

Study finds health professionals need to be cautious on social media

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For health professionals, posting a single negative comment to their Facebook profiles may hinder their credibility with current or potential clients, a new University of Guelph study reveals.

People increasingly use social media to promote themselves or to connect with friends and acquaintances. As the line between personal and professional can easily be confused when professionals use social media to promote themselves, U of G researchers investigated Facebook factors that may affect people's perceptions of professionalism.

They found posting only one subtle comment expressing workplace frustration was enough for people to view you as a less credible health professional.

"This study provides the first evidence of the impact [health professionals](#) ' personal online disclosures can have on credibility," said psychology professor Serge Desmarais, who conducted the study with U of G Prof. Jason Coe, Department of Population Medicine, and Cynthia Weijs, who conducted the study as part of her dissertation research and is now at University of Calgary. "This finding is significant not only because health professionals use social media in their personal lives, but are also encouraged to use it to promote themselves and engage with the public."

Published recently in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, the study involved more than 350 Canadian participants who viewed a mock Facebook profile and rated the profile owner's credibility and then rated their own willingness to become a client of that profile owner.

The researchers tested factors including the identified gender of the Facebook profile owner, whether they listed their profession as a veterinarian or medical physician and whether their profile included a posting of an ambiguous workday comment or a comment expressing frustration.

The ambiguous comment posted stated: "Started with new electronic patient charts today...interesting experience for sure J."

The workday frustration comment stated: "What is it with some people?? I know I only went through 9 years of university...but really, I know what I'm talking about...yeesh!!"

The only factor that influenced viewers' perception of the profile owner's professionalism was the single workday frustration comment. On a scale from 0 to 100, the profile with the negative workday comment was rated 11 points lower (56.7) than the one with the ambiguous workday comment (67.9).

"That's a meaningful drop," said Desmarais. "This shows that it takes just one simple comment for people to view you as less professional and to decide they don't want to become a client of yours. Depending on who sees your posts, you may really hurt your reputation just by being up late one night, feeling frustrated and posting your thoughts online."

Credibility ratings were determined based on participants' scoring of 16 personality adjectives under the categories of competence, caring and trustworthiness. Profile owners with lower credibility ratings were also deemed by participants as less professional.

Even if a health professional refrains from posting this type of negative comment on their promotional page, potential clients can easily find their personal page online, added Desmarais.

"This blurring between private and public may be particularly problematic for people just entering the health profession field who have essentially grown up posting their lives on social media and haven't yet had the chance to build positive relationships with clients."

While social [media](#) can be an effective way to engage with others, as well as promote and brand yourself, it's not the best fit for everyone, he added.

"It makes sense for people whose personalities are a large part of their profession to promote themselves through [social media](#), but it may not make as much sense for [health](#) professionals and other professionals whose trust and [credibility](#) is a large part of their personal capital."

More information: Cynthia Weijs et al, Effects of Mock Facebook Workday Comments on Public Perception of Professional Credibility: A Field Study in Canada, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2019).
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