eCPD PAPER

BY JOHN STANFIELD

THE PHENOMENON OF LOUD VOICES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

An Exploration of Dental Professionals' Use of Social Media in the UK

1½ Hours eCPD PER PAPER

AIM

To explore the phenomenon of 'loud voices' in social media and examine how these influential voices impact professional learning, discourse and development among dental professionals in the UK.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The author will:

- Identify the characteristics and manifestations of 'loud voices' within dental professional social media communities.
- Analyse the benefits and challenges associated with influential voices in online dental education and professional discourse.
- Evaluate the impact of social media platform dynamics on informal learning and continuing professional development (CPD) among dental professionals.
- Assess the ethical considerations and professional responsibilities when engaging with social media as dental practitioners.
- Apply critical appraisal skills to evaluate the credibility and reliability of information shared through social media channels.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Having read this paper, the reader should be able to:

- Recognise how dominant voices shape professional discourse and potentially create echo chambers in social media environments (Development Outcome A).
- Implement strategies for responsible social media engagement whilst maintaining professional boundaries and ethical standards (Development Outcomes A & D).
- Utilise multiple social media platforms effectively for professional development whilst understanding platform-specific risks and benefits (Development Outcome C).
- Demonstrate understanding of General Dental Council guidelines and their application to digital professional practice (Development Outcome D).
- Contribute to inclusive online professional communities by amplifying diverse voices and challenging misinformation (Development Outcomes A & B).

Aligned to GDC development outcome: **A, B, C, D**

TO TAKE THE CPD PLEASE FOLLOW THE LINK OR SCAN THE QR CODE:
HTTPS://WWW.SURVEYMONKEY.COM/R/DH-NOV-2025

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS: 31ST DECEMBER 2025

ABSTRACT

Social media has become an influential tool for professional development and informal learning within healthcare, including dentistry. Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter enable dental professionals to access resources, share insights and engage in continuous professional development (CPD). However, these digital spaces are dominated by 'loud voices', individuals or entities with significant influence, who shape professional discourse, highlight trends and influence perceptions of dentistry. This study examines the opportunities and challenges posed by social media.

The findings reveal that social media facilitates collaboration, knowledge sharing and community building while promoting accessibility to CPD. Influential voices often disseminate evidence-based practices and inspire engagement. However, their dominance may create echo chambers, limit diverse perspectives and amplify misinformation. Ethical challenges, such as maintaining e-professionalism and ensuring information reliability, are also highlighted.

The exploration highlights the importance for professional bodies to address these challenges by promoting digital literacy and establishing e-professionalism guidelines. By encouraging responsible engagement, dental professionals can maximise the potential of social media for networking, informal learning and professional development while reducing its risks. This paper enhances understanding of the dynamics of social media in dentistry and its impact on the profession.

eCPD PAPER

KEY WORDS

Social media, dental professionals, loud voices, informal learning, | digital professionalism

Introduction

Social media has emerged as a transformative space for professional interaction and knowledge sharing, particularly within healthcare sectors. In dentistry, platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook provide practitioners with opportunities to access and share resources, build community connections, and engage in informal learning and professional development. However, these platforms come with their own set of challenges, particularly concerning the dynamics of communication that often amplify certain voices – referred to here as 'loud voices.' These dominant voices exert considerable influence, shaping professional discourse, dictating trends, and even affecting public perceptions of the dental profession.

This article draws substantially from the author's doctoral research whilst incorporating broader literature on social media dynamics to provide fresh analytical perspectives. The empirical findings discussed, including participant quotes and statistical data, were previously reported in that doctoral thesis.[1] This article explores the role of social media in professional learning and examines the impact of these powerful voices within digital spaces, critically evaluating the benefits, challenges and ethical considerations associated with social media use by dental professionals in the UK.

Social Media: The Concept and Professional Development

The invention of the World Wide Web in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee revolutionised access to information. The evolution from Web 1.0's static content to Web 2.0's user-generated collaborative interaction marked the rise of social media.[2] Social media refers to programmes or applications that enable users to generate and share content on specific platforms, allowing them to define their audience and foster interaction among users.

