The Natural Path to Social Media: Assessing the Implications of Social Media in Relationship Management and Audience Engagement for Naturopathic Doctors

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Abstract

Naturopathic medicine struggles to receive equal recognition to allopathic medicine. As a result, naturopathic practitioners must break through stigmas in public perception to create successful clinics. Public relations theory suggests the best way to change perceptions is through relationship management and dialogue. Consequently, the study investigated how social media can be the catalytic tool to assist in building relationships and dialogue, which in turn, brings in more clientele. The study utilized a combination of interviews with industry leaders, literature review and observation/secondary sources to derive a conclusion. It found that there is a legitimate role for social media in terms of practice management when used to engage and promote, specifically, if two-way dialogue is used as the strategic medium of communication. However, further follow-up to this study is needed since social media is still a relatively new communications tool. Therefore, it currently cannot replace the role of face-to-face communications but rather it must act as a supplementation.

Keywords: social media, naturopathic medicine, health communication, communication management, relationship management

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Background

O ver the past fifteen years, green industries have ascended into prominence. The field has been characterized by the promotion of more natural and environmentally-friendly products, as well as the usage of innovative clean technology. This rise of the "green" sector could be attributed to the countless studies, including Srinivasan, O'Fallon and Dearry's (2003), Mitchell and Popham (2008), and Landrigan, Kimmel CA, Correa A, and Eskenazi B (2003), which identified the detrimental long-term impacts of the natural environment, for instance, air and water pollution, and ultimately its effect on our collective health. Gradually, a shift in the status quo occurred and the link between the environment and healthcare became the focus. As the perception of the environment changed, specifically from 42 percent of Americans in 1974 citing the environment as "very im-

portant", to 80 percent in 1996, there was a shift in consumer purchases and ideological thinking to a more natural and "green" perspective (Aidt, 2000, pg 2). Consequently, businesses and corporations altered their products to capitalize on this market segment of individuals seeking natural goods and services by pandering to their rejection of mainstream health products (Thompson & Troest, 2002).The health industry, a major catalyst in the shift of societal perceptions, was not immune to changes.

Natural health appears to be a phenomenon in itself and is receiving more publicity and recognition. For example, a recent Natural Health Product Tracking Survey (2010) for the Government of Canada indicated an increase in familiarity with natural health products to 39 percent, up from 36 in 2005, and an increase in Canadian usage of natural health products to 73 percent, up from 71 in 2005, (Natural Health Product Tracking Report, 2010). With more individuals interested in this healthy lifestyle, even fast food giant McDonald's, known for their unhealthy meals began offering healthy alternatives (Melink, 2011). It is evident that an emphasis has been placed on living a naturally healthy life, in terms of environment, physical health, and emotional health.

As previously mentioned, the need for a natural way of living brought an increased popularity to holistic medicine, which has been closely attributed to and associated with the hippie population for years (Romm, 2000). Holistic medicine, specifically naturopathic medicine, has gained prominence in Ontario. In fact, "an estimated 18 percent of all adult Ontarians— an estimated two million people—have seen a naturopathic doctor" (Innovative Research Group, 2011, p.2). Despite modest increases in acceptance from numerous publics, the strained relationship between naturopathic doctors (NDs) and medical doctors (MDs) has led to misinformation among the public stemming from miscommunication. There are numerous examples of miscommunication between these two groups, with the public stating for instance, that naturopathic medicine is not based on empirical

evidence or that the level of education for naturopathic doctors is not on par with that of the MDs.

Evidence exists refuting the beliefs by the MDs and the unconvinced members of the public. ND students' credit loads, specifically, in terms of science, the area which medical students often are sceptical about regarding an NDs education, are almost identical to those of MD students and the hours of training and practical experience received by NDs is equal to that of MDs (Hinds and Sandesh, 2010). Regardless, miscommunication on these vital issues, oftentimes leads to naturopathic medicine being related to the healthcare periphery as "alt med" and being described as quackery. Compounding this issue is that naturopathic doctors are prohibited from prescribing the full selection of available prescriptions (Sharatt, 2009) and most hospitals do not seek out NDs for employment opportunities. These are issues that help frame the public perceptions that NDs are not doctors. Since these obstacles to employment exist, the vast majority of NDs go on to open their own clinic and integrative practices. Unfortunately, the aforementioned stigmas from MDs and the public at large can still affect NDs who attempt to start their own clinics. As a result, for NDs to market and generate awareness about themselves and their practice, they have to proactively network and educate the community in order to foster influence on the public's perception.

