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The Ethics and Practicality of Using Social Media Platforms in Social Work Clinical Practice:
A Systematic Review

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Abstract

The social work field strives to serve clients in the most ethical, practical and confidential way by educating on mental health issues and advocating for social justice. In going with social trends, this systematic review questions the practicality and ethics of using social media platforms as part of social work clinical practice. For the purpose of this review, social media is defined as forms of electronic communications through which users generate online communities in order to share information, ideas, personal messages, videos, and other content. The purpose of technology in the social work is clear; to increase accessibility and delivery of services. Based on our findings, the research concludes that although the use of social media is practical in direct practice, there is not enough research and guidelines established to make a clear stance on the ethicality. Although the National Association of Social work (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) have worked on creating standards and guidelines to fit the way technology and social work are merging, further development of boundaries and standards addressing social media use in social work practice is needed to draw a more definite conclusion.

Keywords: social work, technology, ethics, practical, social media, therapy, direct practice

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**The Ethics and Practicality of Using Social Media Platforms in Social Work Clinical
Practice: A Systematic Review**

Chapter 1

In today's digital society, it is important that social work professionals use technological resources that are relevant and essential in order to stay up to date with the trends in the field. One emerging trend over the past several decades is the use of information and communications technology (ICT). As stated by Perron, Taylor, Glass & Margerum-Leys:

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are broadly defined as technologies used to convey, manipulate and store data by electronic means (Open University). This can include e-mail, SMS text messaging, video chat (e.g., Skype), and online social media (e.g., Facebook). It also includes all the different computing devices (e.g., laptop computers and smart phones) that carry out a wide range of communication and information functions. (2010, p. 67)

Social media has been defined a number of different ways; however, for the purposes of this review, social media is defined as forms of electronic communications. Websites are used for social networking, through which users generate online communities in order to share information, ideas, personal messages, videos, and other content (Kimball & Kim, 2013; Merriam-Webster, 2006; Robbins, & Singer, 2014). As the world becomes more reliant on technology, there is an urge for social workers to embrace technological advancements (Robbins, & Singer, 2014); however, how does social media relate to social work practice? Many professional social workers are beginning to incorporate the use of social media into their practice and social work educators are increasingly using social media to augment social work education (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Hitchcock & Young, 2016). For instance, Melinda Lewis

is a Licensed Master of Social Work (LMSW) and an instructor at the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas who uses her blog, Classroom to Capitol, to promote policy advocacy and lobbying while shedding light on cutting edge issues. Her blog is a tool to support others in advocacy of social justice and to help professionals in the social work community, giving insight into how social workers can work toward change in policy analysis. Melinda gives educated insight on how others can strengthen their policy skills and become more effective about policy practice. She openly wants visitors to use material from her site to develop their advocacy work (Lewis, 2016). Although research on social media in social work education has been growing, less attention has been given to social media in social work practice.

The objective of this systematic review is to compile and critically analyze the research surrounding social media's usage in social work direct clinical practice. This review specifically focused on investigating the ethical and practical components paired with using social media in practice. In doing so, this review will hopefully provide a clear and unbiased stance on the topic at hand, and provide readers with an extensive review of the literature surrounding the topic. Specifically, the research question is: Is it practical and ethical to use social media in social work clinical practice?

A systematic review was selected in order to present a critical synopsis of the literature surrounding social media use in the social work field. This review critiques evidence and interprets meaning regarding the research on technology and social media use in the social work profession. It provides a well-rounded and up to date overview of technological methods in using social media in social work and examines the effectiveness and applicability to the future of the social work profession and specifically clinical practice.

The Internet reaches over 70% of both adolescents and adults, and with the escalation in the use of cyber communication, professionals are starting to use the Internet for avenues such as marketing, advocacy and practice (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012). Individuals ages 18 to 29 represent 90% of those using social media (Perrin, 2015). Still, usage among those 65 and older has more than tripled since 2010, and in 2015 the older population who now use social media is an outstanding 35% (Perrin, 2015). Social workers who use social media not only have the potential to reach populations that are both young and old, but they are also able to tap into racially different clientele, no matter if they are in rural, urban or suburban areas. As stated by Perrin (2015), 65% of all social media users are White, Hispanic and African American, and 64% of social media users are urban residents, 68% are suburban residents, and 58% are rural residents.

Users of social media do not always have to be individuals; many businesses are starting to join various social media platforms to promote their companies, search for prospective employees, and engage their target audience. The use of social media gives organizations a widespread platform, which allows marketing to help the organization grow and prosper. Companies now have an easier and more effective tool for spreading awareness of their product, as well as finding participants to beta test in exchange for positive reviews (Lee & Walsh, 2015). Social media can be used as an avenue for efficiently spreading information about social services, nonprofits, and other organizations. New agencies can use social media as a marketing tool to promote their services to a wider range of clientele. Additionally, direct service providers can use social media as an avenue to advertise and deliver their services. As a result, research is now advancing the effects of social media and the impacts it may have for businesses and direct service providers (Lee & Walsh, 2015).

Many professionals use various avenues to promote the mental health field. For example, Terri Cole is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) who has over 21,000 followers and uses her YouTube profile and other social media platforms to post videos that help followers build tools to use at home, such as guided mediation, setting goals, and being an active listener. In addition, she also has a link to her public speaking events and other social engagements. Her professional Facebook is full of positive mantras and connects to her website with additional information for users to access (Cole, 2016).

