

Cover Page

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Abstract

Student social workers live in a world where sharing of information seems to be straightforward and unproblematic. However, data sharing is a contentious issue in practice that raises ethical issues. There is a focus on this aspect of practice in social work education particularly in the context of data storage, confidentiality and multi-disciplinary work. There have been examples of qualified workers being sanctioned by the Health Care Professions Council for breaching professional standards related to inappropriate use of social media. Understanding the advantages and potential pitfalls of social media is crucial for social workers. The aim of this research was to develop an understanding about how student social workers use social media during their time at university as a tool for continuing professional development whilst balancing the need to present a professional persona. This paper reports on four themes that emerged from a study that considered social media and social work training: Changing/securing profiles; using social media to support learning and development; university support; replicating earlier behaviour in the professional setting. The findings suggest student social workers are ambivalent about the use of social media both during training and as a way to support ongoing development beyond the university setting.

Key Words: Social Media, Professionalism, Social Work Training, Support

Supporting students to use social media and comply with professional standards

Introduction

Social work practice rests on practitioners having a clear understanding about confidentiality. What it means, when information can be shared and what can be appropriately divulged. The British Association of Social Work (BASW, 2012b) clearly state '[s]ocial workers should ensure the sharing of information is subject to ethical requirements in respect of privacy and confidentiality...' (p. 13). Furthermore, Voshel and Wesala (2015) suggest that it is necessary to expand 'the way we think about social work ethics to include online social media' (p. 67). It is essential then, that social work students understand their ethical and professional responsibilities in this area (Voshel and Wesala, 2015). Time is spent with student social workers exploring these issues not only in the UK (Turner, 2015; Westwood, 2014) but also in other countries such as the United States of America (Kimball and Kim, 2013; Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012; Robbins and Singer, 2014; Voshel and Wesala, 2015) and Canada (Knowles and Singh-Cooner, 2016).

The majority of students currently undertaking social work training have grown up in an era that has embraced the free sharing of information (Borgman, 2007; Deepak, 2016). In 2005, 8% of adult Internet users reported having an online profile. By 2009, that number had increased to approximately 35% (Correa, Hinsley & De Zuniga, 2010, p. 248). The most recent data available from Ofcom suggest that 73% of adults in the UK regularly use social media (Ofcom, 2016, p. 54). Status updates and 'selfies' are posted regularly by an increasing

number of people. Current student social workers and the wider population have become used to sharing information regularly and in a variety of ways (Ofcom, 2016).

However, there is evidence available that demonstrates how difficult some practitioners find it to separate their personal online presence from their professional self, especially when using social media to communicate with a mix of family, friends and co-workers. For example, a number of qualified social workers have faced disciplinary action after posting inappropriate messages on social media platforms and the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) has imposed a number of sanctions on qualified workers connected to these cases (HCPC, 2016a).

Furthermore, instances of social worker misconduct attract negative attention that is reported in the media as the following headline in the *Daily Mail online* illustrates:

It was an amazing moment': Social worker gloats on Facebook over breaking up a family and reveling in the 'massive rollicking' the judge gave the parents (Levy, 2014, p. 1).

Whilst publications such as the *Daily Mail* do not have access to all the information about individual cases, the general public form opinions of the profession based on reporting of this kind. It is therefore of concern to the profession when social work practice is shown to fall short of the standards that are expected. In the UK, both the HCPC and BASW offer guidance to social workers on the appropriate use of social media (BASW, 2012a; HCPC, 2016b). Similar guidance is offered in other countries such as Australia (Chan, 2016;

Chan and Holosko, 2016) and the United States of America (Mishna et al, 2012).

Community Care a website that offers a range of news items and research papers has published a number of articles in recent years about the use of social media. One recent news items suggested, '[s]ocial workers [are] 'not equipped to identify risks of social media' (Stevenson, 2016, p. 1) with the author of this piece highlighting two serious case reviews that 'recommended local agencies should support staff to learn more about social media...' (Stevenson, 2016, p. 1). *The Social Care Network* (a *Guardian* newspaper publication) also regularly reports on the difficulties that social workers experience with Megele (Senior Lecturer at Middlesex University and former Head of Practice Learning at Enfield Council) suggesting that social media should be 'an essential part of new social workers' toolkit' (Megele, 2014, p. 1).

