

# Teaching Veterinary Professionalism in the Face(book) of Change

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## ABSTRACT

Facebook has been identified as the preferred social networking site among postsecondary students. Repeated findings in the social networking literature have suggested that postsecondary students practice high personal self-disclosure on Facebook and tend not to use privacy settings that would limit public access. This study identified and reviewed Facebook profiles for 805 veterinarians-in-training enrolled at four veterinary colleges across Canada. Of these, 265 (32.9%) were categorized as having low exposure, 286 (35.5%) were categorized as having medium exposure, and 254 (31.6%) were categorized as having high exposure of information. Content analysis on a sub-sample ( $n = 80$ ) of the high-exposure profiles revealed publicly available unprofessional content, including indications of substance use and abuse, obscene comments, and breaches of client confidentiality. Regression analysis revealed that an increasing number of years to graduation and having a publicly visible wall were both positively associated with having a high-exposure profile. Given the rapid uptake of social media in recent years, veterinary educators should be aware of and begin to educate students on the associated risks and repercussions of blurring one's private life and one's emerging professional identity through personal online disclosures.

**Key words:** professionalism, social media, ethics, curriculum development

## INTRODUCTION

"Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life."<sup>1</sup>

Facebook is the most popular social network site in Canada and the United States<sup>2,3</sup> and its widespread use has the potential to change the nature of privacy and the consequences of information disclosure for young aspiring professionals. Facebook use continues to increase across all age cohorts, with individuals 18–34 years old currently being the most active users of the site.<sup>2</sup> Repeated findings in the online social networking literature have indicated that university and college students practice high self-disclosure on Facebook and tend not to use privacy settings that would limit public access to their profiles.<sup>4,5</sup> Facebook use among students in professional undergraduate programs has been found to be comparable to use among regular undergraduate students.<sup>6,7</sup> The combination of frequent use and high self-disclosure can have unintended, unanticipated, and negative consequences.<sup>4,6,8</sup>

In the past, online disclosures have been used to assess an individual's employment candidacy, to lay criminal charges, and to justify school suspensions.<sup>9</sup> Fifty percent of hiring officials in the United States have been found to use online searches to evaluate candidates; 30% have rejected a candidate on the basis of content found online.<sup>10</sup> As such, concern has been raised about the risks to the safety, privacy, and image of students in professional programs<sup>6</sup> who may be unaware of the impact of their posted comments and photos and the extent to which the general public has access to their posts. In support of this concern is evidence supporting an actual disconnect between individuals' online disclosing behavior and their

attitude toward the public use of this information<sup>6,7,11</sup> Students appear to post a great deal of personal information on Facebook,<sup>11</sup> but they seem to regard others' use of Facebook profiles to make employment or discipline decisions as a violation of their privacy.<sup>12</sup> This disconnect between disclosure behaviors on Facebook and the implications of disclosing can pose serious consequences for aspiring veterinarians-in-training.

Although Facebook use among students in professional programs has been found to be comparable to undergraduate student use,<sup>6,7</sup> lack of discretion in posting content could have additional repercussions for aspiring professionals. Behaviors such as indications of substance abuse or posting racist, sexist, or derogatory comments may all lead to the erosion of client trust and could tarnish the individual's professional image, the reputation of the profession, or both. As Facebook's use expands from simply helping friends connect to helping businesses, products, and services reach their target audiences, it is realistic to expect that people will search veterinary professionals' profiles on Facebook. Supporting this expectation, seven of 10 pet owners have been found to have searched for pet health information online, with two of 10 indicating that they have specifically searched online for information about a particular veterinarian.<sup>13</sup> Risks associated with online disclosure exist for both current and aspiring veterinary professionals.

To date, the veterinary profession has enjoyed a good public image; it is rated by the general public as one of the most trustworthy professions<sup>14</sup> and by pet owners specifically as the most trustworthy profession.<sup>15,16</sup> In addition, the role of the veterinarian in society is broad. Veterinarians work in education, epidemiology, public health, private practice, research, policy making, and in

various roles within animal agriculture.<sup>17</sup> Understanding and managing the risks associated with social media, and Facebook specifically, are important in preserving the level of trust in the profession. Veterinary educators have an important role in helping veterinarians-in-training navigate the blurring line between private and professional identities brought on by social media.