Public relations theory suggests that an effective method to achieve this shift in public perception is through cultivating relationships and engaging in the necessary dialogue to educate stakeholders and change opinions (Grunig, 2001). This belief is confirmed by public relations studies which indicate that proactively engaging audiences and adopting relationship management polices can be beneficial to an organization. This approach "helps organizations make money by cultivating relations with consumers, stakeholders, and so on who are needed to support the organizations goals" (Grunig, 1999, p.5). Therefore, relationship management, a staple function of public relations practitioners, could be an effective strategy in

engaging diverse publics and changing perceptions to help encourage individuals to seek naturopathic medicine. For an individual just starting their clinic, the question remains, how can an ND manufacture relationships with the necessary publics, while attempting to change/manage perceptions of their field on limited start-up money? There is a possibility that social media could assist in this capacity, as it has become a popular tool used by countless individuals to engage audiences.

An examination of the field of practice management for naturopathic doctors investigated how social media helped in relationship management and creating meaningful dialogue with stakeholders. This dialogue and relationship management is necessary if the field of naturopathic medicine seeks to shift perceptions away from negative labels and connotations to a more positive realm, which in turn, will impact their customer base.

Research Problem

The research problem is important in that it may shed light on whether social media can build relationships, engage stakeholders through dialogue, and assist in altering public perceptions. Examining social media and public perception is integral to other fields that suffer from the same levels of negative public perceptions and stereotypes, for example, in the fields of aroma therapy, acupuncture and reiki healing. Finally, though there is research on social media in terms of audience building and in public engagement, there is little research focused specifically on social media communications and relationship management for naturopathic practitioners, therefore, this study may contribute to the void in research.

Research Questions

RQ1: How has the public perception of naturopathic medicine impacted relationships with clients and potential clients?

The purpose of this question is to exhibit that there is an opportunity for relationship management and dialogue between naturopathic doctors and the public by revealing that the public perception is affecting the NDs and their ability to attract potential clientele.

RQ2: How do naturopathic doctors build professional networks and patient networks?

The purpose is to show how NDs develop their clientele and to begin laying the foundation for a more strategic approach that involves social media.

RQ3: How has social media contributed to the field of naturopathic medicine?

The purpose of this question is to measure the impact social media has made on naturopathic medicine and to identify if social media has been beneficial for those who utilize it.

Organization Studied

The Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine (CCNM) is regarded as the premier institute for naturopathic medical teaching and research in Canada (Lloyd, 2009). Each year, approximately 520 students are enrolled, and courses offered at the College range from those in the sciences, to naturopathic modalities, to practice management (Lloyd, 2009).

CCNM's board of governors, elected by the Institute of Naturopathic Education and Research (INER), is mandated to govern CCNM, with a strategic emphasis on effective policy governance and assurance of executive performance that allows the vision and ends of the organization to be achieved with excellence (CCNM. 2011a). Part of the vision is assisting both their current naturopathic medical school students and their practicing naturopathic alumni throughout Canada in developing their careers.

Literature Review

A growing number of public relations practitioners and scholars have come to believe that the fundamental goal of public relations is to build and then enhance on-going or long- term relationships with key stakeholders (Grunig, 2010). The benefit of relationship management is that it assists in helping increase your bottom line, as well as builds a community, and reinforces your brand. It is in these areas that the naturopathic practitioners need assistance. As previously mentioned, social media is expected to assist in the building of communities and enhancing of relationships. Walters, Burnett, Lamm and Lucas (2009) in their study stated that relationships are the foundation of social networking (as cited in Kent, 2010, p.649). Interaction, dialogue, and sharing, all central tenets of face-to-face relationships, are available in social media. Devoid of those qualities, a social media site becomes just that; a regular website. Though there is not face-to-face interaction, social media still revolves around a central tenet of dialogue being the value of individualism (Kent, 2010). Many social media sites have features that allow one to customize their own space so that each profile acts as a unique identity for one person. Unfortunately, there is a lack of literature in terms of the intertwining of social media and naturopathic medicine, specifically, social media's role in practice management. This could be attributed to the fact that naturopathic medicine, despite its extensive history, is a relatively small field in comparison to allopathic medicine. In contrast, the role of social media in small businesses and start-ups has been extremely well studied. As a result, to bridge the gap of research and information, naturopathic practices were placed under the umbrella of start-ups or small businesses.