It is argued that social media can be utilized to communicate more effectively with other workers and service users (Mishna et al, 2012) but also that social media can be successfully used to fight new types of harm such as cyberbullying, digital isolation and the digital divide, with these types of harm being identified as 'new forms of inequality' (Megele, 2014, p. 1). Fighting inequality in any form is central to social work practice (BASW, 2012b). This aspect of social work is also promoted by organisations such as *The Social Work Action Network* (SWAN) a campaigning organisation that works towards restoring social work to 'practice that is rooted in the value of social justice' (SWAN, 2009, p. 1). Using social media as a tool for positive social change is

clearly important and something that should be considered during social work training. It is also necessary to up skill the existing workforce (Simpson, 2013) as illustrated above (Mishna et al, 2012; Stevenson, 2016), however, the focus of this paper is social work training and considerations of the actions required to support existing practitioners is beyond the scope of this research.

Although many social work practitioners use social media to inform their practice 'many social work educators fail to bring social media into their pedagogy' (Hitchcock and Battista, 2013, p. 33). As student social workers are encouraged to become active consumers of research during their training (Deepak, Wisner & Benton, 2016), modules that focus on research training perhaps offer a space for this topic to be considered with this enabling social work educators to include the use of social media in their teaching (Hitchcock and Battista, 2013). A number of social media platforms offer an opportunity for student social workers to find out about the latest research, development opportunities and engage with more experienced workers from outside their immediate geographic location (for example, Twitter and Facebook). Knowles and Singh-Cooner (2016) describe this as an opportunity to 'develop communities of practice' (p. 261). This concept can perhaps be connected to the notion of bridging capital. Bridging capital is 'created when individuals come together from different backgrounds and social networks to make connections, or bridges, between two [or more] social networks' (Deepak et al, 2016, p. 311).

To effectively make use of communities of practice student social workers perhaps need to consider their online presence. Voshel and Wesala (2015)

suggest that social work students should develop their own online identity and that this should be a conscious act that is supported during training. It is also suggested that social work educators should 'cultivate social media literacies so students will develop the skills they need to be informed professionals' (Hitchcock and Battista, 2013, p. 34). This perhaps indicates a need for student social workers to separate their personal and professional online identities. This would help 'students to understand security and privacy issues' as well as supporting student social workers to understand the ethical challenges social media presents (Knowles and Singh-Cooner, 2016, p. 261). Using social media as a research tool and as a platform to engage with campaigns for positive social change should perhaps now be an important aspect of social work training (Turner, Bennison, Megele & Fenge, 2016). Having a separate and distinct professional presence online may support this endeavor.

However, given the tensions that appear to exist between the risk of inappropriate use of social media and the opportunities for becoming involved in social action, it is important to explicitly debate these issues with student social workers at the earliest opportunity. It is also important for the training of social workers at universities to be 'evidence-informed' and that research is fully utilized so that teaching reflects the realities of current practice (HEA, 2011, p. 3). At the time of writing (January 2017), the HCPC were in the process of seeking views on revised social media guidance to registrants including social workers (HCPC, 2016c). It is important to gain an understanding about how student social workers use social media and the support they receive during

their training so that when the revised guidance is issued, universities are able to incorporate any changes effectively into the training programmes offered.

This paper explores the experiences of a small group of student social workers and their changing use of social media. It is hoped that the findings from this research will be used to inform the way student social workers are encouraged to use social media to be 'research minded' and as a tool for promoting social change whilst managing their professional (online) identity.

