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**Social Media: social workers' views on its applications, benefits
and drawbacks for professional practice.**

Authors:

Sofia Grammenos (MA Social Work)

Dr Nell Warner- Research Associate
CASCADE
School of Social Sciences Cardiff University
warnerah@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

Awareness about current use of social media in social work and its benefits and drawbacks is lacking. An online questionnaire collected data from a sample of 569 participants within social work across different local authorities. Nearly a third (30%) of participants said that they had used social media to “look up” families they support, while less than half (47%) felt adequately trained in using social media in practice. Participants felt social media helped practice by facilitating communication both with professionals and with service users, but hindered practice by disseminating a negative portrayal of social workers, and by enabling users to identify them online, making them vulnerable. Opinions varied on whether it was acceptable to “look up” families. Results highlighted a digital difference in social work with both age and professional role being influential in the way social media is used. Findings indicated a need for clearer guidance to enable a standardised code of practice, awareness of this guidance needs to be raised and the guidance regularly updated.

Key Words: Social Media, Social Work, Professional Boundaries.

Introduction

In the UK in 2020 70% of adults used social networking sites at least once every three months (Office of National Statistics, 2020). Social networks have been defined as “online spaces that allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others” (Ellison, et al., 2006, p.3). Social networking can help people to share ideas and connect with other like-minded people on a digital platform

(Westwood, 2019). Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have millions of users (Johnson 2020), Facebook claiming 1.59 billion active daily users in 2019 (Newsroom 2019).

Increased use of social media raises two questions: how it can be used within social work practice, and what ethical issues does this create? The literature has highlighted advantages in its use: professional online debates, access to research, support networks, problem solving (Cartwright, 2017), enhanced connectedness (Cain 2008) and reaching wider audiences (Reamer 2013; Dombo, et al., 2014). Social media can facilitate communication between service users and professionals (Kirwan and McGuckin 2014), reduce tension from face-to-face assessments (Judd and Johnson, 2012) and promote sources of specialist support (BASW 2018).

However, social media also challenges many key social work principles: confidentiality, privacy and professional boundaries (Turner, et al., 2016). Commentators have raised concerns about how social media blurs professional boundaries (Chan 2016, Miller et al 2016, Ryan and Garret 2018), for example, through social workers accepting friend requests from service users. Mukherjee and Clark (2012) found that 81% of students on a social work course at American Universities would accept such requests. This could cause complications (Kirwan and McGuckin 2014) and affect practice (Westwood 2019). Guidance from professional bodies on how this should be handled is mixed. BASW (2018) says it is not appropriate, Social Care Wales (2019) advises professional judgement.

Surveillance of service users through their social media pages also poses a key ethical dilemma and views on the practice are mixed. White and Wastell (2017) argued that social media surveillance could form an early intervention service. However, Ryan & Garrett (2018) found that only 28% of social work students found online surveillance acceptable. Cooner, et al, (2020) carried out a 15 month observational study researching the relationships between

social workers and service users. Their research found Local Authority Facebook pages scrutinised Facebook accounts of families, and social workers had fake Facebook profiles specifically set up to investigate families. They found that Facebook surveillance “played a significant role in some cases” (Cooner, et al., 2020, p.147) and that the use of Facebook surveillance amongst social workers was normalised, being used daily as a tool for working with families.

There have been calls for clearer guidance in relation to this practice. Stevenson (2018) called for safeguarding boards to develop guidelines for social workers’ use of social media to ‘enhance’ their assessments. The Office of Surveillance Commissioners (2017) state material posted online is in the public domain, but “repeated visits to individual sites . . . would require appropriate authorization” (Office of Surveillance Commissioners, 2017, p. 6). Guidance on this is mixed and evidence is lacking about how wide-spread the practice is in the UK and how social workers regard it.

