% (n = 128), and 4th year 5% (n = 28)).

90% (n = 528) of participants had a Facebook account, and of those, 77% (n = 407) logged in daily. Most of the students (95%, n = 493) said they were aware of the privacy settings available on Facebook, with 91% (n = 493) claiming they use the privacy settings to limit public access to their information on Facebook. Students had mixed views as to whether they thought professional students should be held to a higher standard when it comes to online behaviour than students on a non-professional course; yes 44% (n = 235), no 36% (n = 191) and not sure 20% (n = 107). 66% (n = 347) said that they would continue to use Facebook after they graduate. However 63% (n = 340) wanted more guidelines on online professional behaviour.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found there was a significant difference between the three disciplines on all ten of the statements (Table 3). Post hoc analysis revealed where the differences between the groups lies.

A one-way ANOVA revealed that age was a significant factor in seven of the statements. With post hoc analysis revealing where the differences between the groups lies. (Table 4).

An independent t-test found gender was significant for just three of the ten statements (Table 5).

Only one of the statements was significant for year of study using a one-way ANOVA (Table 6).

Discussion

In contrast to previous research, nearly all the students in the current study were aware of the privacy settings available on Facebook and used them to limit public access to their profiles. This could be a result of the publicity surrounding incidents of inappropriate behaviour and student-posted content online (Acquisti & Gross 2006) and perhaps the increasing academic research in the area. Despite this finding and in support of the research findings on medical students (Mostaghimi & Crotty 2011), the majority of students in the three professional disciplines in this study stated that they wanted more guidelines on online professional behaviour.

Analysis revealed that subject discipline and student age were more significant influences on attitudes towards Facebook use and online professionalism than either gender or year of study. There were interesting differences between the three professional subject disciplines. Both social work and pharmacy students were more aware of their online professional behaviour than nursing

Table 2

5-From Moubarak *et al.* (2011)	*Pharmacists* should not register on Facebook
6-From Moubarak *et al.* (2011)	*Pharmacists* should limit their profile access to Facebook friends only
7-From Moubarak *et al.* (2011)	*Pharmacist–patient* relationship changes if a patient discovers their *pharmacist* is registered on Facebook
8-From Moubarak *et al.* (2011)	*Pharmacist–patient* relationship changes only if the patient has access to the *pharmacist* profile
9-From Moubarak *et al.* (2011)	Access to personal information has an influence on the *pharmacist–patient* relationship
10-From Moubarak *et al.* (2011)	Access to personal photos has an influence on *pharmacist–patient* relationship

Table 3

	Nursing students M (SD)	Social work students M (SD)	Pharmacy students M (SD)	F	df	p
Nursing students agreed significantly more than social work students that what happens on sites such as Facebook is separate from what happens in university	3.76 (1.22)	3.05 (1.34)	ns	3.033	2,533	<.05
Social work students agreed significantly more than nursing students that students' behaviour outside the university environment could impact on fitness to practise	4.25 (.955)	4.77 (.892)	ns	3.949	2,536	<.05
Significantly more social work students than pharmacy students agreed with the statement that 'I understand what the school would classify as unacceptable behaviour'	ns	3.64 (.626)	3.41 (.578)	3.164	2,533	<.05
Both the social work and nursing students were more aware of the professional guidance on personal and professional behaviour than the pharmacy students	3.50 (.695)	3.72 (.798)	2.35 (.877)	5.995	2,530	<.001
Social work and pharmacy students agreed significantly more than nursing students that students in their profession should not register on Facebook	3.66 (.986)	4.28 (.866)	3.92 (1.10)	12.358	2,532	<.0001
Social work students agreed significantly more than pharmacy and nursing students that students in their discipline should limit their profile access to Facebook friends only	1.90 (.900)	3.86 (.964)	2.56 (.795)	6.294	2,531	<.05
Social work and pharmacy students agreed significantly more than nursing students that the professional–patient relationship changes if a patient discovers their pharmacist/nurse/social worker is registered on Facebook	2.98 (1.12)	3.39 (1.16)	3.19 (1.12)	3.014	2,527	<.05
Social work students agreed significantly more than pharmacy and nursing students that the professional–patient relationship changes only if the patient has access to the professional workers profile	1.96 (.953)	3.96 (.953)	2.38 (1.11)	15.124	2,530	<.001
Social work students agreed significantly more than pharmacy and nursing students that access to personal information has an influence on the professional–patient relationship	2.14 (1.02)	3.24 (1.08)	2.162 (.712)	17.793	2,527	<.001
Social work students agreed significantly more than pharmacy and nursing students that access to personal photos has an influence on the professional–patient relationship	2.10 (1.0)	3.21 (1.10)	2.62 (.729)	15.620	2,526	<.001

Table 4

	35+ M (SD)	21–24 M (SD)	18–20 M (SD)	f	df	p
Students in the age range 35+ agreed significantly more than students aged 18–20 and 21–24 that students' behaviour outside the university environment could impact on fitness to practise	3.56 (.556)	2.10 (1.01)	2.24 (1.12)	5.737	4,534	<.001
Students in the age range 35+ were significantly more aware of the professional guidance on personal and professional behaviour than students aged 18–20	3.42 (1.09)	ns	3.02 (.989)	3.714	4,528	<.01
Students aged 35+ agreed significantly more than students aged 21–24 and 18–20 that the professional–patient relationship changes if a patient discovers their pharmacist/nurse/social worker is registered on Facebook	4.08 (.568)	2.94 (.822)	3.01 (.982)	3.587	4, 525	<.05
Students aged 35+ agreed significantly more than students aged 18–20 that the professional–patient relationship changes only if the patient has access to the pharmacist's/nurse's/social worker's profile	3.94 (.567)	ns	3.21 (.498)	2.488	4, 528	<.05
Students aged 35+ agreed significantly more than students aged 18–20 that having access to personal information has an influence on the pharmacist/nurse/social worker–patient relationship	3.72(.789)	ns	3.50 (1.22)	2.399	4, 525	<.05
Students in the age range 18–20 agreed significantly more than students aged 35+ that what happens on sites such as Facebook is separate from what happens in university	3.12 (1.11)		3.86 (1.15)	3.056	4, 531	<.05
Students aged 35+ agreed significantly more than students aged 18–20 and 21–24 that students in their discipline should not register on Facebook	2.62 (.712)	1.96 (.729)	2.14 (1.11),	8.035	4,530	001