Social learning encompasses both individual learning and learning situated within broader social units or communities of practice. Such communities are prevalent on social media platforms.[3-7] These platforms facilitate 'cross-fertilisation' of ideas as boundaries are crossed within social networks, making social media an integral part of modern learning ecosystems.

Social Media as a Transformative Tool

Social media has become integral to professional development, offering informal learning opportunities that challenge traditional CPD frameworks. Research exploring hybrid social learning networks among 328 dental professionals reveals that social media provides flexible, organic approaches to CPD.[1] These platforms enable professionals to network, share educational resources, and stay informed about research developments.

The findings align with Mondkar, Scambler, and Gallagher's (2021) observations among dentists in London.[8] Their study identified widespread use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn for both personal and professional purposes. The research demonstrated that social media facilitates connections with peers, breaking down traditional barriers to accessing knowledge and expertise. Acosta et al. (2025) found that 67.5 % of respondents reported using social media in their dental practice, and that many perceived that it enhanced practice quality and patient care.[9]

However, participants consistently expressed concerns about information reliability and risks of misuse. Fleming and Ludwig (2023) highlighted similar risks, including misinformation spread, patient confidentiality breaches and ethical challenges in maintaining online professionalism.[10] Neville and Waylen (2015) emphasised the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and ensuring that online behaviour aligns with professional values.[11] Kenny et al. (2017) found that whilst dental students actively use social media, significant gaps exist in their understanding of online professionalism, with only 47% aware of professional guidelines for social media use.[12]

Research reveals significant demographic differences in social media engagement patterns among dental professionals. Younger professionals demonstrate higher levels of active platform usage, whilst older practitioners tend to prefer traditional communication methods.[1] This generational divide reflects broader societal patterns of technology adoption and suggests that digital engagement strategies must accommodate diverse preferences within the dental workforce.

Hybrid Social Learning Networks

Hybrid social networks combine online and offline social networks, connecting people in both virtual and real-world contexts. They enable individuals to expand their social circles whilst facilitating connections with like-minded individuals to form meaningful professional relationships.[13] These networks are particularly valuable for informal learning, enabling information and knowledge exchange among individuals with diverse backgrounds and expertise.

Within the dental profession, hybrid social learning networks manifest in various forms. Professional conferences increasingly incorporate social media elements, with hashtags enabling extended discussions beyond physical attendance. Online dental communities organise face-to-face meetups, creating opportunities for digital relationships to develop into meaningful professional connections.

The effectiveness of hybrid social learning networks lies in their ability to support different types of professional learning. They accommodate both formal learning through structured online courses and informal learning through peer discussions and experience sharing. However, their success depends significantly on the quality of facilitation and participant commitment to maintain both online and offline engagement.

Research on Social Media and Informal Learning

The role of social media in informal learning is supported by literature demonstrating its capacity for fostering knowledge exchange and creating collaborative learning spaces. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlighted social media's potential for enabling knowledge exchange, creating environments where professionals can learn from one another through collaborative dialogue.[14] This aligns with Wenger et al. (2002) conceptualisation of communities of practice, describing how groups with shared interests collaborate to solve problems collectively.[5]

Research demonstrates that effective informal learning through social media requires more than passive content consumption. Active participation, including questioning, commenting, and sharing experiences, enhances learning outcomes. The informal nature provides just-in-time learning opportunities and diverse perspectives, but also presents challenges related to quality assurance and information verification.

The Concept of Loud Voices in Social Media

This analysis of 'loud voices' builds upon empirical observations from the author's doctoral research whilst integrating broader social media scholarship.

The concept of 'loud voices' represents a growing focus in social media dynamics studies. These voices often belong to individuals or entities commanding significant attention due to expertise, charisma, or prolific content production. In dental professional contexts, loud voices may include influential practitioners known for clinical expertise, academics sharing research findings, or professional organisations advocating for best practices and policy changes.

