

## Article

# Social media in school health promotion: the need for institutional and professional development

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### Abstract

The progressive increase in youth use of social media can have implications for health. This study explores how school professionals working with health promotion (HP) position their practices at the intersection between the challenges and potential opportunities posed by social media. Empirical data were produced from seventeen semi-structured interviews with various school professionals from state-funded and private schools in Sweden where HP is a shared responsibility among many professionals including nurses, psychologists, special educators, principals and teachers. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis was informed by practice theory. Three themes were generated: (i) navigating an ambiguous terrain of professional practice; (ii) reconfiguring HP practice in relation to student social media use and (iii) social media as resources for HP. The findings indicate that school professionals are reconfiguring HP practice around the increased challenges invoked by students' social media use but are also aware that social media can be fruitfully operationalized in school HP. Professional attempts at harnessing the health-promoting potential of social media are limited to individual initiatives, possibly in relation to a lack of clear policy directives that inform actions and assign responsibilities where social media are concerned. School professionals recognize a need for professional learning to keep abreast of students' highly dynamic use of social media. The study underscores the need for professional development but argues that this development needs to be grounded in a comparable institutional one, for example by reformulating and updating policies to be more professionally supportive.

**Keywords:** social media, health promotion, professional development, school institutions

### Contribution to Health Promotion

- School policies need to have explicit directives that prescribe responsibility domains where social media are concerned to avoid confusions.
- School professionals working with health promotion face many challenges and need institutionally provided professional development opportunities.
- Professional initiatives not supported by solid institutional structures can remain fragmented and isolated and may lead to work overloads.
- The study results can be used to map out avenues for relevant institutional development, e.g. policy reformulation.

### INTRODUCTION

The promotion of student health has long been a school concern (Lavin *et al.*, 1992), not only because schools have a societal and moral responsibility for fostering student well-being but also because health is closely linked to school performance and academic achievement (Klassen *et al.*, 2023; Oberle *et al.*, 2023). School health promotion (HP) is a professional practice that entails appropriate responses to student needs as well as a parallel organizational development that sustains this responsibility (Dadaczynski *et al.*, 2020). School HP faces numerous challenges including shortages in relevant professional training opportunities (Otten *et al.*, 2022; Dinamarca-Aravena, 2023), and the performative logic pervasive in modern schools which can lead to the prioritization

of pedagogical over HP activities in terms of resource allocation (Danielsen *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the inherently dynamic and situated HP is enacted within a framework of institutional regulations (Higgins and Booker, 2022), thus calling for a delicate balance between contextual responsiveness and institutional compliance (Carlsson, 2015).

The overarching goals of school HP are ensuring student wellbeing (physical, mental) and supporting academic performance (Iudici, 2015). The attainment of these goals is contingent on several factors such as institutional support, solid knowledge and continuous professional development (Young *et al.*, 2013; Boot *et al.*, 2015; Carlsson, 2016; Otten *et al.*, 2022; Reinius *et al.*, 2022). HP is also a socially oriented practice that should take into account and address health-relevant

social variables and developments (Judici, 2015). In fact, the success of school HP initiatives is highly linked to contextual sensitivity and societal responsiveness (Colquhoun, 2005; Dadaczynski et al., 2020). One of the major changes that have impacted modern society is the widespread use of social media (Young et al., 2016). Social media have been defined as ‘a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content’ [(Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), p. 61]. Social media use has become a significant daily activity among many school students across countries and settings (Scott et al., 2019; Boniel-Nissim et al., 2023; Internetstiftelsen, 2023; Paraskeva et al., 2024).

Youth in Sweden use social media extensively. According to the Swedish media council (This council is now merged within the Swedish agency for media.), the percentage of youth using social media has doubled in the age group 13–17 years and quadrupled in the age group 9–12 years between 2012 and 2019 (Statens medieråd, 2019). In 2023, despite social media use dropping by 10% among 9- to 12-year-olds, the number of high users (i.e. use more than 3 hours daily) increased in this same age group (Statens medieråd, 2023). In conjunction with this increase, national bodies such as the Swedish public health and media agencies have voiced concerns about how social media use may affect health and called for developing more knowledge about how to facilitate a balanced and healthy use among youth (Folkhälsomyndigheten and Mediemyndigheten, 2023).

