

## **Social Media: A Method to Recruit Students into Undergraduate Nursing Programmes**

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Alternative methods to recruit students into the nursing profession need to be explored and utilised. Social media has the potential to be a very potent recruitment aid. The study seeks to describe and explore some of the social media that could be utilised to recruit students for the nursing profession. A qualitative study (explorative and descriptive in nature), using a literature review and electronic survey-questionnaires was used to elicit suggestions from authors and nurse educators on student recruitment via social media. Quantitative data validation was performed. The study made use of an online tool to reach national and international lecturers. Nurse educators from nursing education institutions (NEI) in South Africa as well as nurse educators from international NEIs constitute the study participants. Result shows that contemporary literature supports the use of social media in student recruitment practices. Most of the participating nurse educators were also making use of their own NEI's website while a limited number of nurse educators make use of alternative social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

*Keywords:* Recruitment, social media, nursing, student

The nursing profession is in a crisis! The global nursing workforce shortage escalated to a deficit of four million nurses (ICHRN 2008) and needs to be addressed (Benton, 2012:2; Van den Heede, 2013:141). Nursing has lost its appeal to the younger generations. This contributes to less students applying for undergraduate studies in nursing (The Presidency 2011). It appears as if traditional methods of recruitment no longer provide Nursing Education Institutions (NEIs) with enough applicants to allow for a selection process where the best and appropriate candidates can be selected. The global trend to advocate degree-prepared nurses as entry level into the profession further emphasises

the need for appropriate and effective recruitment methods and policies (RWJF, 2012). Therefore, alternative avenues for recruitment of new generation students into the nursing profession need to be explored.

One of the alternative avenues is the use of social media and social networking. Lately, young and old are turning to at least one type of electronic device and service provider when answers are needed (Nielson, 2013). Social networking has changed into "a force to be reckoned with" as more and more stakeholders and business owners realise that their clientele (current and potential) are active on the internet and social networks (Toops, 2010:4). It stands

to argue that potential nursing students and their families and friends are no different when looking for possible career streams or future education.

Although social media as a recruitment strategy is widely used in the developed world (O'Neill, 2012, Jobvite, 2012), recruiters in South Africa have only recently started to utilise social media as a recruitment avenue (*Mail & Guardian*, 2011, Deloitte, 2012).

According to Census 2011, only 35,8% of all South African households have access to the internet (Stats SA, 2012). However, 29-million South Africans have mobile phones – that calculates to more than the number of South Africans who have access to clean drinking water (Hutton, 2011). Globally, South Africa is the fifth highest user of mobile data (Hutton, 2011), proving that the people within the South African context do use social media and mobile phones and therefore this avenue should be investigated for recruitment purposes.

### **Background**

Recruitment of nursing students refers to the process of searching and motivating suitable candidates to apply at a higher education institution to pursue studies in nursing. It further involves promotion of the profession and the programmes available at the different institutions, taking into account the unique features, preferences and motivators of the target audience. The focus of this article is on the use of social media and social networks to recruit students for formal studies in nursing.

Social media can be defined as “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking” (Oxford dictionaries, 2013a). Social networking can be defined as “the use of dedicated websites and applications to interact with other users or to find people with similar interests to one’s own” (Oxford dictionaries, 2013b). For the purpose of this article, social media and social networking sites will include online sites used for networking, sharing, bookmarks, knowledge and news.

Web-based services allow individuals to share a connection, including looking for possible career paths and educational opportunities. Web-based networking and electronic interactions are mounting in popularity and becoming standard practice for Generation Y members (digital natives), linking them together and creating communities with shared interests (Evans & Pauling, 2010). The digital natives, renamed “Generation C” to indicate its members’ connectivity with others and with content (Nielsen, 2012), is the most techno-savvy generation to date and they spend approximately one third of their lives on the internet (Field: *n.d.*; Deloitte: *n.d.*). Research reported in 2012 revealed that 20% of the teenagers surveyed visited Facebook™ at least once a day, while another 53% indicated multiple visits per day (Inigral, 2012).

Social media rely on interaction (Lake nd:2) and therefore the fundamental principle is two-way communication. NEIs might need to engage with their target audience, potential students, via social networks. The advantage of the use of social media is that the potential student is met in their “natural habitat” (ZOG Digital, 2013). Various online grids, blogs and chat rooms are available where the online visibility of NEIs and the programmes they offer can be enhanced and reinforced by means of advertisements or links. Data retrieved from the 2012 Social Admissions Report indicated that 71% of high school students used their mobile devices to research various higher education institutions (Inigral, 2012). Dr Nolan, president of Southwestern College, pointed out that social media has become the primary tool for recruitment in their institution (ZOG Digital, 2013).