Ethics and Consent

The ethics committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull approved this research project (reference number FoE 15-/16-240). Participants were recruited from two large social work programmes at a traditional medium sized university in the north of England. 10 participants were interviewed for this study, five from a postgraduate programme and five from an undergraduate training pathway. An email was sent to all student social work students who had completed their first practice placement asking for volunteers to take part in the study. All the participants signed a consent form that made it clear that they could withdraw from the research at any time and that steps would be taken to ensure that individuals could not be identified in any work published by the researcher. Participants were also asked at the end of the interview if they were still happy to be involved in the research to check for informed consent again at the end of the interview process. Protecting research participants' confidentiality is important to the research community (Bryman, 1988; D'Cruz and Jones, 2004; McLaughlin, 2007) and to social work

as a profession as highlighted by BASW in their *Code of Ethics* (BASW, 2012b). Given the very small participant pool no further information can be offered about age, gender and so on of the student social workers that volunteered to take part in this study. Pseudonyms have been used, again to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Research Aims

The aim of this research was to develop an understanding about how student social workers use social media during their time at university as a tool for continuing professional development (CDP) whilst balancing the need to present a professional persona.

Research Question

The research sought to answer a set of inter-related questions around the participants' *experiences* of using social media, including:

- How do student social workers use social media?
- How has their use of social media changed during their training to account for the need to develop a professional (online) identity?
- How can universities support student social workers make full use of the opportunities that social media offers whilst helping them develop as professional workers?

Methods

Qualitative research methods were identified as the most appropriate to use for this study, as the aims of the research were to develop an understanding of the

experiences of the research participants (McLaughlin, 2007). Qualitative methods allowed the researcher to develop a rich contextual understanding of social media use amongst the student social workers that took part in this study (Cunliffe, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. Student social workers were interviewed individually during the data-gathering phase of the research. Semi-structured interviews were used so that a degree of flexibility was available so that topics of interest could be investigated further if necessary (Mason, 2002).

Thematic analysis was identified as an approach that supported the research aims and was used to operationalize the methodology that underpins this small-scale study. The approach used here reflects what Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as a theoretical thematic analysis as the research questions were used to inform the coding stage of the analysis. The interviews were transcribed and then coded. Coding is an essential aspect of qualitative research (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Mason, 2002; Saldana, 2009) and once data had been coded, themes were identified. This paper reports on four themes that are closely connected to the initial research questions (1) Changing/securing profiles (2) Using social media to support learning and development (3) University support (4) Replicating earlier behaviour in the professional setting.

Pedagogical Framework

Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011, p. 4) offer a useful pedagogical framework that can be adapted and used to frame the analysis below. The first level within the

framework is 'personal information management'. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011, p. 4) describe this level as students being encouraged to make use of social media to develop a 'personal learning environment that enables them to engage in self-regulated learning process'. Whilst the original model describes this stage as being used to support students to use blogs and wiki to set learning goals and organise resources it can be adapted for use with platforms such as Twitter to identify material that adds to the classroom based learning experience.

The second level involves 'social interaction and collaboration' (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2011, p. 4) where students share content that helps them to engage in informal learning spaces that are informed by the content of the programme of study. This can mirror content in individual modules or can be used to support learning on the programme as a whole. This stage can be used in the way described by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) as encouraging students to share content in online communities and in the case of student social workers, with qualified social workers with high profile jobs such as Principle Social Worker and lecturing staff involved in delivering the module or programme of study.

Finally, the third level of the framework is described as 'information aggregation and management' (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2011, p. 4). This stage is more sophisticated and requires students to connect levels one and two so that they can reflect on their learning (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2011, p. 4). Level three can be adapted so that student social workers are encouraged to develop an

online presence used both for professional development and as a space to engage in societal level campaigns that can help drive forward positive social change and fight inequality.

Figure 1 Pedagogical Framework



Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011)

This framework (illustrated above) will be used to support the analysis offered below and to outline how it may be possible to improve the way student social workers are encouraged to make use of social media to enable them to become research minded practitioners and engage in social action.

Results

Changing/securing profiles

The participants all reported using social media before starting their social work training. The most frequently used social media platforms were Facebook, Twitter and Instagram:

I used Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Poppy).