In terms of social media, it was important to seek out research that discusses either the impact of social media on public perception or the impact of social media on small

businesses and start-ups. One of the important communication theories when discussing public perception is the agenda setting theory. Initially, agenda setting theory, formulated during the time when traditional media had monopoly over the tools of content creation and distribution (Lippmann, 1949; McCombs, 2004), allowed traditional media to be the central gatekeeper over the passive news reading public. As a result, the mass media had total control in terms of shaping not only the ideas of what the public thought about, but how they thought about it. This means public perception on topics could be shaped by the news media. However, the rise of social media has usurped some of this power back from traditional mainstream media offering those with social media skills the opportunity to shape news and increase their power in setting news agendas. A recent study by Meaz (2009) found that traditional media's agenda setting power is no longer universal or singular within citizen media outlets. Vilma Luoma-aho (2010) also discussed this in his paper *"Is Social Media Killing our Theories?"* stating that digital developments have shaken the world of media. The traditional journalism and journalist as gate keepers to public attention has come into question because of this new technology. Framed for naturopathic medicine, it means if these naturopathic doctors properly strategize in terms of their usage of social media, they have the potential to help shape ideas on naturopathic medicine for the public.

Grunig 2001 states that to be able to make that influence on perception one must engage people. Responsiveness is a salient aspect of social media, as individuals can engage in never-ending dialogue in real time. This occurs through threaded dialogue, such as blogs, where conversation that emerges is in response to a news or conventional post (Kent, 2010). Alternatively, other social media allow for responses to be posted by members and participants, but are not threaded (Kent, 2010). Social media is known for creating conversations and assisting people in connecting with individuals that

share similar interests but this begs the question: is it possible to use social media to engage as a small business owner?

Current literature indicates this is possible. According to Mashable, the premier leaders in news content related to social media (Wong, 2010), the real benefit for social media and small businesses is in the engagement of the local community and establishment of general relationships (Cantone, 2010). Mashable's Samuel Axton states: "the most common advice they received from businesses successfully using social media was through using it to engage your customers in a conversation" (as cited in Mashable's the Real Gist Results Series 2010) The benefit of this tactic is that it allows the audience to recognize the business on more than a superficial level, instead, a personal one. When firms fail to fully engage their customers, they also fail to fully exploit the capabilities of social media platforms. To gain business value, organizations need to incorporate community building as part of the implementation of social media (Culhan et al, 2010).That means in an instance where there is a negative public perception, it is possible that one can help alleviate misconceptions and therefore change attitudes by conversing and engaging their core audiences about topics related to the negative perception. This practice is reinforced by Grunig's definition of two way symmetrical communication where individuals use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviours of both the organizations and the publics (Grunig 2001). Marketers are interested in relationship building, currently renamed as brand loyalty, but increasingly more are focused on building more tangible relationships of trust and commitment (Kent, 2010). The idea that relationship building in social media exists is an opinion reiterated by business giant expert Forbes, which cites building relationships as the number one priority in social media when one is attempting to engage individuals on these platforms (McNicholas, 2011).

Justification for Questions used in Interviews

To accurately evaluate the role of social media in naturopathic medicine, specifically, its role in altering public perception by potentially generating dialogue and relationship management, the following questions were developed based on the three initial research questions as a foundation.

RQ1: How has the public perception of naturopathic medicine impacted relationships with clients and potential clients?

1. What would you say is the current state of public perception of naturopathic medicine?
2. What has/have been your source(s) for understanding the public perception of naturopathic medicine?
3. To what degree do you think that public perception impacts relationships with clients and potential clients?
4. How do you think clients and perspective clients view naturopathic medicine?
5. What do you think the media's role is in this public perception?

