



**Stephanie Almond** BSc(Hons) RVN

Stephanie graduated from Hartpury College and qualified as an RVN in 2013, gaining BSc(Hons) in Veterinary Nursing Science. She is now working in a first opinion small animal practice and hopes to start her Advanced Nursing Diploma this year.

# Effects of social networking site use on working relationships

**Stephanie Almond** BSc(Hons) RVN  
Hartpury College, Hartpury House, Gloucester GL19 3BE, UK

**ABSTRACT:** The use of social networking sites in our daily lives has increased significantly over recent years and still continues to do so (Alloway & Alloway 2012). Extensive literature addresses the negative impact social networking sites are having in academia (Sheng, Hsu & Wu 2011; Paul, Baker & Cochran 2012); however, literature concerning the impact of social networking sites on relationships in the working environment is less evident at present. This article discusses some of the findings from a research study, aimed at veterinary professionals and their human nursing counterparts, regarding the perceived effects of the use of social networking sites on relationships within a working team. The analysis includes responses from 238 participants from across the United Kingdom.

## Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) can be defined as web-based programmes allowing individuals to create profiles from which they may communicate with other users (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Oxford University Press 2012). An increasing reliance on technology has prompted numerous debates and studies into how Internet use is affecting our daily lives, intelligence and mental abilities (Shivelton Queen 2013). As information technology is advancing continuously, it is difficult to predict how SNSs may affect our future or shape our personalities and identities (Gentile *et al.* 2012).

Studies have focused primarily on the younger generation and those in an academic setting; this population has always been perceived as being the most active users of SNSs (Paul, Baker & Cochran 2012; Alloway *et al.* 2013). Many employers are discouraging and forbidding the use of SNSs in the workplace (Brandtzaeg 2012); however, some current research shows that communication between staff on such sites leads to a general increase in work productivity (Ferreira & Plessis 2009; Ou *et al.* 2010; Brandtzaeg 2012). To keep in line with evolving advances in communication and technology,

including the increasing use and availability of the Internet on mobile phones and tablets, it is important to widen the sample population involved in the studies to include all age groups in order to give a truer representation of how SNSs are affecting our daily lives (Alloway & Alloway 2012).

The research reported in this article set out to investigate the following question: Does the use of social networking sites have an effect on working relationships in veterinary practice?



To cite this article, use either  
DOI: 10.1111/vnj.12185 or Veterinary Nursing Journal  
VOL 29 pp339–341

## Aim and objectives

To allow a detailed analysis of how the use of SNSs may be affecting individuals and relationships, five objectives were identified:

1. To investigate if there is a difference between SNS use across age groups
2. To examine whether SNSs can cause rivalry or separation in the team in the workplace
3. To investigate whether those who do not use SNSs feel that there is an increasing pressure to use them
4. To investigate whether the use of SNSs leads to decreased respect between colleagues
5. To investigate whether communication on SNSs between colleagues has a positive effect on working relationships and provides a good support system for staff

## Method

Questionnaires are a popular choice in studies involving SNSs and have the potential to reach a large proportion of the target population successfully (Subrahmanyam *et al.* 2008). An anonymous online questionnaire consisting of 26 questions was distributed to veterinary professionals and human-centred nurses between 23 November 2012 and 23 January 2013. The questionnaire was posted on SNSs, including forums, as well as emailed to a random selection of veterinary practices throughout the United Kingdom, to ensure results were gained from a good representation of the veterinary population. By using email to circulate the questionnaire, the study was also able to reach participants who might not use SNSs.

This questionnaire included a range of questions enabling both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected. Primary conclusions were drawn from the quantitative data collected while additional qualitative data allowed for greater interpretation of the results. The following statistical tests were applied: Kruskal–Wallis test, Mann–Whitney U tests, Spearman’s coefficient of rank correlation and the Chi-squared test (Pempeck, Yermolayeva & Calvert 2009).

## Results and discussion

Questionnaire responses were collected from 238 professionals. The study was

successful in collecting samples from all age ranges, a variety of work positions and a wide range of geographical areas of the United Kingdom. A sample of individuals who do not use SNSs was also collected. The latter sample was vital to enable reliable results based on a true cross section of the population. Many similar studies have not included this sector, but individuals in this group can still be affected in the workplace by those who do use them and may subsequently find their working relationships affected by this.

### Age groups

A significant difference was found between the different age groups and length of time spent on SNSs, but this was not as wide as expected between the age group 18–24 and the older age groups. The results suggest that SNS usage among age groups is changing; the data could indicate that the older generations are becoming more likely to use SNSs and keep up with technological advances than previously thought. There was no difference found in how long different age groups spent on SNSs while at work (Figure 1). Over 60% of respondents are not allowed to access SNSs in the workplace, mainly due to the fear of viruses entering the computer systems and staff wasting time.