According to the Swedish internet foundation (Internetstiftelsen, 2023), youth in Sweden favour a variety of social media platforms including YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok and Roblox. This suggests that they engage in a variety of activities on social media where miscellaneous platforms provide various affordances and constraints that facilitate different activities such as sharing, posting and interacting with other users. These activities can have various implications for health. For example, using social media to search for information can affect help-seeking behaviours while using them to watch videos may be associated with exposure to health-risky content (Barqawi et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2023). Sharing personal experiences (e.g. about mental health issues) can be either a source of support or a psychological burden (Brown et al., 2020). With the rapid development of social media platforms in terms of types, features, functionalities and popularity, the patterns of youth use and the subsequent health implications change rather dynamically (Weller, 2016; Statens medieråd, 2023). In this uncertain situation, it is important to understand how institutional practices such as school HP react and adapt. This is particularly relevant in Sweden where school HP policies lack concrete prescriptions about how professionals should address students’ digital activities (Elsayed et al., 2023).

The increase in social media use represents both an opportunity and a challenge for school HP work. On the one hand, social media platforms can be used to disseminate health-promoting information to students (Hirvonen et al., 2021; Taba et al., 2023), or increase their awareness about issues such as mental or sexual health problems thus complementing institutional health education initiatives (O’Reilly et al., 2019; Fowler et al., 2022). On the other hand, school professionals need to address the health risks occasionally invoked by students’ social media use including exposure to health

misinformation (Atehortua and Patino, 2021; Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez, 2021), and mental health issues precipitated by unrealistic social comparisons (Flynn et al., 2022) or cyberbullying (Li et al., 2023). The Fifth European Conference on Health-Promoting Schools highlighted the importance of including a social media dimension in school HP, but acknowledged that ‘so far, school HP has only partially tapped the potential and challenges of digital media’ [(Dadaczynski et al., 2020), p. 18].

Incorporating a social media dimension in school HP entails that school professionals respond to health risks related to student social media use while remaining amenable to exploiting the health-promoting potential of social media (Hirvonen et al., 2021; Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez, 2021). This calls not only for professional astuteness but also for professional learning and development. School professionals have previously indicated that their rather fragmented understanding of students’ engagement with social media can undermine relevant HP practices (Hjetland et al., 2021a; Papageorgiou et al., 2022). There have been calls for upscaling professional competencies to respond to student needs associated with social media use (Somerville and Brady, 2019). Professional development is deeply intertwined with various institutional variables including organizational workloads, leadership styles and available resources (Jönsson et al., 2019; Higgins and Booker, 2022; Paakkari et al., 2024). Thus, the availability and utilization of development opportunities may be affected by institutional shortcomings or conflicts. In Swedish schools, where professionals are struggling with onerous workloads and exhaustion (Jönsson et al., 2019; Arvidsson et al., 2021), professional development (related to specific domains such as social media) may be difficult to plan and/or prioritize (Higgins and Booker, 2022).

While recent literature has profusely explored the links between social media use and youth perceived wellbeing (Beeres et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2021; Astleitner et al., 2023), it has been less prolific on how these links are addressed in institutional contexts such as schools (Beckman and Hellström, 2021; Hjetland et al., 2021a). We acknowledge the meaningfulness of exploring students’ experiences but argue that inquiries into the links between social media use and student health need to be complemented by an exploration of how these links are addressed in institutional settings particularly schools where youth spend a considerable amount of time from an early age. An exclusive focus on students’ perceptions risks undervaluing the structural and societal dimensions of health (Maller, 2015). We wish to extend existing literature by exploring how school professionals working with HP in Sweden position their practices at the intersection between the challenges and potential opportunities posed by social media. The research questions are:

- (i) How do school professionals make sense of and account for student social media use in the context of HP practice?
- (ii) How do school professionals make use of social media in their HP practice?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study adopts a sociological orientation to HP. This provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between professional actions, societal developments and

societally established structures such as school institutions (Thorogood, 2005; Goldman, 2012). The study is theoretically informed by practice theory which has been described as ‘a sociological project that promises to offer a better understanding of social phenomena’ [(Nicolini, 2017), p. 31]. Practice theory comprises a family of theoretical approaches that see practices as the basic components of social experiences and phenomena (Schatzki, 1996; Nicolini, 2012). Practices, as ‘organized sets of sayings and doings’ [(Schatzki, 2016), p. 129], come together with material arrangements (e.g. artefacts and events) to form practice bundles that occupy the practice plenum where social phenomena occur, evolve and change (Schatzki, 2019). Practices are inherently situated and can be negotiated and reconfigured depending on the context in which they unfold and on practitioners’ understandings of this context (Shove *et al.*, 2012).