Research indicates that approximately 10% of the most active participants generate around 70% of messages in online communities, leading to their dominance.[15] Van Dijck (2013) noted that platforms inherently favour voices conforming to popular norms or trends, potentially marginalising nuanced or dissenting views.[16] This influence raises questions about power dynamics and visibility, as social media algorithms often amplify these voices through preferences, creating digital hierarchies where less-established professionals or diverse viewpoints struggle to gain traction.

Benefits of Loud Voices in Dental Social Media

Knowledge Dissemination: Loud voices often serve as expertise hubs. Influential dental professionals frequently share evidence-based practices, guideline updates, and innovative approaches to clinical challenges. This dissemination is particularly valuable for younger professionals or those in rural areas with limited access to traditional CPD resources.

Community Building: Social media fosters community by connecting dental professionals across geographical and hierarchical boundaries. Influential voices often act as convenors, bringing together diverse groups to discuss common challenges. Research observations indicate that dental professionals value the sense of belonging and camaraderie found in online communities.

Inspiration and Advocacy: Prominent figures often inspire others through success stories, professional well-being advocacy, or championing social causes such as access to care and patient safety. These voices can motivate others to engage more actively in professional discourse and personal development.

Challenges Posed by Loud Voices

Echo Chambers and Confirmation Bias: Research alongside Sunstein's work on 'information cocoons' highlights echo chamber risks.[17] These occur when professionals primarily engage with content reinforcing existing beliefs, narrowing perspective diversity in discussions. This limits opportunities for critical debate, essential for robust professional development.

Misinformation and Overgeneralisation: *The following participant quotes are reproduced from the author's doctoral thesis[1]:*

A key concern is the risk of misinformation in informal learning contexts. Influential voices can sometimes disseminate outdated, incomplete or overly simplistic information, which followers may adopt without adequate scrutiny. Research participants noted:

"I think social media is a useful tool for professional discussion, but people need to be aware that the content is often opinion and not always quality assured. Sometimes people who shout the loudest are the least qualified to give an opinion."

Another respondent expressed frustration with self-appointed experts:

"It is ideal. However, I find the professional forums dominated by self-anointed experts who are no better than any other hygienist who is well-read. This is frustrating when their word is considered gospel."

Exclusion of Minority Voices: Loud voice dominance often marginalises less prominent contributors, including minority practitioners and those with alternative perspectives. This exclusion can stifle diverse viewpoints, reducing professional discourse richness and risking the perpetuation of systemic inequalities within the profession.

Dental Professionals and Social Media Platform Usage

Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for dental professionals seeking informal learning opportunities, with each platform serving distinct professional needs:

Instagram: Visual Learning and Case Sharing. Instagram's visually driven interface appeals to dental professionals for sharing clinical images, case studies and treatment documentation. The platform's interactive features facilitate meaningful professional exchanges, enabling practitioners to seek feedback on cases and engage in treatment discussions. However, the focus on aesthetically pleasing content may emphasise dramatic results over comprehensive treatment planning. Sayers, Newton, and Seehra (2022) demonstrated the platform's potential for public engagement, with the British Orthodontic Society's #HoldthatSmile campaign achieving significant reach across multiple social media platforms.[18]

Facebook Groups: Community Building. Facebook groups function as virtual communities providing structured environments for peer-to-peer mentoring and collaborative problem-solving. Groups often cater to specific specialties, creating safe spaces for discussing clinical challenges. McCulloch and Scott (2024) emphasised the importance of protecting these professional sanctuaries, particularly for dental nurses, highlighting how private groups serve as essential support networks whilst maintaining professional standards.[19] The asynchronous nature accommodates different schedules, whilst search functionality creates valuable reference resources.

WhatsApp: Immediate Communication and Consultation. WhatsApp has emerged as a significant platform for dental professionals, particularly for immediate consultation and case discussion. Its encrypted messaging provides secure communication channels for seeking urgent clinical advice, sharing case images with trusted colleagues and maintaining professional relationships. WhatsApp groups enable real-time collaboration among clinical teams and specialist networks, facilitating rapid decision-making in complex cases.