Although the information of users can vary, the core of what social media entails does not change; which is to provide a space to connect and share information to the masses. Sharing information allows social movements to thrive, which in turn promotes social change. Social media can also be used for advocacy by sharing information in order to create awareness of issues and create dialogue amongst its users. Sharing information allows social movements to prosper, which in turn can promote social change.

Social Work Helper is a website that offers public news/media that anyone can access, but it also has a public Facebook Page, an Instagram, and Twitter page. The page has daily posts for “12 Steps for Self-care,” connections for relevant hotlines, and articles about childhood trauma; all of which are topics that are relevant to the social work field (SocialWorkhelper.com, 2015). From reading posts, one can see that these types of web pages empower individuals to share their stories, find support, and become connected to services. Reaching a wide audience is a practical component of why social workers might use social media. Furthermore, by using social media in this capacity, one can create many circumstances for empowering individuals. Furthermore, many people use their social media platforms to share encouraging affirmations, finding studies related to mental health, and discovering links for receiving mental health

services. These licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) are using platforms like Facebook to promote themselves and their practice. They accomplish this by connecting their audience to things like self-help books or other reading materials that are pertinent to the discussion, which allows followers or anyone who might be interested to access resources.

Even though it has been offered since the '90s, online counseling is becoming more popular in social work practice. Mishna et al. states:

Online interventions are typically offered on a one-to-one basis through modalities such as email or instant messaging. Online counseling requires guidelines regarding matters such as the frequency of giving feedback and the immediacy of responding. Similar to traditional therapy, setting guidelines is imperative for maintaining a positive professional relationship and avoiding abuse of the modality. (2012, p. 278)

In addition to convenience, online counseling will make it possible for clinicians to be able to reach a wider range of clients. Other media outlets, such as blogs, are also an effective means to inform the general population what counseling entails. A simple google search reveals an abundance of social work websites and blogs to connect social workers to numerous outlets.

Relando Thompkins MSW, LLMSW, created a website entitled *Notes from an Aspiring Humanitarian* which links to resources, provides encouragement, and advocates for those who are practicing and continuing to learn and grow in the social work practice. Thompkins states:

For Social Workers, recognition can often be hard to come by. The successes are often private, while failures can often be public. Sometimes, those who are unfamiliar with the profession can be left with a one-dimensional, stereotypical view of who Social Workers are or what they do. Now more than ever, it has become increasingly important to tell our

own stories, and there are many Social Workers who have taken to the web to use technology to fulfill this end. (2013, p.1)

When using social media for the intent of benefitting clients in social work, there are disputes that need to be attended to. Social media is growing so rapidly in our society, social workers must be proactive in regards to their online ethical and professional responsibilities (Sage & Sage, 2015). All social workers should ask themselves before posting any information to social media, one considerable question this question being; how will this information meet the standards of both the NASW's Code of Ethics and their own agency policies? Although it is important for a worker to follow agency policy, the agency can also have strict boundaries on what employees can post on social media. Social workers using social media platforms should aim to maintain client privacy while simultaneously establishing and maintaining their professional and personal boundaries (NASW & ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice, 2005; Reamer, 2013).

Despite all of the precautions a practitioner has to take, social media can be advantageous and reach more individuals in the least amount of time. Ethical coherence may be best achieved through the development of comprehensive social media guidelines, policies, and training that focus on effectively preparing social workers for ethical challenges they will confront in the global world of social media (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). Although this is a growing worry, if it is dealt with early, and social workers become accustomed to social media sooner rather than later, it can be something that is beneficial to their work rather than something that is impeding it. In other human services fields, social media is being used to promote, educate, and connect not only professionals but also those who are interested, seeking information or education (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012) Using social media to promote social justice,

educate, share, and connect with others who are in the human services field helps those who are helping to become better, reach a sizable population and promote issues that are life changing. As stated by NASW & ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice (2005, p. 3), “Social workers and clients can uncover vast web-based sources for information that can enhance the likelihood of effective interventions; support groups for people at risk can be easily created and moderated.” Social workers should take advantage of the possibilities social media opens up in the realm of clinical practice and think about how to ethically and practically utilize these tools.

One of the main goals of the social work profession is to assist clients, to encourage justice and uphold the integrity of clients through ethical social work practice, advocacy, and empowerment. Social workers preserve their ethical principles by following The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2008) and can be informed by the NASW/ASWB standards for ethical use of technology (ASWB, 2014).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Not long ago, the personal computer was considered merely a “machine.” As history notes, Chris Babbage, the father of the computer, conceptualized and invented the first computer in the early 19th century that was designed to aid in navigational functions, but its functions were limited and linear (Witzel, 2007). Even Steve Jobs experienced disastrous results when he introduced the Apple III, which had to be recalled due to hardware failures (Linzmayr, 2004). Over time and ongoing advances, the personal computer evolved from its original one dimensional functions and shied away from being primarily used as a word processor to becoming an effective tool for professional communication and organization.

This use of technology is defined by the utilization of computers and information technology through varying facets of occupational use. This use could be in the nonprofit, for profit, and governmental sectors (Barnes, 2001; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Hackler & Saxton, 2007; and Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The Social Work arena is not any different, as it also utilizes computers and information technology to complete daily tasks and objectives. Not only do practitioners implement programs to carry out financial and personal needs, the use of client and management information systems, by way of an electronic health record, can be seen as the major technological shift.

