

# Social Media Training for Professional Identity Development in Undergraduate Nurses

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**Abstract** The growth of social media use has led to tension affecting the perception of professionalism of nurses in healthcare environments. The aim of this cross-sectional study was to explore first and final year undergraduate student use of social media to understand how it was utilised by them during their course. Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken to compare differences between first and final year student use. No difference indicated there was a lack of development in the use of social media, particularly concerning in relation to expanding their professional networks. There is a need for the curriculum to include opportunities to teach student nurses methods to ensure the appropriate and safe use of social media. Overt teaching and modelling of desired behaviour to guide and support the use of social media to positively promote professional identity formation, which is essential for work-readiness at graduation, is necessary.

**Key words:** Undergraduate nurse; social media; curriculum design; professional identity.

## 1. Introduction

In early 2015, the social media market leader Facebook had over one billion active accounts, of which 14 million were from Australia [1]. Responding to the growth in the use of social media and increasing tension about the effect of use on the perception of professionalism of health workers, professional bodies and higher education institutions developed social media guidelines [2, 3, 4]. Studies have documented that healthcare workers may inappropriately use the internet and social media in the workplace [5] and this may increase the perception that students use digital technology inappropriately [6, 7]. The rapid increase in the use of digital technology has led to the situation where acceptability of social media has outpaced the development of policy or guidelines to govern its use in healthcare environments [8, 7]. The integration of work and personal life afforded by mobile technology further complicates traditional boundaries between the workplace and private life that can cause confusion for students [9]. Current curriculum design for nursing courses in Australia does not include social media etiquette [10, 11] for use during work integrated learning or for professional

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networking. Enabling access to technology while ensuring appropriate and safe use, in healthcare environments, must be addressed by educational institutions, healthcare organisations, professional groups and individual nurses.

In 2012, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, the body governing nursing education in Australia, added the requirement that all accredited undergraduate curricula must include nursing informatics [12]. Interestingly, for many universities, informatics including social media etiquette has not been overtly included in the curriculum, and more specifically in the teaching about professional identity formation or professionalism. Despite efforts that have resulted in the development of Australian nursing informatics competencies [13] the current Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia competency standards do not include nursing informatics [14]. Learning appropriate use of social media is an element of nursing competency in relation to developing professionalism. Understanding the use of social media by undergraduate students can assist in appropriate curriculum development. This paper reports on a study that aimed to explore student nurses use of social media and their media preferences for sourcing information.

## 2. Methodology

This cross sectional study was part of a larger, multi-site survey of undergraduate students undertaking Australian health profession training. Data collection was undertaken between July and November 2013, using a validated online survey, originally developed by Giordano and Giordano [15, 16]. This paper reports on information collected from undergraduate nurses at the University of Tasmania. Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken using R to compare differences between responses from first and final year nursing students.

## 3. Results

Demographically there was little difference in the gender balance between the first and final year students (Table 1). The gender distribution of this cohort demonstrated females outweighed male participants in both first and final year cohorts. The mean age of female participants was 30.5 years with the mean age for males significantly higher at 37.8 years ( $p=0.012$ ). When comparing first and final year participants the mean age of first year participants was 31.8 years with the mean age for final year participants 31.9 years.

**Table 1.** Respondents by gender and year.

	First year (n=65) 51%		Final year (n=61) 49%		All (n=126)	
Male	12	18.50%	11	18%	23	18.25%
Female	53	81.50%	50	82%	103	81.75%

Respondents were asked, *which of the following (radio, newspaper, magazines, journals, online media, television) is your primary source of information?* Online media was identified as the preferred primary source of information by 43% of female respondents and 26% of male respondents. Thirty-two percent of female respondents

identified journals as their preferred primary source of information compared to only 13% of male respondents ( $p=0.078$ ). Male students were more likely to access radio (30%) as their preferred primary source of information compared to almost 5% of females ( $p=0.0012$ ). Again, a greater percentage of males 30% identified television as their preferred primary source of information compared to females (15%).

Respondents were asked about their usage of specific social media sites including Facebook and Twitter. Twitter was used by only 12% of nursing students, in contrast, Facebook was used by 87% of them. Female respondents ( $n=103$ ) were more likely to use Facebook (89%) compared to males (78%;  $n=23$ ). However, male respondents indicated that they were more likely to access Facebook on a daily basis (69%) compared to females (32%). Independent of frequency of usage females were more likely to follow a link to gain health related information with 37%, indicating that they would follow a link compare to 26% of males.