I used Facebook and Instagram (Amber).

These platforms were mainly used to keep in touch with family and friends and to share pictures of social events and family gatherings. Some participants also used social media to access news and current affairs updates. This reflects the way social media is used by the wider population more generally (Mishna et al, 2012). Some of the participants also used social media in work related ways or in the voluntary work that they did:

Before I joined the social work degree I was secretary for a committee. Facebook was sort of how we got in touch with everybody (Iain).

It wasn't my own account it was a work account sort of monitoring and feedback (Poppy).

However, all the participants reported that they had changed the way they used social media now that they had started their social work training. The main change was connected to a concern that they might inadvertently post something that could call into question their suitability or be connected to something that could call in to question their suitability:

I completely deleted my Facebook account...I still have an Instagram but its heavily like I can't be tagged in some photos (Kristy).

A bit of a lockdown...my security setting are quite tight (Lisa).

My use has changed cos I share very little now my personal life is coming off social media (Poppy).

Participants also reported changing their name and location so that it would be more difficult to search for them on social media site:

I took down like the university cos like people on a night out can type in like [name] at [university] and find me (Lisa).

Perhaps the most significant strand to emerge in this theme was that student social workers became very cautious about sharing personal views on issues

such as the recent referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union:

I still posted things like about Brexit but I was very considerate of how my views might impact my career (Iain).

This is important given the role the social work profession plays in positive social change and working to defend and promote the interests of marginalised groups in society. Iain's caution about sharing his political views is therefore troubling. However, it also perhaps demonstrates a degree of reflection and his use of the word 'considerate' indicates forward thinking and purpose to his use of social media. Overall, it appears that the concerns about inadvertently posting something that may call into question their suitability for social work impacted the way this group of student social workers used social media.

Using Social Media to Support Learning and Development

It became clear that some of the lecturers that delivered part of degree programmes used and promoted the use of social media for learning and development, especially Twitter:

Another tutor is really vocal about Twitter (Iain).

The academics are trying to get people to use Twitter (Christine).

This suggests the use of social media is included in some aspects of the programmes and that the student social workers had an awareness of the role social media can have in practice. Some of the student social workers also reported 'following' academics (not only lecturing staff from the university where the participants were training) or having quick links to the pages of prominent social workers:

I do follow relevant academics who use that as a platform in what I'm interested in (Kristy).

I do subscribe to some social workee (sic) pages if there's some new knowledge coming through its nice to just tap into that and read about it (Christine).

This suggests that the promotion of social media by some lecturers had encouraged student social workers to explore social media as a potential resource that could be drawn upon to support their learning and development.

However, these activities were also seen as problematic:

They do try to get people to use Twitter but I don't think it works... (Lisa).

When I use social media I go on it to not think about university or placement (Amber).

The reluctance to use social media is an important finding as it illustrates one of the barriers that may exist to student social workers actively engaging with some of the opportunities that social media may offer. This barrier may be connected to the next theme to be considered in this paper, the support offered to students during the early stage in their training.

University Support

All the students interviewed reported that during welcome week (the first week in semester one that is traditionally used by universities to orientate new students and introduce them to the programme of study and university) the university offered lectures to new students about the use of social media (run alongside sessions about professional standards). However, these lecturers were perceived as being very negative:

I think like a lot of people were like...you got in and it was very like you can't do this you can't do that...a lot of people felt like that (Lisa).

In addition, as outlined above the student social workers reported that some of the teaching staff at the university promoted the use of social media. Several of the participants suggested more could be done to engage trainees:

From what I have seen its professionals talking to professionals...it's difficult to be involved in that (Amber).

Perhaps it could be part of an assessment students could set up and maintain a social media page. Going forward it could meet some of the course requirements (Poppy).

These quotations illustrate a gap that may exist between teaching staff and the students they work with, especially during the early stages in their training. The quotation from the interview with Poppy perhaps demonstrates a desire to use social media, with Poppy offering suggestions about how the university could support such activity.