There are various ways in which social software can be categorised. Siemens and Tittenberger (2009:41) use affordability or applicability as a distinct variable to categorised social software according to six distinct groups and functions, namely software to: access resources; declare a specific presence; express oneself through different tools (Second Life™); create new

content (through blogs and wikis); interact with others (through discussion forums, Twitter™, Skype™ and ELGG™), and aggregate resources and relationships (through Facebook™, iGoogle™ and NetVibes™).

Regardless of the classification method used, each of these groups has unique features that distinguish one from the other. From a managerial, marketing and recruitment perspective, it is important that recruiters either join these networks and forums (where possible) or be guests on them. Valuable information is constantly shared and it will allow NEIs a glimpse into the expectations of prospective students, as members of the social network group (Schawbel 2009). Correct information to address fears and misguided advice can be provided. Lake (nd:2) warns that if the customers, consumers or potential students are 'blogging' about your company, ignorance is not an option, as the magnitude and the potential of social networks cannot be underestimated.

Social media therefore has the potential to create a collaborative online community where everyone interested in nursing can collaborate and virtually meet. This is one of the fundamental principles that might "save" the nursing profession (Mathis, 2008:82) by contributing to the recruitment of students into the nursing profession.

### **Method**

This article reflects on a multi-phased online qualitative study with quantitative data validation and triangulation to explore the use of social media in the recruitment of students for undergraduate nursing programmes.

SurveyMonkey™, a Web-based survey generator, was used to distribute an open ended question (analysed qualitatively), as well as a questionnaire with mainly closed questions used in the quantitative phase of the study. The hyperlink to open ended question was sent to head nurse educators (principals) of the three largest private hospital groups in South Africa in 2011 to obtain data to validate and refine the final

questionnaire for the quantitative phase of the study. In the quantitative phase, the electronic link to the survey was sent in 2012 via e-mail to the head nurse educators of private NEIs. It was also published on forums of Sigma Teta Tau International Honor Society for Nurses (STTI), Nursing Education Association for Nurse Educators in South Africa (NEA), Forum for University Nursing Deans in South Africa (FUNDISA) and on the nurse educators group of LinkedIn, to gain wider and possible international participation and representation in the study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university where the study was registered. A cover letter, ensuring the participants of ethical conduct, voluntary and anonymous participation as well as the option of withdrawal from the study without any consequences was added to SurveyMonkey™. During the study, all ethical aspects of beneficence, respect for human dignity and justice were diligently adhered to.

The trustworthiness of data obtained from the open ended question was ensured by implementing the principles of dependability, confirmability and transferability as described by Polit and Beck (2009). The questionnaire developed for the second phase of the study was pre-tested and the validity and reliability ensured. Data analysis was performed using the built-in SPSS-program of SurveyMonkey™.

### **Results**

Despite the efforts of the researchers, and wide publication on national and international forums, only 80 respondents (N=80) submitted the quantitative questionnaire of the study, but not all questions were completed by the participants resulting in various "n" values. Five participants did not answer this question. South Africa had a 90.7% (n=68/75) representation, with only 8% (n=6/75) of the participants from North America and 1.3% (n=1/75) from South America. No educators from other countries completed the questionnaire.

Sixteen of the 75 participating nurse educators had a doctoral degree as highest qualification, 20 (27%) had a master's degree, 21 (28.4%) a bachelors degree, 10

(10.8%) an honours degree, 5 (6.8%) an advanced university diploma and 3 (4.1%) a diploma.

