Psychotherapy Trainees and Social Networking Use

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Abstract: - Online social networking sites, such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter, are changing the ways people interact with each other on a daily basis. These sites allow the user to convey massive amounts of personal information to anyone that can view his or her page. With this ability come questions applicable to prospective and current mental health professionals and their clients. What kinds of information are being passed on a daily basis and how many people can access that information? This study used a sample of Master's level psychotherapists in training to examine this question. It was found that a majority of the sample used Facebook, but that less than half of those allowed unrestricted access to the information on his or her page, and only a small minority of those students had questionable information available. These results are encouraging and appear to support the idea that graduate students are self-censoring what type of information they make available online. Nonetheless, education in graduate programs about the pros and cons of social networks, including how to enable settings to enhance privacy, should take place.

Key-Words: - Facebook, social networking, privacy, psychotherapy trainees

1 Introduction

Social networking has always been a part of life, as meeting new people or reconnecting with previous acquaintances and friends is part of the human experience. An important part of the process of socializing is learning the rules of engagement in particular social situations. Helping professionals, such as persons in the field of mental health, are often constrained by further rules in social situations especially when issues such as patient confidentiality arises. Advancements in technology have allowed a new form of social networking to evolve. With the advent of Web 2.0 comes the ability for average people, students, and professionals worldwide to network with each other quickly, cheaply, and in many different ways. With greater freedom, though, must come greater responsibility, and the rules for this new era of social networking must be examined.

Of particular interest in the current study is the extension, or lack thereof, of normal social rules into the realm of online networking, specifically those that pertain to presenting oneself as professional in the new realm of social networking websites. With full, licensed professionals in mental health, this type of information gathering would be difficult, so the researchers decided to look at a group one step removed from professionals: graduate students being trained as psychotherapists. Similar information gathering has been performed on medical school students [1, 2] and undergraduate psychology majors [3]. This study examined trainee use of Facebook, a popular social networking website and, the ideal setting to collect data concerning what types of information professionals-to-be would disclose.

Based upon the previous research, this study tested with three distinct hypotheses. First, that the majority of the graduate students investigated would have a Facebook account. Second, the majority of those students with an account would not restrict access to the information on their account. Finally, a minority of those students would have questionable content on their profiles.

2 Problem Formulation

Before data collection began, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study. Because of the requirement to provide both a first and last name in order to register and the huge popularity of the site (over 300 million users [4]), the researchers selected Facebook as the social networking site to investigate graduate students level of personal disclosure. Study authors (D.W. and M.K.) used personal Facebook accounts and enrolled in the "Central Oklahoma" network on Facebook by supplying their University e-mail addresses. By doing this, the researchers could access and view any Facebook profile on the Central Oklahoma network unless the owner's

privacy settings had been specifically adjusted to prevent this from occurring.

This study obtained the names of all graduate psychology majors at UCO ($n = 103$) from the psychology department listing. The study researchers then searched for participants' profiles by first and last name, further defining the search by the location C. Oklahoma if multiple entries were returned with the same name. If the search returned a match, the researchers then determined if the profile was publically accessible or private. Then, after locating a public profile, the researchers collected data about information viewable on the profile, including: the participants' sex, date of birth, hometown, relationship status, political and religious beliefs, sexual orientation, field of study, home address, email address, instant messenger screen name, number of friends, number of photo albums, and number of groups the participant was a member of. After this data collection, the researchers then began a qualitative review of the participant's profile. This review looked among the participant's photos, group names, information page, and each participant's Wall (which includes status updates and comments to and from friends), for the presence of unprofessional material. For the purpose of this study, the researchers defined unprofessional material as display or mention of alcohol or drug use, highly sexualized dress or display of overt sexuality, presence of profanity, and racist or sexist remarks or pictures.

