Social Work Students’ Use of Social Media & Social Work Ethics: Implications for Teaching Social Work & the Profession

Introduction & Background to the Study:

Social work is founded on values and principles that provide the cornerstone of practice by defining how services are to be provided, how clients are to be treated and how social workers are to conduct themselves. The Code of Ethics informs social work practice by providing a reference guide informing them how to identity, navigate and resolve ethical conflicts and serves to monitor professional conduct and evaluate behaviour.

The values of the profession include respecting the dignity and worth of people, pursuing social justice, integrity and confidentiality, competence in practice and service to humanity is the foundation of social work (CASW, 2005).

However the rapid use and expansion of social media sites has changed the landscape for the social work profession and other professional groups. Social work students, educators and social workers use the Internet to access research, collect data, provide online counselling, provide social support, advocate for social justice and raise funds for human service organizations (Giffords, 2009). Indeed clients of social workers also use the Internet and all forms of social media at increasing rates.

Ethical guidelines and standards have not kept up with the increased use of social media sites and we are operating in a world where ethical standards regarding the use of social media do not exist for many professions increasing the potential of ethical violations (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan & Fullmer, 2013; Giffords, 2009; Kays, 2011, Judd & Johnston, 2012; Nye, 2011; Young, 2009). Ethical problems posed for social workers and students using social media, social networking sites and blogs pertain to blurring of boundaries between personal and public lives, violation of ethical codes of conduct such as confidentiality, privacy breaches, dual relationships and the rise of conflict of interests (Halabuza, 2014).

Social media has implications for the identity formation of new social workers, leading to an increased responsibility for social work educators to educate students on the ethical and professional pitfalls of social media (Keys, 2010; CASWE-ACFTS, 2012; Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan & Fullmer, 2013; Judd & Johnston, 2012). Social work educators have a dual responsibility of socializing students about the professional norms and educating them as to relevant knowledge, which includes their online presentation of self. The online image students
create has implications for students professional roles in the future (Sec. 2.44, 2.46 CASWE-ACFTS, 2012; Judd & Johnston, 2012).

**Purpose of the study:**

The purpose of this study to was:
- to understand how students in social work use social media and
- to attempt to determine what ethical concerns exist in students’ use of social networking sites and
- to develop some insights on how the curriculum can be changed to provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to ethically use social media sites.

**Research Methods:**

This study consisted of a survey questionnaire consisting of questions pertaining to program of the student; social media sites they used and privacy information; e-mail; opinion questions; types of information sharing; and a final question asking for feedback. Prior to launching this questionnaire, we conducted a pilot study consisting of 5 participants and made final revisions on the questionnaire. This study was conducted over a 6 week period of time in the fall semester of 2015 (concluded Oct. 29, 2015). After the study was completed the Faculty of Social Work posted a Social Media Policy for all students (posted in November after final approval by the faculty).

Qualtrics Survey was used as a research server for the questionnaire. The results of the research are completely anonymous and confidential in that no identifying information or IP addresses were collected. The questionnaire was able to be completed within a half an hour.

All students registered in the Faculty of Social Work were contacted via e-mail describing the research, asking for participation with a link if students chose to complete the survey questionnaire, if they were over the age of 18 years. This email went out to all programs, MSW, BSW and Pre-Social Work. During the six weeks that the survey was conducted, students received one friendly reminder.

**Findings:**

n = 163 who completed the study.

Total n of students registered in social work or pre-social work = 663

- 163 out of 663 students registered in the Faculty of Social Work in the fall semester of 2015 completed the survey. However, we cannot calculate a response rate because we do not know
how many of the 663 students actually use their university email address, if spam picked up our email or if students thought it was spam. This sample is a non-representative of all social work students and results from this study cannot be generalized to other social work students in Canada and statistical inferences cannot be made. We did not conduct a chi-square analysis because no inferences to other social work students in Canada or the U of R are possible because it is not a representative sample.

Students who completed this survey consisted of 83 BSW students, 15 MSW students, 58 pre-social work students and 7 students who chose not to identify which program they were registered in. This sample provides a snapshot of how social media is being used by social work students.

Out of the 163 students who completed this study 90.8% maintained a Facebook or other social media site and 83.4% of the students also maintained a Facebook site.

Results:

The breakdown by type of program the student was enrolled in was as follows:

MSW: 63.2%
BSW: 73%
Pre-Social Work: 66.9%

Privacy settings:
78.8% of all students reported using privacy settings and 7.4% did not use privacy settings.

