

Status Update: Perceptions of Counselor Competence on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Social media is an integral part of students' and our clients' lives. These sites can be utilized to reach those in need of counseling support. The current study investigated the impact of content and degree of self-disclosure by fictional counselors on Facebook. Graduate counseling students role-played as potential clients and rated the perceived competence level of these fictional professional counselors. It was predicted that a moderate level of appropriate self-disclosure would direct clients to select a particular counselor. Additionally, we hypothesized that status updates related to professional events drive perceptions of counselor competence. Findings of this study revealed specific characteristics of Facebook profiles that evoke high levels of perceived competence and interpersonal warmth. Professional counselors can apply these social media strategies to manage their online presence and foster productive working relationships.

Keywords: counselor, social media, competence, professional, perceptions

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Social media sites, such as Facebook, are often co-opted and repurposed for professional uses. Professional counselors have the option of launching quasi-personal Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts – but what are the costs and benefits to doing so? It is certainly important to be strategic about one's public postings before clicking "post." However, best practices and guides to social media for professional counselors are scarce. The current study examined the following overarching questions. What inferences do people make about professional counselors, based on the content they share on social media? As counseling professionals, how much should we self-disclose online? And, how might we demonstrate personality characteristics that foster productive working relationships with our clients?

Previous research supports that personality often manifests itself in social networking sites such as Facebook (Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007) and that people can draw personality inferences about others through viewing personal websites and social networking sites (Gosling,

Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011). Research also supports that personality inferences made through social media are valid with Facebook profiles tending to display users' actual, rather than idealized selves (Back et al., 2010). Because of the self-presentational nature of social networking sites, narcissism has also emerged as a personality trait of interest (Satyawadi, Lederer, Herboth, & Houska, 2011). Satyawadi and colleagues found that participants high in narcissism were more apt to use Facebook and create content on the site (e.g., post status updates, add photos).

While other social media sites, namely Twitter, have been investigated less by psychological scientists, personality is also displayed on Twitter (Bain, Hoffman, & Houska, 2012). Personality judgments may be evoked by the profile owners' degree of self-presentation. Namely, through the number of tweets, substance of posts (i.e., words, subject matter), and the choice of pictures (i.e., TwitPics). It is plausible to expect a similar process on Facebook and Instagram. Twitter trumps Facebook for overall reach through quick announcements known as Tweets. Even though Twitter, historically, has not seen usership at the level of Facebook (i.e., nearly 200 million Twitter users to 800 million Facebook users; see Filloux, 2011), many find the ease of relaying information in a shorthand form attractive. As a result, many busy professors use Twitter to communicate regularly with students regarding course information or other related items (Bain, Hoffman, & Houska, 2012). Professional counselors could similarly leverage Twitter for office news or emergency information.

Many students rely on Twitter to obtain course and discipline information from professors that use their accounts (Bain, Hoffmann, & Houska, 2012). A concern appears when professors even share personal information using Twitter or other social media platform. While there are not clear statistics on how many professors engage in inappropriate sharing via these platforms, Froment, Garcia Gonzalez, and Bohorquez (2017) identify some of the pitfalls. A literature review by Froment and colleagues (2017) noted that the areas of inappropriate concern included sharing about alcohol consumption, racist or political comments, and negative comments about colleagues, students, or classes. Sarcasm and alleged satire can also be misinterpreted on Twitter (see Quintana, 2017 for a case study), and should therefore be avoided.

Despite some of the recent reprimands of professionals due to controversial Tweets, social media remains an easy, and potentially effective, vehicle for self-disclosure. Appropriate self-disclosure can set the stage for productive working relationships. Pedagogical research demonstrates the effects of self-disclosure and rapport on learning outcomes for students (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994, 1997; Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh, 2010). However, can these outcomes be achieved through social media? Moreover, do these outcomes translate to the context of professional counseling?

According to Mullen, Griffith, Greene, and Lambie (2014), school counselors must use social media to connect with the students with whom they work on a daily basis. If this directive is one to be followed, guidelines, boundaries, and knowledge on how to use social media effectively are needed. When sharing social media accounts with students, issues can arise such as the establishment of dual relationships and violation of professional boundaries. Similarly, working relationships between counselors and their clients risk becoming compromised as social media interaction increases. To avoid these potential risks, recent work (i.e., Froment et al.,

2017) supports following professional recommendations for social media and applying these standards consistently.