RQ2: How do naturopathic doctors build professional networks and patient networks?

6. What tools do naturopathic doctors use to build networks and relationships?
7. How important are professional networks and patient networks to practice management?
8. What role does relationship management have in practice management networking?
9. What role does generating dialogue with your audiences have in networking for practice management?

RQ3: How has social media contributed to the field of naturopathic medicine?

10. What role has social media played in naturopathic medicine?
11. How do naturopathic doctors perceive social media?
12. What is your source for understanding how naturopathic doctors perceive social media?

13. How do social media tools assist in clinic practice management?

Case Study Methodology

In this study, the qualitative research methodology of case study was used. This study featured elements required of case studies, for instance, the "how" question, specifically how social media can assist in relationship management and stakeholder dialogue for public perception. Furthermore, it included a contemporary event that is currently being lived by naturopathic doctors; specifically the NDs' desire to build clinics but requiring effective communications tools to achieve this. Finally, in regards to the last element of case studies of behaviour manipulation, this one adhered to the idea of not controlling behaviours.

Case studies have limitations, specifically, their lack of rigorousness, their inability to provide more information to create generalization, their time-consuming nature, and their difficulty in establishing causal relationships (Yin, 2009). It is important to acknowledge these issues to remain unbiased and keep readers informed to make objective judgements on the research presented. More importantly, identifying these limitations is imperative so that future social scientists wishing to continue on with the research have a framework for understanding the potential limitations that may arise. But as Yin (2009) states, the majority of these flaws within case studies can be allayed with implementation of a meticulous methods approach. This study adhered to this approach in both data collections and data analysis

Data Collection Methods

Three major principles of data collection exist: use multiple sources of evidence, create a case study database, and maintain a chain of evidence (Yin, 2009) to provide a solid foundation for data collection and help reinforce the accuracy

of the research project. For multiple sources of evidence, the case study involved interviews, direct observations and documentation. In-depth interviews, where respondents were asked about the specific facts of issues, while offering their opinion about events, was the type of interview technique used (Yin, 2009). The individuals interviewed were:

1. Interviewee A, an administrator from CCNM;
2. Interviewee B, a naturopathic doctor with a well-known practice; and finally,
3. Interviewee C, a lecturer for the practice management course at CCNM.

The benefit of having these distinct individuals was their diverse backgrounds and wealth of experience in the industry, giving them a leading edge in recognizing trends in the field and changes in public perception over time. Interviewee B is currently involved in practice management with his own clinic; therefore, he provides the insight of the practitioner. Meanwhile, Interviewee A offers the administrative perspective and institutional aspects of naturopathic medicine. Finally, Interviewee C teaches naturopathic doctors how to start their clinics, thereby, offering the perception of educators. For this case study, the course on practice management, a class that assists students in building their practices, is of salience and will be a focal point.

Interviews are not without their issues; main concerns with interviews include response bias, and inaccuracies due to poor recall. Consequently, these issues were mitigated with the second source of evidence; documentation. This helps corroborating and augmenting evidence (Yin. 2009). Documents, including surveys and internal lecture material from CCNM were used to verify information presented in the interviews. Data was also collected from social media conversations to gauge what students and graduates used social media for. The process involved following 50 students and 25 graduates via Twitter, using the account @myCCNM. A Twitter list, which can be used categorize tweeters into groups, was

developed to make it easier to see all tweets individuals made each day.

In terms of direct observation, this research project utilized casual direct observations. A visit to Interviewee C's practice management course was conducted to document discussions with the students in relation to social media and naturopathic medicine.

To create a case study database, the collection involved a separate database distinct from the report to ensure no blurring of the report's conclusion and contents with the data occurred. Consequently, future studies will be able to utilize the data, therefore, increasing the reliability of the information (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, the data collected involved a chain of evidence that also increases reliability and allows readers to: "follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions" (Yin, 2009, p. 122). This was conducting through keeping data collection methods consistent and verifying evidence appearing in the interview stages with documents or observations when applicable.

Data Analysis Techniques

Four major strategies exist in case studies, the most salient one involves following the theoretical perspectives that led to the case study (Yin, 2009). This meant focusing on the theory that suggests public relations is an effective method for cultivating relationships and engaging in the necessary dialogue to change opinions (Grunig, 2001) and that social media are communication tools that can help achieve relationship management and engagement via stakeholder dialogue.

