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The influence of Internet Social Media on Professional Practice: A Case Study of Perceptions of Foundation Dentists in Health Education England, Kent, Surrey and Sussex

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Abstract

Social media is a popular, technology-led form of communication. It has a developing but contentious role in healthcare professional practice, attracting interest and opinion from official bodies, academic institutions and terrestrial and internet media. This project explored Health Education England Kent, Surrey and Sussex (HEE KSS) Foundation Dentists' (FDs) perceptions of the influence of internet social media on their professional practice.

What This Research Adds:

This paper offers healthcare colleagues (including ostensible 'digital immigrants') some insight into FDs' perceptions of work-related social media. Besides consideration of participants' appreciation and scepticism, apropos of the healthcare content, the research looks at responses in a societal context. Focus group method is recommended in this field as a democratic and rich source of data gathering from a purposive sample.

Background

Social networking describes links that connect individuals together in groups, families and organisations. It may influence an individual's behaviour.¹ The World Wide Web ('The Web') is a vast, freely available source of information accessed via the internet. It has evolved from static, 'reader-only' pages to dynamic 'user-generated content' (**Web 2.0**), and is seen as the foundation for the growth of social media.³ **Social media** facilitates social networking by allowing users to create and share content. This includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and blogs, chatrooms and message boards.⁴ Users create a profile, upload photographs and videos and share information and opinion. Platforms are free and easy to use with access facilitated by the development of the 'smartphone', a technology possessed by four out of five UK adults.⁵

Healthcare Professional Interest

- Healthcare professionals engaging with social media have created virtual communities⁶ promoting professional networking, knowledge dissemination and combatting professional isolation.
- Entering the key word 'Dental' (26-12-2016) into search facilities on Facebook revealed 392 groups, Twitter showed 102 accounts and Pinterest, 1,000 people. Groups included student year groups in academic institutions, dental specialties, dentally-related professions and study groups.
- Research shows that challenges arise when material is equally accessible to the unique motives and perspectives of clinicians, patients and official bodies. Information may be unreliable, with elusive website authors and obscured conflicts of interest.⁷ User entries may spread virally and last in perpetuity.⁸ Violation of patient privacy by sharing confidential information or excessive self-disclosure, has led to negative consequences such as dismissal.⁹
- The **General Dental Council (GDC)** (June 2016), warned against cyber-bullying and intimidation, publishing guidance on personal privacy, maintenance of patients' confidentiality and the unsuitability of social media for raising concerns about colleagues.¹⁰

A Researcher's View

- The researcher's sense of how 'traditional' media (TV/Radio/Print/Paper Marketing) questioned their professional practice, could potentially be analogous to FD professionals' impressions of the influence of social media.
- Familiarity and understanding of professional social media appears deficient, with questions raised over how virtual healthcare communities function, the depth of an individual's involvement and the basis of myriad reported benefits and detriments.
- Opinion about social media outweighs empirical research into the perceptions of its users.



Methodology and Methods

- Qualitative research using a case study approach.
- Two focus groups (four and five participants, respectively) of FDs, recruited voluntarily from HEE KSS Deanery. Two, 45-minute recordings were made and transcribed.
- A semi-structured questionnaire was used as a second source with seven respondents.
- Transcriptions and questionnaire answers were analysed using descriptive codes and categorised.
- Seven themes were realised.

Results

Despite sufficient confidence in platform security for regular use, participants voiced concerns over:

- Lack of **control** online because of platform use of their personal data or its spread through sharing.
 - Privacy and platform vulnerabilities.
 - Consequences of **infractions**, whereby past data is used in litigation or disciplinary action.
 - Other users' **online hostility** acting as a barrier to their engagement in discussion.
 - Information veracity**.
- Participants identified the following benign traits:
- Regulation** from the **GDC** and platforms was seen as reasonable.
 - Social media was recognised as a portal to dental knowledge and experience.
 - 'WhatsApp' groups provided emotional and practical support.

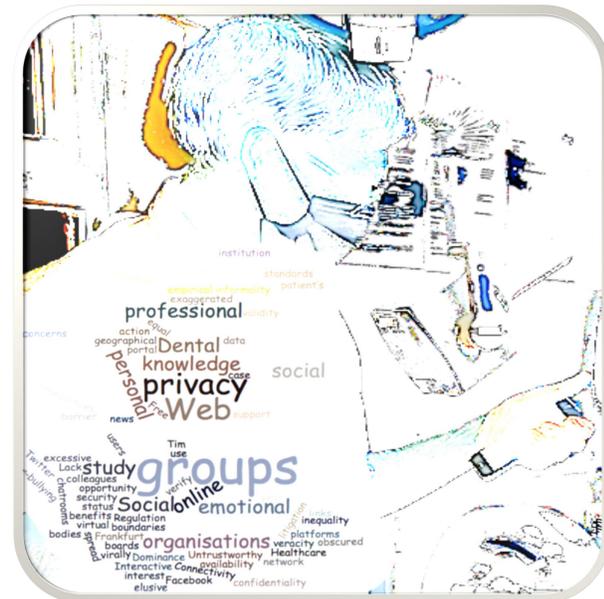
However.... greater value was accorded to assistance from colleagues and traditional media.

Discussion

Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee, envisaged the internet as a place of equal opportunity, free of geographical and cultural boundaries, but users cede **control** to platform owners through the acquisition and use of personal data, recycled as tailored news, advertising and search engine results.¹¹

User data has potential immortality free from context and boundaries. Official bodies may interpret such data as **infraction** whereby personal behaviour erodes confidence in the profession (GDC Principle Nine). Social Dominance Theory relates **online hostility** to behaviours associated with group-based inequality, including the promotion of hierarchy and individual discrimination.¹²

Concern over **information veracity** evokes a so-called 'Frankfurt School' view that televisual media erases the borderline between cultural and empirical reality.¹³ This may link to the web phenomenon of status-seeking.¹⁴ Commentary from questionnaire respondents reveals disquiet over excessive official body (**GDC**) **regulation** or surveillance, and is in sympathy with past resistance to this from healthcare professionals.¹⁵



Conclusions

- Social media is an integral part of participants' daily lives.
- Free availability and informality override concerns about security and control.
- Connectivity for geographically and professionally displaced users has practical and emotional benefits.
- Discord may arise when professional healthcare and social media mores collide. Comments betray anxieties over privacy and security, platform vulnerabilities and potential infraction, drawing attention from officialdom and the justice system.
- Social media could be the source of newer, exotic knowledge and inspiration but there is scepticism over information validity and the claims of other professionals. Nevertheless, participants have the motivation and tools to verify online content.
- Academic resources and connectivity from the Foundation Training scheme plus direct practical support from trainer colleagues made professional social media less relevant to the FD year.

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