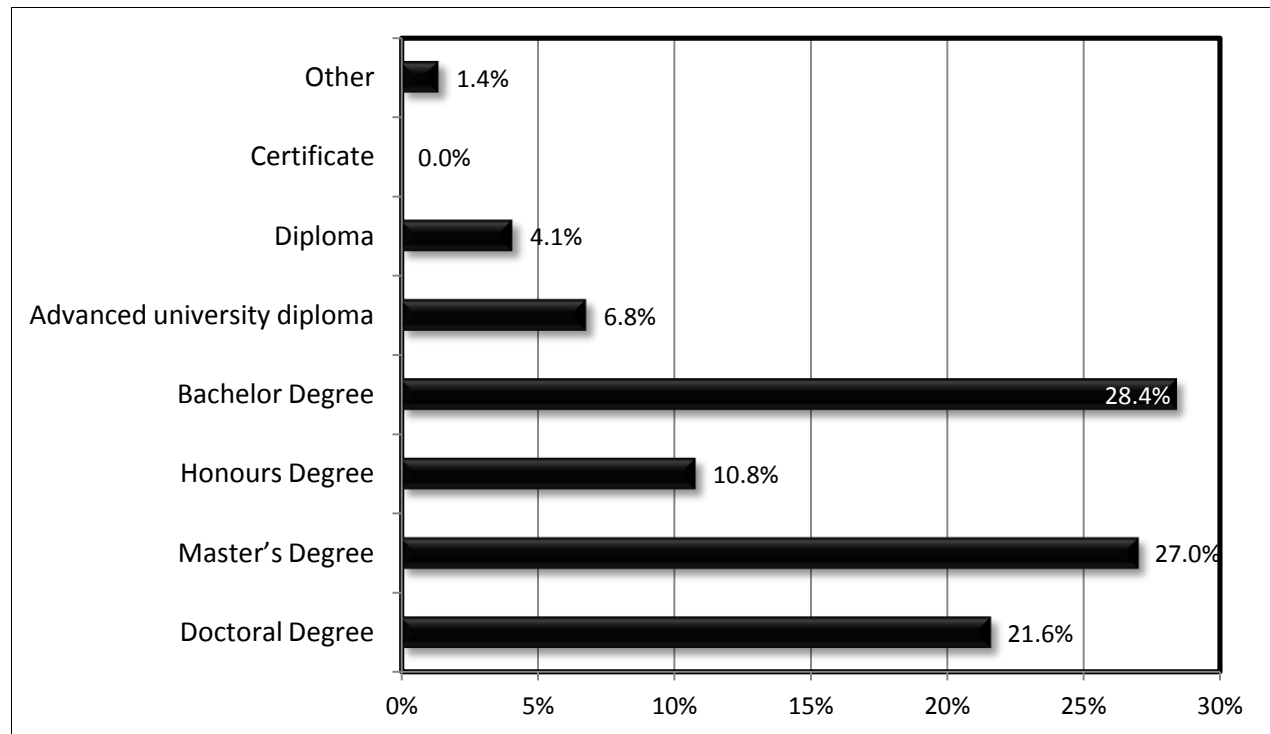
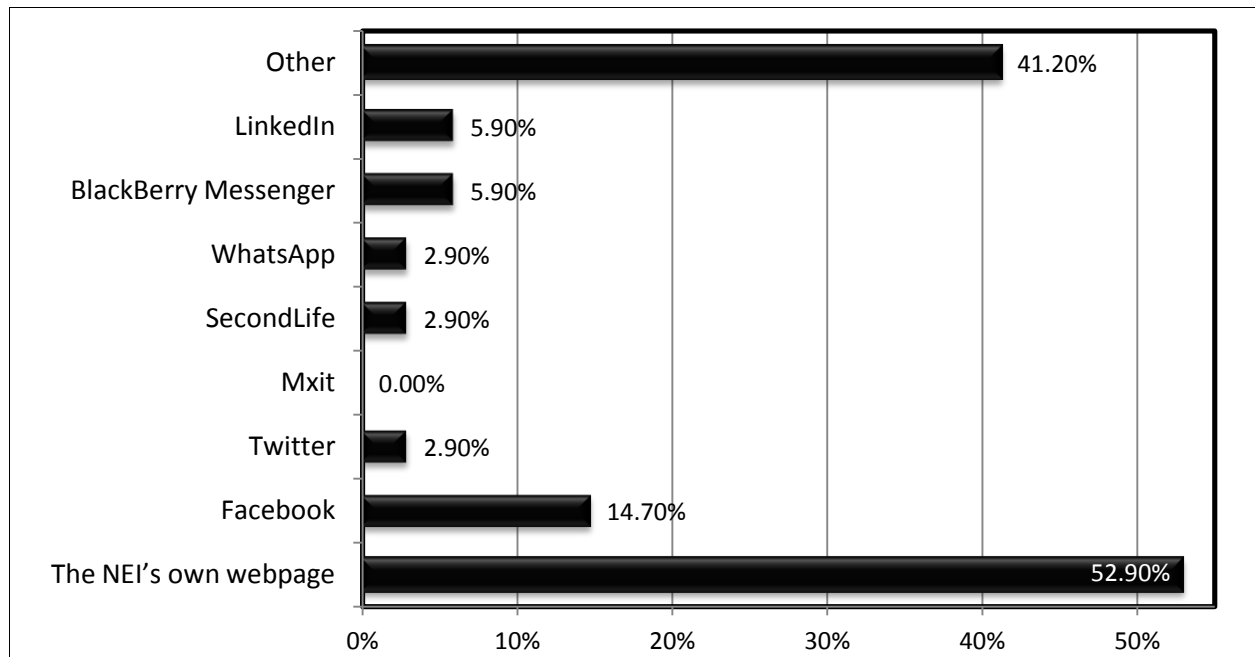