An essential technique to developing theoretical perspectives involved explanation building, which analyzes the case study data to build an explanation regarding the totality of the case using a narrative approach, is (Yin, 2009). This study involved uncovering an idea on the impact of social media for

relationship management and stakeholder engagement to manage public perceptions.

There are issues with utilizing the explanation building model for data analysis such as confusion over the data collected (Yin, 2009) However, to combat those issues, the case study protocol was used which involved, for example, indicating which data is to be collected (Yin, 2009). This was outlined in the section *Data Collection Methods*. Identifying key data helped prevent the researcher from deviating from the original topic of interest, since it forces the individual to continuously refer to the original purpose of inquiry and potential solutions that rectify the initial problem (Yin, 2009).

Results

RQ1: How has the public perception of naturopathic medicine impacted relationships with clients and potential clients?

All three interviewees demonstrated knowledge of the public perception of the field, with each highlighting the increase in acceptance of naturopathic medicine by the public. There was, however, a difference in opinions when the interviewees discussed how positive the acceptance was. Though Interviewee A stated 85 percent of the public are well-aware of naturopathic medicine and from those 85 percent, approximately 75 percent are supportive; Interviewee C contrasted those statistics stating 80 percent are *unaware* of naturopathic medicine. Moreover, he contextualized his calculations by identifying the role students must play in being positive advocates of naturopathic medicine because the public is misinformed. For Interviewee A, he cited the recent study commissioned by CCNM and undertaken by the Innovative Research Group (2011) as his primary source of information on the subject of public perception. However, upon further examination of the survey, Interviewee A's statements were slightly inaccurate in that the exact statistics were 43 percent of Ontarians were "somewhat familiar with naturopathic

medicine" and additionally, 41 percent of Ontarians would be likely to see a naturopathic doctor in the next few years, however, this statistic has been unchanged since 2006 (Innovative Research Group Survey, 2011, p.3).

Interviewees unanimously agreed that public perception impacts relationships with clients. However, their interpretations for how the public perception could affect clientele varied. For example, Interviewee A offered a practical financial theory:

> The individuals that see naturopaths have to use their own money; therefore, if their perception of naturopathic medicine is negative then it's more difficult to convince them to use their own money, especially, during tough economic times.

Meanwhile, for Interviewee C, his answer deviated to the societal opinion of the education level of naturopathic medical school students:

> I think especially on the education requirements there is a misinformation that naturopaths are taking weekend courses and becoming full-fledged naturopathic doctors. People fail to realize it is a full-fledged profession that acts as a family doctor.

In discussions on the view of naturopathic medicine by clientele and prospective clientele, interviewees identified that individuals treated with naturopathic medicine perceive it positively. This was a sentiment replicated in the survey study with 72 percent of users having a positive impression of naturopathic medicine (Innovative Research Group Survey, 2011). Benefits of naturopathic medicine which help to comprise positive views included:

> Clients see it as a solution to bigpharma (pharmacy) and some see it as a reflection of their personal views on natural approaches to health care (Interviewee A). 57 percent

of Ontarians believe naturopathic medicine is leading to better health care outcomes (Innovative Research Group Survey, 2011, p.5).

A concerted effort was made by interviewees to mention that despite positive experiences of naturopathic medicine by current users, an opportunity existed to enhance the global recognition of NDs and their role in providing integrative health care solutions and preventative medicine. Furthermore, that NDs still lacked the recognition paralleling that of allopathic medicine.

When the topic of the media's perception of naturopathic medicine arose, all three interviewees stated positive changes were being made. The media, in particular, were seeking more articles from naturopathic doctors as sources of information in comparison to previous years (Interviewee C). Interviewee B contextualized this in stating naturopathic doctors were the "authority in the field," therefore, in topics of general health and well-being; naturopathic doctors had their 'finger on the pulse." However, cautious optimism, a recurring theme prevalent in many of the respondents' views on public perception, was salient in this question. Despite the apparent increase of naturopathic doctor-created content being publicized by the media, an interviewee mentioned naturopathic doctors acting as "filters of information" that the media diffused about the field (Interviewee B). Moreover, a concerted effort by NDs was still required to educate the largely "ill-informed" media (Interviewee C).

