

# Navigating social media as a medical student

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Social media is part of everyday life for most of us, with an estimated 99% of medical students using Instagram, Snapchat, X, or YouTube, and up to 75% multiple times a day. While use of social media supports connection, learning and self-expression, it's important to remember that once you enter medical training, your online activity begins to intersect with your professional standards. From the first day of placement, professional standards apply – not only in clinical settings, but also online. Understanding how social media fits within these expectations helps you build good habits early and protect your future career.

## The importance of social media boundaries

Your digital footprint is being formed during training, not after graduation. Posts, comments, images and interactions can be shared, saved or revisited long after they were created, even if they feel informal or private at the time.

There can be real consequences for students when boundaries are crossed. These may include university disciplinary processes, placement concerns, reputational harm, or regulatory issues later in practice. The aim isn't to discourage social media use, but to ensure it reflects sound judgement and professionalism.

## What are my professional and legal boundaries online?

### Professional standards apply online

Professional behaviour extends to online spaces. Even when posting in a personal capacity, content can influence public trust in the profession, particularly if you are identifiable as a medical student.

Key expectations include communicating respectfully, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and avoiding content that could undermine confidence in the professionalism.

### Confidentiality and privacy concerns

Patient confidentiality applies online in exactly the same way that it does in person. Sharing clinical stories, images or experiences, even when names are removed, can still breach privacy if individuals could reasonably be identified through context, timing, or detail. Privacy risks can also arise from photos taken in clinical settings, background information in images, screenshots or private messaging. Once shared, information can be difficult to fully remove.

### Defamation and online commentary

Comments made online are subject to the same defamation laws as spoken or written statements. While the right to freedom of expression is recognised, there is no place for discrimination, racism, or intolerance in the medical profession, including online. Posting negative, emotional or unverified comments about supervisors, placements, colleagues or organisations can create legal and professional risk.

A useful rule of thumb is to avoid posting anything you wouldn't be comfortable saying publicly, professionally or formally.

### Maintaining healthy boundaries

Clear boundaries help protect both students and patients. This includes maintaining appropriate distance online, particularly around patient contact.

Accepting friend or follow requests from patients, former patients or their relatives can blur professional lines and create expectations that are difficult to manage. Where possible, keeping personal and professional accounts separate can help maintain clarity.

## Simple actions you take now can protect

# professionalism and patient trust

Developing safe social media habits doesn't require perfection – just consistency and awareness.

## Golden rules

- Protect patient privacy at all times
- Maintain professional boundaries, online and offline
- Avoid venting about placements, colleagues or patients
- Be respectful and culturally safe
- Only share information within your scope as a medical student and based on evidence

## Before you post, ask?

- Would I be comfortable if a patient, supervisor or future employer saw this?
- Does this respect privacy, professionalism and trust?
- Could this be misunderstood or taken out of context?

## Simple steps you can take to protect your digital footprint

1. Review your privacy settings and revisit them regularly
2. Check what appears publicly when you search your name
3. Pause before posting when emotions are high
4. Seek guidance early – advice now can prevent unnecessary issues later

## If you are uncertain about how to do something on social media...

- Consult your medical school
- Check the guidelines provided by the AMA
- Contact MIPS for 24/7 Medico-legal Advice on 1300 698 573

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## References:

1. Australian Medical Association (AMA). A guide to social media & medical professionalism. The tips and traps every doctor and medical student should know. Available at: [https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020%20AMA%20Social%20Media%20Guide%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://ama.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020%20AMA%20Social%20Media%20Guide%20FINAL_0.pdf) (accessed January 2026).
2. Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Social media: how to meet your obligations under the National Law. Available at: <https://www.ahpra.gov.au/Resources/Social-media-guidance.aspx> (accessed January 2026).
3. Azer SA et al. Use of social media and professional attitude and beliefs of medical students and interns. Should social media use be part of professional assessment? *Medicine (Baltimore)* 2025;104(28):e43114.

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