3 Problem Solution

3.1 Participants and Public Disclosure

Of the 103 graduate psychology majors, 53.4% ($n = 55$) had an existing Facebook account at the during the course of the data collection. Of those, less than half (45.5%, $n = 25$) were publically accessible to anyone also in their network. All further information (see Table 1) was gathered from this group. Of those participants with publically accessible accounts, 60% (n = 15) were female.

Table 1: Descriptive information obtained from public Facebook profiles.

Revealed Information	Total (n=25)
Birthday	92%
Hometown	76%
Relationship status	88%
Political views	68%
Religious views	44%
Sexual orientation	72%
Personal photograph	96%
Field of study	92%
Home postal address	4%
Email address	36%
IM screen name	24%
Mean # friends	269.84
(Range)	(0-1457)
Mean # photo albums	6.96
(Range)	(0-45)
Mean # social groups	18.72
(Range)	(0-86)

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

As stated above, the researchers conducted a qualitative assessment of the material available on the profiles of those graduate students who had public profiles. Specifically, the researchers looked for items that could be potentially harmful if viewed by future employers, universities, or clients. This was a key investigation of this study because current research shows that many universities and employers do check for this content during application and hiring processes [5]. Included in this category were depictions of or references to alcohol and drug use, profanity, and overt sexuality. Also included were instances of racism and sexism in comments, photographs, or group affiliation. The decision was made to conduct this qualitative analysis of profiles concurrently with the collection of the previous data to prevent occurrences of participant dropout due to status change (public to private) as seen in previous research [3]. Of the 25 participants who had publically accessible profiles, 36% ($n = 9$) had references or displays of alcohol use, 32% ($n = 8$) displayed or referenced overt sexuality, and only 4% ($n = 1$) had any form of profanity present on their profile. The researchers found no evidence of the other questionable content categories (drug use, racism, and sexism).

3.3 General Discussion

This study did find that the majority of participants investigated had a Facebook account. However, it should be noted that previous studies would have predicted almost 70% of the students would have an account, while the results of this study found only 53.4%. Looking at the rest of the data gathered, this is just the first of the deviations from our hypotheses about this study.

The researchers predicted that the majority of the participants with Facebook profiles would also be publicly accessible. As can be seen by the data, this is not the case. Only 45.5% of the participant's profiles were public at the time of data collection.

Finally, the researchers predicted that a minority of the participants with public profiles would contain questionable content. While technically this occurred, evidence was only found for half the criteria of questionably content described. Previous research indicates that at least some evidence of all instances of questionably content would be displayed.

This study began as a replication of previous investigations into the realm of personal disclosure on Facebook by students. What this study found was a deviation from previously established results. Possible explanations for this include the limited size of the population or possibly uninvestigated peculiarities of the population in question. Could these results generalize to other, similar populations of psychotherapists in training? Alternatively, is this group more aware of the need to be professional in online interactions than those in the medical field or undergraduates? More research with a larger sample of the population in question is needed to answer these questions.

4 Conclusion

Today's technology allows instant communication across the world at very little expense and Web 2.0, with its user based content and social networking sites, further offers a breakdown of traditional social networking stratification. Students and teachers, professionals and clients, therapists and patients; all of these groups can interact in a setting at once more intimate and autonomous than ever before. With this new system, old rules become obsolete and new ones rise to take their place. Of concern, however, is the effect of this reorganization of social structure in the virtual world has upon the real world. Students and professionals both need to be made aware of what is

acceptable practice in the virtual world and the impact it can make in the real one. Just imagine, a student in college filling out the information for a site like Facebook, thinking nothing of filling out that information about home address, or posting those pictures from that party last week. What happens when it comes time to apply to a job, only to be turned down because someone in human resources saw those pictures as well? What happens when the student graduates, becomes a professional working with deeply disturbed individuals that happen to find that information about exactly where their new therapist lives?

Students and professionals both need to be presented with these questions and others like them to demonstrate the possible pitfalls of using online social networking sites. These sites should not be decried completely however, because they are the future of socialization. As in everything a professional is taught, responsibility in using these social networking sites should be taught and stressed.

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