Professional recommendations should be based not only on anecdotal evidence but also empirical research. One study germane to this discussion was an experiment conducted by Bain and colleagues (2012). Bain et al. systematically varied the content of professors' Tweets to induce differences in perceptions of personality. Independent variables of knowledge (i.e., high, low) and warmth (i.e., high, low) were presented in a within-subjects design. The dependent measures included overall impression, professional competence, and the likelihood of enrolling in the professor's class based on the presented Tweets. One key finding was that the most positive responses were stimulated by Tweets that portrayed both high interpersonal warmth and great professional knowledge. It is reasonable to expect that these general findings translate to other professional contexts.

The Current Study

Empirical literature has yet to reveal a direct investigation of Facebook content as it relates to strategic use by professional counselors. As social media continues to emerge as a tool for professional use, the current study featured master's level counseling students as research participants. A primary aim of the research was to provide graduate students realistic examples of what professional counselors *should* and *should not* do to promote themselves in their practices and professional work. The current research followed the procedure established by past research (Bain et al., 2012). That is to say, participants rated fictional social media account owners on a variety of personality traits and their likelihood of relevant behaviors.

Based on past research (i.e., Bain et al., 2012), the highest perceptions of counselor competence were expected when the status updates concerned professional activities. The greatest likelihood of counselor selection was anticipated after a status update that demonstrated appropriate self-disclosure. Moreover, in line with Bain and colleagues' findings, we hypothesized that demonstrating high professional knowledge and high interpersonal warmth would lead to the most positive responses. Expressing the powerful combination of both knowledge and warmth provides potential clients a sense of a counselor's competence. Importantly, this social media strategy is consistent with the ethical guidelines of our discipline.

Method

Participants

Thirty-one female and four male graduate counseling students participated in the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 25.89$ years, $SD = 6.23$ years). Thirty-two of the participants identified as White (Hispanic/ Latino $n = 1$, Asian American $n = 1$, bicultural $n = 1$). Students were enrolled in a New Jersey Northwest University's clinical counseling ($n = 14$), dual clinical counseling ($n = 11$), school counseling ($n = 5$), or counseling/school ($n = 5$) program, with an average of 22.38 graduate credits earned ($SD = 12.29$) toward their M.A. degree. The majority of participants (80%, $n = 28$) were Facebook users, and averaged nearly two hours a day ($M = 1.89$ hours, $SD = 1.23$) on social media. Additionally, students were asked to participate in this study as part of a classroom activity and discussion. All participants volunteered with no incentives provided. In

addition, all participants' responses were anonymous. The sample size was small as a result of the convenience sampling method, therefore a within-subjects design was employed and all participants received all conditions. Given the multiple statistically significant results, statistical power was adequate enough to detect some effects, noted in the results section below.

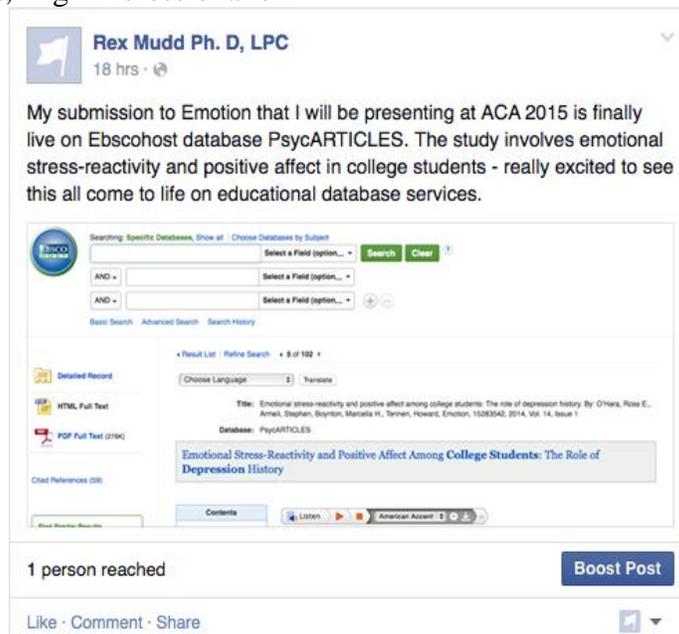
Materials

All stimuli were presented, online, using Fluid survey's stimulus presentation and survey software. Sixteen fictitious Facebook profiles were presented, one profile per page, in completely randomized order. Profiles were developed for a 2 x 2 x 4 completely within-subjects design [(counselor gender: male, female) x (counselor status: certifications visible, no certifications visible) x (type of Facebook posting: high warmth, high professionalism, low professionalism, low warmth)]. See the sample postings (Certifications Present, High Warmth; Certifications Present; High Professionalism) for reference (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Figure 1
Certifications Present, High Warmth



Figure 2
Certifications Present, High Professionalism



Underneath each profile was the following item, “Suppose you were seeking a counselor. Based on the social media content above, indicate the likelihood you would select this counselor,” presented on a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = “not at all likely”; 9 = “extremely likely”). A Likert-type grid of trait items were presented below the counselor selection item and were preceded by the instructions to “rate the counselor in terms of the following traits.” Ten traits were presented in randomized order, and included the traits of interest: competent, knowledgeable, warm, empathic, and compassionate. Participants also received these items on a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = “not at all”; 9 = “extremely”). This approach has been previously used to examine aspects of Twitter postings by fictional professors (Bain et al., 2012).