Practices are organized through sets of teleoaffective structures, general understandings and rules. Teleoaffective structures are defined as the conceptual and emotional motivations for actions. General understandings and rules are respectively shared conceptualizations and formal instructions which inform, but not necessarily circumscribe, a practice (Schatzki, 2019). General understandings vary across cultures. Practitioners whose practices cut across cultures may need assistance from cultural intermediaries to bridge gaps in understanding thereby providing opportunities for revising concepts and upscaling performance (Welch and Warde, 2016). Developing a comprehensive understanding of a practice, requires not only investigating the actions performed within the practice (i.e. performance), but also the understandings and material events around which the practice is configured (Hui, 2016; Welch and Warde, 2016; Schatzki, 2019).

Material events (e.g. classroom layout) can lead to the reconfiguration of practice bundles. For example, they can make certain actions feasible (e.g. instruction) and others less so (e.g. group discussion) thus shaping future actions, a relation referred to as prefiguration (Schatzki, 2019). Using a practice approach in the current study provides an opportunity for understanding how (if at all) school HP practice is (re)arranged in relation to the increasing prevalence of social media use (as a material event). Exploring school HP as a practice plenum can contribute to a better understanding of the situatedness of HP activities, thereby informing the development of said activities in a manner that moves beyond individualistic understandings of health (Maller, 2015).

## METHODS

### Sampling and data production

Data were produced from semi-structured interviews conducted with school professionals in Sweden between spring 2021 and autumn 2022. In Sweden, there is no designated subject matter for health education. School HP is a joint responsibility among various professionals such as teachers (e.g. within biology or physical education lessons), nurses, counsellors and special pedagogues (special needs educators responsible for adapting learning environments to student needs). There are no uniform institutional rules that prescribe how social media should be addressed in the context of school HP.

There are three types of schools in Sweden: municipal, independent and private. Municipal (owned by municipali-

ties) and independent (owned by independent actors) schools are stately funded while private schools are not. All schools follow national laws and curricula but enjoy some autonomy in adapting national regulations to local contexts. Schools are also allowed to recruit private providers for some HP services such as psychological support or special needs education.

In order to provide a multi-perspective understanding of how social media are addressed in various settings, a purposeful maximum variation sampling was used where school professionals from different professions, schools and municipalities were approached. This approach was complemented by a snow-balling technique where participants were asked to recommend other relevant actors from their professional networks for participation in the study (Tracy, 2012). Seventeen participants were interviewed. The participants included school leaders (who also lead the student health teams in each school), health care professionals such as nurses and psychologists, social care professionals such as social workers and school counsellors, special pedagogues and teachers (see Table 1 for details).

Considering the practice theory (with its sociological orientation) approach to this study, an in-depth interviewing technique was used. In-depth interviewing provides ‘a meaningful opportunity to study and theorize about the social world’ (Miller and Glassner, 2016). An interview guide was used as a point of departure for each interview. The guide included inquiries about various aspects of HP practices related to students’ digital activities such as how participants understood students’ digital activities (including social media) and whether they thought these activities had an impact on school HP practices. The interviewer also inquired about whether any digital tools were used for HP at the participant’s school. Study participants were encouraged to expand on the cultural and institutional frames of their experiences. As the interview was semi-structured there was flexibility in terms of formulating situationally appropriate follow-up questions. Moreover, participants were given room to bring up other topics they found relevant thereby encouraging engagement and reflexivity (Orbuch, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 2016; Miller and Glassner, 2016). Interviews lasted on average 45 minutes. They were audio recorded then transcribed verbatim.