RQ2: How do naturopathic doctors build professional and patient networks?

A series of tools were mentioned by the interviewees when the discussion turned to tactics used by naturopathic doctors to build professional and patient networks, specifically, the most popular being:

- Face-to-face informal meetings with people
- Speaking engagements
- Community events *(presentations, speaking events)*
- Connecting with local employers *(networking in local communities)*
- Seminar-type events *(workshops, offering classes, speaking at seminars)*
- Integrated events with fitness clubs *(speaking at fitness club events, nutrition events)*
- Business cards
- Pamphlets
- Social media (*Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter*)

During this line of questioning on social media, it was noted by an interviewee that some naturopathic doctors found comfort in social media marketing because they lacked the necessary social skills required to actively participate in public events. The interviewee specifically stated that "two thirds" of naturopathic medical school students may lack social skills. However, the interviewee who mentioned this information on student personality traits asked to have his answer remain anonymous. Another interviewee provided an additional perspective on strategic tools implemented by NDs not mentioned by any of the other interviewees. He believed tools selected by a naturopathic doctor play to the doctors' character strengths. For instance, an extroverted ND may choose social methods of building networks such as being out in the community and attending events. Moreover, Interviewee B discussed personality traits, such as honesty and trustworthiness, as a part of the methods that naturopathic doctors use to build patient and professional network relationships.

For each interviewee, referrals and patient networks were important. Their opinion was referrals came from being known through networking, and referrals were the most common source of patient networks. This was reiterated by Interviewee A's point being most successful naturopathic

doctors are those established in small towns because "small towns mean that everyone knows each other." The Ontario Association of Naturopathic Doctors (OAND) became the focal point on discussions of professional networks. Interviewee B was visibly unimpressed with the need for this network, and their role in practice management:

> I pay fees out of respect but there is no value to me for an OAND membership, nothing from it but the odd referral. It's important for the profession yes but my practice no.

His rational for this uninhibited frustration was attributed to the multiple certifications and payments he makes. His OAND fees were over a thousand dollars; therefore, to recoup that expenditure in referrals a patient would have to book multiple clinic appointments with his practice for him to recover the return on investment. Interviewee B was the only one of the three to comment on naturopathic professional networks. But the other two interviewees were not members of any naturopathic medicinal associations.

The three interviews remarked on the importance of relationship management. However, Interviewee C discussed the prospect of abusing relationships and how that impacted clientele.

> Relationships are important but it's just as equally important not to abuse them … As an ND (naturopathic doctor), cultivate relationships first before trying to convert them into being a client or bombarding them with information.

He continued on to discuss techniques naturopathic doctors should use for relationship building and he specifically said "Facebook is brilliant for keeping in contact with people." Meanwhile, Interviewee A delved further by discussing business relationships. He spoke about the anxiety and the difficulties for students who had not developed professional relationships. He noted, "one day you are in school working

in a supervised setting in a clinic, all of a sudden, you become an ND with your own clinic." As a result, having great business relationships is important for success in the clinic and being able to manage all these relationships, needs, and wants of competing priorities and of competing individuals is equally as important. The intertwining dynamic of managing relationships with patients was a subject which Interviewee B offered the best prospective on as he is the only interviewee currently practicing. He discussed the issues in treating personal friends and the difficulties that arise as relationships change over time. Interviewee B suggested the best method to managing patient relationships, is to "keep personal and professional relationships separate."

All interviewees claimed that dialogue had a role in networking for practice management. For them, two-way communication is vital. Interviewee B said "dialogue (for a naturopathic practitioner) is critical and it helps to establish a report between doctors and patients. It is especially important for treatment and helps when engaging people." From a financial standpoint, Interviewee A said dialogue was needed to engage, especially, considering the nature of the naturopathic field as it is not covered by Ontario Health Insurance Plan; therefore, individuals have to pay out-of-pocket, unless, their extended employment health insurance plans cover them. Consequently, he felt for a patient to find it necessary to spend finances on naturopathic doctors, they needed to feel as though their "concerns were heard" and the "best way to achieve this was through dialogue – listening" (Interviewee A, 2012). For Interviewee C, dialogue was important, however, it was equally important to use an integrative approach that intertwines social media dialogue with a face-to-face traditional approach:

> It has to be face-to-face not just Facebook. I think it is different meeting face-to-face then following people using social media versus never meeting someone and automati-

cally following them via social media. It's the difference between advertising versus marketing

The focus on differentiating between advertising and marketing is salient. All three interviewees stressed communicating with dialogue was important, as well as the ability of naturopaths to truly know their patients and they emphasized the extra care naturopaths offered their patients. Their off-topic and tangent comments seemed to imply naturopaths do not want to appear as salesmen or saleswomen plotting to gain more clientele, but rather, as individuals who genuinely care about their patients, and the health and wellness of members of society. All three understood naturopathic medicine was a business, however, it appeared that they felt naturopathic doctors must appear less businesslike and more humane. It is possible this is how they want to be framed. Interviewee C ended the discussion on dialogue pondering whether honesty and openness of social media would translate into better business. Eventually the question was self-answered in him stating "I would think as a potential patient this would help."

RQ3: How has social media contributed to the field of naturopathic medicine?

Though each interviewee stressed the beneficial role of social media, the need for face-to-face personal interaction versus focusing all dialogue, relationship management, and networking on social media repeatedly arose. Interviewee A noted "it (social media) hasn't played a role in doctor patient interactions; people still want to see you face-to-face as a naturopathic doctor." Interviewee C added to this point:

> Social media has impacted the ease of communications but it also makes it superficial. In terms of business … social media helps with your search engine optimization. You need a blog (another form social media) to talk about

yourself. All are important for a naturopathic doctor… you need to talk to people before the word-of-mouth clicks in from social media. I do think social media has made us less social-able in some respects (Interviewee C, 2012).

Based on his responses to other questions, it is obvious for Interviewee C, that though social media is a positive tool for communicating, it should not be the *only tool* for communications purposes. His nonverbal actions and tone of voice seemed slightly sceptic of social media being the primary tool to communicate for practice management. Each time he spoke of the benefits of social media, he was quick to counteract it by stating it needed to be part of an integrative communications approach that included face-to-face interaction.

According to the interviewees, social media in naturopathic medicine is viewed differently depending on the age demographic of users with younger NDs viewing it positively, whereas, the older ones either had little knowledge of it or were failing to capitalize on the benefits of it. The interviewees felt the younger generation recognized the uses of social media for marketing, dialogue, and for building patient and professional networks. In contrast, the older generation, "had already established their entire clinics", therefore, there was no need for them to "waste time" implementing another tool to seek out more clientele (Interviewee C, 2012).

In observations of Interviewee C's 3rd year practice management class, when the students were asked "by show of hands how many people use social media", about 80 percent of 100 students raised their hands. The most popular of the four major social networks was Facebook with more than 60 percent of the students having a presence on it, meanwhile, less than 30 percent having Twitter, YouTube or LinkedIn accounts. The 20 percent, those who had yet to engage social media, appeared to be middle-aged students, approximately around 35+ years old. Already, some of the students, about 50 percent, were starting to use social media for the purposes of branding themselves and networking in order to begin at-

taining patients for their prospective clinic. Based upon observations on social media conversations, the majority of current students use social media as a way of promoting and marketing themselves or for personal enjoyment. However, graduates of CCNM use it for similar reasons but are more inclined to engage in discussions which correct misconceptions on naturopathic medical research or remedies, and engaging allopathic doctors in conversations. This could be attributed to them having graduated from the school and feeling more confident in their knowledge to take on detractors. For instance, a discussion was witnessed where graduates of accredited naturopathic medical schools responded to negative claims about naturopathic medicine. For accuracy purposes, names in the threaded dialogue were verified with LinkedIn name searches to ensure those individuals had indeed graduated from naturopathic medical schools.

The most common ways social media assists for naturopathic practice management according to the three interviewees include:

- Maintaining a link to patients
- Building professional networks
- Promoting one's self and the work they do through video
- Supplementing websites
- Blogging to share ideas
- Communications tool for the introverts.