Please evaluate the counseling professionals based on the information presented on their Facebook walls.

Underneath these images are a number of traits that may nor may not apply to the Facebook profile owner. Please select a number next to the statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree that particular statement applies (or does not apply) to the owner of the Facebook profile.

Prefer Not to Answer Not at all Likely (1) (2) (3) (4) Somewhat Likely (5) (6) (7) (8) Extremely Likely (9)

Suppose you were seeking a counselor. Based on the social media content above, indicate the likelihood you would select this counselor.

Traits

Now, please rate the counselor in terms of the following traits. Use the scale that follows: 1: "not at all," 5: "somewhat," 9: "extremely."

	Not at All (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Somewhat (5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	Extremely (9)
Competent	<input type="radio"/>								
Knowledgeable	<input type="radio"/>								
Professional	<input type="radio"/>								
Empathic	<input type="radio"/>								
Disconnected	<input type="radio"/>								
Warm	<input type="radio"/>								
Flat	<input type="radio"/>								
Cold	<input type="radio"/>								
Genuine	<input type="radio"/>								
Compassionate	<input type="radio"/>								

Procedure

Potential participants read an electronic informed consent sheet on the study entry page. Graduate students in a Master’s program in counseling, who chose to participate, provided their electronic consent and continued with the study anonymously. On the second page, participants were instructed that they would view a sampling of 16 Facebook walls and that they should view and interpret the information as though it were posted by counseling professionals. After viewing the information, they were to rate the Facebook profile owners on a series of personality characteristics.

Participants then completed a demographics page. Afterward, they viewed sixteen fictitious Facebook profiles in completely randomized order. After viewing and rating the fictional counselors, participants received an electronic debriefing form on the last page of the

study. The second researcher thanked students for participating and proceeded with a full oral debriefing and answered questions about the experiment. Subsequently, the first researcher led a discussion of social media usage by counseling professionals.

Reliability and Validity

As stated in regards to participants and the limited sample size, a within-subjects design was used and all participants received the condition. The increased power of the within-subjects design allowed this study to use fewer subjects than would otherwise be needed to obtain statistically reliable differences among the treatments. In this study, given the multiple statistically significant results, statistical power was adequate enough to detect some effects. Therefore demonstrating reliability in the research design.

The within-subjects design carries specific threats to internal validity. Although, with the conditions of this study, several were not a threat and therefore validity was maintained. Differential selection was a potential concern as subjects were not randomly assigned and all participants experienced all conditions. Selected interaction is also a potential threat for similar reasons noted with differential selection. Because all participants experienced the same condition, many of the threats do not have the same impact and therefore the significance effect can be accepted after considering the overall research design.

Results

Counselor Selection

A main effect of type of posting was observed for the counselor selection item, $F(3, 78) = 50.98, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .79$. Both the high warmth ($M = 5.70, SE = .31$) and high professionalism ($M = 5.65, SE = .37$) items led to significantly greater likelihood of counselor choice relative to the low professionalism and low warmth postings. Similarly, a main effect of professional status was observed for the counselor selection item, $F(1, 26) = 6.62, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .20$. Fictional counselors who had their certifications visible ($M = 4.28, SE = .20$) received a significantly greater likelihood of selection than those who did not have certifications visible on their Facebook profiles ($M = 3.88, SE = .20$). A posting type x professional status interaction was also observed in the data, $F(3, 78) = 6.43, p = .001, \eta^2 = .20$.

Competence

A main effect of professional status was observed for the trait of competence, $F(1, 30) = 15.26, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .34$. Fictional counselors with certifications present ($M = 4.83, SE = .18$) were viewed as significantly more competent than those counselors without certifications ($M = 4.32, SE = .21$). Additionally, a main effect of posting type was present in the data, $F(3, 90) = 62.05, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .68$. Those counselors who posted highly professional content yielded significantly higher competence ratings ($M = 6.60, SE = .32$) relative to the other posting conditions (i.e., high warmth, low professionalism, low warmth). Lastly, a posting type x professional status interaction was observed, $F(3, 90) = 5.08, p = .003, \eta^2 = .15$.

