STATEMENT

Personal Digital Branding as a Professional Asset in the Digital Age

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In recent years, society's rapid adoption of social media has made the boundary between professional and private life nearly indistinguishable. The literature provides guidance on how to demonstrate professionalism via social media platforms. Social media policies within health professions education tend to be legalistic in nature, serving primarily to highlight behaviors students should avoid. One missing element in social media literature is the concept of online invisibility. In this paper, we define personal digital branding, discuss the professional implications of choosing to abstain from social media use, and urge educators to recognize that the personal digital branding may be an emerging asset for young professionals in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: social media, personal digital branding, e-professionalism, networking, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

Only a few decades ago, the arena in which professional behavior was expected and exhibited was clearly defined. However, in recent years, the rapid adoption of social media has significantly blurred the boundary between private and professional life. In response, the concept of "e-professionalism" evolved to describe how traditional professionalism paradigms may apply in digital media.¹ Society is beginning to understand how to harness the potential advantages of social media.^{2,3} However, as social media use further develops into a societal norm, educators should understand the implications that social media presence, or lack thereof, has for individuals entering professional fields.

Most colleges and schools of pharmacy have official policies detailing the appropriate use of social media, but because of their inherently legal nature, most of these policies are negatively framed and serve to highlight behaviors students should avoid.⁴⁻⁶ At best, social media is presented as a controllable potential liability. While social media policies are necessary, focus on policy alone can ignore the potential advantages of social media use, and explicitly or inexplicitly may encourage students to hide their digital presence through security settings or abstain from using social media altogether.⁷ While effectively removing one's social media profile from public view is desirable to pharmacists wishing to keep their

private and professional lives separate, there are potential downsides of doing so.

While the literature includes arguments cautioning the use of social media, little has been written about the possible implications of lacking a digital identity.^{8,9} In this paper, we report on professional literature and media coverage that moves beyond the cautionary approach to social media, examine the rationale for establishing and promoting personal digital brands, and discuss what such branding means for educators.

THE PERSONAL DIGITAL BRAND

The term "digital brand" was originally associated with corporate marketing efforts.¹⁰ However, the term "personal brand," associated with individuals and developed and popularized in the late 1990s, has been digitized as a result of the ubiquity and user-friendly nature of social media environments like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter.^{10,11} Differentiating between corporate and digital brands has necessitated the creation of a new term: the "personal digital brand." For purposes of this paper, we define the personal digital brand as a strategic self-marketing effort, crafted via social media platforms, which seeks to exhibit an individual's professional persona.

The complex concept of digital identity shaping is increasing in importance as digital communications have become a societal norm.¹² For young professionals, the choice is no longer simply to use or not use digital communication tools, but also whether to proactively control a public image whether through the use of social media or lack thereof. As digital communications become more prevalent, absence of an online presence could potentially

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send an unintended negative message that the individual is ill-equipped for digital communications. Future education efforts should not only focus on e-professionalism, but also stress the value of controlling one's personal digital brand. Such efforts may involve shifting our focus from social media use as a potential liability to social media use as a professional asset in the digital age.

PERSONAL DIGITAL BRANDING – DISADVANTAGES VS ADVANTAGES

Approximately 74% of adults who use the Internet use social media sites, leaving more than a quarter who have not yet established a social media presence.¹³ Although social media use appears to be higher among pharmacy students than the general population, a significant percentage of students either don't use social media or consider deleting their online presence as a result of potential negative consequences.¹⁴ While nonusers protect themselves from those potential negative consequences, they may also want to consider the potential risks of being virtually invisible. Some of these risks include possible negative reactions from residency directors, employers, and/or future colleagues, who may speculate about what the person is trying to hide.¹⁵ Students may also forfeit the potential advantages of social media use, such as promoting the profession's advancement and their professional careers.

A recent American Pharmacists Association (APhA) report suggested that social media was a ubiquitous communication tool, and those who abstain from it relinquish control of their digital identities.² Professionals who strategically create a personal digital brand garner control over their digital persona and ultimately can make the message associated with that brand more impactful.¹⁶ The absence of a digital identity sends a message of its own—one which the professional has no control over.

Literature regarding the impact of having or lacking a personal digital brand is sparse. Results from a 2010 study of pharmacy residency program directors provided limited insight. Among residency directors who viewed social media profiles of applicants, 48% said the content had an effect, either positive or negative, on the applicant's selection.¹⁷ When social media is part of the hiring equation, it can become a deciding factor to the benefit of candidates with a strong digital brand. Professionally-oriented social media content can positively impact employment opportunities and salary, independent of resume content.¹⁸

A professional's online image can directly affect the trust placed in the profession as the line between online personal and professional content blurs. In the field of medicine, Chretien and Kind explain: "How we as a

profession have responded to past – and continue to respond to present and future – social media challenges to professionalism reveals what matters most: maintaining public trust and honoring our contract with society."¹⁹ While proper social media use is a responsibility of all professionals, we advocate that it is also an opportunity.

In addition to professional-oriented Twitter and Facebook accounts of pharmacists, The Honest Apothecary²⁰ and Mattingly Management²¹ are two blogs focused on the pharmacy profession and are examples of successful professional digital brands. The blogs take a positive approach to pharmacy branding, as opposed to pharmacy blog sites, such as The Angry Pharmacist,²² which take a negative approach and are best described as rants against jobs, patients, employers, and/or the profession. While creating a blog is not feasible or desirable for everyone, the first examples illustrate how some pharmacists are currently using digital tools to advance their careers and the profession. For example, they write about emerging topics in the profession, which serves to both inform the pharmacy community and demonstrate professional expertise.