Many commentators discuss the challenges posed by the blurring of professional boundaries, (Chan 2016, Miller et al 2016, Ryan and Garret 2018), but it has been suggested that it would be unfair to expect professionals to censor their online personal social media activities (Strom- Gottfried, et al., 2014). One possible solution is the use of separate online personas allowing professional connections whilst retaining a separate personal identity (Mostaghimi & Crotty 2011). These do offer a solution, but there is little evidence on whether they are used in practice. An alternative approach is the use of pseudonyms for public accounts. Mansfield (2011) however, suggested that these provide only a “thin layer” of anonymity. Ventola (2014) cited Sermo, a physician-only social media website allowing medical professionals to exchange ideas: the majority of the 260,000 users used pseudonyms, protecting their professional identity from other professionals rather than the general public. However, it is not known how common the practice is in social work.

Training and guidance for professionals seems essential, but it has been suggested that it is inadequate (Kirwan and McGukin 2014) and lacking in clarity, leading to fear, anxiety and despondency among professionals (Turner, et al., 2016). There have been calls for compulsory adequate training, educators being more pro-active and students more self-critical (Judd and Johnson, 2012; Duncan-Datson, et al., 2013; Voshel and Wesala, 2015). Cooner et al., (2020) described confusion among those in the social work profession about professional social media use. BASW policy recommends spending time on this during training, but there is no evidence this is happening. Fenwick (2016) and Westwood (2019) state that the current emphasis in training is on institutional rather than practitioners' concerns. There is a lack of guidance from local authorities on this, with Carson and Stevenson (2017) pointing out that in 2015 only 2% of local authorities had social media guidance for their workers.

Questions arise over a possible digital difference among social workers in professional social media use. Prensky (2001) talked about how younger generations have grown up with digital language, while older people may be less familiar with new technologies, thus less comfortable. Zur (2012) suggested this means that older generations may tend to be more reluctant adopters of new technology. Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) disputed the term 'digitally native' when referring to differences in age, arguing that it was not age that causes a digital divide in the way technology is used but rather access and opportunity. A digital difference in age for the use of social media has been identified in the medical profession by Thompson (2008) who found that more senior medical professionals were less likely to have a social media presence.

There are clearly debates about the relationship between social media and social work practice, however there is a lack of quantitative data in the literature examining specifically how social media is being used within social work. Cooner et al., (2020) do provide some

qualitative data giving insight into how social media is being used but does not provide data about how prevalent certain practices are.

This paper collected both qualitative and quantitative data using a mixed methods survey to explore the relationship between social media and social work practice. It looked at how social media is used, and whether social workers perceive that it helps or hinders practice. It sought answers to some of the key gaps in the literature: the prevalence of certain practices (eg: using social media for surveillance), whether social workers feel they have had adequate training in regard to social media use and how aware social workers are of guidance.

The research aimed to answer five central questions:

- (1) How does social media help and/or hinder practice?
- (2) Is its use professional, personal or both? If both, are separate accounts being used?
- (3) Is there a digital difference (in terms of age and occupational status) in social media use within social work?
- (4) Are professionals taking security precautions online?
- (5) Are professionals “looking up” supported families?

Materials and Methods

The study used an online questionnaire featuring a mixture of closed and open-ended questions.

The closed questions were used to gain information about:

- The participants, including their age group and their social work role.

- The types of social media platforms they use. Three platforms were considered: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These were used as they are the three platforms most discussed in current literature.
- The ways in which they used the social media platforms. Questions about how they manage their social media use to keep online, and professional lives separate, whether they use their social media accounts for professional or personal use or have separate accounts for each. Whether they keep accounts open or closed to the public and whether they use a pseudonym online. Questions also asked about more specific ways in which social media may have been used: is it used to look up families? Would they accept friend requests from service users? Have they ever faced any threats or abuse online?
- Have professionals received any guidance on using social media? Have they read published guidance or had adequate training?

Two open-ended questions were used to enable participants to provide more detailed descriptions of the way they feel social media both helps and hinders them in their practice.

The survey was developed in Qualtrics, and data was collected using snowball sampling. An anonymous link was emailed to local authorities across the UK, universities running social work programmes, professional social work agencies and other social work platforms. The email gave information about the aims of the study, plus contact details for the researcher. It asked respondents to forward the link to other potential participants. An online blog was also set up on Exchange Wales to promote the survey. The survey was also promoted by many academics and researchers within Cardiff University via social media.