All three mentioned using social media as a form of engaging and creating dialogue. Interviewee B seemingly more familiar with social media stated:

> Social media is good for disseminating information, creating dialogue and engaging readers all over the world. I post studies and I want to be an authority in my field. Social media helps me do that. Indirectly, I get followers or in some cases clientele because of Twitter postings.

Interviewee B maintains he spends upwards of one hour-a-day in content searching, and engaging the masses to strategically benefit from social media.

Conclusions and Limitations

The study addressed all of the initial research questions. It confirmed that naturopathic medicine remains far from receiving the level of recognition it seeks, but through incremental gains there has been improvements to the public perspective. The study showed that the negative stigmatization affects how society views naturopathic medicine. As a result, indicates naturopathic doctors must continue to advocate for their industry. Continuing to educate the community and the media on the naturopath's role in society will hopefully yield positive results. If the industry desires to strive to change perceptions, there should be a focus on discussing the rigorous education of naturopathic doctors and on naturopathic remedies being founded on empirical studies. This would target the two most frequent stereotypes of the field of naturopathic medicine, as confirmed in the interviews.

In regards to the initial research problem, the case study demonstrates that social media can be used for relationship management and dialogue as well as providing a plethora of benefits to the clinic management. However, face-to-face interaction is necessary and cannot be neglected. Patient networks, specifically, referrals are crucial to the success of a naturopathic doctor and social media is integral to the blossoming of professional networks.

In regards to changing perceptions for individuals with negative opinions of naturopathic medicine, the data remains inconclusive. Interviewee B, for instance, did say he periodically received patients who began as followers on Twitter, but it is difficult to know whether a change in the individual's perception actually occurred. It is possible these individuals may have always been interested in naturopathic medicine but were just unfamiliar with the logistics of clinics. Therefore,

connecting with Interviewee B merely provided them with an opportunity to become a patient. A potential research case study topic, focused on qualitative research, could investigate: how the public is converted into becoming patients at naturopathic clinics or what communications or marketing tools convert a sceptic individual into seeing a naturopathic doctor? This would address the inconclusive aspect of this study in confirming whether social media did indeed shift a perception.

There were numerous research related limitations, including a hindrance in attempting to generalize from the results, statistical issues within the secondary research, researcher biases and the expertise of interviewees. When conducting research on one's own place of employment, it is difficult to separate one's self from being a researcher and an employee, as a result, biases can exist when interpreting information or arriving at conclusions. As the study was limited to three interviews, there is some difficulty in generalizing from this sample. However, in this case study, there was the combination of examining documents and conducting observations, to ensure the results were generally reliable and verifiable through triangulation.

Social media was a focus in this study; therefore, one would want interviewees with more in-depth knowledge of social networking. Multiple times an interviewee queried me stating "maybe you would be best answering that question" or "social media is still really knew so I'm not sure" before responding. For future research, interviews should be conducted with individuals who have a greater level of understanding of social media so as to better assess how social media impacts practice management. Alternatively, the prospect exists of comparing individuals with beginner's knowledge with those with advanced knowledge in order to compare how knowledge impacts one's behaviour and opinions regarding social media.

For the Innovative Research Group Survey, there was an issue with the line of questioning. One of the questions seems

to influence a person's response because the additional information offered in the questions is both influential and biased. To maintain objective responses from those surveyed, the question should have been reworded.

Though not creating its own theory, the case study contributes theoretically by confirming opinions throughout communications and the small business fields. Firstly, it confirms that social media is used to engage, and create dialogues, as illustrated by Kent (2010). Furthermore, it solidifies individual's preference for communication that is two-way as surmised by Grunig (2001). Finally, in terms of Forbes' and Mashable's opinion on how social media should be implemented in small businesses, the case study replicated those organizations' thoughts by showcasing that doctors should use social media to engage in dialogue with clients and prospective clients strategically versus merely using it as a tool for marketing.

Lastly, in terms of practical contribution, the study will be given to CCNM, with the most practical usage for the study being used as a guideline for future lectures on strategic social media and practice management at CCNM. This, in turn, leads to diffusion of knowledge for future students in the 3rd and 4th year classes and is important to both the CCNM which strives to continuously evolve each year and those in the field of naturopathic medicine who are constantly in a battle for legitimacy.

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