As social work keeps up with the technological trends of modern society, history has shown that the field of social work has adapted accordingly and its roots can be traced through social work documentation. During social work's earliest years, in the early 20th century, discussions about documentation focused almost exclusively on theory building, research, and teaching (Eliot, 1928). Record keeping to aid in practice management in early social work

history can be seen through Jane Addams, co-founder of the Hull House, a settlement house started in 1889 Chicago, whose documentation of individuals, groups, and environmental factors led to a study to highlight institutionalized environmental injustice for the city's working classes that led to eventual municipal reform (Platt, 2000). By the 1920s and 1930s, social work's literature emphasized the importance of record keeping when "personality influences, psychological goals, and psychiatric casework were involved" (Pinkus, 1977 p.1161). By 1940, professional standards had evolved for three distinct types of case records: (1) chronological reports of services provided, (2) summary recordings of practitioners' relationships with clients, and (3) process recordings that provide moment-by-moment details of clients' behavior and interactions between practitioners and clients (Burgess, 1928).

Over time social workers refined their recording practices with respect to assessing client's' circumstances, statuses, and needs; documenting more subjective information about clients' circumstances (information provided by the client, family, and significant others); recording objective information based on tests or other independent sources, the social worker's assessment, and plans; and completing standardized forms that summarize client information using short answers or checklists (Kagle, 1987).

At first, notes were kept in public files (Strode, 1940). While technology evolved, the field of social work adapted accordingly by incorporating new methods of record keeping. With the induction of the personal computer, the method of record keeping introduced an information system movement that would create a shift within the profession. Although the use may differ between professions that incorporate the EHR, it shares the premise of storing records onto a digital database that is connected through the Internet so users from varying locations can access the same information. The Electronic Health Record (EHR) is a "repository of patient data in

digital form, stored and exchanged securely, and accessible by multiple authorized users. It contains retrospective, concurrent, and prospective information and its primary purpose is to support continuing, efficient and quality integrated health care” (Mantas, 2001, pp. 250-257).

Social workers use electronic health records to write reports and progress notes, developing case histories and diagnosis, while tapping into resource networks, and database systems for accessing files and compiling facts and figures. The EHR is used by different health care professionals and also by administrative staff. Among the various health care professionals who use different components of the EHR are physicians, nurses, radiologists, pharmacists, laboratory technicians and radiographers (Hayrinen, Saranto, & Nykanen, 2008, p. 296).

The use of technology and information systems in social work is not limited to just an EHR. Professionals in all areas of social work practice can employ information communication technologies. One example of this is geographic information systems (GIS) technologies that can be used for a variety of purposes, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating of programs and services (Felke, 2015).

GIS technologies are mapping tools used to create digital representations of key demographic variables according to desired geographic areas. A GIS is an organized collection of computer hardware, software, geographic data, and personnel designed to efficiently capture, store, update, manipulate, analyze, and display all forms of geographically referenced information. (ESRI, 1992)

The application of GIS technologies first appeared in the social work literature in the late 1990s when Hoefler, Hoefler, and Tobias (1994) proposed GIS technologies as a potential tool for social workers to consider. Other examples include the use of technology in child welfare (Sage & Sage, 2015), electronic counseling or e-therapy (Santhiveeran, 2009; Chester & Glass, 2006),

social media and digital activism (McNutt & Boland, 1999; McNutt & Goldkind, 2014; Saxton, Niyiora, Guo, & Waters, 2015).

Practicality

Technology is not only transforming how people collect and share information, but also altering how people interact with one another. Modern technology is being used to create social connections through social media in ways that users can use technology for entertainment and information purposes (Duggan & Smith, 2013). The obvious result from this is that more and more people are using SNS (Social Networking Sites) or social media. Social media sites; including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn, are common networking platforms used by approximately 73% of online adults (Duggan & Smith, 2013). The speed of technology has created the lure of immediate gratification and the pressure to communicate more quickly, often with larger numbers of individuals” (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole, & Rishchynski, 2006). It comes as no surprise that technology is being used more and more by the populace because of how readily available and easily accessible it has become.

Technology has also changed the landscape for practitioners by allowing them to contact their colleagues and clients through devices such as email, fax, chat rooms, cell phones, and online messaging (McNutt & Hick, 2002). As early as 1982, self-help online support groups emerged and in the 1990’s, online counseling was offered by clinicians through secure websites (Barak & Grohol, 2011; Reamer, 2013). Through these mediums, social work direct practitioners can offer their clients online and video counseling (Min, 2007). E-counseling and E-therapy is providing counseling and therapy services over the Internet through programs such as Facebook, Skype, and Facetime (Santhiveeran, 2009). In addition to using social media and online Internet applications in social work practice, social workers have also been using mobile

phone applications (apps) (Dombo, Kays, Weller, 2014; Reamer, 2013). With the widespread use of Smartphones in the United States, apps may be new frontier for technology in social work practice since 91% of Americans own a mobile phone (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), and 61% of mobile phone owners have a smartphone (Nielsen, 2013). It seems that smartphones are becoming what computers were to society decades ago, especially since Smartphones are basically miniature computers.