### Effect on the team

When asked if SNSs had separated the team into groups of those who do and those who do not use SNSs, over 65% of respondents disagreed and nearly 15% strongly disagreed (Figure 2). It could therefore be argued that there was a strong correlation between how

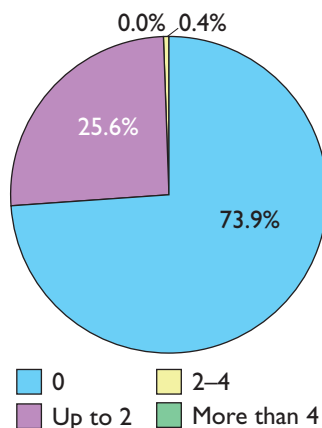


Figure 1. Percentage of how many participants spend time on SNSs while at work\*

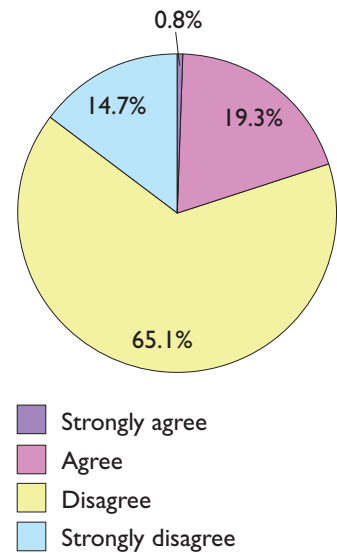


Figure 2. Percentage of participants who agree that SNSs have separated those in the team who use SNSs from those who do not\*

frequently SNSs were used and the idea that SNSs can cause separation between colleagues. The use of SNSs could also be interpreted as having reduced potential to cause disruption to working relationships due to rivalry between staff members (Figure 3).

### Respect

Over 70% of respondents (70.2%) disagreed with the premise that the use of SNSs can lead to less respect for senior members of staff. There was no correlation between an individual’s use or

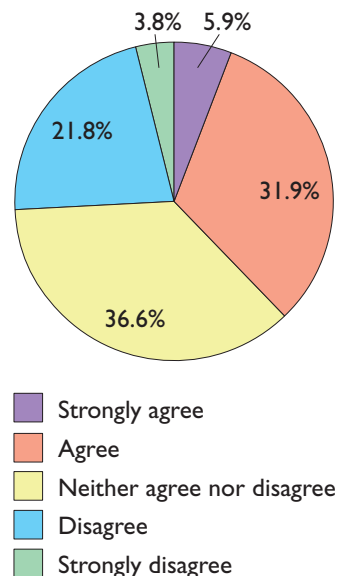


Figure 3. Percentage of participants who agree that the use of SNSs can cause rivalry between staff

\*Due to figures being rounded to a single decimal place, the chart totals to 99.9%.

non-use of SNSs and whether or not they respected other staff members. However, there were a number of emerging themes in the area of respect which included concern about unprofessionalism and uncertainty as to whether the sharing of information on SNSs could affect the work hierarchy, where managers might be perceived as 'equals' by the rest of the staff. The majority of respondents did not see use of SNSs as likely to cause a problem between management and the rest of the team.

These results could be due to veterinary practices generally having small teams of individuals who may socialise outside work regardless of hierarchy; the outcomes could be different in larger establishments with a more rigid hierarchy. It should be noted that the fear of mixing private and work life is well documented in other research areas.

### Support system

More than 6% of respondents strongly agreed and half (50%) agreed that SNSs provide a good support system between colleagues, suggesting that SNSs can strengthen a team's relationships (Figure 4). It was found that an increase in how often work colleagues communicated on SNSs correlated with an increase in how resilient the working team was. There was also a strong correlation between how often colleagues communicated with each other on SNSs and whether individuals believed SNSs have improved their working relationships. Given the positive

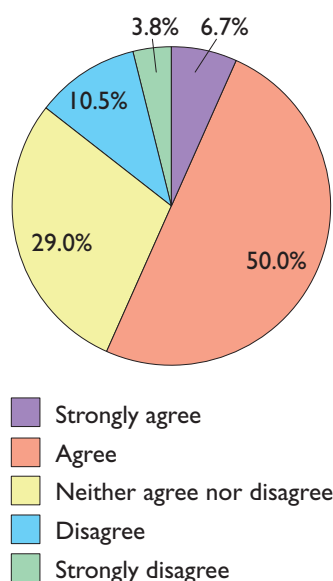


Figure 4. Percentage of participants who agree that SNSs are a good support system between team members

correlation found between team strength and frequency of SNS use between colleagues, it would appear that this change in work relationship dynamics is shifting slowly in a positive way.

### Further discussion

It was found that SNSs did not appear to cause separation, isolation or feelings of rivalry and did not affect respect for senior members of staff. Increases in frequency of communication between colleagues via SNSs promoted a stronger working team and improved working relationships, thus having a positive effect. SNSs were also found to be valuable and useful support systems, again exhibiting a positive effect. There were also indications that, although use of SNSs outside work differed with age, no difference was found between ages and use of SNSs while at work. This is a significant finding, providing a foundation on which to base further research to investigate how use of SNSs may change within age ranges depending on environment.

While this survey had a gratifying response, it could not be said to be representative of the population as a whole and continuation would ideally involve a longitudinal study including a larger number of non SNS users. In addition, it would incorporate a population based upon different working sectors, to establish further trends and patterns between use of SNSs and how working position, environment and age may affect this. Further qualitative analysis would also be greatly beneficial in allowing opinions concerning feelings such as separation, rivalry and isolation to be explored.

### Conclusion

The use of SNSs is constantly changing. This study highlighted this fact and provided an insight into an area previously lacking relevant research. The question originally posed was: 'Does the use of social networking sites have an effect on working relationships in veterinary practice?' Based on the results of this primary study, it would appear that their use has a positive effect on working relationships in veterinary practice. <sup>[vni]</sup>

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge UWE Hartpury where this research was based. I would also like to thank Celia Hadwin for the help and support given throughout this research project.

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