The objective of this study was to examine the publicly available content posted to Facebook profiles of veterinarians-in-training to assess their disclosure practices and the risks to students, veterinary colleges, and the veterinary profession.

## METHODS

The study protocol was reviewed and cleared by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. Using her own Facebook account, from January 2010 to April 2010 one of the authors (Weijs) pursued Facebook profiles of veterinarians-in-training enrolled at the four English-speaking veterinary colleges across Canada by entering a number of college-affiliated search terms (e.g., Ontario Veterinary College Class of 2013, OVC 2010) into the site's search engine. We excluded the French-speaking veterinary college in Canada because of our limited fluency in French. Students' enrollment at one of the four veterinary colleges was confirmed through disclosure of current educational program. We chose this approach to replicate the accessibility of publicly available information to future employers, colleagues, or clients. No attempts were made to join a specific Facebook group or befriend a student veterinarian to gain access to information protected by an individual's privacy settings.

Once a profile was identified, a hired research assistant was enlisted to go through the profile and record all publicly available content using an established template. The template was based on examples from existing literature.<sup>18</sup> Information available on each Facebook tab publicly present on the student's profile was recorded. Facebook gives users the option to provide information on several different pages; these are labeled *info*, *wall*, *notes*, *photos*, *boxes*, and *discussions*. Facebook users choose which pages they want to make public. The presence of these pages and the information contained on them (such as *personal information*, *school-affiliated networks*, *employment history*, *family members*, *photos*, *full name*, *gender*, *friends*, *contact information*, and the number of Facebook pages they like) were recorded.

### Privacy Categories

We developed criteria to categorize each student's Facebook profile into one of three levels of information exposure using the summative nature of publicly available content posted by an individual. The *low-exposure category* (i.e., high privacy) refers to a relatively private profile and included at most: name, gender, friends list, school affiliation network, and a profile photo. This category was based on what was commonly the minimal amount of information contained within a profile, as well as Facebook's recommendation for a private or baseline profile.<sup>19</sup> *Medium exposure* (i.e., medium privacy) included

ambiguous personal disclosures deemed beyond the traditional veterinarian-client relationship (e.g., phone number, date of birth, family photos, political views, sexual orientation). *High exposure* (i.e., low privacy) included disclosures of personal information that had the potential to reflect poorly on the student as an aspiring veterinary professional. In part, decisions to categorize profiles into the high-exposure category were assisted by prior knowledge of behaviors identified in the literature as unprofessional,<sup>6,7,20-22</sup> including but not limited to obscene, disrespectful, and derogatory comments; overindulgence in alcohol; and overt sexuality. Each identified veterinary student's Facebook profile was categorized as low, medium, or high exposure by one of the authors (Weijs).

### Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean, range, and standard deviation) were calculated. On a random subset of the Facebook profiles (10%), inter-rater agreement was assessed by one of the authors (Weijs) and the hired research assistant for the categorization of profiles into low, medium, or high exposure. Cohen's  $\kappa$  was used to test agreement. A Cochran-Armitage trend test was used to determine whether the number of profiles found by graduation year was significant.

Seven variables (number of years to graduation; college, representing the four Canadian veterinary colleges; number of friends; number of page links; single vs. in a relationship; male vs. female; and presence vs. absence of a publicly visible wall) were tested as potential determinants of a student's Facebook profile being categorized as a high-exposure (i.e., low-privacy) profile. Binary logistic regression was used. Univariate analyses were performed to screen potential determinants for unconditional associations ( $p < .20$ ) with a student's Facebook profile being categorized as a high-exposure profile. All predictor variables for which the  $p$  value was less than .20 were retained.

Including only retained variables for which there was complete data, an initial model was developed including all possible interactions. Backward elimination was used to reduce terms in the model. After this process, any additional variables retained but with missing data were individually tested within the reduced model by independently adding each variable to the model using forward selection.