The survey was live for 12 weeks accumulating 584 responses, fifteen of which lacked sufficient data, leaving a sample of n=569 used in the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The opening page of the survey described the aims of the study and how the data would be used. Participants were assured that any data provided would be anonymous and participation was entirely voluntary. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Cardiff University.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for all the closed questions. Bivariate analysis was carried out to see how social media varied according to the participants' age and role. Chi square tests were used to identify significant relationships. Statistical analysis was carried out in SPSS. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the responses given to the open-ended questions.

Results

Responses came from social work staff with different roles. A large proportion, (n=249, 43.8%) of the participants were social workers, it was also completed by social work managers (n=91, 16.0%), social work students, (n=72, 12.7%), social work assistants (n=37, 6.5%) and social work researchers (n=23, 4.0%). 97 (17%) of responses came from people who described a range of other roles including retired social workers, principal workers, senior managers, lecturers, academics, and independent social workers. Ages ranged from 18 to over 60. Twenty-two participants practised overseas in places such as the Philippines and the USA. The majority of participants (83%) heard about the survey via email, 10% via social media, while the remainder heard about it through word of mouth.

Statistical Analysis

Table 1 shows the number and percentages of respondents who indicated that they used one or more of the social media platforms and provides further details about this use. A small number of participants (n=29, 5%) indicated that they did not use any form of social media.

Facebook was the most commonly used site, followed by Instagram, then Twitter. The majority said their social media use was largely personal. Very few said they had two separate accounts, despite this being suggested in the literature. The ways in which sites are being used differed; Twitter being used more for professional use than the other two. Facebook and Instagram were mostly used personally, but accounts were left open to the public more often on the latter. Participants were asked further questions about how they used social media, see Table 2.

As can be seen, while accepting friend requests and facing abuse are relatively infrequent, they still occur in small numbers of the sample. Of the 21 people who said that they would accept friend requests from service users nearly half (10 people) were in age category 36-45. The 21 participants included 5 who worked in research, 4 social workers, 3 managers, 1 student and 8 participants who listed their job role as 'other' which included educator or trainer. This suggests that those whose role involve less direct contact with service users and their families feel more comfortable accepting friend requests. Just over half used pseudonyms to keep themselves anonymous from service users. Slightly less than half felt they had had adequate training, and less than a third had read appropriate guidance. 30% of participants said they had used social media to "look up" service users.

Bivariate analysis was carried out to identify if there was an age-related influence over the extent of social media use: for results, see Table 3.

The participant's age was a factor in whether participants had used Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with the use of all three platforms more common in young participants. There was also an association between the participant's age and whether they used social media to look up families with 25–35-year-olds being the most likely to have done so. A digital difference in professional practice is suggested. Further tests queried whether there is an association between social work role and the practice of looking up families, see Table 4. This was also significant and indicates more qualified professionals were the most likely to have done so, students the least, possibly due to their having less direct contact with users.

Thematic Analysis: How Social Media Helps or Hinders Practice.

The open-ended question on this topic resulted in 369 participants (64%) explaining how it helped, while 330 (58%) explained how it hindered.

Thematic analysis revealed opposing arguments for both how social media helps and hinders practice. One theme to emerge was the strength of feeling, albeit on opposing sides of the argument. Some commented that social media not only hindered practice, but that its use was dangerous.

“I don't use it for social work practice as it puts you at risk and opens up GDPR concerns. It should always be kept separate from your work”

Counter to this 39% of the comments left by the 369 participants keenly stressed the benefits and did not feel that social media was any hindrance to their practice.

“I make full use of social media for work purposes, and cannot identify any area in which it hinders my practice”

However many of the comments also advocated care in use, awareness of possible pitfalls, and shrewd use of privacy settings as means of precluding any hindrance.

Advantages and Disadvantages to Professionals.

A clear divide emerged between those highlighting the benefits to social work professionals using social media and those highlighting the risks. Around 55% (202/369) of the comments on how social media helped practice related to ways in which professionals are using social media, for example to widen professional knowledge and capabilities. The potential for keeping abreast of current research, legislation and guidance is rarely mentioned in current literature, yet 40% of comments highlighted how professionals do exactly this, especially reading research into areas that might develop professional practice.