Replicating Earlier Behaviour

As the students progressed through their degree programme they appeared to start to better understand the potential benefits that social media could offer. As part of social work training in England and Wales, trainees complete two placements. The first is 70 days long and the second is 100 days in length. These placements are assessed and form a significant part of the programme completed by trainees. Several of the student social workers reported that when they started at their first placement they were surprised to find the agency they had been placed at had only a limited social media presence:

I went to them and said you don't have an Instagram account and to me Instagram is a lot more user friendly...so I set up an account that I now run for them (Kristy).

The social work students then, identified social media as a key tool that can be used to engage service users and promote the services that an agency has to offer with this reflecting the way some of the participants had used social media in their work life before beginning their social work training. However, while the student social workers actively promoted social media to help engage service users and attract new people into services they still appeared to struggle with the notion that social media can be used more broadly to promote positive social change.

Discussion

Using Social Media

The way participants used social media before embarking on their social work training mirrors patterns of use by the wider population that have been identified and reported in other research (see for example, Boulianne, 2015; Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). The findings from this research suggest student social workers are involved in stage one of the framework developed by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) in a limited way. However, the findings from this study suggest that student social workers are cautious in their use of social media as a tool for professional development. Whilst several of the participants reported using social media to identify resources that may help their learning they were reluctant to setup and maintain a profile that could represent their professional self.

This could be addressed in the early stages of social work training if more focus was given to the positive aspects of social media. As Lisa, one of the

participants stated, 'you got in [to the professional standards lecture] and it was very like you can't do this you can't do that.' If the initial lectures (such as the one referred to by Lisa) were used to encourage students to set up profiles on social media platforms at the same time as highlighting the ethical and regulatory challenges, students may be more open to the use of social media to support their learning and development. This would also help students to start to develop a professional identity and would help them to begin to recognize the importance of networking (Voshel and Wesala, 2015).

However, the reluctance to use social media perhaps reflects the fear reported by some participants about how their use of social media could impact on their future employability. Social media is most frequently used to maintain friendships and stay connected to others and also to 'gain social capital' (Drouin, O'Connor, Schmidt & Miller Drouin, 2015, p. 123). However, research suggests that an increasing number of employers are now screening job applicants by searching for an online presence (Jeske and Shultz, 2016). This suggests the student social workers' caution is rooted in evidence about how a social media presence can impact employment prospects and is therefore something that would need to be considered when supporting student social workers to more actively engage with social media in a professional context. Again, this could be addressed in the initial professional standards lectures and followed up during other teaching sessions.

By supporting student social workers to make positive use of social media, the concern about employers screening potential job applicants by reviewing any

social media presence could be addressed. This is important as non-engagement in this increasingly important area of practice (Mishna et al, 2012) may also lead to what Mullard (2007, p. 81) describes as a 'chilling effect'. Mullard (2007) developed this concept in response to the 'war on terror' in particular the surveillance of citizens in areas such as the material individuals read by monitoring public libraries. This chilling effect 'narrows the space for dissent [and] also corrupts the democratic process...' (Mullard, 2007, p. 81). This is problematic as BASW (2012b, p. 5) clearly state '[h]uman rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action.' This chilling effect may limit the ways in which student social workers (and perhaps qualified workers) engage in wider social media based campaigns to promote social justice.

Learning and Development

It was clear that lecturers at the university where this research took place encourage student social workers to make use of social media, but that the barriers highlighted above appear to limit the extent that student social workers embraced social media both to support their learning and as a tool for engaging in social action. In addition to the barrier outlined above (impact on future employability), it is perhaps also connected to the messages delivered at the start of the students' training during welcome week. Stage two in the module offered by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) involves active sharing of content. Given the barriers identified earlier in this paper students struggled to move forward to this stage. One of the student social workers (see quotation taken from the interview with Poppy above) suggested that more could be done during

classroom based learning to develop this aspect of professional training. Having an assessment based on using social media appears to be a well thought through suggestion. Deepak et al, (2016, p. 311) argue that ‘...the use of social media, has been found to facilitate students’ [engagement in] learning.’ This type of assessment could be utilized within a module used to teach student social workers how to critically engage with research in practice. Indeed Singh Cooner (2014) has used this approach with Facebook and reported ‘higher levels of learner satisfaction’ following the introduction of this imaginative approach (p, 1078).