Who can see postings on Facebook sites:
- 3.7% were able to be seen by the public
- 66.9% for Friends
- 8.6% for a custom list.

Who can look you up on Facebook:
- 38% Everyone
- 14.1% only Friends
- 19% said Friends of Friends.

Comments posted on Facebook:
- 17.8% emotional state
- 15.3% injuries, illness or overwork
• 3.7% work complaints
• 1.8% problems in their personal life

**Other types of social media sites were used by:**

• **60%** of students

**These sites included:**

- 28.2% Twitter
- 8.2% use Google Plus
- 23.3% used YouTube
- 11% used Linkedin
- 52.1% used Instagram
- 44.2% used Pinterest
- 9.2% used Tumbir
- 1.2% used Flickr
- 7.4% used Vine
- 46% used Snapchat
- 3.7% used Plenty of Fish
- 2.5% used other sites.

The most sites used were Instagram (52.1%); Snapchat (46%); and Twitter (28.2%) followed closely by Google Plus (23.3%).

- Texting was used by 97.5% of all students.

**Pseudonym:**

- 22.7% of all students stated they used pseudonyms on social media sites.
- 16.6% used false names or photos when engaging online to disguise their identity

**Information on their site that they do not want future or current clients to view:**

- 20.9% of all students said they did not want clients in the future or current clients to view their postings
- When we compared the results to students who have privacy settings we found that out of the 20.9% of students who did not want clients to see their information, that 87.5% had privacy setting restrictions and only 4 did not (12.5%) which
indicates a reasonable high degree of consistency between protecting their privacy and their actions.

**Has a client asked to Friend you?**

- 19% out of the 163 students who completed the survey had completed practicums thus would have had client contact
- 20.2% stated that a client had contacted them.

In a previous question, 78.8% of students stated they had privacy settings, which indicates consistency between those who have privacy setting were less likely to have client Friend requests i.e. approximately 80% of students had privacy settings and did not receive “Friend” requests and 20% presumably those without privacy settings did receive “Friend” requests.

- 20.2% (n = 33) a “Friend” request on Facebook or other social media site
- 68.7% did not receive a request

*We asked students who did receive “Friend” requests (20.2%) on Facebook or any other social media platform how they responded:*

- 9% out of the 20.2% accepted the invitation [or 1.8% (n=3)of all the students] (concerns of possible dual relationship, breach of confidentiality and blurred boundaries)
  - 3/163 (n =3) said yes, which is 1.8% of all responses from students said yes.
- 15.2% made a different decision (n=5)
- 45.5% declined the invitation (n= 15)
- 18.2% ignored the invitation (n=6)
- 24.2% (n=8) chose another response of which the responses were:
  - .6% (n=1) accepted if I was no longer in a working relationship with them
  - .6% blocked client and declined the invitation
  - .6%; blocked the individual
  - .6%; explained that because of the nature of the relationship it was not appropriate to be contacted through social media
1.2% (n=2) explained to the client that it was not appropriate

.6% ignored or accepted but put them on a restricted list so that they could see very little

.6% told them that within their agency we accept clients as Friends solely for the purpose of contact – agency policy

We also asked students if they would check and read social media information on current or former clients what would be their reasons:

- 19% (31/163 students) said they would do so for curiosity (which is a possible invasion of client privacy)
- 29.4% (48/163) would do so because of therapeutic concern
- 34.4% (56/163) would do so if requested by the client or family member to do so
- 9.8% (16/163) would do so for other reasons

Other responses about reading client social media sites were:

- .6% (1) I don’t know why anyone would use social media as a professional source, this being said, I have “googled” clients out of personal curiosity based on something they alluded to (in our sessions)
- 8.4% (14) said they would not do that or have never done that
- .6% (1) said they would for safety reasons
- .6% (1) said they would to see how truthful the client was being
- .6% (1) said they would to see what was happening in their life

We asked students what would be reasons for not reading social media sites of current or former clients:

- 8.6% (n=14) said this topic never came up
- 46.6% (76) believed reading clients social media sites was outside of the therapeutic relationship
- 46.6% (76) was because they did not have client consent
- 1.8% would not do so for other reasons such as that it was not right ethically (1.2%; n=2)) and
- .6% (1) did not want to know what clients were posting

All total only 8% (13) of students surveyed had read social media sites of clients:

Out of those 8% we found:
• 4.9% (8) addressed the concerns with their client that arose from social media sites
• 7.4% (12) read social media sites with their client.

