**TITLE PAGE**

Title of the paper: **IMPACT OF A SOCIAL MEDIA GROUP PAGE ON UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL PHYSIOLOGY LEARNING**

Short title for use as a running head: Social media in medical physiology learning

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**Abstract**

**Objective:** To investigate the impact of associating classroom learning of medical physiology with a Facebook group page in an all-women medical college of a conservative small city in Pakistan.

**Study design:** Qualitative Interpretivist study using semi-structured interviews

**Place of study**: Women Medical College Abbottabad, Pakistan.

D**uration of Study:** 10 months.

**Methods:** A closed Facebook study group was established at a local medical college in Pakistan. It was used to upload learning resources and initiate discussions. It was coordinated with classroom lectures of Physiology. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteer students according to a standard protocol.

**Results:** The following major themes were identified: Facebook group is something new and exciting; it motivated self-study, research, collaborative learning and improved class attendance; convenience of easily accessible resources allowed the students to concentrate on the lecture rather than note taking; it was easier to communicate with the instructor through Facebook than face to face; ’Lurkers’ were also learning; high achievers who had adapted to the current didactic system of teaching were less receptive of the collaborative learning and favored teaching geared towards exam preparation

**Conclusions:** Using social media for e-learning in undergraduate medical education can enhance the student learning experience, especially in resource limited regions where Information and communication technology is not an integrated part of the teaching process.

**Key Words:** social media, e-learning, motivation, communication with instructor

**Introduction**

E-learning has been used in medical education for a long time but the use of social media tools is relatively new. The social media tools which have been used in medical education include blogs, wikis, Twitter, Facebook and customized online learning environments.[1](#_ENREF_1) Social media offer certain advantages over typical e-learning as reported by the literature. There is more opportunity for collaborative learning, prompt and effective feedback to students and teachers,[2](#_ENREF_2) peer review of posts which ensures maintenance of quality of teaching material,[3](#_ENREF_3) development of learning communities and flexibility of learning.[1](#_ENREF_1)

The feedback from students regarding use of social media in learning has been positive.[4](#_ENREF_4) Several recently published reviews have discussed how students in all health professions accept social media tools for learning.[5-7](#_ENREF_5) The most popular among these networks is Facebook.[8](#_ENREF_8) The use of Facebook in medical education is an under-researched area. A recent review[7](#_ENREF_7) reports sixteen research articles which investigated the role of Facebook in medical education: of these, only one was from a developing country Nepal.

For a developing, resource limited country like Pakistan, catching up to the international eLearning trend is a big challenge. Even though the tide has started to change, with medical colleges in some of the major cities adapting according to international standards, the lack of integration of Information and Computer Technology (ICT) with medical teaching is still a common issue in Pakistan’s medical colleges. In this context we investigated the impact, of associating classroom learning with a freely available potential e-learning medium, a Facebook group page, in an all-women medical college in Abbottabad, one of the smaller and more conservative cities of Pakistan**.**

**Methodology**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Khyber Medical University. In May 2014 a closed Facebook study group (‘Physiology\_WMC’) was started by the first author (who was at that time employed as a teacher of physiology) in a women’s medical college, with the aim of facilitating the students' learning in the subject of physiology. The Facebook group was used to upload PowerPoint lecture presentations, clinical cases and videos, to initiate discussion between the students regarding difficult concepts and for announcements regarding learning activities and quiz competitions. The group quickly enrolled over 200 members from a total of 300 students in the three classes who were taught physiology by the author. The cohort was composed of 1st and second year students taught physiology between March and December 2014.

An average of six posts per week were uploaded. These posts were related to the topics which were being covered in class at the time. These were actively discussed in posts in the form of comments made by students and the administrator. In addition, there was an average of three independent posts each week by different students. The group was administered by the principal author for 8 months after which student volunteers were made administrators and the author assumed a passive supervisory role. It is to be noted that the group is still active for the past 9 months since the author left the college and now has over 300 members.

In December 2014, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Students were requested to participate voluntarily in the research process through an advertisement on the Facebook group page itself as well as by word of mouth. Twelve students were interviewed after which data saturation was noticed and further interviews were not pursued. Prior to the start of the interview, the student was briefed about the purpose of the research, the length of the interview and the fact that recording devices were being used and informed consent was taken. Each interview lasted 15-35 minutes. The interviews were conducted by the first author.