students. Nursing students viewed Facebook as separate from their professional lives, whereas social work students viewed Facebook use as potentially problematic, and were more aware of how unprofessional behaviour on Facebook has the potential to affect the professional–client relationship. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the dominance of Facebook use today, social work and pharmacy students did not think individuals or students in their respective professions should use Facebook. Yet from the study it is evident that the majority of students do use, and intend to continue

Table 5

	Female M (SD)	Male M (SD)	t	df	p
Female students agreed significantly more than male students that they understand what their school would classify as unacceptable behaviour than males students	3.75 (.881)	3.47 (.645)	3.330	533	<.001
Female students agreed significantly more than male students that they were aware of the professional guidance on personal and professional behaviour than male students	3.76 (.886)	3.45 (.644)	3.537	530	<.001
Male students agreed significantly more than female students that what happens on sites such as Facebook is separate from what happens in university	2.52 (1.24)	2.90 (1.24)	−2.428	533	<.05

Table 6

	1st year M (SD)	3rd year M (SD)	f	df	p
Third year students agreed significantly more than first year students that students in their professions should not register on Facebook	3.22 (1.36)	3.75 (.632)	6.114	3,514	<.0001

to use, Facebook after graduation. Compared to social work students, nursing students felt that what happens on Facebook is separate from what happens in university. This difference between the cohorts may be a reason why the social work students viewed having a Facebook account as more problematic to their professional lives than the nursing students did.

The differences were between students aged 35+ and those of the lower ages, particularly the 18–20 age range. In general students in the age range 35+ were much more aware of online professional behaviour and were more cautious in their use of Facebook. For instance, the students aged 35+ agreed more that their behaviour outside of university can impact on fitness to practise, and they were also significantly more aware than younger students of the professional guidance on personal and professional behaviour. Older students (age 35+) were also more aware of the potential impact online behaviour can have on the patient–client relationship. Significantly more students in the age range 18–20 than students aged 35+ agreed that what happens on sites such as Facebook is separate from what happens in university. The difference in attitudes in age groups could be a reflection of the fact that although all age ranges use Facebook, younger students are more frequent and active users. It may also be inferred that younger students find it more difficult to negotiate their personal and professional lives than older students (Finn *et al.* 2010).

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the ten statements did not yield many significant gender differences. More gender differences were expected since more females than males have a Facebook account (Lam *et al.* 2011) and previous research has found differences in the use of Facebook between the genders (Mazman & Usluel 2011). However this could be due to the subject disciplines of the students in this study as the subjects are all female-dominated disciplines. In general, female students were more aware of what might be viewed as unacceptable behaviour and their disciplines' professional guidance than male students.

The only difference between first and third year students was that significantly more third years agreed that students in their profession should not register on Facebook. This may suggest that as students progress through university they become

more aware of their professionalism. Longitudinal research is needed to investigate if student attitudes do indeed alter towards Facebook use and online professionalism as they progress through university, or indeed as they age/mature.

Despite these interesting findings, the study had a number of limitations. First, it was conducted within just one UK university which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, although the questionnaire received a good response rate for an online survey, the response rate was still low. Third, the questionnaire may have benefited from additional qualitative questions in order to capture further details about the issues raised.

Conclusion

This study indicates that professional students have quite different attitudes towards Facebook. The results suggest that student professionals need more of an understanding of the implications of their online behaviour. University courses should provide students with adequate guidelines on online professionalism in order for all student professionals, and all students in general, to have the same understanding of the implications of their online behaviour and student-content postings. What students in different disciplines are told with regard to the use of Facebook and professionalism needs to be acknowledged as this will differ widely, since there appears to be no single consistent message across the university. Regulatory bodies of many disciplines have, or are starting to consider, guidance on SNS use. For example, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society has recently published guidelines to help pharmacy professionals use SNS more appropriately. Similarly the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has *Guidance on professional conduct for nursing and midwifery students* (2009), which covers how to use *The code: standards of conduct, performance and ethics for Nursing and Midwifery Council (2008)* in the use of SNS. The 2009 guide provides practical guidance for students, nurses and midwives using SNS. Both of these professional guidelines are available to students; however, it may be more appropriate for students to be told more directly about the risks and ways in which they should behave online as well as offline, since the guidelines may get overlooked by students. Therefore more awareness

to complement the guidelines is needed. On the other hand the British Association of Social Workers (2012) does not make any reference to the use of SNS and professionalism. Therefore a lot more guidance is needed for social work students.

At present little is known about what students get told about the use of SNS as students and in preparation for their future careers. However, it is evident from this study that educators need to do more to assist students in managing their online, as well as offline, personas and provide students with awareness of their online activity. We hope that this study will be an impetus for university courses to establish more solid guidance in the area, as well as provide students with specific knowledge of the issues regarding online professionalism relevant to their profession and university. All students need to be employable and if employers are increasingly using SNS as a means to filter applicants more needs to be done to provide students with online as well as offline skills.

Acknowledgements

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