Figure 1: Highest qualification

Sixty five (74.7%) of all nurse educators who participated in the study were 45 years and older, and were thus from Generation X or Baby Boomers. Educators from this age group did not grow up in a social network environment, especially in South Africa and third world countries. Direct paper based communication still is the media of choice for 80% of Baby Boomers and 70% of Generation X (Hanover Research, 2012). This may have had an impact on the study results regarding social media as most of the participants were in this age group.

Thirty four (42,5%) of the 80 participating educators indicated the use of social media as important in the recruitment of nursing students. The Nursing Education Institutions' own webpage was used, according to 52,9% (n=34) of the participating educators, to recruit students. Five (14.7%) of the 34 participating educators indicated that Facebook™ was used, while two educators (5,9%) respectively indicated that LinkedIn™ and BlackBerry Messenger™ were used. Only one participant selected Twitter™, one-SecondLife™ and one- WhatsApp™ (See figure 2).



**Figure 2: Social media currently used in student recruitment**

### Discussion

As in other countries across the globe, the South African population spends a substantial amount of time on social networks (Madden, 2010:2; Nielsen/NetRatings, 2008). Even though the participants in this study, namely the educators, did not unanimously indicate social media as a venue for recruitment of students, the prospective Generation Y students grew up in an environment where social media were used as tools for communication and information. Twenty eight percent of Generation Y use Facebook™, 24% text messaging, 18% mobile applications, 12% Twitter™ and 7% LinkedIn™ (Hanover Research 2012). It will therefore be beneficial for the NEIs in terms of student recruitment to maintain an online presence and make use of social networks to recruit students.

Websites are popular choices for the recruitment of students. Possibilities include virtual tours. The “connected” prefer “visiting” places from the comfort of their recliner chairs. As stated earlier, Generation Y is technically highly advanced and watching video clips on YouTube™, for example, poses no problem to them. Therefore, the general perception is that if

their friends think the clip is “cool”, they will forward it to one another without hesitating. If the clips are “cool” enough, the Generation Y will therefore unknowingly do the marketing on behalf of the institution.

Generation Y-members love playing electronic games and a way to entice them, is by having a competitive game on the website (preferable free of charge) where they can accumulate marks or play against one another (Bunchball, 2012).

In an article, “7 Ways Small Offline Businesses Can Use Online Tactics to Keep Customers Loyal”, Katz (n.d.) gives hints on the use of the internet for contact with potential clients. These hints or principles can be useful in the recruitment of students. It includes: *Joint Ventures* where hospital groups and the NEIs can advertise online in collaboration with one another or with one of its suppliers or on the supplier’s website. Putting a hyperlink on the supplier’s website that re-directs the “browser” either to the hospital group’s website or to a website where free health education is available, will contribute to increasing the face of nursing in the community and may attract good students.

Open days at the NEI can also be hosted in collaboration with the various hospitals in the region. Promotion of these days on the hospital group's website, the NEI's website and other social media will create awareness of the education needed and the stance of nursing health care.

Another tactic is to include educational and informative articles on health care on the nursing education's institutional website in order to attract applicants to actually visit / browse the website for information. A blog where people can post questions and have a health expert available to answer those questions can be worthwhile. Employees of the NEI should also participate in the conversations that take place on the blogs.

The NEI can create a database of all former applicants and employees and send electronic information regarding career opportunities or information via SMS. Running a competition for Grade 12 learners (Generation Y members usually love competitions) and simultaneously collecting contact details from the participants may be very effective. However, participants should be asked permission to use their details to forward information pertaining to career possibilities to them. The option to discontinue receiving information should be provided.

Nurses already use social websites like Facebook™, Twitter™, YouTube™ and MySpace™ for social networking and to share information. Various websites and blogs exist that is specifically aimed at selected nursing groups (McBride & Cohen, 2008: 17). However, in third world countries, websites should be user friendly for mobile phone users as 90% of Generation Y in these countries use their mobile phones to access information.