Knowledge

A main effect of professional status was observed for the trait of knowledge, $F(1, 30) = 14.57, p = .001, \eta^2 = .33$. Fictional counselors with certifications present ($M = 4.91, SE = .19$)

were viewed as significantly more knowledgeable than their counterparts without certifications ($M = 4.42$, $SE = .17$). Additionally, a main effect of posting type was present in the data, $F(3, 90) = 72.56$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .71$. Those counselors who posted highly professional content received significantly higher knowledge ratings ($M = 7.08$, $SE = .28$) relative to the other posting conditions (i.e., high warmth, low professionalism, low warmth). Lastly, a posting type x professional status interaction was observed, $F(3, 90) = 5.91$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$.

Warmth

A main effect of gender was observed for the trait of warmth, $F(1, 30) = 10.05$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Female counselors were rated as significantly warmer ($M = 4.72$, $SE = .18$) than their male counterparts ($M = 4.18$, $SE = .19$). A main effect of professional status was observed for warmth, $F(1, 30) = 18.26$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .38$. Those fictional counselors with certifications were perceived as significantly warmer ($M = 4.32$, $SE = .17$) than those colleagues without certifications present ($M = 4.17$, $SE = .18$). A main effect of posting type on warmth was also revealed in the data, $F(3, 90) = 53.19$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .64$. High warmth postings fostered significantly higher ratings of warmth relative to other posting types.

Empathy

The data revealed a main effect of gender on the trait of empathy, $F(1, 30) = 6.59$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .18$. Female counselors were rated as significantly higher in empathy ($M = 4.72$, $SE = .18$) relative to their male counterparts ($M = 4.18$, $SE = .19$). A main effect of professional status was observed for the trait of empathy, $F(1, 30) = 20.54$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .41$. Fictional counselors with certifications present ($M = 4.65$, $SE = .20$) were viewed as significantly more empathic than those counselors without certifications ($M = 4.05$, $SE = .18$). Additionally, a main effect of posting type was present in the data, $F(3, 90) = 54.49$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .65$. Those counselors who posted content high in warmth yielded significantly higher empathy ratings ($M = 5.95$, $SE = .27$) relative to the other posting conditions (i.e., high warmth, low professionalism, low warmth). Lastly, a gender x posting type interaction was observed, $F(3, 90) = 5.57$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Female counselors with high warmth postings yielded the highest ratings of empathy ($M = 6.24$).

Compassion

A main effect of gender was observed for the trait of compassion, $F(1, 30) = 20.36$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .40$. Female counselors ($M = 4.75$, $SE = .18$) were viewed as significantly more compassionate than male counselors ($M = 4.07$, $SE = .17$). A main effect of professional status was observed for the trait of compassion, $F(1, 30) = 20.75$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .41$. Fictional counselors with certifications present ($M = 4.69$, $SE = .15$) were viewed as significantly more confident than those counselors without certifications ($M = 4.13$, $SE = .18$). Additionally, a main effect of posting type was present in the data, $F(3, 90) = 58.10$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .66$. Those counselors who posted high warmth content received significantly higher compassion ratings ($M = 5.98$, $SE = .27$) relative to the other posting conditions (i.e., high professionalism, low professionalism, low warmth). Lastly, a gender x posting type interaction was present, $F(3, 90) = 10.41$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .26$. Specifically, female counselors who posted high warmth content were rated the highest in compassion ($M = 6.55$, $SE = .30$).

Discussion

A number of statistically significant findings were observed in this study. Some of the key findings for professional counselors and researchers will be discussed. Counselors who were perceived to be warm individuals received a higher likelihood of selection. Counselors who displayed their certifications and other credentials also received a higher likelihood of selection. A significant interaction effect was also observed. Counselors who were both high in interpersonal warmth and high in professionalism received the greatest likelihood of selection. Taken together, these findings support that professional counselors appear best in the eyes of potential clients when they are both warm and knowledgeable. While this finding is rather intuitive, how to conjure these perceptions online is the challenge.

One way to establish professional status is through the inclusion of certifications on one's profile (e.g., "Ph.D., LPC, NCC, ACS"). Another strategy is to share one's knowledge within social media postings. These types of professional certifications and professional posts led to the highest perceptions of counselor competence in our sample. The general pattern of interaction remained the same; participants that perceived counselors to be high in warmth and high professionalism received the highest likelihood of counselor selection. It is important to note the additive impact of certifications and academic credentials. When certifications and academic credentials were present, counselors were found to have slightly higher ratings of competence. Thus, practitioners may want to include the relevant abbreviations on their professional social media profiles.