### Data analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021). The analysis, informed by practice theory (Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2019), started by an in-depth reading of the transcripts for data familiarization. This was followed by descriptive semantic coding to generate domain summaries capturing the range of empirically relevant topics raised by participants. In the reflexive variant of thematic analysis, these domains are not seen as themes because thematization is conceptual not descriptive. However, generated domain summaries can be referred to within themes. The domain summaries included empirically relevant issues that the participants frequently problematized. Thereafter, a stage of conceptual latent (i.e. goes beyond surface meaning) coding was undertaken where conceptually founded patterns of meaning cutting across the domain summaries were identified (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2021). This stage was informed by practice theory. For example, the domain summaries showed that professionals were adjusting their practices in relation to some perceived challenges. During

**Table 1:** Description of study participants

Participants	Profession	Work experience (years)	Employer <sup>a</sup>	Student cohort
P1	Teacher	5	Municipal school	Middle and lower secondary
P2	Counsellor	4	Private school	Lower secondary
P3	Teacher	5	Private school	Lower secondary
P4	Principal	10	Independent school	Lower secondary
P5	Vice principal	11	Independent school	Upper secondary
P6	Vice principal	5	Independent school	Upper secondary
P7	Nurse and vice principal	7	Independent school	Upper secondary
P8	Psychologist	6	Municipality	Heterogenous <sup>b</sup>
P9	Nurse	10	Municipal school	Lower secondary
P10	Principal	5	Municipal school	Lower secondary
P11	Social worker	2	Non-profit organization	Heterogenous <sup>b</sup>
P12	Teacher	45	Independent school	Lower secondary
P13	Nurse	3	Municipal	Preschool and elementary
P14	Special pedagogue	14	Private provider	Heterogenous <sup>b</sup>
P15	Counsellor	6	Municipal school	Middle and lower secondary
P16	Special pedagogue	20	Municipal school	Upper secondary
P17	Special pedagogue	7	Municipal school	Elementary and lower secondary

<sup>a</sup>At the time of the interview.

<sup>b</sup>Participant works with student cohorts from different ages and/or schools.

conceptual coding we were able to position adaptations to various challenges (domain summaries underlined three recurrent and practice-relevant challenges: cyberbullying, uncritical peer comparisons and health misinformation on social media) as reconfigurations of practices around social media as a material event.

The conceptual codes were iteratively contrasted against the domain summaries then condensed into themes. The themes were informed by practice theory concepts (such as reconfiguration, material events and teleoaffective structures), but also related to domain summaries to ensure they were both theoretically informed and grounded in participants' lived experiences and thus accessible and relatable to a broader audience (Sandelowski and Leeman, 2012). The first author coded the data. Single-researcher coding is a typical practice in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Themes were iteratively discussed and refined among the authors. Quote selection was made to showcase the findings and was informed by the authenticity and argument principle described by Lingard (Lingard, 2019), where quotes are succinct, analytically illustrative and representative of participants' accounts.

### Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Board (Dnr 2021-03699). All participants signed informed consent forms. Data were anonymized, stored on a secure university server and processed in accordance with the GDPR (IMY [Swedish Authority for privacy protection], 2018). For the sake of anonymity, participants are referred to in this text by *Px* where *x* is the serial number given to the participant's interview in the data set. An ethically responsible and responsive stance has been maintained throughout the data production, analysis and dissemination phases (Markham, 2018).

## RESULTS

Three themes were generated: (i) navigating an ambiguous terrain of professional practice, (ii) reconfiguring HP practice in relation to student social media use and (iii) social media as resources for HP work. A summary of the findings is presented in Figure 1.

### Navigating an ambiguous terrain of professional practice

This theme describes participants' struggles with defining the domains of professional responsibility in relation to students' social media use. The theme highlights the tension between participants' commitment to fostering students' wellbeing and their understanding of HP as an institutionalized practice that needs to be performed within policy prescribed remits.

Participants noted that student conflicts that started on social media were often carried over to school thereby affecting student mental health (e.g. anxiety related to cyberbullying or social rivalry), cognitive focus (distraction) and occasionally school attendance (absenteeism due to peer disputes on social media). They also noticed that students sometimes engaged in unhealthy behaviours (e.g. extreme dieting) related to exposure to misinformation or peer pressure on social media. Participants experienced a tension between the recognition that students' use of social media had health implications, and the understanding that it was institutionally not a school imperative to account for social media use in HP work.