There are various social networks and applications available to make contact with potential students. Facebook™, one of the well-known social networks, is a social network with more than a billion registered users. On any given day, at least 60% of their users log onto Facebook™ (Facebook, 2013). The availability of these networks is not restricted to users with access to

computers connected to an internet service. At the end of 2012, there were 680-million active users who utilised their mobile phones to access Facebook™ (Facebook, 2013). These social networks are important as they allow their members to form a community, enabling them to connect with other people who share similar interests and passion; facilitate the sharing of ideas and allow them to build new relationships (Skiba, 2008:370). Nursing Education Institutions should use a network widely used by Generation Y, and accessible via mobile phones, as a recruitment strategy.

LinkedIn™ is another popular website where, for example, 200-million professional people (in more than 200 countries) connect to exchange information (LinkedIn, 2013)]. Due to the fact that LinkedIn™ is exclusively for professionals, it will not assist in recruiting novice nurses or students for nursing. It is, however, crucial to remember that the parents of many prospective nursing students are registered on LinkedIn™ and that the NEI can build a trusted brand with which these parents might want their children to be associated with. LinkedIn™ is used by 69 of the Fortune 100 companies (Verde, 2011).

SecondLife™ is a digital online virtual world. On average, nearly 60 000 people log onto SecondLife™ (Dwell-On-It, 2013) daily. Currently, SecondLife™ has 33,3-million active virtual inhabitants that "live" and interact in this sphere (Dwell-On-It, 2013). SecondLife™ forms a platform where interactive experiences can take place and students can prepare – in simulation – for real world experiences. In SecondLife™ there are virtual campuses where students can meet, attend classes and even create content together. Various well-respected higher education institutions (Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, New York, San Diego and Texas State Universities, to name but a few) have virtual campuses in SecondLife™. There are over 200 educators who are currently using it for projects with their students and to participate in research, learning and even classes. To quote the Second Life™ website (Second Life, n.d.),

these platforms “bring a new dimension to learning”. Nurse educators can no longer afford to be ignorant regarding the virtual worlds where the Y Generation actually has another or a second life.

To take full advantage of these virtual worlds, the recruiter or responsible people for recruiting students into the nursing profession need to be involved and interact with the prospective student. Having a virtual online presence further enhances marketing and recruitment as a recruiter can be “placed” in the virtual world to answer questions and provide information.

South Africa and other third world countries are the top users of Twitter™ in the world (Opera, 2012) and nurse educators should use this popular social network forum to recruit suitable students for the nursing profession. It is an easy way to share information pertaining to the nursing profession and the requirements to be selected as a student. Nursing Education Institutions should “listen” to what the people are saying, engage in communication and build relationships with the community of Generation Y (Sviokla & Curran, 2009). These are the fundamental building blocks in any marketing or recruitment campaign. If these principles can be applied in “tweets” it would appear as if Twitter™ can be a valuable communication and marketing tool for Nursing Education Institutions, enabling them to reach the techno-savvy newer generations.

According to Mathis (2008:82), social media have the potential to create a collaborative online community where everyone interested in nursing, from the prospective student to the retired nurse and even the nurse executive, could collaborate and interact. Social media can be one of the fundamental principles that would “save” the nursing profession” (Mathis 2008:82).

Although BlackBerry Messenger™ and WhatsApp™ were included in the questionnaire, their usability as a recruitment application has limited value as it entails the collecting of personal contact details and PINs from minors, which has many unwanted ethical implications.

### **Conclusion**

In a highly competitive world, all possible avenues need to be explored to enable NEIs to reach and recruit the best possible candidates for nursing education. This implies that social networks and social media need to be used as Generation Y comprises the students who need to be recruited into the nursing profession. To enhance the amount of suitable student applications into the nursing profession, and thus into nursing programmes in Nursing Education Institutions, online visibility needs to be evaluated and an explicit decision needs to be made to feature on these sites as either an advertisement, a competition or as a link offering free information. If nearly half a million people are searching the employment sector, it will be worth one’s while to establish which site they visit and sell the value of nursing as a profession, the face of nursing, the type of quality students the profession needs, as well as the quality of nursing education.

If adequate numbers of suitable candidates for undergraduate nursing programmes can be recruited, it can have a positive impact on the global number of professional nurses. The nursing fraternity needs to progress and adapt to a changing educational environment where technology, internet and social media plays a significant role.

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