“Reading relevant and interesting research, articles, videos that assist with improving practice, offers a holistic approach (elements of neuroscience, latest psychological research, resilience, emotional intelligence)”

Participants reported following professional organisations such as BASW and the HCPC, maintaining an awareness of relevant changes to policies and legislation. Awareness of current affairs and debates was also mentioned. Keeping up to date with the latest “trends” made participants feel more relatable to young people, believing that it made them more approachable if they were aware of what was relevant in young peoples’ lives. Participants used social media to increase knowledge of current affairs including those directly affecting service users. One participant said:

“I use social media to stay up to date with social justice campaigns and this, I hope, will ensure that I work with greater nuance and understanding”

Responses also highlighted the benefits of social media facilitating peer support among professionals: sharing of ideas, and benefiting from others’ expertise. Signposting also enabled professionals to alert service users to events, groups and charities that might help them.

Whilst the benefits to professionals were highlighted, around 36% (118/330) of comments on how social media hindered practice related to the potential risk to professionals. This mostly related to service users finding social workers’ personal information online. Responses discussed websites such as “Shame your social worker” which enables the public to name social workers and share details such as the social worker’s address, family members and car registrations. Participants shared real experiences and fears of photographs of themselves, or their families being posted on anti-social work websites.

“I am worried about service users identifying me and finding out my personal details. It has happened to another social worker in my office, they were able to identify her address and make threats to her”

Online descriptions of social workers as “child-snatchers” was also mentioned as a hindrance: giving service users preconceived ideas about social workers.

Another hindrance lay in social media blurring professional boundary lines, thus impacting service user/professional relationships. There was a concern that professionals might accidentally cross the professional boundary line. As seen in the literature review one of the ways this can happen is through accepting friend requests from service users. The awkwardness of friend requests from service users and having to explain to them why that was not appropriate was seen as a hindrance to forming relationships.

“When service users send you friend requests. This may hinder your professional relationship with the service user”.

Advantages and Disadvantages to Service users.

As well as the risk to professionals 11% (36/330) of participants commented on how social media caused a huge risk to already vulnerable service users. Participants mentioned grooming, child sexual exploitation and online bullying, with the ease of communication via social media being highlighted as a concern.

“Social media allows people to speak to each other quickly and anonymously, making it much easier for groomers and exploiters”

However, this ease of communication was also seen as an advantage to service users as it eased communication with social workers, especially for young people. Around 8% (30/369) of comments for how social media helped practice mentioned that social media was the main form of communication for young people; this needed to be recognized and incorporated into social work practice. Comments identified social media as the most direct way to reach young people, citing the assumption that young people almost invariably have mobile phones, but when they did not there arose difficulties which social media could circumvent. One participant reported using social media for:

“Contacting young people who don't have any credit. They can use free wifi to message on Facebook”

“Looking up” Service users

One of the widest divides, echoing the literature review, was in attitudes to “looking up” service users on social media. This accounted for 15% (56/369) of the comments on how social media helped practice and 6% (20/330) of the comments on how it hindered.

Participants highlighted the benefits of using information from service users’ social media pages. One participant said they used it to “see if they are up to no good”. Others mentioned its usefulness in checking whether users were having contact with ‘persons of significant concern’. Facebook was used to ascertain the relationship status of service users, particularly if social workers felt they may be concealing relationships. One participant reported using Facebook to:

“Look at what parents do when caring for their children, and with whom the parents are in a relationship with”.

Social media had been used to show evidence of negative behaviour during referrals and assessments to assess risk. These included drug use in the presence of a child, children having contact with people who posed a risk and substance misuse by service users themselves. Using such information enabled challenging service users’ statements, producing more open and honest conversations. No participant mentioned using service users’ accounts to look for positives, for example evidence of good parenting or abstention from substance misuse.

Some participants highlighted the complications of ‘looking up’ service users on social media, due to the impact of the information found, and what to do with this information, particularly if it evidenced safety plans not being adhered to. Others were concerned about information on social media causing prejudgements of service users.

“It can create pre-conceived ideas/judgments of service users based on their profiles and social media history or activity”.

Many felt it preferable to rely on the more traditional information given by service users themselves.

Looked After Children and Social Media.

