Original Research

Pharmacists' perceptions of professionalism on social networking sites

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Abstract

Background: Social networking sites (SNS) are a new venue for communication, and health care professionals, like the general population, are using them extensively. However, their behavior on SNS may influence public perceptions about their professionalism.
Objective: This study explored how pharmacists separate professional and personal information and activities on SNS, their perceptions of professional behavior on SNS, and opinions on guidelines in this area.
Methods: In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with international practising pharmacists ($n = 31$) recruited from a range of countries ($n = 9$). Initially, pharmacists known to the research team were invited, and thereafter, participants were recruited using a snowballing technique. The interviews lasted from 30 to 120 min. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed.
Results: A majority of participants mixed professional and personal information and activities on SNS, and about one third adopted a separation strategy where professional information and activities were clearly separated from personal ones (e.g. two different SNS accounts, or one particular SNS for professional use and another platform for personal purposes). Most participants expressed concern over how pharmacists present themselves and behave in SNS when they reported (un)professional behaviors of peers they had observed. Examples of perceived unprofessional behaviors included revealing details of personal life and activities; open complaints about the pharmacy sector, co-workers, physicians, and patients; inappropriate description of pharmacists' roles and activities; and breaches of patient confidentiality. Positive professional behaviors, such as expression of compassion for patients, examples of effective patient management, promotion of pharmacists' role, and correction of misleading health information being spread online were also observed. There was no consensus on having professional social media guidelines. Some preferred SNS to be unregulated while most believed certain guidance was needed to maintain high professional standards in the online environment.

Conclusions: A definitive strategy to separate professional and personal information and activities on SNS was not adopted by most pharmacists. E-professionalism issues could negatively impact on the standing of individual practitioners and the profession. Most agreed that education about SNS use would be beneficial; however, support for guidelines or regulations for pharmacists' use of SNS was not unanimous.
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Keywords: Social media; Social networking sites; Facebook; Pharmacy; Pharmacists; Professionalism

Introduction

The recent advent of social media (SM) and its huge and increasing popularity may be represented as a paradigm shift in social communication, where traditional human interaction is replaced, or at least complemented, by the use of a variety of web-based tools.[1] SM can be defined as a group of websites whose content is created, edited and spread by users themselves,[2] while social networking sites (SNS) comprise a specific SM group in which users create a profile and establish connections with other users within it creating a network.[3] Facebook, established in 2004, is considered the most popular SNS, with 1.59 billion monthly active users worldwide as of December 31, 2015. SM shifted the Internet from a one-way road of communication into a very interactive platform. It has provided pharmacists with different ways of communicating and portraying themselves. Consequently SM, especially SNS, affords not only benefits, but also poses new challenges for pharmacists, particularly related to professionalism. The intersection between professionalism and social media platforms has created a new construct: e-professionalism, defined as the attitudes and behaviors reflecting traditional professionalism paradigms that are manifested through digital media.[4]

The exact meaning of professionalism is frequently discussed.[5,6] One factor that creates confusion is the common use of the word profession (or professional) to designate or describe any occupation, including those that are not connected to the long-established construct of professionalism.[7,8] A dictionary definition of professionalism reads as "the qualities and skills that someone with a professional job is expected to have."[9] Over a period of time certain occupations have evolved to become professions, in a process called professionalization. These prestigious occupations share common attributes such as a systematic theory and expert body of knowledge, community sanction for power and privileges, code of ethics, and a culture.[10,11] In the mid 60s' sociological literature, pharmacy was described as a marginal, borderline profession or in the process of professionalization.[12,13] However, pharmacy has since undergone considerable change, particularly in the last two decades.[14,15]

There is a paucity of literature on pharmacy professionalism, with much of what exists focusing on pharmacy students.[8] Similarly, the bulk of the e-professionalism pharmacy studies, particularly empirical ones, have focused on pharmacy students' attitudes and behaviors on SNS.[16–22] This e-professionalism research preference for pharmacy students might be due to the fact that the process of learning professional values, attitudes and behaviors starts early during pharmacy school training,[23] and that students and young practitioners are the demographic most engaged with these online platforms.

Two studies focusing on pharmacy blogging have revealed how pharmacists portrayed themselves and behaved in the "blogosphere."[24,25] Both studies identified pharmacy blogs and reported that few of them portrayed pharmacists as empathic health care providers dedicated to patients' well-being[25] and that almost half of pharmacist blogs used unprofessional language.[24] Although pharmacy e-professionalism is a topic of discussion within the profession,[15,26] and studies on the pharmacy blogosphere have been conducted,[24,25] to the authors' best knowledge, there are no empirical studies that have addressed e-professionalism of pharmacists on SNS. Considering the widespread use of SNS and its reach, this study explored how professionalism is expressed on SNS from the perspectives of pharmacists, focusing on how pharmacists separate professional and personal information and activities on SNS, their perceptions of professional behavior on SNS, and opinions on guidelines in this area.

Methods and materials

Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to explore pharmacists' professional use of SM