Since Smartphones are beginning to have the power computers once had, a new phenomenon of a virtual/digital worlds are beginning to become possible. An example of an app designed for mental health management is Self-help for Anxiety Management (SAM), which is an app created by University psychologists and computer scientists with the intention of providing interactive resources for people trying to manage their anxiety according to the IOS app store description. All of these apps have the “potential to make psychosocial interventions more engaging, more efficient, and less expensive, while reaching clients who might otherwise not be served by traditional parenting programs and services” (Lee & Walsh, 2015, p. 118).

Another emerging technology in the past decade is the use of role playing games and virtual reality. Role-playing games are computer games played offline or online that allow the gamer to assume a role in the story of the game and have to make certain choices that advance the story. Many of these Role-playing games (RPGs) require players to make moral decisions that can be judged as good or bad, consequently changing the game play, story, and the individual’s role in the game. Role-playing games have also been used in psychosocial treatments (Sorbring, Bolin, & Ryding, 2015). It is common social work practice to use role-plays as an intervention with clients. It should come as no surprise to incorporate role-playing games as psychosocial interventions in the social work arena. Social workers in Sweden used an

online role-playing game with youths to teach them about and combat adolescent dating violence and the results were positive (Sorbring et al., 2015). Games like this could transcend several facets of life and increase awareness, acceptance, and change in behaviors by members of our society.

Resistance

Technology use does not come without some possible drawbacks and while some social workers agree with the positive use of technology in the social work field, there are other social workers that are resistant to technology use and believe that it could do more bad than good (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000; McNutt & Hick, 2002). Younger and more computer-savvy social workers are welcoming of technology as opposed to their older counterparts who grew up with typewriters and are used to paper records (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000). Even though, there are positives to the use of technology, there is still resistance met with social workers in the field.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) illustrates the factors affecting whether or not a social worker will be receptive or resistant to technology use (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989). The factors included in the model are: usefulness (U), perceived ease of use (EOU), behavioral intentions to use (BI), and the actual system use (Davis et al., 1989). Usefulness (U) refers to whether or not social workers believe that using technology can enhance the quality of life of the clients and if the services offered are delivered more effectively and efficiently (Davis et al., 1989). There is a gap in the perceived ease of use (EOU) between older clinicians, often referred to as digital immigrants, who worked using typewriters and paper notes versus younger clinicians, or digital natives, who grew up in the digital age using computers (Davis et al., 1989). The resistance is felt more from the older clinicians (McNutt & Hick, 2002; Reamer, 2013; Reardon, 2010). Another factor contributing to resistance is the weak implementation and deficit

in training of technological tools. The behavioral intention (BI) adds to the resistance of technology in the social work field because some clinicians believe that technology reduces the client-clinician relationship and the rapport built (McNutt & Hick, 2002; Reamer, 2013; Reardon, 2010). The hope with using social media is that it might be able to build rapport in ways never before imagined.

Because there has been a major increase in the use of technology in the world today, especially for communication, it is no wonder that there are serious value implications, such as breaking confidentiality, privacy and security issues, and the quality of the personal therapeutic relationship. Despite these value implications, increased productivity, reduced paperwork, increased accessibility and delivery of services are but a few advantages of technology use in the social work arena (Reardon, 2010). Social work professionals still need to understand how to use technology ethically and appropriately.

Ethics

In today's busy world, web based services have offered clients greater access and flexibility, especially for clients in rural settings and those who cannot drive to site locations (Reamer, 2013). This means that if clinicians have the desire to work with children through a technology based medium such as a social media site, certain ethical concerns must be addressed. Some of these concerns include: ethical standards of obtaining consent, preserving confidentiality, avoiding disclosure, and verifying youth identity (Dombo, Kays, & Weller, 2014; Reamer, 2013). The ethical standards can also differ on a state by state basis. In some states, if the youth gave his or her Facebook name or Twitter Handle, that was enough to allow permission for the clinician to contact the youth (Dombo et al., 2014; Reamer, 2013). Also, in some states, just by "liking" the Facebook page of a clinician it gave permission for the clinician

to contact the youth (Dombo et al., 2014; Reamer, 2013). These standards were in conjunction with Facebook's terms of service and agreement. Other states required that clinicians obtain the written consent in person from the child before engaging in online communication (Dombo et al., 2014; Reamer, 2013). This would be difficult for youth in rural settings as well as accessing and paying for travel to the clinic would present another barrier to traverse. Some states did not allow any youth under 18 the privilege of therapeutic services online with their own consent (Dombo et al., 2014). In regards to avoiding disclosure, certain states need approval from the legal counsel, whereas others were only accountable to follow their individual agency policies and liabilities (Dombo et al., 2014; Reamer, 2013). NASW and ASWB have provided guidelines, but there are no clear and definite guidelines across individual states, thus leaving much to the discretion of the social worker.

Changes in the field of social work prompted the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) to develop standards for technology in social work practice in 2005. The NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology define technology as “a set of prescribed events that are embedded in hardware, software, or telecommunications and that direct activities, decisions, or choices” (NASW, 2005, p. 20) More specifically, the ASWB believes that, “social workers should acquire skills that use technology appropriately and adapt traditional practice protocols to ensure competent and ethical practice” (NASW, 2005, p. 4).