All statistical analyses were performed with standard software.<sup>a</sup> Values of  $p \leq .05$  were considered significant.

### Content Analysis

Using standard software,<sup>b</sup> one of the authors (Weijs) performed content analysis on a random sample of 80 (30%) Facebook profiles from the high-exposure category. Content analysis is a qualitative research process that involves making clear decisions about information contained within non-numerical data.<sup>23,24</sup> We were interested in the type and amount of information student veterinarians posted to their Facebook profile that could reflect poorly on them. After several reviews of the 80 profiles selected from the high-exposure category, a number of trends and patterns relating to content that could reflect poorly on a student were identified. The emerging trends

and patterns were then organized into categories and sub-categories and described in a codebook. The categories identified represented the broad themes of potentially unprofessional behavior emerging from students' Facebook profiles. Any items that proved difficult to categorize were discussed between two of the authors (Weijs and Coe) until consensus was achieved.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

We identified 805 Facebook profiles constituting 77% (805 of 1,049) of the total number of veterinary students enrolled at the four Canadian veterinary colleges during the time of the study. The number of Facebook profiles found by expected graduation year ranged from 70% to 89%. There was no significant difference in the number of profiles found across years. Of the students, 83% (670) disclosed their gender, of whom 84% (562) identified themselves as female. Seventy-one percent of students made their friends list publicly accessible. The mean number of Facebook friends students had was 318 (median = 285, range = 22–1,090). Twenty percent of students had a Facebook profile with a publicly visible wall.

Generally, students posted a notable amount of personal information such as relationship status (14%), partner's name (9%), sexual orientation (12%), and names of family members (6%). Three percent of students posted their birthdate, 4% identified their hometown, and 29% posted their current city.

### Privacy

Of the 805 profiles, 265 (32.9%) were categorized as low exposure (i.e., high privacy), 286 (35.5%) were categorized as medium exposure (i.e., medium privacy), and 254 (31.6%) were categorized as high exposure (i.e., low privacy). Eighty-one profiles were used to establish inter-rater agreement between Weijs and the research assistant. The  $\kappa$  statistic calculated for the categorization of student's Facebook profiles into low, medium, or high exposure was 0.86, demonstrating high inter-rater agreement.

A sample of 80 (31%) high-exposure profiles was analyzed using content analysis. Unprofessional content was found to be posted on students' wall, info, photos, and notes pages. Of the 80 student Facebook profiles reviewed, 16 (20%) students posted the information only to their wall, 45 (56%) posted this information only to their info page, and two (3%) posted the information only to their notes. Seventeen (21%) students posted content to more than one of these locations.

### Factors Associated with a Veterinary Student's Facebook Profile Being in the High-Exposure Category

Including only retained variables for which complete data were available, an initial three-term model including all possible interactions was developed. The final reduced model retained three main effects: presence of a wall, college, and years to graduation. The model suggests that when controlling for college and the number of years

to graduation, students who had a publicly visible wall were 3.1 times more likely to possess a high-exposure profile than those who did not have a publicly visible wall ( $p < .001$ ; 95% confidence interval = [2.2, 4.5]). Moreover, when controlling for the presence of a wall and college, the number of years to the student's graduation increased the probability of the student's possessing a high-exposure profile (odds = 1.30,  $p = .001$ , 95% confidence interval = [1.12, 1.49]). When controlling for both presence of a wall and years to graduation, college was also found to be a significant ( $p = .003$ ) predictor of students' possessing a high-exposure Facebook profile.

An additional variable, number of friends, was also retained after the univariate analysis; it contained missing data (>25%) that excluded it from the original three-term model. Using forward selection, this variable was added to the reduced model (containing presence of a wall, college, and years to graduation); however, it was not retained.

### Qualitative Analysis

Individuals whose profiles were categorized into the high-exposure category were found to have posted significant material that was considered unprofessional. In total, 241 unprofessional incidents were posted on the 80 profiles included in the qualitative analysis. These incidents fell into eight categories: juvenile profile pictures (10), overt sexuality (29), substance use and abuse (59), obscene comments or photos (56), threats to clients' confidence (four), breaches of client confidentiality (10), disrespect for animals (10), and venting (62).