Many dental professionals utilise multiple platforms simultaneously, creating integrated learning ecosystems. However, this requires significant time investment and raises questions about information consistency and professional identity management across different digital spaces.

Balancing Accessibility with Reliability

While social media's accessibility represents one of its greatest strengths, the informal nature of these platforms also presents significant challenges related to content validity and reliability. Unlike traditional CPD frameworks, which are often rigorously quality-assured through peer review processes and institutional oversight, social media platforms lack consistent oversight mechanisms. This absence of systematic quality control means that information shared may vary dramatically in quality, ranging from peer-reviewed evidence and expert clinical insights to unverified opinions and potentially misleading content.

The democratic nature of social media, whilst enabling broader participation in professional discourse, also means that all voices carry equal weight in terms of visibility, regardless of expertise or evidence base. This can create situations where compelling but inaccurate information gains traction simply due to its presentation or the charisma of its originator, rather than its scientific merit.

Dental professionals must therefore develop and apply sophisticated critical appraisal skills when engaging with social media content. This includes assessing the credibility of sources through examination of professional credentials, affiliations and track records of accuracy. It requires cross-referencing information with established clinical guidelines, recent research publications, and recognised professional standards. Practitioners must also consider potential biases, including commercial interests that may influence content creators, personal preferences that may skew the presentation of information, and cultural or demographic factors that may limit applicability across different practice contexts.

The development of these critical evaluation skills becomes particularly important given the speed at which information spreads through social media networks. Misinformation can propagate rapidly through professional communities, potentially influencing clinical decision-making before accurate information can provide correction. This temporal challenge requires practitioners to develop habits of verification and reflection rather than immediate adoption of new information encountered through social channels.

Ethical Considerations

This section adapts analysis from the author's doctoral thesis whilst incorporating contemporary perspectives on digital ethics.

Social media use by dental professionals presents complex ethical challenges requiring careful navigation. Key concerns include patient confidentiality, professionalism, and potential promotion of commercial interests. The critical need for digital professionalism training helps practitioners address these complexities.

GDC Standards and Digital Professionalism

The General Dental Council (GDC) Standards for the Dental Team (2013) provide essential guidance for professional conduct online.[20] Principle 4 requires practitioners to maintain and protect patient information, meaning that any patient-related content shared on social media must be anonymised and supported by informed consent. Principle 9 emphasises maintaining patients' confidence in the dental profession, which can be compromised by misleading, unprofessional, or disrespectful content.[21] GDC advertising guidance also applies to online spaces, requiring accuracy and honesty in any claims or endorsements.[22] Failure to observe these principles has resulted in professional misconduct cases, underlining the importance of digital professionalism in clinical practice.

Patient Confidentiality and Privacy Protection

Patient confidentiality represents one of the most critical ethical challenges in dental professionals' social media use. The visual nature of dental work, combined with social media's sharing culture, creates particular risks for inadvertent disclosure of patient information. Even when practitioners obtain appropriate consent or adequately de-identify materials, the combination of clinical images with contextual information can potentially enable patient identification.

The permanence and searchability of digital content compound these privacy risks. Information shared for professional education may be copied, shared, or archived beyond the original poster's intent or control. Professional bodies have developed guidelines, but the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms often outpaces regulatory guidance.

Professional Boundary Management

When dental professionals use social media, the lines between their personal and professional lives often become blurred in ways that can create real dilemmas. In traditional practice settings, it is usually clear when you are 'being a hygienist', you are in the surgery, wearing scrubs, treating patients. But on social media, a practitioner might share a clinical case in the morning, post holiday photos at lunch, and comment on a colleague's family update in the evening, all on the same platform.

This mixing of personal and professional content can lead to awkward situations. A dental therapist might connect with a patient on Instagram to share oral health tips, only to realise that the patient can now see their weekend social activities. Similarly, casual interactions with colleagues online might cross into overly familiar territory that would not occur in a professional setting. What starts as a friendly comment on a colleague's post about their new practice might evolve into sharing personal struggles or opinions that could affect working relationships.

