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# Social Media Use by Residents and Faculty in Otolaryngology Training Programs

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Despite the growth of social media in healthcare, the appropriateness of online friendships between otolaryngological residents and attendings is poorly defined in the current literature. This issue is of growing importance, particularly as residency programs increasingly utilize social media as a means of connecting with and evaluating applicants due to limited in-person experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our objective was to better understand the prevalence of and concerns surrounding social media use between residents and faculty.

**Methods:** This study sent out 2 surveys in 2017 to all United States Otolaryngology residency program directors to disperse to their residents and attendings, respectively.

**Results:** We received a response from 72 residents and 98 attendings. Our findings show that social media is commonly used by both residents and attendings, and most residents have at least 1 online friendship with an attending. Resident and attending opinions diverge on topics such as appropriateness of use, privacy settings, and professionalism.

**Conclusions:** We call on residency programs to delineate a transparent social media policy so applicant expectations on social media are clear.

## Keywords

residency training, residency program director, resident education, academic leadership, surgical training

Social media use in healthcare is growing and it is gradually being recognized as more than just a tool for communication. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to limit in-person experiences, residency programs have turned to social media to connect with applicants.<sup>1</sup> Despite this growing use of social media across medical specialties including otolaryngology,<sup>2</sup> there has been no study on specific utilization rates or attitudes toward social media in otolaryngology. The appropriateness of online friendships between otolaryngological residents and attendings is poorly defined in the current literature. Our objective was to describe the rates of social media use, online friendships between residents and attendings, and concerns surrounding these relationships in the setting of otolaryngological training programs.

In 2017, we sent out 2 surveys to 106 United States Otolaryngology residency program directors to disperse to their residents and attendings, respectively. Our questions focused on social media use and user opinions regarding potential negative consequences. To ensure resident and attending anonymity, no identifying information was tracked. A statistical analysis using Likert-scale response options was conducted, that is, the response options Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree, were converted to the numerical values 1, 2, 3, 4,

and 5, respectively. Mann–Whitney *U* tests were used to compare responses between the 2 cohorts.

There were 72 initial resident respondents, and 91.7% (66/72) completed the survey in its entirety. Of the 98 initial attending respondents, 75.5% (74/98) completed the survey in its entirety. Our results show that most residents and attendings in Otolaryngology use social media. Of those

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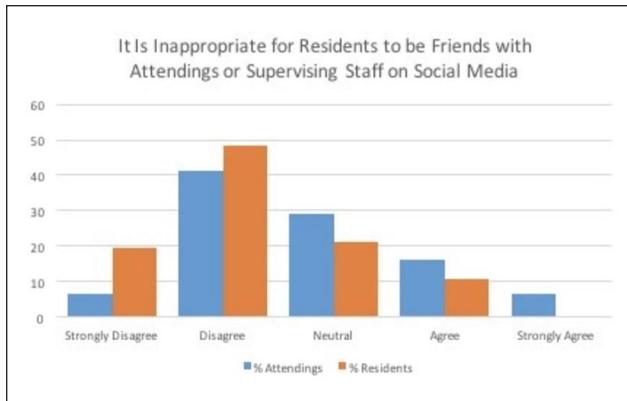
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**Figure 1.** Percentage responses by attendings and residents to “I believe it is inappropriate for residents to be friends with their supervising staff/attendings on social media.” N = 75 attendings, N = 66 residents.

responding to our survey, 95.8% of residents and 80.6% of attendings have a social media account. This is consistent with other studies, which show that a majority of residents and attendings from other surgical specialties are active on social media.<sup>3</sup>

Two-thirds of residents reported currently being friends with at least 1 supervising attending, suggesting that online friendships between these groups are common. Interestingly, more residents (68.2%) than attendings (48%) agree that online friendships between these 2 groups are appropriate (Figure 1). Regarding the prompt, “I believe resident-attending social media friendships are inappropriate,” attending group scores were significantly higher than resident group scores (Median 3 vs 2;  $P = .005$ ). This discrepancy between the responses demonstrates the different beliefs between the 2 groups regarding professionalism and boundaries between work and personal life. This may also reflect a generational difference given the age gap between the 2 groups and does not seem to be due to the notion that such friendships indicate bias, as a majority of both groups disagreed with this statement on the survey.

Resident and attending opinions seem to diverge the most when asked about hiding their accounts when applying for a new position, with 78.8% of residents compared to only 36.5% of attendings in agreement with the prompt. This effort to avoid any negative attention based on social media presence specifically in the application season is reasonable, as program directors do consider applicants’ social media to check for unprofessional behavior as a factor in their overall rank lists.<sup>3</sup> The recently retracted #medbikini study described 26% of social media accounts of young vascular surgeons as “unprofessional,” prompting a discussion on what it means to be unprofessional and bringing unfair biases against female residents into light.<sup>4</sup> Not only does this demonstrate the subjectivity of “unprofessionalism,” but

also explains why residents may be concerned about perceived judgment from their superiors when posting on social media.

Due to the cancellation of many in-person activities during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, residency programs are increasingly using social media to create a brand for themselves as a way to attract students.<sup>5</sup> Programs have also used social media as a platform for virtual open houses or virtual sub-internships. These innovative alternatives to in-person interviews allow students to connect with existing residents and have a better understanding of the program. Conversely, connecting with applicants on social media gives programs a glimpse of the medical student outside of their formal application.

Due to the many advantages of social media in a virtual interview season, residency program participation in social websites has nearly exploded in the past year. Of 118 Otolaryngological programs, 74 participate on Instagram, with 51 of those accounts being created in the year 2020 alone.<sup>1</sup> The substantially higher growth rate in 2020 is true for other media such as Facebook and Twitter as well.<sup>1</sup> Despite this rapid growth in social media usage, our findings, albeit from 2017, show clear discrepancies in resident and attending opinions surrounding appropriateness of social media use, privacy settings, and professionalism standards. As experienced by a general surgery applicant, the lack of transparent rules and regulations set by residency programs leaves students unsure on how to approach programs on social media.<sup>6</sup>

We call on residency program directors and faculty to set standard etiquette for engaging with residency programs and even faculty on social media. Some medical schools, such as the University of Nevada, Reno and the University of Tennessee have instituted social media policies, with a focus on HIPAA compliance, for all graduate medical trainees.<sup>7,8</sup> Certain medical specialties have also outlined a social media policy for current residents, such as The University of Nebraska Medical Center Department of Internal Medicine.<sup>9</sup> However, at the time of this writing, there is no social media policy that addresses prospective residents during their application cycle.

Establishing expectations may have been understandably difficult in 2020, when even residency program directors were met with unprecedented challenges. However, with no foreseeable end to virtual interviews, and the rapid increase in the use of social media for program advertising and applicant recruitment, setting clear social media expectations is more important now than ever. Our request is consistent with a strong recommendation made by the Council of Residency Directors Social Media Task Force, which stated that every residency program should develop a social media policy.<sup>10</sup>

Our study is limited in its external validity. To ensure anonymity, no identifying information about the participant

or program was collected and all data was viewed in an aggregate form. It is possible that all or most respondents are from a small number of programs or from programs in a similar geographic region, and therefore may not be representative of Otolaryngologic residency programs across the nation.

The authors of this study hope to add to the literature surrounding perceptions toward social media use in the medical field. A majority of otolaryngologists use social media and agree that attending-resident online friendships are appropriate, but greater discussion is needed to standardize what is considered professional online behavior. Such research becomes increasingly important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as social media becomes a primary method of engagement between applicants and residency programs. We call on residency programs to delineate a transparent social media policy so applicant expectations on social media are clear.

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