**Juvenile Profile Pictures** Examples of juvenile profile pictures included a profile photo of a student posing with an animal that had undergone taxidermy, profile photos of students dressed in silly outfits, or use of cartoon characters for one's profile photo (e.g., Homer Simpson).

**Overt Sexuality** Content of this nature primarily included photos in which women showed significant cleavage, the leg above the knee, or bare midriffs or had their head canted in a sexually suggestive pose. These photos were predominantly found posted to an individual's wall or photo album.

**Substance Use and Abuse** Content in this category focused primarily on excessive alcohol intake, with a lesser exposure of illicit substance use. This content presented both as written comments and as photos, often in the form of a profile photo including alcohol. Written references to alcohol and illicit substance use were primarily linked to studying or social events (house parties or nights on the town described in Facebook lingo as *global mayhem*). Comments about overdrinking were frequently linked to a social event posted to the student's wall (e.g., a house party, a night on the town after the completion of exams). Other comments about alcohol had no precipitating comment or thread of conversation that invited the comment. Rather, students made stand-alone comments as a status update telling others when they were drinking (e.g., while studying), what they were drinking (e.g., margaritas), or why they were drinking (e.g., stress).

**Obscene Comments or Photos** The focus of this category was profane comments, crude comments or photos, and sexist or racist remarks. Crude photos were often focused on various body parts. The crude comments in this category were usually crude descriptions of people or events and were seemingly random. One student posted that she wanted to sell her old, loud, squealing car, and asked if anyone wanted to buy it. In response, a friend asked if there was a hooker in the trunk (hence the squealing). The profile owner responded that the hooker would explain the groaning.

**Threat to Clients' Confidence** This category consisted of a small number of comments considered to work against building client confidence in the veterinary student. All comments reflected a lack of self-confidence on the part of the student. For example, under employment info, one student, in describing her anaesthesia job at a veterinary college, suggested that the animals under her care hopefully woke up after surgery. Another student described herself as abnormal, crazy, and with little intellectual ability.

**Breach to Client Confidentiality** Content in this category was either photos (seven) or comments (three) that provided some details of an interaction with a client or veterinary patient. There were profile photos of pets with veterinary students in clinic settings that did not explicitly indicate that client consent had been provided to post the picture. In most cases, the animal was an uncommon veterinary patient (e.g., snake, iguana). On one occasion, a student appeared to mock client confidentiality: A picture was posted of an individual wearing surgical scrubs, a surgical mask covering his or her face, and a surgical cap. Adjacent to the individual was an animal hooked up to intravenous fluids, in a large-animal recovery stall, with a black bar censoring the animal's eyes.

On rare occasions, students would post comments on their wall about specific cases they had recently seen in the veterinary teaching hospital.

**Disrespect for Animals** Comments (seven) or photos (three) in this category showed some level of disrespect for animals. For instance, one student had a profile photo of herself performing a rectal exam on a cow. Another student had the initials of her veterinary college painted in black on the side of her white long-haired cat. In one example, a thread of comments contributed to by a number of veterinary students appeared to be meant as a joke, but that intention was not obvious to all friends and was thought to be in bad taste by others. A student posed a question asking others how much it would cost to do away with a dog, as the neighbour's dog was barking loudly. Friends provided responses, one of which was whatever was the cost of a bullet. Several friends with access to the thread did not perceive it as funny and thought it in bad taste.

**Venting** Comments in this category were subdivided into disinterested comments (19) and derogatory comments (43).

**Disinterested Comments** Disinterested comments included general comments about studying (five), which

reflected the idea that there were other things the student would rather be doing than studying, including watching television, going to a movie, drinking, napping, or using Facebook. Comments with respect to specific courses (eight) suggested that the coursework was not interesting or keeping their attention. For example, one student suggested studying is not working anymore as he was currently daydreaming and making shadow puppets on his notes for an identified subject. Also in this category were references to regularly missing classes (six). A profile owner posted a status update expressing her intention to start attending classes more regularly and to begin getting homework done. A friend posted that the student was noticeably absent from class the following day to which the profile owner agreed, admitting that she was a failure as a student.