The questions evolved as interviews progressed, particularly during the first three interviews, but the following formed the basic protocol:

1. How does the Facebook group help you in your learning?
2. What did you think of the relevant cases uploaded on the page before the lecture?
3. What did you think of the uploaded lecture presentations?
4. How did interaction with fellow students help you?
5. Any suggestions for improvement?

Data analysis was done concurrently with data collection.[9](#_ENREF_9) A grounded theory approach was used for analysis of data.[9](#_ENREF_9) Codes and categories were created and themes were identified. Quotes from all the transcripts of the interviews were re-organized as indicators for the identified categories in a tabulated form for analysis. The data was triangulated with student comments and posts on the Facebook group page.

**Results**

Multiple themes were identified including ‘impact on motivation’, ‘convenience of easily-accessible resources’, ‘motivation to attend classes’, ‘motivation for self-study and research’, ‘easier communication with teacher’, ‘easier communication with teachers’, ‘lurkers learning’ and learning beyond the classroom’.

The quotes which give evidence for the themes are shown in table 1.

Regarding impact on motivation, the students thought the Facebook group was ‘something new’ and different which rekindled their enthusiasm for the subject of Physiology. One student reported that some of the students from more conservative family backgrounds made Facebook profiles especially and only to access this group page

‘Convenience of easily-accessible resources’ wasone of the most commonly recurring themes in the interviews. Students had easy access to the lecture materials, which meant that they felt under less pressure to take notes in class; instead they could “*fully concentrate”* on the lectureand focus on class discussions without feeling “hurried” and “stressed”.

Another common theme that surfaced from the interviews was ‘motivation to attend classes’. Despite the availability of lecture material online, class attendance was noticeably improved. The students attributed it to the interest and curiosity the uploaded material had aroused in them.

Majority of interviewees expressed how they developed a genuine interest for the subject and were motivated to study on their own. This ‘motivation for self-study and research’ was reported by 11 out of 12 interviewees. However one high achiever disagreed. She stated,

*“[Uploaded] scenarios didn’t really motivate us to study before coming to class. We would have studied more if you would have given a direct order to come prepared with certain topics”.*

Several students also reported feeling motivated enough to research on the internet out of curiosity when certain scenarios or quizzes were uploaded, even though this had nothing to do with their assessments and current curriculum.

A further very significant theme to surface from our study was ‘easier communication with teacher’. The students cited several reasons they were hesitant asking questions in class. First, they were scared of ‘offending the teacher’ who is traditionally an authoritarian figure. Students are even more scared of approaching teachers after class. They felt as if the teacher would ‘feel bothered’ and that they were ‘taking up the teacher’s free time’. Second they were apprehensive of getting embarrassed in front of their peers if they ask a ‘silly question’ and getting snubbed or scolded by the teachers in the presence of their classmates. In contrast they felt safe asking questions on Facebook. Those who were more shy interacted using fake identities. One of the most active members of the group was a student who was never active in the class. but was a dynamic member of the Facebook group. She added how one of the factors which helped become more confident was her active participation on the group page.

We also discovered that ‘Lurkers’ also learn. The passive users on social media who read but do not participate in comments are commonly referred to as lurkers.[10](#_ENREF_10) There were a large number of students who would view the posts but were hesitant to participate in discussions directly.

Afurther unique theme to emerge from our data was ‘learning beyond the classroom’. The students reported how the Facebook group had freed ‘learning’ from the restrictions of the classroom and made it a part of their lives. It was no longer just something they studied at college. Keeping up with notifications gave them a feeling that they were “surrounded by learning” all the time.They reported enjoying this feeling.

‘Peer learning’ was also promoted via the page. The students talked about how they learned from each other, especially the first year students in relation to learning from the second year class. Their Facebook interactions facilitated their face to face interactions and discussions as well. The students understood better when other students explained certain concepts in their own language

Last but not least was the students’ use of the Facebook page to keep upto date about academic activities**.** This was one of the unintended applications of the page. The students started depending on the page to keep up to date with academic activities and eventually started using it themselves to share information. They thought it was more convenient than looking up notice boards.

**Discussion**

The medical education system in Pakistan is slowly but surely developing to match international standards.[11](#_ENREF_11), [12](#_ENREF_12) However the pedagogical approach in medical colleges is still overwhelmingly teacher-centered and didactic. Teachers face a constant pressure to ‘finish the course’ in time for the exams, students are under continuous stress to ‘cram’ information in order to do well in exams and ‘become a doctor’. It is not surprising that students only engage in self-directed study when the examinations are near, even then, their study is often superficial and dictated entirely by those topics which they believe to be relevant to the exam. There is a general lack of motivation in the students to take charge of their own learning, especially in the preclinical years.