On the other hand, the *Model Regulatory Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* (2014) are an updated revision of the NASW and ASWB standards. This version responds to the growth of technology and social media use in the social work field such as online chats, smartphones and video technology. With the growing usage of social media in social

work, it is important to have standards in place when using various platforms. This explains the need for social workers who want to use technology and social media in their practice to have boundaries and standards. These standards ensure the safety of the clinician and client. The ethical standards are described in further detail and gives more understanding to social workers moving forward with social media/technology usage in their practice.

Part of the social work code of ethics is to best serve their clients and using social media usage can be used to do so but in order to their must be standards in place which this updated version addresses. With the rapidly growing usage of social media it is pertinent to social workers to have the standards in place when using social media and that is why this is so important for the systematic review. There is a need for social workers moving forward with social media and technology use and works to ensure the safety of the clients and the social workers from risk and harm.

The research indicates that there are many potential applications for social media use and that these applications are extremely practical for obtaining certain effects. Despite the evidence for practicality, there are still many issues that need to be addressed on the ethical side of things. Specifically, the NASW and ASWB, need to keep up with the ever changing field of technology. The guidelines surrounding the use of technology need to be specific and current in order to effectively combat ethical dilemmas and possible complications. Since social media is still a budding field, the guidelines need to have specific points regarding social media use, whether it be in the private life of a practitioner or in the public domain of their profession. The research indicates that without any current guidelines on present day social media platforms, clinicians and practitioners are left to their own devices in deciding what may be acceptable and

what may not be, creating a general consensus of apprehension and fear of using social media in direct practice (Dombo et al., 2014).

Many practitioners fear that using social media somehow goes against the social work profession or that it simply allows room for ethical dilemmas and gray areas to develop. One example addressed in the literature is a fear of breaking client confidentiality through a social media platform. The apparent practicality of using social media in social work is crucial in shaping the future of the profession and carries major implications into the ethicality of it all. Even though the NASW/ASWB has created these standards, there are limits on how to implement these standards in the context of social work practice (Dombo et al., 2014; Reamer, 2013).

Social workers use technology in many ways and in doing so they need to consider and create ethical boundaries. For example, there are not exact guidelines to follow when creating a social work persona online, it is up to the social worker to create policies and guidelines that he or she will abide by. One guideline to follow is to clearly distinguish whether the social worker is representing the agency he or she works for (Dombo et al., 2014). Other things to consider include whether or not one should engage clients in social media and to what extent, and to make sure to be clear on if one is representing him/herself or the agency one works for (Dombo et al., 2014; Mishna, Bogo, Root, & Fantus, 2014). This social work persona can exist in blogs, social network sites, and other social media tools. Social workers know how to act professionally and know the guidelines for professional behavior in person, but in online arenas the lines are blurry as to how one should conduct themselves.

This may be a possible move for some agencies but because technology can help an agency in a lot of ways, technology use in the workplace will become more commonplace.

Seeing there are so many advantages to using technology and social media in the field of social work, many professionals will create an online presence using social media. One question that social workers who maintain public social work personas online will have to ask themselves is how they will respond to clients who post on their page (Hill & Ferguson, 2014). Some social workers are hesitant to make the switch into being more technologically savvy, but in not joining in with the trend, they run the risk of not being in the know of an evolving technology laden social work field (Hill & Ferguson, 2014).

One area where technology has spread across the field of social work is in regards to e-advocacy. Electronic advocacy would include but not limited to: conducting policy information gathering and research, appraising public awareness and education, cultivating cyber communities and activism, efficiently organizing communities online and offline in solidarity, fundraising, and pressuring and influencing on policy makers on future decisions or stances (McNutt & Boland, 1999; McNutt & Hick, 2002). Technology allows social workers to promote “social justice and equality for marginalized populations” (McNutt & Hick, 2002). Due to the fact that electronic advocacy is so important in the social service field, the use of electronic advocacy techniques appears to be achieving recognition among the social workers in the field as (McNutt & Boland, 1999; and Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008).

After going through the history of technology in social work, the practical uses of technology, the clear resistance from professionals in the social work field, and the ethical concerns surrounding the topic, some major concerns presented themselves. The first is that the social work landscape appears to be an ever-changing one, and that this is largely due to changes within technology. These changes have resulted in major implications for the field. Practical applications have been and are being developed that are rooted in the technological advances

throughout the years. These practical applications have been developed for many reasons, but the majority of them aim increase productivity in some way, allow greater access for clients, or even improve delivery of services. The use of technology can be both effective and efficient due to the fact that communication technology requires minimal resources and has the capability of reaching a global audience.

Even though technology has come a long way, there are still gaps within the ethical guidelines and this has resulted in resistance. Some social workers appear to agree with the changes in the field, while others may be skeptical or even vehemently against all technology use in the profession. Some of the most prominent naysayers even go as far to say that technology use in practice completely goes against the ethical standards of the social work profession, which is the second major concern. As more and more technology ultimately gets introduced in the field, there needs to be up-to-date research surrounding this intertwining. Since the research surrounding social media is lacking, especially in regards to the social work, this systematic review aims to increase the knowledge base and help pave the way for more studies to follow this critical topic.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this review is to compile and critically analyze the research surrounding social media's use in the helping professions, more specifically in social work direct clinical practice. This was accomplished by investigating the ethical and practical components social media use could have in the clinical setting. The goal of this systematic review was to find studies that utilized social media in some form of direct practice in order to provide a clear and unbiased answer to the research question of determining the practicality and ethics in using social media in social work clinical practice.