**Derogatory Comments** Comments in this category were posted entirely on walls and were derogatory toward the school in general (six), specific courses (16), professors (six), potential clients (seven), and the veterinary profession (seven). These comments show more anger and frustration than the disinterested comments. One student extensively cursed about a particular course on Facebook while suggesting that he was not going to miss a favorite TV show as a result of having to study. In another post, the person noted that he would just like to sleep in and not have to go to early classes for subjects the person identified as dumb, adding he had already boycotted another earlier class he also considered dumb.

Students also expressed derogatory comments toward potential clients; these often took the form of negative evaluations of local people in the communities where they were attending veterinary college.

Comments that denigrated the profession were almost always made by friends of students already working as veterinarians. In general, the comments advised new graduates to stay in school because the reality of practice was not great. One notable comment written by a veterinary student painted the veterinary profession in a very bad light. A student posted a comment about how veterinarians must be willing to price gouge animal-loving clients in order to be successful. This post was found on the profile owner's notes page and appeared to be in response to a question posed in class on the attributes of a successful veterinarian. Several links to the quote were also found on the walls of friends of the profile owner.

## DISCUSSION

Facebook appears to be an important communication tool for veterinarians-in-training because they use it regularly to make plans, keep in touch with friends, and update others about their daily activities. However, this study identified that veterinary students also post a significant amount of publicly available content to their personal Facebook sites that could reflect poorly on them in trying to establish a professional identity, on the veterinary college they attend, and on the profession as a whole. Therefore, developing approaches to educating veterinary students about appropriate online conduct is important to the entire veterinary profession.

Within the current study, veterinary college attended, presence of a wall, and years to graduation were all associated with a veterinary student's possessing a Facebook profile with publicly accessible content that was deemed to be questionable in nature. It is likely that each of the four veterinary colleges in this study has different direct or indirect influences that affect students' online posts. Nevertheless, each of the four colleges did have a sample of students categorized into the high-exposure category; therefore, regardless of the college-level influence, all administrations should be conscious of this issue and continue to develop strategies that safeguard the college and their students against the potential risks of social media. One step may be to raise students' awareness of the risk of having a publicly visible Facebook wall. Having a publicly visible wall was found to be associated with an increased likelihood of possessing a high-exposure profile. The wall was also identified as an area where questionable content was posted not only by the profile owner, but also by the owner's Facebook friends. Veterinarians-in-training should consider using the highest privacy options on Facebook, especially in relation to protecting content posted to one's wall.

Findings of the current study indicate that education about appropriate online behavior and professionalism may need to be positioned earlier rather than later in veterinary curricula because students who had more years to graduation were more likely to have posted unprofessional content to their profile. Findings of a recent study<sup>25</sup> indicated that young people are less likely to use privacy settings and more likely to disclose information on Facebook than adults. However, awareness of the consequences of sharing information on Facebook led both groups to be more protective of their privacy. It is possible that veterinary students increase their use of privacy settings and decrease their online disclosure of information as they become more aware of the professional implications of online disclosure through their veterinary training. It has been suggested that professionalism is acquired over time;<sup>26</sup> veterinary students who have been in a professional program longer may have greater exposure and opportunity to experience the consequences of online behaviors leading to the trend identified in the current study.

The generation of veterinary students entering veterinary college today may be particularly vulnerable to the risks of social media. First, they have grown up with the Internet and, as a result, are likely to be comfortable with online disclosure.<sup>27</sup> As such, their understanding of public and private identities, or perhaps their comfort level with mixing these two identities, may differ substantially from that of older generations. Second, communicating via social media is a new societal phenomenon, with the largest uptake of Facebook so far being specifically among individuals aged 18–34;<sup>2</sup> therefore, more experienced practitioners may not be ideal role models for young veterinarians-in-training with respect to appropriate online behavior. As a result, the education of veterinary students regarding online professionalism and the role modeling of appropriate online behaviors may currently be lagging behind students' use of social media, specifically Facebook.

