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**A preliminary exploration of medical students' time spent on online social networking activities**

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Online social networking sites such as Facebook are extremely popular as indicated by the numbers of members and visits to these sites. They allow students to connect with users with similar interests, build and maintain relationships with friends, and feel more connected to their university life. The criticisms of online social networking are that students spend far too much time on these activities and also open themselves to public scrutiny and risk safety by revealing excessive personal information. Though some research on the use of online social networking has been done in other countries, little is known about the dynamics of its use among Sri Lankan students. This study sought to determine how 459 medical students from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year (47% male; mean age 21 years) at a medical faculty in Colombo are using online social networking sites, namely Facebook, online games and public chat rooms. The students completed a questionnaire (with an array of questions on their online social networking use) at the end of a lecture in their regular timetable. It took approximately 15 minutes to complete this questionnaire. Results revealed that 72% of students have an account in the social networking site, Facebook, and on average, they spend 1.4 hours on it during the working week (Monday to Friday), and 1.6 and 1.5 hours on Saturday and Sunday, respectively. Results also revealed that 21 % of the medical students do online social networking games like Farmville and these students spend, on average, 1 hour during the working week, and 1 hour each on Saturday and Sunday. With respect to public chat rooms, results showed that 19 % of students chat on online public chat rooms, and on average they do so 1 hour on weekdays and 1.2 hours each on Saturday and Sunday, respectively. Hence, it appears that the majority of students are on Facebook while a smaller number participate in online games and public chat rooms. In this age of online communication, there is a blurring of the interface between work and personal lives. Social networking websites are popular among young pre-professionals, and allow medical students to communicate and share information with peers via personalized profiles. These self-created profiles contain personal information such as address, phone numbers, and photos, and include information such as relationship status and political views. Unfortunately, medical students, with their sense of medical professionalism just beginning to develop, may not understand that their publicly available content directly reflects their professionalism. Unknowingly, medical educators, future employers, and even patients may have access to their content online, not without consequences.

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