A systematic review was chosen in order to present a focused, critical synopsis of the literature, systematic reviews are considered the best evidence for getting a definitive answer to a research question. This review interprets findings, critiques the strength of evidence, and finds meaning in the research on technology in social work. It provides a balanced, recent snapshot of technological methods in using social media and examines the effectiveness and applicability to the future of the clinical social work profession (Khan, Kunz, Kleijnen & Antes, 2011). A systematic review is performed by narrowing criteria including only those studies reporting a particular outcome, but by limiting the review to specific study designs. The disadvantage of this approach can include biases as well as studies meeting inclusion criteria may represent incongruous studies. A systematic review of available data presented in qualitative form following clearly defined methods allows some freedom in interpreting the best evidence (Wright, Brand, Dunn, & Spindler, 2007).

Systematic Review Process

The initial step in the review process was to define social media in regards to this review. The definition was based on research regarding how professionals view social media in social work practice. The definition was also based on how the dictionary officially defined social media. From there, the definition of social media was modified to help set the parameters of this review. For the purposes of this review, social media is defined as forms of electronic communication used for social networking, through which users generate online communities in order to share information, ideas, personal messages, videos, and other content (Kimball & Kim 2013; Merriam- Webster, 2006; Robbins & Singer 2014).

Once the definition was created, the researchers moved on to looking for journal articles through online databases. The research included gathering information such as other peer reviewed scholarly articles, social work journals, field related blogs, and social media platforms used by social workers. This search was performed between November 2015 and May 2016 using the following databases: PsychINFO, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Social Work Abstracts, and Social Services Abstracts. Through meticulous reading, articles were eliminated to include more specific research to support the proposed question. Inclusion criteria for this review was; peer reviewed articles within the years 2000-2016 and specific keywords; social work, technology, ethics, practicality, social media, informatics, helping professions, therapy, benefits, and social services.

Only peer reviewed articles were considered in our first stage of research. Following the first stage of research, the search included real life application of social workers in the field who demonstrate using various platforms such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook to reach an audience in a positive and practical way. For technical purposes, peer reviewed journals were the primary

source of information, but social media platforms were used as supplementary to support ethical social media usage and to provide practical examples.

In order to maintain fidelity in this review, all researchers used the same set of parameters and keywords that were posted in the methods journal. All members posted their articles, as well as key terms and a synopsis of the article in the methods journal so that everyone pooled from the same set of articles. This also adds a level of reliability to the study. The list of parameters included the citation of the article, the keywords used to search, characteristics of the article that met criteria, and the importance of the article that made it significant amongst others. These created parameters helped conclude if technology and social media platforms have a practical application and ability to improve the social work field.

Chapter 4

Results of the Systematic Review

After extensive online research through databases such as ProQuest, Google Scholar, Social Work Abstracts, Social Service Abstracts, and after the pruning process, the review resulted in five specific articles that fit the specific parameters. These articles were chosen because they were published within the set time interval (2000-2016), were published in a peer reviewed journal, and contained content that coincided with the aims of the systematic review based on specific keywords. The keywords “technology” and “social work” had to both be used in the included articles. This section identifies the results of the systematic review.

Summaries of the Research

Kimball and Kim’s article, *Virtual Boundaries: Ethical Considerations for use of Social Media in Social Work* (2013) looks at the ethics involved with social workers using social media in their practice. According to the article, social media is used to share information from personal platforms. All of this interaction presents the opportunity for personal and professional lives to intermix in social media spaces. This article attends to the ethics involved with social workers using social media in their practice by creating guidelines. Those who use social media in the social work profession need to abide by ethical codes and policies. By understanding the benefits and consequences of integrating social media into practice, social workers can be more aware of the virtual boundaries and personal boundaries they are creating so that they are using social media within the realms of ethical practice.

To best fit the review, Kimball and Kim (2013) define the forms of common social media platforms used in today’s society. For example, blogs and microblogs such as Twitter, and other sharing websites. The authors also define other social media tools and forms that are useful to

social workers. The article by Kimball and Kim was used to define guidelines towards social media use and how sharing this information will best benefit clients. Kimball and Kim (2013) address that social media is used by social workers in both a professional and personal realm. Likewise, Kimball and Kim (2013) state an overview on recommendation for boundaries when using social media for personal and professional use.

A study conducted by Bullock and Colvin (2015) sheds light onto how technology is currently being integrated into the social work field. The article *Communication Technology Integration into Social Work Practice* (Bullock & Colvin, 2015) contains a brief history of technology in the social work field and gives a comprehensive overview of potential positive outcomes and challenges of implementing technology in direct practice. The article addresses a theoretical framework called “Technology Acceptance Model” (TAM), which measures worker resistance to the use of technology in direct practice and offers explanations as to why they have such resistance. The study also illustrates the practicality of using technology in social work practice and the ethical implications. Arguments stated in the article discuss the use of social media and social work, technology usage in the social work field by focusing on potential opportunities that technology can create and recommends that by embracing technology and social media, we can see gains in human service deliverables. In regards to “social media” the article mentions social media and communication platforms such as teleconferencing, chat rooms, and online messaging.