The advantages and disadvantages of social media were also mentioned in the context of looked after children. Participants mentioned being able to use social media to obtain photos of birth families to show during life story work. It had also been used positively to contact family members when other means had failed.

“I have previously accessed Facebook accounts to get photos of birth parents to use within adopted children’s life story books otherwise they would not have a photo of their birth parent- we are now looking into this becoming a policy”.

Others highlighted the hindrance social media caused. Looked after children might look up their birth families without the supervision of a social worker, meaning that it might not happen in a secure manner.

“Children we work with use social media to make contact with their birth families; this can mean contact can happen earlier than hoped and in a less safe/monitored way”

The disparities between those in favour and those against social media use reinforces the need for training and guidance.

Discussion

This paper reports on an online mixed-methods survey carried out with social work professionals about their use of and views about social media in their practice. Both quantitative and qualitative response analysis reflect a variety of opinions and practices in relation to social media and a lack of training and guidance on this issue.

Many participants discussed the benefits from social media use, echoing those found in previous studies: ease of communication and ability to use social media for peer support (Cartwright, 2017). Responses also highlighted the benefits of professionals using social media to stay informed about current research and debates allowing for a more holistic approach to social work.

The research highlighted that one of the main ways in which social media hinders social work practice is the risk to professionals. There is a fear among participants of service users being able to find out and use against them information accessible online. This causes a reluctance amongst social workers to use social media within their practice, or indeed at all.

Benefits to service users included direct work and the ability to signpost service users to relevant organisations. Additional advantages included work with young people; including the potential to facilitate contact with young people who do not necessarily use or have mobile phones. The pitfalls of social media use for vulnerable service users were also highlighted, including its potential for online grooming, sexual exploitation, and bullying.

The findings also noted the advantages and disadvantages to social media use in looked after children. The benefits included using social media in direct work, and finding family members when other means had failed. The disadvantages included looked after children contacting birth families without social worker supervision.

Both the qualitative and the quantitative results revealed a clear debate over whether it is acceptable to 'look up' service users on social media. Overall, 30% of participants indicated that they had done this, but there was a clear difference between age categories: 41.6% of those in the 25 to 35 age group had done so, compared with only 22.2% of those aged 60+. The qualitative analysis highlighted contradictory results: some using social media for surveillance, and calling for it to be used as part of social work assessments, others arguing that it breached service users' privacy, creating ethical dilemmas. Potential pitfalls are obvious, as is the need for uniform protocols to prevent inadvertent mishap or even malpractice. Questions need to be asked about whether it is acceptable that there are such divergent views and practices within one profession, and what can be done to ensure that service users are treated fairly. Cooner, et al., (2020) also highlighted this concern saying that the profession needs to protect service users from the potential illegal use of social media within social work

Quantitative analysis highlighted that most participants used social media only for personal use, and just a few for professional use. Current literature suggests that to prevent professional boundary lines being crossed, professionals could create two online personas (Mostaghimi & Crotty 2011, Reamer 2013). Our results indicated that only 31 (5%) of participants used this practice, suggesting that advice is not being followed by professionals. Of those who used social media, 53% said they used pseudonyms; a low number given current concerns about personal information being misused online.

The clear differences between how participants feel social media should be used, and the different approaches, all point to the need for clear and consistent guidance and training for all social work professionals. However, 53% of participants felt that they had not received adequate training in social media use. This suggests that, in spite of previous calls for adequate training (Kirwan and McGukin 2014, Cooner et al., 2020), this is still not in place.

There is a lack of awareness of existing guidance on professional use of social media, with below a third of participants indicating that they had read BASW's social media policy. More work needs to be done to ensure that all social work professionals are aware of guidance and have a more uniform approach to social media use in their practice. This is particularly evident in how social media is being used to "look up" families, but there are other areas where further guidance could be useful, for example, how social media can be used to support communication with young people. Guidance needs to be promoted at all levels, from social work students through to operational managers; systems need to be put in place so that social workers are trained and made aware of it. **Guidance also needs to be updated regularly by social work regulatory bodies to match the evolution of social media.**