A teacher emphasized that students' social media use cannot be seen as a school responsibility because *'it doesn't happen during school hours, and it doesn't happen on school platforms'* (P1). P1 acknowledged the potential health effects of risky exposures on social media and kept an eye on students' social media use but described this vigilance as a personal initiative, remarking that *'it is not something we are obliged to keep track of'* (P1). Here, P1 tried to reconcile a moral commitment to student HP (which seems to increasingly require a

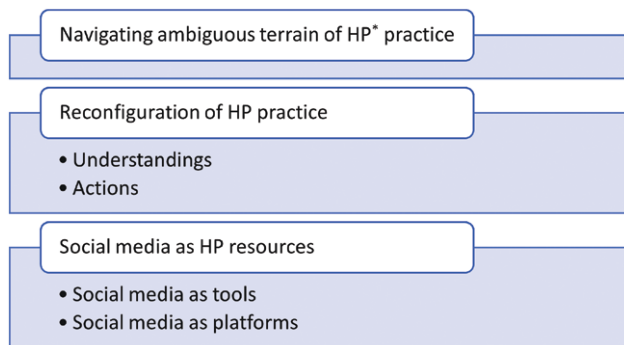


Fig. 1: Summary of findings. \*HP: health promotion.

social media dimension) with the institutional rules that govern the practice by framing any HP work she does in relation to students' social media use as a personal initiative rather than a professional task.

A vice principal (P5) also problematized the responsibility domains. P5 pointed out that professionals realized they needed to address health-related social media issues. However, that could be problematic when health challenges arose within student communications that were not by default visible to professionals. P5 explained *'we can't go in and spy on what they are doing on Tik Tok or yes you know'*.

Another vice principal (P6) indicated that outlining a precise domain of professional responsibility in relation to students' social media use was problematic describing it as walking a *'fine line'* but also reflected:

They live large parts of their lives online and yes that time counts as well... It is not the school's responsibility to monitor their behavior, but things that spill over to school time are definitely the school's responsibility (P6).

The fluid arrangements (in terms of space/time) of social media have apparently blurred the boundaries between what happens inside and outside school generating uncertainties about what counts as a school responsibility. Several participants now perceive that strictly adhering to institutional rules (do not literally prescribe social media activities as a domain of professional action) challenges not only their moral codes but also the fulfilment of HP goals, thus creating a tension between the teleoaffectivity of the practice and the rules informing it.

### Reconfiguring HP practice in relation to student social media use

This theme describes what can analytically be seen as a practice reconfiguration, i.e. the rearrangement of professional practice around social media use as a material event. This reconfiguration involves a conceptual dimension represented by developing a better understanding of students' social media use and a performative dimension represented by reconfiguring actions to emerging challenges.

#### Developing a better understanding of students' social media use

Participants indicated that the health challenges they faced among students (e.g. mental health issues) were exacerbated by what they described as risky social media behaviours (e.g.

cyberbullying). However, they pointed out that their professional understanding of how these challenges evolved was not fully developed, possibly because they lacked a full-fledged comprehension of *how* students used social media, e.g. communication dynamics on different platforms. A school counsellor stressed the importance of developing a better understanding of students' social media use, highlighting the need for professional learning: *'the goal is that it shouldn't be a foreign world for adults...but if we can't, then we have to learn'* (P15).

A teacher turned to his own children to provide insights into *'how this type of world operates within that age group'* (P3). The teacher thought this helped him be more responsive and proactive in HP work. Thus, P3 enlisted the help of cultural intermediaries to gain conceptual accessibility to students' *'worlds'* and used the newly gained insights to improve professional practice.

#### Reconfiguring professional action to emerging challenges

Participants described how they needed to adjust their actions in response to social media-invoked challenges. Three professional challenges were repeatedly highlighted across the data set: cyberbullying, uncritical comparisons on social media and health misinformation. We will use these challenges to present informative examples of practice reconfiguration.