An important consequence of the introduction of the Facebook group page was the effect it appeared to have in reducing the barrier between students and teacher in the classroom. The student interviews revealed the persistence of a traditional perception of student-teacher relationships. Students hesitated to approach the teacher and were “*constantly afraid of getting on the teacher’s bad side”*. Despite the first author’s attempts to be approachable and encourage class participation, she still found students hesitant. After the establishment of the Facebook group, not only were the students asking questions and making comments on the main page and private inbox chats, but their increasing ease of interaction with the author as teacher in the classroom was also palpable.

What is perhaps most interesting given their previous experience of a teacher-controlled learning environment is their appreciation of the value of learning from their peers. The Facebook page group encouraged peer learning both online and in real life. Students would discuss the uploaded material with their friends who were not using the internet and social media. After interacting with other class fellows on the Facebook page they were motivated to form study groups. Not only was there increased interaction among students of the same year but also between students of first and second years and even the third years who had used the Facebook page in their second year of study. This peer learning from senior students was valued by the first years, and the second year students also reported feeling good that they were able to guide the junior students. The atmosphere of collaborative learning provided by the social media page enhanced student learning in our study.

An interesting aspect of the study is the relatively lukewarm response of the ’high flyers’, the students who were achieving high grades in the existing system. In our cohort there were two such students. These students seemed to favor individual rather than collaborative learning and a strategic rather than a deep approach to learning. When asked how they would like to see the page improve they commented that the page should have more resources directed towards exam preparations; it should be more about academic matters and less about socializing; and it should be controlled more by the teacher. The students who gained most from this intervention seemed to be those who were struggling with motivation and lack of interest under a didactic teaching style.

Previous studies on use of social media in medical education have shown similar results in terms of student satisfaction.[1](#_ENREF_1), [4](#_ENREF_4) Several studies have reported the benefits of use Facebook in education. [13](#_ENREF_13), [14](#_ENREF_14) However, studies on use of Facebook groups in medical education are not common. A recent paper[15](#_ENREF_15) has reported that medical students appreciate the ease of access of educational resources with help of Facebook and Twitter. This is similar to our findings. Another recent article analyzed the effects of Facebook on undergraduate medical learning. This study also reports improved student motivation and facilitation of peer learning.[16](#_ENREF_16) These findings are also in line with results of our study. Some studies have reported unprofessional behavior of medical students on Facebook.[17](#_ENREF_17), [18](#_ENREF_18) We did not encounter such issues with our cohort. A reason could be all female medical students from a conservative culture.

The drawback of our study was a limited number of interviews. Despite the fact that the first author had a good rapport with students and also that she was no longer involved in student assessments at the time of the interviews, students were shy and hesitant in coming for interviews. However, there was close correspondence among the perceptions of the students interviewed, almost no instances where a range of views emerged. The second limitation is the inherent risk of bias involved in the interviews when a former teacher is interviewing the students. However, there is some triangulation of the student responses expressed in interviews with the active student participation both on the group page and in class. It is also to be noted that the study group is still very popular and growing in numbers nine months after the author left that institution.

**Conclusion**

This is a small study of a relatively short intervention; nevertheless it provides strong support for the effectiveness of social media in fostering active engagement and collaborative learning in undergraduate medical education especially in resource limited regions where ICT is not an integrated part of the teaching process.

**Declaration of interest**

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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**Table 1: Representative quotes from interviews corresponding to themes identified (complete quotes are provided in the supplementary material)**