When comparing first and final year respondents, Facebook was utilised by 89% of first year and 85% of final year respondents. Forty-six percent of first year and 68% of final year students indicating they used Facebook at least daily. Independent of the frequency of usage, 32% of first year students and 38% of final year students indicated they would follow a link to gain health related information.

Final year students were asked if and how they used LinkedIn. Only 11% ( $n=7$ ) of respondents indicated they did for connecting with employers, networking or job opportunities. Frequency of use by these students varied from once per day to about once per month.

#### 4. Discussion

The survey results indicated nursing students used a variety of media platforms for information, knowledge building and connection. The lack of development from first to final year in the use of social media and their media preferences indicates there is also currently a gap in the curriculum to ensure appropriate guidance and support in the use of newer platforms. Curriculum design to enhance development of professionalism and promotion of positive professional identity formation by modelling and informing students about how to appropriately use social media in the classroom and during work integrated learning, is required. The similarity between first and final year nursing student's use of social media may indicate limited development of online information seeking skills and behaviour. This deficit may impact on professionalism and reflect the need for curriculum development to ensure students use mobile technology and social media appropriately and safely.

Social media has the ability to connect students with peers, colleagues and experts or organisations locally, nationally and internationally to assist them to remain up to date with important professional changes. Many organisations and recruitment agencies use social media, such as LinkedIn, to vet candidates, so maintenance of online public profiles to enhance employment potential is necessary. It is important that students learn to manage their social media presence early in their education. By understanding how to use social media professionally, through show casing their knowledge, expertise and connections it is possible to forge professional connections and strengthen their position for future employment.

While professional social media guidelines are available, they lack specific information about how to use social media appropriately in the classroom or workplace.

The widespread use of Facebook by students indicates that preparation for use of social media is required. The findings of Pauleen et al [9] and McBride et al [5] indicate there is a blurring of boundaries by workers that requires guidance of students. This preparation of appropriate use needs to occur in the classroom or during simulation activities, to ensure the potential risks, benefits and challenges are understood by students. For example, modelling and practising appropriate use by demonstration of positive use to gain information about University or facilities; knowledge building about nursing; networking among peers in the classroom and colleagues in the workplace; finding resources; undertaking professional development and engaging in nursing activities. Undertaking simulation activities that promote clinical reasoning about the risks and challenges will enable students to gain an understanding about positive professional behaviour. Students can also learn about the need for maintaining infection control procedures. The promotion of a positive learning environment can reduce the risk of students being enculturated into current workaround practices or modelling poor professional behaviour during work integrated learning.

There is a need to embed strategies to scaffold learning about professionalism in the use of social media across the units delivered in nursing courses at this regional university will assist with ameliorating the current situation where access to technology for learning is ad hoc [11]. The lack of consistency of access within and between units is confusing for educators, clinicians and students. It is up to leaders in nursing education to lead and develop mechanisms to ensure the next generation of nurses are equipped to manage and filter the overload of information to ensure students remain focused on the learning and when in the clinical setting they are patient-centred and aware health professionals. Incumbent on Faculty is the need to integrate and model appropriate use into classrooms and during work integrated learning, to ensure that at graduation nurses can interact with professional learning opportunities, minimise distraction of non-work related activities and be work-ready professional users of mobile technology.

Limitations of the study include the self-reporting of data as well as the social desirability inherent in self-report measures. This may have resulted in social media usage being under or over reported. Whilst the cohorts were of similar size, there was an over representation of female students, however, this is consistent with the nursing workforce. The survey tool itself is potentially problematic as social media trends are rapidly changing and platforms regularly superseded.

Further research to evaluate the impact of including social media etiquette in curriculum design could inform whether it has an effect on perceptions of nurses using social media and any change in professional identity formation or perceptions regarding professionalism. Additional study to capture the use of social media in healthcare environments will ensure that curriculum development remains abreast of emerging trends.

## **5. Conclusion**

The majority of nursing students use social media for a range of purposes and in a range of locations, indicating a need to update nursing curricula to enable learning about appropriate use of these platforms. Classroom and simulation activities should be used to model appropriate use of social media. Teaching undergraduate students social media etiquette in a safe environment can ensure the next generation of health

professionals develop and promote positive professional identity and professionalism regarding the use of digital technologies and social media. Overt teaching about appropriate use will maximise employment opportunities for students whilst minimising privacy risks and ensure that patient safety remains paramount in this rapidly changing environment.

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