##### Cyberbullying

Participants indicated that what they described as cyberbullying had been progressively increasing among students, thus posing an HP challenge that was rather difficult to assess and control because it was quite extensive and took place on platforms not necessarily visible to school professionals. Some professional actions were suggested to address this challenge including moderation and fostering students' critical competencies. It was also argued that isolated professional actions were not sufficient and that parallel policy development was needed.

A school counsellor pointed out that adult moderation of students' social media use can be a temporary solution: *'If we have a class chat, for example, where lots of crap gets said, we try to include an adult in that group. Then the students start their own class chats [laughs]'* (P15).

A special pedagogue suggested that fostering student competence was more pragmatic, pointing out that *'we must learn to develop children and young people's competences to react when something is wrong'* (P14).

A teacher emphasized that school policies needed to be updated in tandem with increased student social media use:

I think it's also really something that should have been included in the curriculum itself, in the policy documents, in school, how to actually behave online because the digital world will only get bigger and bigger (P1).

Study participants are then not only suggesting a reconfiguration of HP practice at a performative level, i.e. professional actions (P15 and P14) but also referring to institutional strategies that can support these actions (P1).

##### Uncritical comparisons on social media

Participants noticed that students were increasingly engaging in what they described as uncritical peer comparisons on

social media thereby precipitating mental health problems such as anxiety or depression. Participants devised various situated responses to this challenge including individual counselling (reactive approach) and class discussions (proactive approach). A school counsellor explained:

I think like TikTtok, Instagram and so on, so what you choose to publish in such environments, so you only show your good days, so to speak. It's very nice people in nice surroundings who are happy, and you know there were no problems and stuff like that. It affects a lot because I notice in my conversations with students that many feel this way that everyone else is so freaking happy, why am I so terribly unhappy? And why am I a failure? And what is wrong with me? And that's not it, it's just that you kind of see a beautified picture of reality, so to speak. So, we try to talk a lot about that (P15).

Here, social media-based social comparison is acknowledged as a material event that can potentially undermine mental wellbeing thus calling for a reconfiguration of performance (promoting critical awareness).

#### *Exposure to health misinformation*

Participants thought that students' critical health awareness was insufficient to counteract exposure to misinformation on social media motivating them to take different actions. For example, a teacher (P3) noted that students' ability to discern fake health-related news was not well developed and responded by designing class activities to support critical awareness. One activity entailed that students searched individually for health-related information about the COVID-19 pandemic then discussed their findings in class under the teacher's supervision who then highlighted that some of the findings were fake news rather than trust-worthy information. P3 explained *'they kind of knew that there were fake news and false news. Like you know they know that, but they think it's obvious but it's not obvious'* (P3) [participant's emphasis].

Another teacher (P12) became aware that some students were exposed to social media videos that normalized risky health behaviours. The teacher gave the students her private phone number and urged them not to act upon any social media content (e.g. imitate) until they had sent her a message. The teacher could respond to students outside working hours (e.g. afternoons) thus creating an extra workload that was neither designed nor accounted for at the institutional level.

#### **Social media as resources for HP work**

This theme describes professional attempts at harnessing the health-promoting potential of social media in practice. There were sporadic (i.e. not mainstreamed in school nor described as typical practices) professional initiatives to make use of social media in HP either by using social media as learning tools for HP or by referring students to social media platforms for support or construction of health-relevant knowledge.

When using social media as a tool, the participant used a particular feature of a social media platform within a learning environment. For example, when using YouTube videos, students were shown a video in a learning context but did not use other platform features such as commenting or interact-

ing with other users. On the other hand, when referring students to social media platforms, the students could use the full range of affordances on a given platform, including sharing, posting and interacting with other users.

#### **Social media as health-promoting tools**

A teacher (P12) displayed educational YouTube videos addressing health issues in class. One HP challenge described by P12 was that students sometimes refrained from seeking health advice because they found it too revealing to bring up sensitive topics in school. The videos helped overcome this obstacle by providing neutral points of departure for group discussions particularly where mental and sexual health issues were concerned.

The video can then be seen as a material event introduced into an existent practice bundle (health education) to mediate it. The video serves to put health information (rather than the student) in focus thus allowing for a more inclusive practice where all students participate in discussions with no risk of exposure. P12 explained how this could be helpful in the case of mental HP *'they bring up all these psychological youth issues and start and so one can continue to talk about it'*.