The challenge is that everything shared online becomes part of a practitioner's professional reputation, whether intended or not. A comment made in a personal capacity can be screenshot and shared, potentially affecting how patients, colleagues, or employers perceive that individual's professionalism. This creates constant pressure to self-censor and consider how every online interaction might be interpreted through a professional lens, even when simply trying to engage socially with friends and family.

Commercial and Professional Integrity

Commercial aspects of social media create additional ethical challenges related to advertising, product promotion, and conflicts of interest. The integration of professional content with commercial messaging can blur lines between education and marketing, potentially compromising professional advice integrity.

The rise of 'influencer culture' within professional social media creates additional challenges. Practitioners with large followings may find their opinions carry disproportionate weight, creating responsibilities for ensuring evidence-based content. The pursuit of engagement can create incentives for sensational content that may not serve professional education or patient welfare interests.

Recommendations for Optimising Social Media Use

To maximise benefits and mitigate risks of social media for dental professionals, strategic evidence-based approaches are necessary:

1. Training in Digital Professionalism

Digital professionalism training should equip dental professionals with skills for effective social media use whilst maintaining ethical standards. Key elements include ethical social media use emphasising confidentiality, content verification skills for assessing online source credibility, and professional boundary maintenance.

2. Encouraging Diverse Voices

Addressing loud voice dominance requires intentional efforts to amplify diverse voices through mentorship programmes pairing less-experienced professionals with seasoned practitioners, campaigns highlighting underrepresented voices, and promoting equity in platform design features.

3. Quality Assurance of Shared Information

Developing robust mechanisms for content verification and curation is essential. Professional organisations could develop verified content repositories, collaborate with social media companies on flagging tools, and introduce peer review mechanisms for social media posts.

4. Establishing Ethical Guidelines

Clear, enforceable guidelines for social media use should address platform-specific considerations, provide case studies and examples, and offer practical application guidance for ethical principles.

5. Promoting Critical Engagement

Professionals need to engage critically with social media content through promoting analytical skills for evaluating evidence behind online claims and fostering collaborative discussions using social media as a dialogue space rather than one-way communication.

6. Inclusivity and Mental Health Considerations

Social media platforms can amplify underrepresented voices, but require addressing algorithmic bias and structural barriers. Additionally, mental health considerations, including exposure to curated success stories and negative interactions, require attention through support networks and digital detox strategies.

Conclusion

Social media represents both an opportunity and a challenge for dental professional development. While these platforms facilitate knowledge sharing, networking, and community building, the dominance of loud voices creates risks, including echo chambers, misinformation spread, and marginalisation of diverse perspectives.

The dental profession must navigate these dynamics thoughtfully, implementing strategies that harness social media's potential whilst mitigating its risks. This requires comprehensive approaches, including digital professionalism training, quality assurance mechanisms, ethical guideline development, and efforts to amplify diverse voices.

Professional bodies play crucial roles in providing guidance, establishing standards, and supporting practitioners in developing digital literacy skills. By fostering responsible engagement and critical thinking, the dental profession can optimise social media's transformative potential for lifelong learning and professional development.

The evolution of social media continues to reshape professional learning landscapes. Understanding and addressing the phenomenon of loud voices is essential for ensuring that these powerful platforms serve the broader interests of dental professionals and, ultimately, the patients they serve.

Author: John Stanfield PhD, MSc, PGCT&LCP, FHEA, Assoc FCG Dent, RDH has held key leadership roles, including serving as the Dental Care Professional (DCP) Lead for NHS England and as a Council Member of the College of General Dentistry. He was also the inaugural Chair of its Faculty of Dental Hygiene & Therapy. Additionally, John contributed editorially as the editor of Team in Practice at the Faculty of General Dental Practice (FGDP). Currently in clinical practice in Cheshire, John holds a PhD in Technology-Enhanced Learning from Lancaster University, an MSc in E-Learning Technology from the University of Portsmouth, and a Diploma in Computing from the University of Oxford.

