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Research

Perceptions of student pharmacists on professionalism and social networking sites: A Rasch analysis[☆]

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Abstract

Background: The use of social media by students in professional health programs has led to concerns about social networking site (SNS) content, and colleges and universities are deciding whether they should provide guidance for students regarding professional online content.

Objective: The primary objective was to evaluate the validity of an instrument used to assess student pharmacists' comfort level and concerns regarding SNS. A secondary objective was to describe students' perceptions of and concerns about specific SNS behaviors at one college of pharmacy.

Methods: In 2009, a 24-item questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled at the University of Arizona College of Pharmacy. The first section of the questionnaire (nine questions) asked students to indicate their level of agreement with specific SNS behaviors. The second section (eight questions) requested students to state their level of concern with specific unprofessional SNS behaviors. Rasch analysis was performed to assess reliability and validity.

Results: A total of 292 students submitted completed questionnaires (74% response rate). Facebook was the primary SNS used. Respondents indicated that they would not send a friend request to or accept a friend request from a faculty member. Students were most concerned about online posting of profanity and least concerned with online posting of unprofessional content affiliated with the pharmacy profession.

Conclusions: Student pharmacists were uncomfortable networking with faculty or future employers, and their lack of concern with the potential unprofessional online posts could raise some legal and ethical issues for colleges of pharmacy, especially those without a social media policy.

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Keywords: Student pharmacists; Facebook; Rasch analysis; Professionalism; Social network

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Introduction

Facebook is one of the largest online social networking sites (SNS). Currently, approximately 87% of adults, aged 18–29 years, have an online Facebook profile.¹ Facebook has been used to help students connect with friends and family members, make connections on campus, and network with friends.² However, some concerns about SNS have been raised, including threats of crime and violence,

alcohol and drug violations, and photos and descriptions of unprofessional behaviors.^{2–5} A concern for university officials is determining how and when to intercede in student behavior in a public forum that is not owned or controlled by their institution. It is also unclear if officials of professional programs, like medicine and pharmacy, should develop rules and guidelines for SNS postings.²

Previous research has examined the behaviors of faculty members with their online Facebook profiles. While 46% of the faculty members had profiles, 79% indicated they were not “friends” with any of their students.³ The majority of faculty indicated they would either decline a friend request from a current student or decline until after the student graduated. Focus groups have examined the behavior of student pharmacists toward becoming Facebook friends with faculty members. Students perceived it was not appropriate to become Facebook friends with faculty members; however, they were willing to become Facebook friends with pharmacy residents.³ In addition, health professional students, including pharmacy^{4,5} and medicine,⁶ are aware of the information they are posting to their personal SNS pages, including postings, photos, or other information that may not want to be viewed by a patient, faculty member, and/or future employers. This study also reported that written policies from their colleges would decrease the confusion regarding the appropriateness of certain postings.

Research into student attitudes toward SNS and personal postings has provided mixed findings. One study that assessed the opinions of medical students found that students did not always agree about the inappropriateness of certain postings, outside of Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) violations and illegal activities. These postings ranged from pictures depicting intoxication, to references about alcohol, to speaking poorly about their attending physicians, school, and classmates.⁷ Another study with medical students found that images with derogatory or private patient information and images suggesting marijuana use were considered by students to be the least appropriate.⁸ In addition, one study involving student pharmacists indicated that respondents felt that professional students should be held to higher standards than other students on SNS.⁵

Some university officials have provided e-professional presentations to all students to increase awareness about their SNS behavior (and postings).⁵ Others have developed social media policies to provide students with SNS guidelines. One such policy provided a list of forbidden and discouraged behaviors and activities for all SNS.⁹ In response to the policy, many student pharmacists updated their security settings and made information less publically visible.⁹ While this did not eliminate unprofessional behavior, the policy made it more difficult for the public to view the actions of professional students’ SNS personal pages.

Previous research has examined unprofessional behaviors with SNS in other health professional students (e.g., medical, dental,¹⁰ and veterinary¹¹), and one study

examined student pharmacists’ unprofessional SNS behaviors.⁵ Other research studies involving student pharmacists have examined the effect of a social media policy on security settings⁸ and the appropriate use of SNS.^{4,5} Additionally, while specific Facebook behaviors have been categorized as appropriate and/or professional, no research has examined the level of agreement with these behaviors among students in a professional program. The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the validity of an instrument used to assess pharmacy student’s comfort level and concerns regarding SNS. A secondary objective was to describe the students’ perceptions of and concerns about specific SNS behaviors at one college of pharmacy.

Methods

Participants

A questionnaire was administered to students who were enrolled in the Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) program at a four-year, public university (University of Arizona College of Pharmacy) in the spring semester of 2009. A paper copy of the questionnaire was administered to first, second, and third professional year student pharmacists during a required classroom-based course. Final professional year student pharmacists, who were completing clerkship rotations, received an electronic message via their official college e-mail address requesting them to complete the same questionnaire online. A total of 396 student pharmacists were eligible for the study. Participants received a disclosure form with the questionnaire informing them that their responses would remain anonymous and their consent was assumed based on questionnaire completion. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board.

Questionnaire design

A total of 24 questions were developed by the researchers to gain information about usage, comfort level, and concern about Facebook use among student pharmacists. Seven questions asked students to report their gender, current year in school, year of birth, SNS used, primary SNS, awareness of whether their school’s professionalism policies cover online content, and awareness of disciplinary action or incidents from unprofessional online content at the school. The remaining 17 questions were divided into two scaled sections: (1) level of agreement with specific social networking behaviors and (2) level of concern with specified unprofessional behaviors. The questionnaire was initially designed by the researchers to answer key issues faced by the university. Questions were created by the researchers and reviewed by other faculty members and student pharmacists for face validity.

Comfort scale

Nine questions asked students to rate their level of agreement with specific behaviors and functions linked to

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