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| --- | --- |
| **THEME** | **SAMPLE QUOTATIONS** |
| 1-Impact on motivation | * *“we even feel that this page is something different, class routine gets bored [boring], it’s good that the page is giving us something more than usual…”* |
| 2-Face book profiles with fake identities made by students from conservative backgrounds | * *“There were some. They made Facebook profiles especially for this page, they don’t use it now that physiology is over”* |
| 3-Easily-accessible resources | * *“When we had our physiology lectures we end up trying to get down all the notes, we miss a lot of what is being said, we should be listening more and writing less because the mind becomes diverted, so now we just listen to the lectures and review the uploaded lectures when we got back home.”* |
| 4-Motivation to attend classes | * *“we would be so curious, and the (uploaded) case would be so interesting that you wanted to know its answer and our colleagues would not be able to explain it as well as the teacher if we missed the class that’s why I think everybody attended physiology lectures, very few absentees”.* |
| 5-Motivation for Self study and research | * *“ I admit I normally don’t feel motivated enough to study but when there is [an uploaded] case it arouses my interest, I want to know about what the patient has, why he has it, then I would end up opening the book, using the net, so I can find out about it”* |
| 6-Easier communication with teacher especially for shy students | * *“..in class we are hesitant; generally afraid that the teacher might scold us. There is a communication gap with teachers and we cannot express ourselves freely face to face in class. We are scared, but on Facebook raising questions and having them answered is easier.”* |
| 7-Lurkers also learning | * *“Hmm, it’s like I am not participating (actively on facebook) yet then I am able to learn a lot. Like when you upload a case or any topic I look for the answers , after seeing that I read it in my text book ‘n it feels easy ‘n I guess other students are also doing it in the same way”* |
| 8-Learning beyond the classroom | * “*mam I am logged in all day. I keep telling my mother, what was posted that day, and ask her if she has any similar problem as the uploaded case”* |
| 9-Peer learning | * *“It’s like a group study kind of thing. All of my friends are there, teachers are linked with us…it’s like a mini class room or something…, so it’s better than studying individually in my own room or something”* |
| 9-Better information on academic activities | * *“With the physiology page we remain up-to-date about upcoming competitions, tests, revision classes. It’s more convenient than watching bulletin boards”* |