Professional websites:
• 22.1% (36) of the students who completed this survey have professional website policies
• 5.5% (9) of the students would discuss their online activities with a client:
Topics they would discuss included: n=9
• .6% would discuss online activities with a client such as a group or article that would help to empower or motivate the client
• .6%; anything inappropriate that I don’t feel as though they should be posting
• .6%; how to maintain a positive online presence and keep safe restrictions
• .6%; news, educational videos and comedy videos
• .6%; sometimes a patient has a public support page we may read entries by supporting people
• .6%; therapeutic resources and topical interests if they were related to the therapeutic process
• .6% very little, “I saw this on FB etc.”

E-Mail:
• 16.6% (27/163) of students who completed this survey said they would allow a client to email them at their personal email address and 65% (106) would not.
• 9.2% (15) of students who completed this survey have provided professional services with a client that they have met in person

Opinion Questions:
1. What happens on websites such as Facebook is separate than what happens in the Faculty of Social Work:
• 14.1% (23) strongly agreed
• 19.6% (32) agreed
• 24.5% (40) neither agreed or disagreed
• 18.4% (30) disagreed
• 5.5% (9) strongly disagreed.
• This means that 33.7% (55/163) students believe that there is no association between their personal social media use and how it impacts them while they are in the Faculty of Social Work.
• 23.9% (39) believe that their social media use is not separate while in the Faculty of SW
• 24.5% (40) did not agree or disagree.

Implications:
• From a teaching perspective, this means it is important we convey to students that their personal websites can in fact affect them in the Faculty of Social Work, for example the Dalhousie problems in the dentistry program which lead to the suspension of several students. From an ethical perspective, this pertains to personal and professional integrity and the Faculty of Social Work has a policy regarding student professional suitability and a policy regarding ethical use of social media, but this policy was not passed or posted until after this survey was completed.

2. Social work students’ behaviour outside the university could impact getting licensed as a social worker:
• 30.7% (50) Strongly agreed
• 35.6% (58) Agreed
• 5.5% (9) Neither agreed or disagreed
• 3.1% (5) Disagreed
• .6% (1) Strongly disagreed

Cross Tabulation Results by type of student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BSW Responses</th>
<th>MSW Responses</th>
<th>Pre-Social Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24% strongly agreed</td>
<td>4% strongly agreed</td>
<td>22% strongly agreed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% agreed</td>
<td>8% agreed</td>
<td>22% agreed</td>
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<tr>
<td>8% neither disagree nor agree</td>
<td>0% neither disagree nor agree</td>
<td>1% neither disagree nor agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>3% disagreed</td>
<td>0% disagreed</td>
<td>2% disagreed</td>
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<td>1% strongly disagreed</td>
<td>0% strongly disagreed</td>
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Implications:
• These results indicates that students believe for the most part 66.3% (108) students believe that how they conduct themselves while in university (presumably this includes their
behaviour in practicum) has an impact on their career but based on the previous response, they do not see this behaviour including their social media presence.

- Overall, for the students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed there were only 6% of which some of them may not have taken Social Ethics class.
- In the previous question, 33.7% (55/163) students believed that what happens in their social media sites is separate than what happens at the Faculty of Social Work which indicates that they do not understand how their current social media behaviour could impact them as a student or as a future professional, which is not necessarily correct given the professional suitability policy for students or the fact that whatever is posted on social media can be viewed out of context, in the future and misrepresent where the person is at in the present.
- 3.7% (6) students did not believe there is an association while 5.5% (9) were unsure.

3. Results by type of student for social work students behaviour outside of the university could impact them getting licensed:

- For this question, 59.5% of responses came from BSW students; 52.8% responses from MSW students and 63.2% were from pre-social work students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross Tabulation Results by type of student and impact on licensing:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BSW Student Responses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% strongly agreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31% agreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7% neither agreed or disagreed</td>
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<tr>
<td>2% disagreed</td>
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<tr>
<td>1% strongly disagreed (n=1)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Once again, those students who disagreed or strong disagreed were only 5% (n = 8) and again could be composed of students who have not taken our Social Work Ethics class given that they were in the BSW program or Pre-Social Work program. This does not raise any ethical concerns because it indicates that they take personal integrity seriously between how they conduct themselves in society has an impact on their professional behaviour.

4. Students need to use precautions when using social media because of legal and ethical considerations:

- 94% of the students who responded to this survey strongly agreed; 37% agreed; 3% neither disagreed nor agreed; 1% disagreed and no students strongly disagreed. Again this response
indicates awareness about the importance of integrity in conducting themselves in accordance to social work values and principles. Only 1% disagreed.

