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Original Research

# Community pharmacists, Internet and social media: An empirical investigation

Natalia Shcherbakova, Ph.D.<sup>a,\*</sup>, Marv Shepherd, Ph.D.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Pharmaceutical and Administrative Sciences, College of Pharmacy, Western New England University,  
1215 Wilbraham Rd., Springfield, MA 01119, USA

<sup>b</sup>Center for Pharmacoeconomic Studies, College of Pharmacy, The University of Texas at Austin, TX, USA

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## Abstract

**Background:** Use of social media and Internet for health information sharing is expanding among patients, physicians, and other health care professionals. Research on professional use of social media by community pharmacists is limited.

**Objectives:** 1) To determine the extent to which Texas (U.S. state) independent community pharmacists use text messaging, email, Facebook, Twitter, and/or other information technology for professional communication with patients and health care professionals and identify the perceptions of Texas independent community pharmacists toward such usage; 2) to determine the extent to which Texas independent community pharmacists develop and employ their pharmacy websites to provide drug information and patient care services.

**Methods:** A 25-item survey with questions addressing the objectives of the study as well as basic demographic questions (gender, age, and type of pharmacy degree) was mailed to a random sample of 1196 independent community pharmacists in Texas in January 2012.

**Results:** The study response rate was 23.7%, with 284 usable questionnaires returned. The majority of respondents reported that Internet access is available at their pharmacies (98% (278)), and 91% (258) are familiar with the term ‘social media’. To communicate with health care professionals, 56% ( $n = 160$ ) of respondents use email, 34% ( $n = 97$ ) use text messages and 5% ( $n = 14$ ) use Facebook. To communicate with patients, 36% ( $n = 102$ ) of respondents use email, 30% ( $n = 86$ ) use text messages and 7% ( $n = 19$ ) use Facebook. The perceptions of pharmacists who communicate with patients using electronic tools about information related to drug therapy once a month or more frequently were more positive than those of pharmacists who never or hardly ever communicate with patients via electronic tools about drug therapy ( $P < 0.05$ ). Over 50% of independent pharmacists reported maintaining a pharmacy website.

**Conclusions:** This study is the first U.S. statewide assessment of the use of electronic communication and social media for professional pharmacist’s communications and perceptions toward the use of social media in patient–pharmacist communications among independent community pharmacists in Texas. Future

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 413 796 2441; fax: +1 413 796 2266.

E-mail address: [natalia.shcherbakova@wne.edu](mailto:natalia.shcherbakova@wne.edu) (N. Shcherbakova).

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studies conducted in other states as well as nationwide will contribute to a better understanding of the use of electronic communication, Internet, and social media in the daily professional activities of independent community pharmacists.

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*Keywords:* Social media; Internet; Community pharmacy; e-Health communication; Pharmacist e-communication

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## Introduction

Health care communication through electronic channels, including social media, has gained popularity among both patients and health care providers over the past several years.<sup>1–12</sup> Recent review papers attempted to summarize the body of literature on social media use for various purposes by health care professionals, students and educators.<sup>13,14</sup> Research on electronic communications and social media use for professional purposes by pharmacists in the U.S. has been limited to a few studies, which examined either the general use of social media by pharmacists or the use of social media for professional activities other than patient–pharmacist communication.<sup>15–17</sup> Alkhateeb et al surveyed 50 attendees of the West Virginia Pharmacy Association Convention in 2009 and found that the majority of pharmacists use social media primarily for personal purposes.<sup>15</sup> Kukreja et al surveyed a sample of pharmacists that are registered as preceptors for Purdue University College of Pharmacy in early 2010 and also found that respondents use Facebook primarily for social purposes.<sup>16</sup> Hajar et al in 2012 conducted a qualitative study of 204 pharmacists' Twitter accounts and found that only 10% of accounts are of professional rather than social nature according to examination of 30 most recent tweets.<sup>17</sup> Lupianez-Villanueva et al conducted a web-based survey in 2006 to assess Internet usage by physicians, nurses and pharmacists in the Catalonia region of Spain.<sup>18</sup> The primary use of the Internet for professional purposes by pharmacists ( $n = 898$ ) was reported as follows: 46.7% of pharmacists share information with citizens, 38% share information with friends and relatives, 9.2% spread their own scientific papers to the scientific community, 7.4% promote a debate in their specialty, and 18.8% share information with their patients. In the Catalonian study, 73.3% of pharmacists use email to communicate with other health care professionals, while only 38% of pharmacists do so with patients. A 2012 national survey of U.S. pharmacists practicing primarily in clinical settings identified increased use

of mobile technology and social media as the key change in patient communication that pharmacists foresee in the next five years.<sup>19</sup> To date, no studies in the U.S. have assessed community pharmacists' use and perceptions toward their use of electronic communication and social media for professional purposes, including patient–pharmacist communication. With about 15% of community pharmacists nationally practicing at an independent pharmacy setting, this study focused solely on this group due to its flexibility in adopting various tools, including electronic communication and social media, to improve patient care.<sup>20</sup> The primary objective of this study was to examine independent pharmacists' use and perceptions toward the use of social media for professional communication, including communication between patients and the pharmacist. The secondary objective was to assess the degree to which independent pharmacists develop their pharmacy websites to provide drug information and patient care services.

## Methods

The study was a cross-sectional survey of independent community pharmacists practicing in the U.S. state of Texas. We obtained approval from the University of Texas at Austin IRB to conduct the study.

### *Survey*

A 25-item survey instrument was developed for the study, piloted, and revised based on comments from eight practicing community pharmacists. The items included questions addressing the objectives of the study as well as basic demographics (i.e., gender, age, type of pharmacy degree, year pharmacy degree was completed, professional affiliations, pharmacy location, and primary employment position at the pharmacy). The 12-item scale assessing perceptions toward the use of social media in patient–pharmacist communication was developed in part based on a study conducted by Lupianez-Villanueva et al among physicians, pharmacists and

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