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL:**

**TABLE 2: COMPLETE QUOTES FOR ALL THE IDENTIFIED THEMES**

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| --- | --- |
| **THEME** | **QUOTATIONS** |
| 1-Impact on motivation | * *“we even feel that this page is something different, class routine gets bored [boring], it’s good that the page is giving us something more than usual…”* * *“…..actually it made physiology interesting for me. In second year, I was into physiology”* * *“..before that [the intervention] teachers would come, put up slides, teach and then go and I never opened any book of physiology, and I barely passed my mid terms and after you people came [and started this intervention] I started studying physiology”* |
| 2-New face book profiles made by students from strict conservative families using fake identities especially for this group page. | * *“There were some. They made Facebook profiles especially for this page, they don’t use it now that physiology is over”* * *“…..actually it made physiology interesting for me. -.. and there were so many girls in the class who joined Facebook for this page only, I think 60-70 of them… yes they were not on any social site. They used fake names and joined,”* |
| 3-Convenience of easily-accessible resources | * *The point is that now that you upload all the lectures, I do not really have to sit in the class and note every single thing, I can easily be in the peace of mind, --- try to understand, dissolve what I can, not be concerned about writing down notes….”* * *“When we had our physiology lectures we end up trying to get down all the notes, we miss a lot of what is being said, we should be listening more and writing less because the mind becomes diverted, so now we just listen to the lectures and review the uploaded lectures when we got back home.”* |
| 4-Motivation to attend classes | * *“we would be so curious, and the (uploaded) case would be so interesting that you wanted to know its answer and our colleagues would not be able to explain it as well as the teacher if we missed the class that’s why I think everybody attended physiology lectures, very few absentees”.* * *“you must have noticed that you have more than 90% percent attendance or higher than that in all of your class and you are never forcing people to attend it and then there are teachers who are threatening us to fail us and they are like why don’t you attend our classes and they are never point towards themselves that maybe if we make it more interesting; why would we go to a lecture we thought was not useful.”* |
| 5-Motivation for self study and research | * *“ I admit I normally don’t feel motivated enough to study but when there is [an uploaded] case it arouses my interest, I want to know about what the patient has, why he has it, then I would end up opening the book, using the net, so I can find out about it”* * *“I was always interested in physiology but it has increased because of the page. When you would give us cases we would end up opening our books to see what it was all about and discuss amongst ourselves”* * *“yes mam we would read before coming to class, we would read up related material from the text book as well as other resources before coming for the lecture, because we knew what was going to be discussed and wanted to come prepared to class”* * *“yes I did it [research answers on the uploaded case] one or more times, and then later you would upload the answers we would find out for sure”* * *“With uploaded cases, even if we didn’t understand something we would research on the net and try to answer the given question…, we never felt the need to research before, only referred to our books .. when the case was put up , I researched on the net and it resolved a lot of my confusions”* |
| 6-Easier communication with teacher especially for shy students | * *“..in class we are hesitant; generally afraid that the teacher might scold us. There is a communication gap with teachers and we cannot express ourselves freely face to face in class. We are scared, but on Facebook raising questions and having them answered is easier.”* * *“if you know this person is going to assess you and you are meeting them face to face. I think it takes a lot of courage to walk up to somebody who will assess you, and face them and ask a ridiculous question, and it’s ok, if they didn’t feel like answering it they wouldn’t., this I can do whenever I want and you can do whenever you want”* * *“ I myself was hesitant asking questions before, if i say something wrong other students may make fun of me and talk about it later as well and you stop asking questions after a while because of this reaction from peers, there are even some teachers who snub the students who ask questions saying that we are disturbing the class by asking questions. On the page even if you say something wrong that does not get dragged on , students don’t keep discussing it. After experience of answering and asking questions on Facebook I feel more confident about asking questions or answering them in the real classroom”* * *“ …but I have seen students who do not really talk in the class, on the page they don’t really tell that we are the students , but they easily convey the stuff. It’s very easy for them”* * *“I notice that a lot of the other girls, who didn’t speak in class or anything actually commented and they were like out there…I see them around and notice their confidence level and everything and I know they wouldn’t normally do something like this, face to face to a teacher, but on Facebook they are commenting and they are talking to other people about it, and they are not comfortable in class but at least they are doing it on the internet where they don’t actually have to face the person”* * *“With shy students they can hide their identities from others and ask questions on the page. I am confident about asking questions in class, but my own friends would ask me to ask questions on their behalf in class, but on Facebook they make comments”* * *“even now I am talking to you confidently but in class the atmosphere is strange and I wouldn’t have felt confident asking you a question. May be now I can do it”* |
| 7-Lurkers also learning | * *“they [people in my group] mostly 'like' the post and replay the uploaded videos, and later we would all be discussing about it.”* * *“..even if they are not actively participating they are reading the MCQ or whatever is on the page, …something remains in the mind, for example an MCQ comes, they have seen the MCQ, they have seen the answers, you have posted the real answer, so it’s there in their mind, … Even if they do not want to participate somewhere in their mind, a space is made, they could recall it”* * *“Hmm, it’s like I am not participating (actively on facebook) yet then I am able to learn a lot. Like when you upload a case or any topic I look for the answers , after seeing that I read it in my text book ‘n it feels easy ‘n I guess other students are also doing it in the same way….“yeah, I read them [comments given by other students in response to uploaded MCQs]... sometimes they are helpful as they clarify the concepts like why the other option cannot be correct”* |
| 8-Learning beyond the classroom | * “*mam I am logged in all day. I keep telling my mother, what was posted that day, and ask her if she has any similar problem as the uploaded case”* * *“It’s like you go home and you don’t expect it and it’s like there, it’s a reminder you know. I like the fact that on the internet it’s always around you. Over here it’s school, college and then you go home…you are constantly connected you know…not constantly thinking of it but you are aware of it, everything you check your notifications, you are like alright physiology, even if it is for 5 seconds it’s part of your life…like this profession is…..completely takes over your life”* |
| 9-Peer learning | * “*you see ma'am there are students who grasp things naturally and some don’t, so if someone were to ask a question (on the page) others would answer and communicate and discuss. That would increase the knowledge of the person who is answering the question as well as us who were asking the question”* * *“I can know my senior colleagues, I have made a lot of friends through the page ..with senior students”* * *“..like people randomly post pictures and everything and I think there were a couple of videos that were like really amazing … I wouldn't have stumbled upon them on our own”* * *“Look there were a couple of times when you (referring to the first author who was the administrator of the group) weren’t present (online) and a couple of girls themselves tried to explain things and the fact that they were trying to do that helped a lot, because everyone explains in their way and sometimes one student’s way of explaining is different than others”* * *“It’s like a group study kind of thing. All of my friends are there, teachers are linked with us…it’s like a mini class room or something…, so it’s better than studying individually in my own room or something”* * *“… even when the answer would be there. We would still discuss it amongst ourselves, about particular aspects of the case, finally discussing the cases a lot and it would help clear our concepts further…..especially with clinical cases one girl would diagnose something incorrectly or miss something and another would correct her, then we would think that yeah that was also a point we should have thought of”.* |
| 9-Better information on academic activities | * *“The thing is we don’t have everybody’s contact numbers, so if one girl knows some important information and can’t tell everybody, she can post it, because everyone opens Facebook, notifications come automatically and everyone can look up the information.”* * *“With the physiology page we remain up-to-date about upcoming competitions, tests, revision classes. It’s more convenient than watching bulletin boards”* |