Contact: info@johnstanfield.co.uk

References

1. Stanfield J. *Informal learning using hybrid social learning networks for continuing professional development amongst dental professionals in the UK* [Doctoral Thesis, Lancaster University]. Lancaster University; 2024. doi:10.17635/lancaster/thesis/2350.
2. O'Reilly, T. (2005). What Is Web 2.0. Available at: https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html (accessed 20 Sept 2025).
3. Lee K. Everyone already has their community beyond the screen: reconceptualizing online learning and expanding boundaries. *Educ Technol Res Develop.* 2018;**66(5)**:1255-1268. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-018-9613-y
4. Wenger E. Learning as social participation. *Knowledge Manage Rev.* 1999;**6(1)**:30-33.
5. Wenger E, McDermott R, Snyder WM. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge.* Harvard Business Review Press; 2002.
6. Wenger-Trayner E and Wenger-Trayner B. (2015) An introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses. Available at: https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice (accessed 20 Sept 2025).
7. Wenger-Trayner , Wenger-Trayner B, Reid P, Bruderlein C. Communities of practice within and across organizations, a guidebook: Social Learning Lab;2023.
8. Mondkar A, Scambler S, Gallagher JE. Hashtag, like or tweet: a qualitative study on the use of social media among dentists in London. *Brit Dent J.* 2021:1-8. doi:10.1038/s41415-021-2655-2
9. Acosta JM, Detsomboonrat P, Pisarnturakit PP, Urwannachotima N. The use of social media on enhancing dental care and practice among dental professionals: cross-sectional survey study. *JMIR Form Res.* 2025;**9(1)**:e66121. doi:10.2196/66121
10. Fleming PS, Ludwig B. Orthodontic groups on social media: Creating and maintaining an educational forum. *Semin Orthodont.* 2023;**29(4)**:346-352. https://doi.org/10.1053/j.sodo.2023.07.001
11. Neville P, Waylen A. Social media and dentistry: some reflections on e-professionalism. *Brit Dent J.* 2015;**218(8)**:475-478. https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2015.294
12. Kenny P, Johnson IG. Social media use, attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of online professionalism amongst dental students. *Br Dent J.* 2016; **221(10)**:651–655. https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.2016.864
13. Hodgson V, Reynolds M. Consensus, difference and 'multiple communities' in networked learning. *Studies Higher Educ.* 2005;**30(1)**:11-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507052000307768
14. Kaplan AM, Haenlein M. Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Bus Horiz.* 2010;**53(1)**:59–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003
15. Baek SI, Kim YM. Longitudinal analysis of online community dynamics. *Indust Manage Data Syst.* 2015;**115(4)**:661-677. https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-09-2014-0266
16. Van Dijck J. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media.* Oxford University Press; 2013.
17. Sunstein CR. On rumors: *How falsehoods spread, why we believe them, and what can be done.* Princeton University Press; 2014.
18. Lam Y, Jadbinder S, Abeal S, Cobourne MT. Exposure across social media platforms for the British Orthodontic Society retention awareness campaign: #HoldthatSmile. *J Orthod.* 2022;**49(1)**:33–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/14653125211054859
19. Silver R. Upholding professional sanctuaries: protecting dental nurses' safe spaces in social media groups. *BDJ Team.* 2024;**11(4)**:154-155. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-024-2626-y
20. General Dental Council. Standards for the dental team. London: GDC; 2013. Available at: https://standards.gdc-uk.org (accessed 20 Sept 2025).
21. General Dental Council. Principle 9: Maintain patients' confidence in you and the profession. London: GDC; 2013. Available at: https://standards.gdc-uk.org/pages/principle9/principle9.aspx (accessed 20 Sept 2025).
22. General Dental Council. Guidance on advertising. London: GDC; 2013. Available at: https://www.gdc-uk.org/standards-guidance/guidance-on-advertising (accessed 20 Sept 2025).

Cite this article:
Stanfield J. The phenomenon of loud voices in social media. An exploration of dental professionals' use of social media in the UK. *Dental Health* 2025; **64(6)**: 23-29. doi: https://doi.org/10.59489/bsdht172