By using an online survey this study has been able to gain information from a relatively large sample of professionals about the opinions of social media within practice. However, the study has limitations, particularly in relation to the sampling method. Therefore the findings cannot be considered to be representative of the entire profession. Some (10%) of participants found out about the survey through social media: possibly participants were more likely to use social media than the profession does as a whole; the findings need to be considered within this context. This research was conducted prior to the global COVID 19 pandemic. **The COVID 19 crisis suspended many non-essential visits for social workers, and therefore placed a greater emphasis on communication through ICT means such as mobile phones, and tablets (Mishna, Milne, Bogo, & Pereira, 2020).** If this research were conducted again it is likely that the data would reflect this, potentially meaning that the data from this study is not a reflection of current levels of social media use within social work. Nevertheless the survey illustrates a range of opinions from the social work profession on using social media, and the relatively large sample size and numbers of open-ended comments provided reflect strongly held views from the profession on this topic.

Given the pandemic restrictions, what becomes clear is that social media is becoming a major means of communication both personally and professionally and there exist worrying inconsistencies in its use by social work professionals. The digital difference illustrated by this study highlights a different attitude to these issues between older and younger colleagues, and that differences in attitudes may exist between social workers and their managers. This again highlights the need for a more uniform approach across the social work profession.

In order for the profession to be able to develop and improve communication with service users (as seen in COVID crisis 19) discussions in the social work profession need to continue, guidance will need to be updated regularly and training will need to be ongoing. Clearer guidance needs to be produced looking into how social media can be incorporated into social work, to do otherwise risks missing opportunities for improvement to the profession. In this changing digital world we need to do all that we can to ensure professionally helpful use of social media with a clear and consistent approach so that professional boundaries are not blurred, social workers are kept safe, and service users are treated equally and fairly.

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Tables

Table 1. Ways participants report using social media platforms

	Facebook n (%)	Twitter n (%)	Instagram n (%)
Have an account	479 (84%)	250 (44%)	321 (56%)
Whether used for personal or professional use*			
Professional	7 (1.5%)	83 (33%)	7 (2.1%)
Personal	449 (93.7%)	140 (56%)	309 (96%)
Two accounts, one professional and one personal	18 (3.7%)	17 (6.8%)	2 (0.6%)
Whether account is open to public*			
Private	450 (94%)	135 (54%)	264 (82%)
Open accounts	26 (5.4%)	108 (43%)	54 (16.8%)

Percentages calculated as the percentages of those who use each type of social media platform.

Table 2. Numbers and percentage of participants who report different types of social media activities

Activity	n (%)
Use of pseudonyms	301 (53%)
Looking up families /service users	171 (30 %)
Faced threats or abuse	33 (5.7%)
Would accept friend requests from service users	21 (3.7%)
Read BASW social media policy (or national equivalent)	174 (31%)
Felt that they have had adequate training	270 (47%)

Table 3. Social Media Use According to Social Worker Age

	18-24 N(%)	25-35 N(%)	36-45 N(%)	46-60 N(%)	60+ N(%)	Significance of Chi² Square
Use Facebook	35 (97.2%)	153 (87.9%)	119 (79.3%)	149 (83.7%)	22 (73.3%)	0.019*
Use Twitter	24 (66.6%)	78 (45.3%)	66 (44.0%)	74 (42.0%)	7 (23.0%)	0.001**
Use Instagram	34 (94.4%)	135 (78.0%)	71 (47.6%)	69 (39.4%)	11 (37.9%)	0.000**
Have used social media to “look up” families	5 (13.8%)	70 (41.6%)	50 (35.2%)	40 (24.2%)	6 (22.2%)	0.001**
Feel that they have had adequate training	18 (52.9%)	85 (50.0%)	61 (34.8%)	87 (55.0%)	18 (69.2%)	0.170

* Significant at $p < 0.05$, ** Significant at $p < 0.01$

Table 4. Social Media use according to social worker role.

	Social Work Student n (%)	Social Work Assistants n (%)	Social Worker n (%)	Social Work Managers n (%)	Significance of Chi² Square
Percentage that had used social media to 'look up' families.	10 (15.6%)	10 (27.8%)	99 (39.7%)	27 (29.6%)	0.001**

** Significant at $p < 0.01$