**Cross tabulation:** We compared students need to use precautions with whether or not they use a pseudonym on social media:

- 69.6% (n = 94) of the students surveyed strongly agreed
- 27.4% agreed (n = 37)
- 2.2% (n = 3) neither agreed nor disagreed; .7% disagreed and 0% strongly disagreed.

**E – Types of Information Sharing**

1. In addition, we asked students questions about the types of information they shared to determine if they were consistent in being aware of how they conduct themselves online is important from an ethical perspective.

- 67.5% (n = 110) stated their birth date or age – 15.3% (n = 25) did not
- 52.8% (n= 86) stated their relationship status – 30.1% (n = 49) did not
- 63.2% (n = 103) stated their home town – 19.6% (n = 32) did not
- 45.4% (n = 74) stated their employment status – 35.6% (n = 58) did not
- 32.5% (n = 53) stated their sexual orientation – 50.3% (n = 82) did not
- √ 6.7 (n = 11) stated their current address – 74.8% (n = 122) did not
- 46.6% (n = 76) stated their interests and hobbies – 35.6% (n = 58) did not
- √ 9.8% (n = 16) provided personal contact information (address/phone number, personal email) – 71.2% (n = 116) did not
- 17.2% (n = 28) stated their religious views - 63.2% (n = 103) did not
- 51.5% (n = 84) posted pictures of themselves for private use – 27.0% (n = 44) did not
- 26.4% (n = 43) posted pictures of themselves for professional use – 50.9% (n = 83) did not
- 74.2% (n = 121) posted pictures or videos of friends or family – 5.5% (n =9) did not

Pictures on social media is not unethical or wrong, but it does put students identities at risk of having their identity used for other students, which students in my classes have reported.

2. **Types of interests posted on Facebook or social media:**

- 33.1% posted exercise behaviours (cycling, gym etc.) – 49.7% (n = 81) did not
- 15.3% (n = 25) posted alcohol related behaviours – 67.5% (n =110) did not
- 27.0% (n = 44) posted other interests or clubs – 39.3% (n = 64) did not
Other types of information related to their personal life situation included animal rights, cats, art, Cree cultural activities, Green party, projects in non-social work job which may include being at the bar/volunteering/political views such as attendance at Gay Pride/AIDS walk), if I am involved in something and have a photo to share, ex. human society dog jog, travel, music related posts, reading, recipes, sports, causal outings with friends, books, travelling, wildlife, and gardening. All of these were .6% or 1 person.

44.2% (n = 72) posted information about charity involvement – 38.0% (n = 62) did not
15.3% (n = 25) posted information based on your religion – 66.3% (n = 108) did not
30.7% (n = 50) posted information based on their political parties - 52.1% (n = 85) did not
3.1% (n = 5) posted complaints about their work – 78.5% (n = 128) did not
28.8% (n = 47) posted information about their place of employment – 52.87% (86) did not
.6% (n =1) posted client information – 81.0% (132) did not

3. Cross tabulation:

We compared information about whether they post relationship status with whether they use a pseudonym on social media:
Results showed 63.7% (n = 86) of all students did and 36.3% (n =49) did not

We asked students about the types of information they saw when viewing social media sites of other social work students:
33.1% (n = 54) saw swearing – 46% (n = 78) did not
33.1% (n = 54) saw pictures or talk of excessive drinking – 46% (n = 75) did not
Note: 15.3% (n = 25) reported this which shows an inconsistency & 5.5% (n=9) said they posted photos of excessive drinking
27.0% (n = 44) saw crude or unprofessional humour – 52.1% (n = 85) did not
21.5% (n = 35) saw complaints about their workplace – 57.7% (n = 94) did not
15.3% (n = 25) saw complaints about supervisor or work – 63.8% (n = 104) did not
Note: 18.2% saw complaints of supervisors
10.4% (n = 17) saw complaints about clients – 68.7% (n = 112) did not
Note: 13.2% (n=16) saw complaints about clients which is consistent

Types of photos that students posted included:
76.1% (n = 124) of travel
5.5% (n = 9) excessive drunkenness
58.9% (n = 96) photo of partner
1.8% (n = 3) photo of clients from practicum or work

Note: While this number is low, it does represent a breach of confidentiality
72.4% (n = 118) photo of friends

A. Cross tabulations:

We compared information with when viewing personal information on other students’ social media sites with privacy restrictions we found:

Swearing:
If they saw swearing was cross tabulated with privacy restrictions:

- 40.5% (n = 49) said yes & 4.1% (n = 5) reported no privacy restrictions
- 52.1% (n = 83) did not see swearing & 3.3% (n = 4) no restrictions
- 92.6% of the total responded

Note: Here the concern is the 40.5% saw swearing yet only 5 said they did not have privacy restrictions.