A main effect of professional status was observed for the trait of knowledge. Professionals with certifications should, in theory, be more knowledgeable by virtue of their advanced training – relative to those without that training. Professionals who post high knowledge content reveal their expertise, and that information should impact the process of counselor selection to some degree. The other variable implicated in this process, as observed for other dependent measures, is interpersonal warmth. The interaction effect remains the same for perceptions of knowledge. Counselors who were high in warmth and professionalism yielded a higher counselor selection likelihood than the low warmth and low professionalism counselors. Thus far, interpersonal warmth has been a key ingredient in counselor choice.

Traits such as warmth, empathy, and compassion are only driven by social media postings but they are also derived from counselor characteristics. A main effect of gender was observed for the trait of warmth. That is, female counselors were perceived to be higher in interpersonal warmth than the fictional male counselors in our experiment. The finding may be indicative of a gender stereotype and expectation that female counselors be warm (see Eagly, 1987 on social role theory). Similar trends were observed for the traits of empathy and compassion.

Participant perceptions of warmth, empathy, and compassion also appear to be affected by subtle variations of social media profiles. When certifications were present on the fictional counselors' profiles, participants perceived female counselors to be higher in these traits. At this juncture, it is unclear whether this effect reflects a halo effect (see Forgas & Laham, 2016) or is simply noise in our sample's data. It is reasonable to expect, though, increasingly positive

perceptions of intelligent and professionally accomplished individuals. How male counselors may overcome our society's cognitive biases and gender stereotypes is well beyond the scope of this research, and is not without pitfalls.

The general trends observed for posting highly professional content, regardless of counselor gender, is consistent with past research in this area. Bain et al. (2012) observed that professors who Tweeted about professional activities and shared knowledge through posting links were rated significantly higher in competence, enjoyed more positive impressions, and yielded the highest likelihood of class enrollment. The current study extends Bain and colleagues' work into the domain of professional counseling. As to be expected in research of this nature, a few considerations can be addressed in future work.

Limitations and Future Considerations

A limitation of this study is the sample size. This study employed convenience sampling in order to assess students perceptions of professional counselors based on the information provided via social media as a result of class activity and discussion, after the study was conducted. While the participants responded to the survey anonymously, we have to consider that the participants have a working knowledge of the field of counseling and may have inherent bias as a result.

First, academic credentials and certifications could be isolated and placed into separate fictional profiles. In the current study, both Ph.D. and LPC were included on the same profile. Therefore, we were unable to ascertain whether the academic credentials (Ph.D.), certifications (LPC), or the additive combination, were motivating the participant response. It is also important to note that our sample was comprised of graduate counseling students. Undergraduates or the general population may not be as aware of the academic credentials or certifications as was our sample. Future research could consider different levels of education and licensure, such as M.A. and Ph.D., practicing licenses such as LPC, LMFT, LCSW and Psychologist. These modifications to the stimuli would shed some light on perceptions of counselor training.

Second, gender plays a role in counselor perceptions. The more realistic the contrived profiles become, the more likely responses can be attributed to these variables. In our research, we included gender of the counselor in an effort to make the simulation more realistic for our students. Future researchers may consider using names free of gender assumptions or redacting the counselor names. One of these strategies would allow a closer examination of posting content or the aforementioned credential – certification distinction.

Third, this research employed a within-subjects design. Participants received all stimuli in a randomized order of presentation. On one hand, the approach lends itself to greater statistical power than a between-subjects design; on the other, participants bear a greater cost of participation – fatigue. Data quality can suffer as ratings and items increase. However, for the purposes of a course experience and discussion in a relatively small class, the within-subjects design sufficed. Future inquiry may focus on key outcomes, such as counselor choice and competence. Dispositional perceptions such as warmth, empathy, and compassion may be pared down or included in a separate phase of the follow-up study.

Conclusion

Social media is a large component of our students' and clients' lives. Having familiarity and knowledge of this space can assist us in becoming better practitioners and scholars. Counseling professionals do need to be mindful about content disclosure and appropriate circumstances to disclose such content. Furthermore, practitioners need to decide whether their public social media profiles are posted for professional exposure or posted to broadcast for potential clients. Findings of our research imply the following: 1.) if posting for potential client recruitment, consider sharing positive and uplifting posts; 2.) if posting for professional exposure, consider sharing professional accomplishments and knowledge. While some may see social media as trivial for a counseling professional, these communications do serve a purpose. Social media allows practitioners and scholars to engage in impression management, share knowledge, and actively plant the seeds for productive professional relationships.

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