

Chapter 14

Social Network Sites and Their Role in the Sharing of Health Information

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ABSTRACT

Currently there is an exponential growth in technological mediums that have had a global impact in the manner in which individuals are connecting and communicating with one another. The use of Social Network Sites is shifting the way people communicate as well as challenging traditional theories in the domain of sharing information.

The role of existing social capital has now been transferred to an electronic medium, and unlike in the traditional real world sense of face to face communication, this has led to both benefits and disadvantages. The benefits being that these mediums, particularly Social Network Sites, allow for a greater use of gathering information from weak relationships and strengthening already strong relationships. The disadvantage of these mediums is the proliferation of information that may have questionable sources and the concerns around the privacy and security regarding use, storage, and transferring of information via these networks.

The benefits and the disadvantages of this medium have now become an active study area for researchers in health information sharing, as it is beginning to impact traditional health systems. Thus, this chapter will explore the growth and development of Social Network Sites and their role in healthcare. The chapter will investigate the various privacy, security, and ethical considerations that need to be addressed when utilising this medium.

As this medium is now an inclusive part of the day to day living of individuals on a global scale, the impact they have within the healthcare setting cannot be underestimated.

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BACKGROUND

Since their introduction, Social Network Sites (SNSs) have attracted millions of users globally. Their use has become so pervasive that millions of people have integrated accessing these sites as part of their daily practice. The most visible use of these sites is within the Gen Y group. In 2009, the demographic that was found to be growing even faster than the Gen Y group was the 35-54 year old age group, with a 276.4% growth recorded in a 6 month period of using SNSs (Silvia, 2009). These statistics alone indicate the influence of SNSs.

The purpose of SNSs is varied, with some focused on maintain pre-existing social networks, while others allow strangers to connect via common interests, while still others are based on language, race, culture, nationality etc. Ultimately the aim of an SNS is to create an electronic social network in which various pieces of information can be transmitted (Hirst, et al., 2008).

From starting off as a static, one way dissemination tool, the internet has transformed dramatically, especially with the advent of Web 2.0. There is no simple definition for Web 2.0, but broadly put, it is a paradigm shift in the way the internet is used. Web 2.0 involves a more open approach to the internet, in particular user-generated content, Blogs, Podcasts, social media, review sites, Wikipedia, etc. (O'Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 has engineered the use of terminology such as "prosumer" to describe the fact that the traditional Web 1.0 "consumers" of information are now Web 2.0 producers of information (Doherty, 2008). Other common Web 2.0 terms include "architecture of participation" and "people-centric Web" indicating the involvement of users in the production of web content and the collaborative nature of the Web 2.0 environment (O'Reilly, 2005). Finally, the term "collaborationware" has been applied to the range of Web 2.0 technologies to express their potential for enabling people to work together online (Doherty, 2008). It is these terms that have laid the foundation for the development of Social Media and subsequently SNSs.

Social Media is the umbrella term that encapsulates six specific forms; SNSs, blogs, wikis, podcasts, forums, content communities and microblogging. The focus of this research is SNSs, however it must be noted that as technologies develop these six forms are bound to converge and stand as distinct social media types. According to Mayfield (2008, p. 5) all social media contain most if not all of the following qualities:

- **Participation:** "social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between media and audience,"
- **Openness:** "most social media services are open to feedback. They encourage voting, comments and the sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content—password-protected content is frowned on,"
- **Conversation:** "whereas traditional media is about "broadcast" (content transmitted or distributed to an audience) social media is better seen as a two-way conversation,"
- **Community:** "social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities share common interests, such as a love of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show,"
- **Connectedness:** "Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources, and people."

All these characteristics have been summarily defined by Chou *et al.* (2009), who term social media as the "participative internet."

Based on this definition of social media, it is easy to understand why there are number of definitions for SNSs. However, the accepted definition in the academic community is that offered by boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211):

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