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# Pharmacy students' perceptions of social media in education

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study measures students' perceptions of social media in education, to consider how social media may be incorporated as a complementary learning tool.

**Methodology:** Undergraduate pharmacy students (n=623) took part in a survey to gauge their perceptions of social media in education. Data is analysed for emergent themes.

**Evaluation:** Thirty-four per cent (n=262) of the programme cohort responded. Six themes emerged from the data; privacy and confidentiality, access to technology, peer socialisation, enforcement of social media, acceptance of social media, and past experience. Ninety-two per cent of respondents reported actively using social media, nonetheless, fifty-seven per cent favour the University virtual learning environment in preference to social media for learning.

**Future Work:** Pharmacy students are active users of peer-mediated social media learning groups. However, students have reservations regarding online professionalism, and doubt the place of social media in education which includes the teacher. Desire for favourable perceptions on professionalism, and lack of experience with social media as a teaching method, negatively impacts the genuine use of social media for educational purposes.

**Keywords:** *Social media, student perceptions, technology*

## Introduction

Sixteen to twenty-four years olds contribute ninety per cent of social network users in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2014) social media platforms are increasingly used for educational applications for students born into a digital age (Mazman & Usluel, 2010). Online socialisation leads to collaborative learning, critical thinking, participation and knowledge sharing (Maloney *et al.* 2014). It can also improve students' learning outcomes, by adapting the learner into the culture of university life; through social-acceptance and relationship building (Madge *et al.*, 2009).

Clinical educators are exploring social media in academia (Cartledge *et al.*, 2013) for clinical studies, programme promotion and student satisfaction activities (Vrocharidou & Efthymiou, 2012). However little is known about the perceptions pharmacy students have about social media in particular relation to their training.

The virtual learning environment (VLE), Blackboard, is used by Manchester Pharmacy School. Research suggests that VLEs have limited functionality beyond file sharing (Divall & Kirwin, 2012; Junco, 2012). Online learning through discussion boards within VLEs rely on asynchronous technologies, in stark comparison to social media tools which are immediate and accessible (Benetoli *et al.*, 2015).

## Assessment Method

The study aim was to consider if, and where, social media could be used for teaching and learning.

Manchester Pharmacy School undergraduate students (n=623) were invited to take part in a survey to gauge thoughts and perceptions on social media in teaching and learning. Students were emailed directly via University email accounts and response was voluntary.

The survey consisted of ten questions using Likert scales and multiple selection questions. There was one open-ended further comments question. Data was analysed for simple frequencies within Excel. Open comments were analysed to identify emergent themes.

## Evaluation

A total of 196 students (31%) responded. Response rates were similar across year groups; year one; eighteen per cent, year two; twenty-six per cent, year three; twenty-nine per cent and year four; twenty-six per cent. One hundred and eighty (92%) respondents reported actively using social media. Facebook (79%), Instagram (46%) and Twitter (39%) are the most popular platforms with those surveyed.

Students have experience with student-led discussion boards (79%), chat (70%) and file sharing (68%), but little experience of webinars (11%) or teacher-led activities (39%) such as tutor-led discussion. Fifty-eight per cent of students would like to use Facebook for their studies; in particular for group work (80%), peer communication (77%), links to further reading (71%), exam preparation (68%) and peer support (67%).

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Teacher-led activities attracted less enthusiasm; feedback (36%), webinar (28%) and support (52%).

Fifty-five per cent of students would welcome social media in education, but 36% were unsure of its benefit. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents would prefer to use the University virtual learning environment (VLE), Blackboard, exclusively for their studies when asked their preferred choice. Forty-seven per cent of students felt that they would have definite concerns about their privacy by using social media for education.

Six themes from the open-ended comment question were identified. Both negative and positive trends surfaced, and are highlighted below with illustrative quotes.

Theme one concerned privacy and confidentiality:

*"I don't like the idea of using my personal Facebook account to interact with people that I would not necessarily interact with outside school", "I would feel very uncomfortable using anything other than Blackboard...mainly due to my separation of work life and social life, and concerns about my privacy", and "I do not want my use of social media to affect my employability".*

Theme two was access to technology:

*"This should not penalise those who lack the necessary hardware to engage i.e. smartphones", "the technology does not yet exist to incorporate social media into education", and "everybody can access Blackboard but not social media".*

Theme three exposed the openness of learners to peer socialisation:

*"We already have closed groups on Facebook ... there is no need to worry that a lecturer could read the information shared" and "interactions with peers on social media I have less concerns with, it is an extremely effective tool for organising work or getting input from the rest of the year about questions or queries".*

Theme four highlights past experience with social media in education:

*"In high school we used Google+, it was really successful" and "Blogger is a really good platform for the purpose of studies that I have used before".*

Theme five deliberated enforcing social media use:

*"It should not be an obligation", "others will miss out if they do not use the particular media", and "social media and education should be kept separate".*

Theme six concerned acceptance of social media:

*"very useful tool and much easier to access than Blackboard", "it would be much easier to discuss questions where everybody can instantly see the answers", "everyone is a part of at least one social media site, it's a good way to interact with students", and "this must be utilised".*

These themes mirror the evidence that students are using social media to learn, but are less inclined to formalise this technology as a teaching method that includes the teacher, unless the learner has positive prior experiences.

### Future Work

Manchester pharmacy students are active users of social media; indeed it forms part of our modern culture and society. It is common for students to create, moderate and maintain their own closed cohort groups (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Maloney *et al.*, 2014a) and this is common between our students. Teaching staff believe the use of social media offers more advantages than drawbacks (Prescott, 2014), in particular narrowing the gap between theory and practice (Hamm *et al.*, 2013). However, pharmacy students have reservations regarding online professionalism and privacy (Prescott *et al.*, 2012; Hall *et al.*, 2013).

There is no documented evidence that highlights problems with professionalism through social media educational interventions (Cartledge *et al.*, 2013). However, healthcare students are concerned, and potentially negative about, using social media in education for these reasons (Prescott *et al.*, 2012; White *et al.*, 2013). This reinforces the risk-averse stance that pharmacy students take towards professionalism (concerning employability, registration and progression). Albeit unfounded, this desire for favourable perceptions on their professionalism as a student, negatively impacts the genuine use of social media for educational purposes, which may be reflected in this study's findings. The results show that students will use social media in education if this is peer facilitated. Introducing teachers into this phenomenon makes learners less likely to participate in this method of teaching and learning; students are sceptical of being moderated.

Providing learners with a legitimate and objective educational experience, using a social media platform (particularly Facebook or Twitter), may satisfy the students' willingness to engage in innovative teaching methods, using platforms with functionality beyond VLE software, and dispel concerns around privacy and confidentiality (Benetoli *et al.*, 2015). This may lead to a more positive opinion of using social media, as our students graduate from their undergraduate education into professional practice, where social media is becoming a significant part of modern working lives.

Evaluating a teacher-led educational intervention using social media is a future step to further understand the impact teachers have on students' perceptions of learning digitally.

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