#### **Social media as health-promoting platforms**

A school counsellor referred students (after counselling) to the youth centre webpage which provided health information and allowed students to share health-relevant experiences via social media platforms (e.g. Facebook). The counsellor explained that this approach gave the students a sense of fellowship: *'So, there's actually not just grownups telling the teenagers what to do but also teenagers giving advice to teenagers'* (P2).

A social worker (P11) started a Snapchat group for students where he published the school policy for digital activity, then deleted any student input not conforming with it. He strived to make students understand the link between cyberbullying and mental health and moderated the group activity in a way that consolidated this understanding. Here, P11 is using a social media platform as an HP resource but choosing to exert more professional agency (than P2 above) by moderating activities on said platform.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored how the opportunities and challenges related to social media use were addressed in school HP. Our findings indicate that school professionals are aware that social media can be resources for HP but are still struggling with how to manage the health concerns invoked by students' social media use. They struggle with issues such as exposure to health misinformation, cyberbullying and online social rivalry. These issues have previously been problematized by students (Hjetland *et al.*, 2021b) and school professionals (Hjetland *et al.*, 2021a) alike.

Our findings bespeak of a tension between the teleoaffective structure (orientation towards goals) of school HP and the institutional rules regulating the practice. School professionals seem to be questioning the institutional confinement of HP work to school perimeters. The arrangement is increasingly being perceived as a moral quandary. It is also seen as lacking in terms of contextual responsivity because the problems associated with students' social media spill over to school time. Some school professionals find that accounting

for students' social media use in school HP is a more moral and pragmatic approach to practice and include this dimension in their work despite the absence of supporting policy directives. Others frame any work they do in relation to students' social media use as a personal initiative rather than a professional responsibility thus satisfying their moral sense while remaining in conformation with institutional directives. Such changes in understanding are common to complex organizations (e.g. schools) engaging in self-reform (Diehl, 2019). Our findings resonate with prior empirical evidence of school professionals' struggles with the boundaries of responsibility in relation to students' social media use (Thunman *et al.*, 2018).

This negotiation of the boundaries of professional accountability signals a shift in the general understanding of school HP. General understandings, which inform practices (Schatzki, 2002), can be revised in tandem with social or cultural shifts (Welch and Warde, 2016). Changes in general understanding precipitate changes in practical intelligibility (what it makes sense to do) which then lead to changes in performance (Schatzki, 2002). In line with previous empirical findings (Hjetland *et al.*, 2021a; Papageorgiou *et al.*, 2022; El-Asam *et al.*, 2023), school professionals in this study expressed a need for professional learning about student social media use and the potential health risks therein. This need has probably developed in conjunction with a growing realization of a need for adding a social media dimension to school HP practices (Dadaczynski *et al.*, 2020).

Professionals described various changes in their HP practices (in terms of understanding and performance) which can collectively be seen as a reconfiguration of the practice (Schatzki, 2019). Students' social media use, a material event, prefigured HP practice, i.e. made some actions more reasonable than others. For example, the multiplicity of social media platforms and the smoothness with which students moved across them prompted some participants to seek to promote students' critical awareness rather than monitor or moderate their social media activities, the latter being perceived as a short-term and impractical approach. Previous research indicates that school professionals adjusting to contemporary societal developments find some professional actions more pragmatic or meaningful than others (Hjetland *et al.*, 2021a).

Most of the performance reconfigurations described by school professionals in this study were individual initiatives rather than institutionally prescribed actions. We argue that this individuality signals an institutional underdevelopment where institutional regulations have not sufficiently developed to accommodate societal developments. Professionals, who were faced with shifting student needs, were morally and practically compelled to devise appropriate practice strategies. However, these strategies were not designed nor recognized within formal institutional structures. As such, some of these strategies may end up having negative implications for the professional (e.g. stress), the practice (e.g. unsustainability) and the students (e.g. unequitable access to services). We will use a concrete example from the data to illustrate our reasoning.