Given the fast uptake of social media, little academic research exists to support or guide instructors in teaching veterinary students about appropriate online behavior.<sup>28</sup> As with other ethical decisions in veterinary practice, the four guiding principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, and justice provide a useful framework for assisting instructors and veterinary students in navigating the various risks associated with posting online content.<sup>29</sup> *Non-maleficence* refers to avoiding intentional or unintentional harm;<sup>29</sup> this may be considered in terms of online disclosure that may harm oneself, one's peers and professors, the college, and the veterinary profession.<sup>28</sup> When posting information online, students should be encouraged to consider the intention of the post; whether the post will harm themselves, peers, the college, or the veterinary profession; and the costs or benefits of posting the information to all parties.

*Beneficence* refers to promoting good; a principle that, in turn, often ensures non-maleficence by removing harm.<sup>29</sup> In relation to online posts, students should consider whether any posts on their profile should be protected by privacy settings, modified to reduce harm, or removed altogether. Even when using privacy settings to limit exposure, users need to remain aware of the distance posted information can still travel depending on their choice and number of friends. Students in the current study had an average of 318 Facebook friends, indicating that information protected by privacy settings still reached a large number of individuals. This distance is exponentially increased when settings allow friends of friends to see posted information (e.g., 318 Facebook friends each with an average of 318 Facebook friends produces exposure to an audience of 101,124 people).

*Autonomy* refers to an individual's right to choice,<sup>29</sup> including the right to choose one's personal online disclosures. In the current study, a number of students chose to post veterinary-related comments characteristic of dark humor. The medical literature refers to *dark humor* as a mechanism for professional venting.<sup>30</sup> Although the use of dark humor may be defended as comments in jest, clients and the general public may not necessarily consider such online posting in the same manner.<sup>30</sup> In exercising autonomy, veterinary students should be encouraged to consider the balance between one's right to publicly post information and the potential harm to others, including the broader veterinary profession. Autonomy also has boundaries in the form of societal laws and professional codes of conduct regulating the veterinary profession. In the current study, evidence of breaches of client confidentiality was found. Education about the need to respect client confidentiality should include specific discussions with students about the online posting of client information, including a discussion of how information protected by privacy settings remains legally subject to evidentiary discovery.<sup>31</sup>

*Justice* relates to treating everyone in a fair and equal manner.<sup>29</sup> Students need to realize that their in-training status does not shield them from the potential consequences or harm of unprofessional online behavior. Moreover, research has shown that unprofessional behaviors exhibited by a student during professional training are predictive of future unprofessional actions.<sup>32</sup> Veterinary

educators have an important role in educating students about appropriate online behavior as well as in holding students accountable for unprofessional online conduct.

The present study was restricted to veterinary students attending four colleges across Canada. Similar studies conducted in other countries with medical students<sup>7</sup> and early-career physicians<sup>22</sup> have found similar disclosure behaviors, suggesting these activities cross disciplines and geographical boundaries. More important, it was easier to confirm a student's Facebook profile if the veterinary student maintained low-privacy settings, thereby publicly revealing a wealth of personal information. It is possible that the number of students maintaining high-privacy settings is underrepresented. Although we referred to the established literature when needed to more objectively identify potentially unprofessional behavior among students' Facebook disclosures, it is likely that certain behaviors and activities identified in the current study may be perceived differently in terms of professionalism by other cultures. For example, it is possible we have overlooked certain categories of behavior that would be considered unprofessional within cultures other than our own. Readers should take this into consideration as they reflect on professional and unprofessional student behaviors within their own culture and settings.

Although Facebook has social benefits, the current study found that the posting behaviors of a number of veterinary students carries inherent risks to individual students, their peers, their college, and the veterinary profession as a whole. With approximately one-third of profiles containing questionable content that was publicly available, veterinary educators should consider their role in educating students about the blurring line between one's private life and developing professional image brought on by social media. This role should include educating students on steps that can be taken to protect themselves, their careers, and the profession from the risks of social media.

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## NOTES

- a Predictive Analytics Software version 18.0.0, 2009, Chicago, IL.
- b Atlasti version WIN 16.2.16 scientific software, 1993–2011, GmbH, Berlin.

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