Social media also gives professionals a connection to past, current, and potential colleagues. Maintaining a curated social media presence to connect to professional organizations and peers has a 3-fold advantage for pharmacists: staying abreast of new information, maintaining professional ties with colleagues, and ensuring the image portrayed to those peers and colleagues is professional. LinkedIn is particularly useful in this regard because it allows users to endorse the skills of their connections, giving potential employers access to a peer-reviewed resume. LinkedIn is the largest professional matchmaking service in the world and caters to the need for self-promotion.¹²

Finally, even if one is averse to using social media, future employers may use it for business purposes and for many, the ability to navigate social media is a non-negotiable 21st-century skill. Facebook is now used by both chain and independent pharmacies to advertise and connect with patients.²³⁻²⁶ Maintaining a personal digital brand can signify a candidate's mastery of digital communication skills and potentially make them more attractive to employers.

Some professionals may resist the concept of personal digital brands. While there are positive aspects of social media, there are also significant negative aspects. For example, some may perceive a stigma attached to self-promotion through social media.²⁷ A delicate balance exists between the proverbial "putting your best foot forward" and shamelessly "selling yourself" to others. Personal digital branding ventures close to the latter, thereby losing its appeal to many potential users. Some

may also question the ethics of health care professionals using social media for personal branding, even though professionals have done this for many years in the nondigital realms when they speak and behave in a manner designed to make themselves appear competent, trustworthy, and respected. Privacy is another important topic with regard to online communications in general and social media in particular.^{28,29} Personal and/or family safety require some to remain digitally undetectable. Others may want to limit time spent on media outlets or to avoid the negative emotions the social media community can evoke.³⁰ However, young professionals may want to educate themselves about the positive and negative implications of using or refraining from social media.

THE 21ST CENTURY PROFESSIONAL AND THE ONLINE PERSONA

People use social media for a variety of reasons: to connect with family, to become part of a community, to receive support, and even to expand professional reputation. Professionals may have to learn how to manage dual and potentially competing interests with regard to their own social media use. It can be difficult to craft a professional digital brand while simultaneously using social media for personal pleasure or fulfillment. Moreover, in exchange for free use of digital tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc., users voluntarily comply with their marketing strategy of sharing of information from such sites.

Educators have framed these persona separation issues in negative terms by instructing students on what not to do,⁷ but unintended consequences could accompany those well-meaning warnings. As Cho and Salmon explain in their discussion of health communications, the unintended effect could be the creation of an “epidemic of apprehension.”³¹ When conscientious users are overly concerned with protecting an image, they may hesitate to forge a positive, influential image of themselves and the profession. Such apprehension could result in more promising and professional pharmacists surrendering the digital pharmacy sphere to colleagues less concerned with promoting positive images. This gives the negative social media “ranters” a louder and more influential voice than they otherwise might have. Instead of policing use of social media and warning against improprieties, educators may want to instruct students on appropriately marketing themselves and their profession online by giving positive examples of social media use in pharmacy. Social media can be “the difference between advancing and faltering in the pursuit of... goals.”¹⁷ Newer pharmacy graduates will spend their careers in an increasingly digital world, and students should be encouraged to capitalize on the opportunity social media

provides—for example, the ability to speak on behalf of themselves and the profession through positive and thought-provoking social media posts.

Because the concept of personal digital branding is new, additional research is needed to determine exactly how members of the pharmacy community view the absence of a social media profile and how different platforms compare to each other in terms of perceived professionalism. More information should also be gathered regarding which types of positive content have the greatest impact on employers (eg, professional photos, endorsements via LinkedIn, command of grammar and language). In the absence of research findings that will more comprehensively guide digital branding, pharmacy educators can take steps to prepare students for using social media for professional purposes. Presenting the concept of personal digital brands to students is a first step. Because it is personally relevant to students, they may be enthusiastic to discuss the topic with faculty members. Using authentic or fictitious case studies for group discussion is a way of raising awareness and encourages students to think about their personal digital brands.

In addition, while educating students about e-professionalism is important,¹ efforts should extend beyond addressing privacy controls and ill-advised Facebook posts to encompass proactive, positive uses for social media. One challenge for the health care professions is harnessing the power of social media to promote the profession and the professional.³² In a statement on social media use, the American Society for Health-System Pharmacists provides a framework for establishing the foundation for a positive digital brand.³³ The three major tenets in the statement are advancing the well-being and dignity of patients, acting with integrity and conscience, and collaborating respectfully with health care colleagues. With those tenets in mind, steps could be taken to create a personal digital brand indicative of a sincere and caring professional. While not all students need to do this, tweeting links to articles that promote patient well-being, advocating for high standards of patient care through Facebook posts, and collaborating in social media health care platforms are 3 examples that students and young graduates can undertake to help shape their digital brand.

Personal digital branding will not benefit every professional. Presently, social media use is considerably more prevalent in younger generations.¹¹ Individuals who have established professional reputations with years of experience may not need personal digital branding. However, students and young professionals whose careers will span deep into the digital age should be educated on emerging issues related to digital communications and skills necessary to use social media strategically. The 2016 Accreditation Council for Pharmaceutical Education Standards list

professional communications as a required element of pharmacy didactic curricula, specifically mentioning exploration of technology-based communication tools as an important aspect.³⁴ They may also need more education on reconciling their personal and professional personas online. The focus of social media education should, therefore, be on fostering in students a “critical sensibility” of how to engage social media as a professional,³ while recognizing and respecting that strategic social media use will not look the same for every student.

CONCLUSION

As 21st-century professionals, students should have up-to-date knowledge of LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and other contemporary social media sites as they pertain to their professional careers. Moreover, as research expands the social media knowledge base, pharmacy educators will likely discover they need to instruct students on personal digital branding and the skills needed to maintain and manage a personal brand. Social media policy within pharmacy education should evolve to reflect this knowledge.

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