Dolinsky and Helbig’s study, *Risky Business: Applying Ethical Standards to Social Media Use with Vulnerable Populations* (2015) discusses the importance of ethical standards being followed in the ever changing social work realm and how technology plays a role in these changes, especially in regards to the ethical standards when using social media with vulnerable

populations. The article also discusses the inadequacies of the current NASW ethical guidelines; seemingly supporting the notion that the standards created by the NASW and ASWB need to be updated because of how rapidly technology upgrades. With the lack of guidance on how to incorporate ICT in to social work practice, practitioners will continue to use social networking sites and social media based on their own interpretations of the standards that are currently in place. This could result in ambiguity on critical issues regarding client's information. The analysis of ethics is significant because it discusses all of the ethical considerations that are taking place and possible gaps that may exist. Some examples discussed in the article are obtaining consent, preserving confidentiality, avoiding disclosure and verifying youth identity.

Lee and Walsh's study, *Using Technology in Social Work Practice: the mDad (mobile device assisted dad)* (2015) studied mobile technology in the form of a smartphone application. The study assessed the effectiveness of this technology-based intervention on health outcomes. More specifically, the researchers developed an app geared towards new fathers that was aimed to help the fathers learn about and engage their toddlers more efficiently. The article discusses the recent trend of clinicians and direct service providers starting to implement technology-based interventions into their practice and the implications this might have. In addition, the researchers measured the usability and acceptability of the app that was developed, in order to fully comprehend how the participants viewed the intervention tool. Even though the study focuses on only one specific app, the conclusions could be drawn that this opens up a discussion into incorporating social media usage into practice as well.

Although Lee and Walsh's (2015) technological intervention is not strictly a social media platform, it would fit under the definition of "social media" as defined in this systematic review. A smartphone app like the one described in this study carries many of the same qualities

as a social media platform and can reach a wide range of people. This mDad app is an accessible option for clients and has been shown that it can produce positive outcomes. Because of this, one can feel secure in saying that many social media platforms likely carry this same potential, depending on the intended use.

Voshel and Wesala's article *Social Media & Social Work Ethics: Determining Best Practices in an Ambiguous Reality* (2015) demonstrates that with the growth of social media it is essential to have social workers be proactive about their ethical and professional responsibilities in the area of social media. Outlining the need for social workers to have the professional standards outlined by the NASW Code of Ethics. This not only keeps social workers accountable but also elucidates how to use social media ethically in practice. Client privacy and confidentiality is something that must always be maintained. The fine lines between professional and personal boundaries are at risk for becoming blurred in regards to using social media, especially if newer guidelines are not developed. Moving forward, the importance for social workers to have up-to-date guidelines that discuss incorporating social media into social work practice is quite apparent. Social media is new to the social work field and therefore guidelines need to be established for managing risk, ensuring ethical coherence or training for social workers.

Addressed in this article are social media platforms and the ethical considerations paired with using the platforms in social work practice. The article makes it very clear that the guidelines surrounding the usage of social media in direct practice are limited and need updating. This is important to mention because this theme keeps arising in many of the articles that were used for this systematic review. The specific topics that are discussed are: the current professional standards, field instruction, ethical implications, professional practice, professional

versus personal social media use, risk management, maintaining professional boundaries, protecting online identity, ethical diligence, the importance of social media policies, and recommendations for ethical social media practice. All of these topics include ramifications regarding the practicality and ethicality of using social media in direct practice and are therefore incredibly important for the systematic review.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this systematic review was to determine the practicality and ethicality of using social media platforms as part of social work clinical practice. This was addressed through extensive research and strict parameters in order to complete a well-rounded and unbiased review. Since social media is still fairly current in the field, social workers need to be mindful of the content they post and conscious of the audience they are reaching out to. In order to ethically take advantage of social media usage, guidelines that help professionals in the field need to continue to be updated. Professionals need to have specific and current guidelines on what is appropriate and ethical to post, when it comes to social media platforms.

Interpretation of Results

The articles that were chosen for the systematic review contained several major themes. As society becomes more reliant on technology, the blending of technology and social work is becoming more common than ever. However, these changes have not come without resistance. The research highlights some of the ethical concerns, dilemmas, and gray areas surrounding the implementation of technology in social work. On the contrary, despite resistance many of the articles found positive qualities to implementing technology. Much of the literature highlights the potential technology has and the practical uses within the confines of social work. These practical implications carry major weight for the future of the social work field and helps support the notion that these two can integrate successfully.

Kimball and Kim (2013) discuss ways social workers can intermix personal and professional use of social media and emphasize the practicality of using various platforms. They suggest five questions that every social worker should ask themselves that are centered on evaluating the information ideally before posting. Essentially, the social worker should consider

whether the information is important, helpful, harmful, confidential, or incriminating to the client and if there is an overall benefit to what they are sharing. Since social workers are held at a high standard to protect and uphold the NASW's Code of Ethics as well as agencies policies, it is important that they are sensitive when posting on social media platforms (Hill & Ferguson, 2014).