By setting up a social media profile and engaging with topical debates about practice, students may opt to continue using the profile beyond the module and into practice. This would then allow student social workers to move through stage two of Dabbagh and Kitsantas’ (2011) framework and into stage three. It would also encourage the development of communities of practice (Knowles and Singh-Cooner, 2016). Furthermore, this type of approach would promote engaged learning, a term used to describe ‘a positive energy invested in one’s own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing...and involvement in specific learning activities’ (Schreiner and Louis, 2006: 6). It would also promote the development of social capital (Deepak et al, 2016). Incorporating this type of assessment would also help student social workers to further develop their understanding of risk in this area and ‘how to navigate social work ethics related to their use of social media (Voshel and Wesala, 2015, p. 68). This learning could be connected to the social work value base with links being made to the regulatory body guidance.

The Same but Different

Stage three of the framework offered by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) requires student social workers to link stages one and two so that they are able to reflect on earlier learning. It has been adapted here and the third stage is seen as student social workers connecting stages one and two to develop an online presence for continued professional development and as a tool to be used to engage in societal level campaigns for positive social change. Although the participants in this study struggled to move to stage two of Dabbagh and Kitsantas' (2011) framework, they did appear to make connections about the use of social media and their work whilst on placement. The student social workers appeared to replicate their behaviour in previous work environments. This is evidence that they were developing 'social media literacies' (Hitchcock and Battista, 2013, p. 34) and is something that could be used to further support student social workers develop in this area.

This is interesting, as although the student social workers demonstrated an understanding of the positive aspects of social media they appeared reluctant to embrace social media as a tool for personal development and for engaging in social action. It has been suggested that social media offers new opportunities to develop social work practice (Chan and Holosko, 2016). By drawing on the experience some student social workers will have had of using social media in work-based settings it is possible that student social workers could be guided towards using social media in the ways described in this paper.

This could also help reduce the 'chilling effect' and enable students to engage in social action.

Conclusion

As this was a small-scale research study it is not possible to suggest the findings reported here represent the experiences of student social workers in other locations. It is therefore not possible to generalise these findings. However, the analysis of the data suggests that with relatively small changes to teaching practice and perhaps more focus on the benefits of social media the gaps identified by Stevenson (2016) that social workers are not fully aware of how to use social media appropriately could be addressed. This could be achieved by including specific study skills lectures and workshops designed to facilitate developing social media profiles that could be used during training to engage in debates about the profession at the start of the student social workers' learning journey. This could be built upon at later stages of the programme perhaps in modules designed to help students develop research skills. Student social workers could then be guided in the appropriate use of social media throughout their time at university. Moreover, adopting this approach would also encourage newly qualified social workers to fight the new types of harm identified by Megele (2014) as they transition into their first newly qualified role. This may then become a routine activity that qualified workers engage in throughout their career.

Given the difficulties that this group of student social workers reported, further research is needed to investigate the issues raised here in more depth. This

will enable universities to develop support and guidance that enables student social workers to use social media to engage in campaigns that promote equality and positive change in society whilst complying with the codes of conduct that HCPC offer and the (revised) guidance that covers the use of social media. Ultimately it is hoped that moving forward, teaching will be informed by the findings here. With support, student social workers could then become active consumers of research that is found through the use of social media and engage positively with the opportunities that social media can offer such as engaging in campaigns that promote social justice. Fighting new forms of inequality including digital isolation and the digital divide (Megele, 2014) clearly fit with the *Code of Ethics* offered by BASW (2012) and student social workers may feel more able to become involved in social (work) action.

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