Excessive Drinking:
Pictures or talk of excessive drinking was cross tabulated with privacy restrictions:

- 39.7% (n = 46) said yes & 4.1% (n = 5) reported no privacy restrictions
- 52.9% (n = 64) did not see evidence of drinking & 3.3% had no restrictions
- 92.6% of the total responded

Note: almost 40% saw excessive drinking compared to self reports which showed 15.3% reported excessive talk about drinking and 5.5% self reported photos of the same. In addition, the fact that 40% saw excessive drinking but yet 4.1% had no privacy settings.

Unprofessional behaviour:
Crude or unprofessional behaviour was cross tabulated with privacy restrictions:

- 31.4% (n = 38) said yes & 3.3% (n =4) reported they do not have privacy restrictions
- 61.2% (n = 74) did not see unprofessional behaviour & 4.1% had no restrictions
- 92.6%

Note: in previous questions 27% said they saw unprofessional behaviour, in addition to the low number of students who reported not using privacy restrictions.
Workplace complaints:

Complaints about your workplace were cross tabulated with privacy restrictions:

- 24.8% (n = 30) said yes & 4.1% (n = 5) reported they did not have privacy restrictions
- 67.8% (n = 82) did not see workplace complaints & 3.3% had no restrictions
- 92.6%

Note: only 3.1% said they complained about workplace compared to almost 25% which said they saw workplace complaints. In addition, concerns again about the low number or privacy settings, which suggests that students may not be aware of how to set their privacy settings.

Supervisor complaints:

Complaints about supervisor were cross tabulated with privacy restrictions:

- 18.2% (n = 22) said yes & 2.5% (n = 3) reported they did not have privacy restrictions
- 74.4% (n = 90) saw no supervisor complaints & 5% (n = 6) had no restrictions

Note: In previous sections 15.3% (n=5) said they complained about their supervisor, which is consistent with what others reported but again concerns exist about privacy settings.

Complaints about clients:

Complaints about clients were cross tabulated with privacy restrictions:

- 13.2% (n = 16) said yes & .8% (n = 1) reported they did not have privacy restrictions
- 79.3% (n = 96) saw complaints about clients & 6.6% (n = 8) had no restrictions

Note: .6% (n=1) said they complained about clients online yet this shows 13.2% and again concerns about whether students really know how to set their privacy settings.

General Feedback from students included the following comments:

- Several pre-social work students noted that questions that pertained to clients did not apply to themselves.
- Another student commented that social media was useful for advertising their exercise classes, being a part of SWSS, and finding out about events.
- A student commented that they do not post much on social media but find it to be a useful avenue to look at what others are doing, and went on to state, “I feel it is better for me not to post much because I know that it can cause problems. I wish I could post more of my opinions and viewpoints but I know that you can’t always please everyone and things can be twisted so I feel it is better not to say anything on line.”
• On the question of who can see your profile or who can add you, however, there is an option where only friends can do those things with proof of knowing the person first and a sent request to add a person. I know for myself, I have my privacy set to friends only for everything and most of my information is restricted to public friends.

• I would like to indicate that I do not post anything online that is not common knowledge about myself or that I would be ashamed of if people knew that about me. I take great care to never post a picture of someone from whom I have not received consent. While I enjoy discussions and debates, I do not post things on Facebook that can have a negative view of any group, rather I endorse positive acts. I find social media can be a podium for education, awareness, and advocacy of societal issues.

• It was easy to understand, but some questions were difficult to answer truthfully. They made you think twice before answering.

• It was a difficult survey to fill in, the wording was clear but I felt a lot of guilt. I don’t have a Facebook, but I do have Instagram and I am constantly questioning boundaries with clients post therapeutic care (for example: is it ok to maintain email contact with a client whom have had a strong rapport with after the therapeutic relationship is over?

• When doing this survey, I questioned what I had posted when I was younger. I went through my Instagram and Facebook and deleted what I thought was inappropriate. I just wanted to share how this survey made me think.

• Some of the things I posted were visible to friends only.