However, Kimball and Kim (2013) also explain the lack of ethics involved with social workers using social media in their practice and the need to create guidelines. The article stresses the importance of following ethical codes and policies, and becoming more aware of the virtual boundaries and personas they are creating so that they are using social media within the realms of ethical practice. Based on the article, *Virtual Boundaries: Ethical Considerations for Use of Social Media in Social Work*, the authors seem to conclude that it can be practical to use social media in direct practice for many reasons (Kimball & Kim, 2013).

These findings have large implications on the future of the social work profession. The practicality and efficiency of social media platforms has the potential to shape direct practice and alter the way services are delivered to clients. On the ethical side of things, it is clear that the guidelines need to stay current and include detailed information that practitioners can follow without any ambiguity. Standards should discuss all areas and variations in order for practitioners use social media to benefit their profession.

The article *Communication Technology Integration into Social Work Practice* (Bullock & Colvin, 2015) illustrates the practicality and ethical implications of using technology in social work practice. From this research, it can be concluded that there are many potential opportunities for social media use and therefore are major implications in the social work field. According to the TAM framework, social workers are resistant to using new forms of technology in practice,

which the article gives solutions to resolve this dilemma. The social work profession has the capability to improve alongside societies technological gains, but it will require the creation of boundaries, confidentiality guidelines, and technologically trained clinicians.

The article *Using Technology in Social Work Practice: the mDad (mobile device assisted dad)* (Lee & Walsh, 2015) demonstrates information related to technological intervention used in the field. This study allowed for conclusions to be drawn on the integration of social media platforms in social work direct practice. Mobile applications and social media platforms are created to meet the needs of many in a diverse population. These applications are accessible from any mobile device, and users can receive support without impeding physical boundaries.

The article *Risky Business: Applying Ethical Standards to Social Media Use with Vulnerable Populations* (Dolinsky & Helbig, 2015) looks at the role technology plays in changing the ethical standards of social work. More specifically, at the current guidelines for social media usage in the social work profession and determines that these guidelines likely needed to be updated. This update has major implications on the profession due to the fact that these guidelines help guide practitioners bound by the NASW Code of Ethics, more specifically the ASWB standards for technology use.

Voshel and Wesala's article *Social Media & Social Work Ethics: Determining Best Practices in an Ambiguous Reality* (2015) urges social workers to be proactive about their ethical and professional responsibilities in the area of social media. By keeping social workers accountable for their online activities, the ASWB explains how to use social media ethically in practice. To follow ethical practice, social workers need to abide by clear and universal boundaries.

Implications of Further Research

Social media used in the social service field can one day be a commonly used tool. From the findings of this review, it is clear that more research needs to be conducted on the usage of social media in a direct practice setting. This is mainly because technology in social work is still in the infancy stages and constantly changing. In addition, further research on the implementation of social media in social work practice is limited by the NASW code of ethics, which has not been updated since 2008. In order for research to progress, clinical social work practice guidelines need to correlate with where social work standards are today. This is especially true in regards to the implementation of technological devices and other tools like social media.

One of the biggest fears to using technology and social media in practice is the breach of confidentiality. Many believe that technology and social media use are not within the boundaries of ethical practice. Private health information such as progress notes, medical records and history, and other important documents are kept private under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability ACT (HIPAA). As social work and technology continue to merge, more research needs to be completed in order to address the debate between technology and social media use in regards to safety and confidentiality across the profession.

The social work profession must stay up to date with the current and changing trends of society. These changes should be grounded in evidence based practice, research, and the practical experiential knowledge of practitioners. It is recommended that more studies be done that focus on the current usage of social media in social service organizations and direct practice settings.

Limitations

Limitations of this review consisted of; the databases that were used were too broad, particularly using the database, JSTOR. This was ineffective for our search due to the fact that research used in this database is no longer relevant for our study. The search produced too many articles that were irrelevant, after sifting through many of the articles, many were not included as they did not meet the criteria for inclusion. A more targeted search could have been taken using specific databases or even targeted journals such as the Journal of Technology in the Human Services. In addition, key terms were picked before creating the literature review, thus inhibiting our search. The final limitation was a lack in duration of the research period, as research was only conducted for three months.

Despite the limitations, this review concludes the practicality in the usage of social media is substantial, there is however, apprehension from those who work in the field. Furthermore, with the proper standards in place to decrease ambiguity, social media platforms can be implemented ethically in social work.

Conclusion

As the world becomes more technologically focused, social media is becoming a common part of today's culture. The field of social work should continue to evolve and adapt with the trends of society. Social media makes it convenient and practical to reach larger quantities of people and as the potential benefits of using social media seem to outweigh the risks. However, specific guidelines must continue to be developed in regards to the usage of social media in direct social work practice in order to cohesively outline ethical boundaries.

The purpose of this review was to compile research to address the question on social media usage in the social work profession and determine if technology has an ethical and

practical use in social work. These new technological developments bring the ability to connect with others, spread information, and have access to areas all across the globe with the simple touch of a button or click of a mouse. One of the most effective avenues for tapping into this global presence is through social media. On the contrary, some would argue that social media does not have an appropriate place in social work clinical practice. However, the results of this review suggest that technology, and more specifically social media, do have practical and ethical possibilities within the profession of social work. Furthermore, with the technological shift in modern society, using social media looks to be inevitable for the social service field. The apprehension that exists among many social workers should not hold back the profession from moving forward in order to better the lives of vulnerable populations, and yet the integration of technology and social work must be done ethically and appropriately.

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