A teacher (P12) supplied students with her private phone number (for consultation) in response to what she perceived as risky social media exposures with potentially serious health implications (Rutherford *et al.*, 2022). While the initiative demonstrates professional awareness and engagement, it may also be seen as unaccounted for institutional work. Taking

on more work, outside the remit of institutional frameworks (that would otherwise compensate by redistributing prior responsibilities), may create a considerable work overload and precipitate professional stress (McCuaig *et al.*, 2022). This stress can undermine both the efficiency and sustainability of school HP. Recent literature suggests that professionals' ability to delimit their work and sustain their own wellbeing is a meaningful competence in school settings (Paakkari *et al.*, 2024). Work overloads can lead to increased absenteeism or reduced productivity (Wong *et al.*, 2019, 2021) which would ultimately undermine school HP (Pursey *et al.*, 2022). Thus, a practice that draws heavily on personal initiatives without parallel institutional support may be self-deprecating in the long run.

Predominantly individualistic approaches to HP can also undermine students' equitable access to services where HP initiatives might differ by class allocation. In making this argument, we are not undermining the importance of flexibility and individual initiatives in HP work. In fact, in the inherently dynamic school setting (Imants and Van der Wal, 2020), professional agency and informed professional judgement underpin the success of school HP (Carlsson, 2015) and can be invaluable in crisis management (Torrance *et al.*, 2023). We are simply drawing attention to the benefits of having a regulatory umbrella for practice, under which professionals can efficiently operate, and students can have comparable access to support. Reinius *et al.* point out that despite the value of professional initiatives in schools they still need to be supported by organizational structures (Reinius *et al.*, 2022).

In this study, school professionals underlined the meaningfulness of overarching institutional directives that could support the reconfiguration of professional practice implying a need to bracket their situated responses within recognized institutional structures. Previous empirical findings indicate that school professionals value structure and agenda setting in HP contexts (Kostenius and Lundqvist, 2022). This is understandable considering that educational policies represent the discursive dimension of school practices thereby setting the practice agenda and permeating professional performance (Nicolini, 2012). Institutional directives can be seen as a form of sociopolitical knowledge that provides an '*infrastructure for coordinating shared work*' [(Markauskaite, 2017), p. 80]. As such, policies inform not only individual professional actions but also collective ones. Reconfiguration of school HP, an essentially multidisciplinary practice, can benefit from operating under an umbrella of shared regulations to avoid interprofessional conflicts that can undermine the practice (Danielsen *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, policy support has long been considered a key ingredient in the success of HP practices (WHO, 1986; Rütten and Gelius, 2011).

Policy development is not only beneficial in terms of coordinating professional actions but also in terms of professional development, e.g. by prescribing formal and systematic professional development opportunities. Professional learning and development are pivotal ingredients in upscaling school practices (Guerra *et al.*, 2019; Reinius *et al.*, 2022). In the present study, school professionals described professional learning in individual rather than institutional terms. For example, one teacher used his children as cultural intermediaries to provide insights into how students interacted on social media signalling a possible deficiency in formal training opportunities (Welch and Warde, 2016). Somerville and Brady argued that school professionals needed more formally

structured professional development opportunities to improve professional practices in relation to students' social media use (Somerville and Brady, 2019).

In the current study, there were sporadic individual professional attempts at exploiting the health-promoting dimension of social media in HP. While these attempts were not mainstreamed in school HP, they reflected an awareness of the potential value of social media as health-promoting resources and a professional willingness to reach out to students on the communication platforms they favour. There have been calls for exploiting the health-promoting potential of social media (Betton *et al.*, 2015). Goodyear and Armour highlighted the value of social media as HP resources in schools while O'Reilly *et al.* (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2019) suggested that an integration of school HP with a digital platform can be beneficial especially in terms of fostering students' critical health awareness (Goodyear and Armour, 2021).

Although participants in this study exhibited a consciousness of the HP opportunities as well as challenges posed by social media, the challenge discourse seemed to dominate their accounts. This resonates with prior empirical findings from both Norway (Hjetland *et al.*, 2021a) and the UK (O'Reilly, 2020). The seeming professional focus on the negative aspects of social media probably reflects a combination of (i) legitimate concerns grounded in scholarly knowledge (e.g. Gupta *et al.*, 2021; Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2023), (ii) a long-standing institutional unease regarding the moderation of students' social media use (Shariff and Hoff, 2007; Hinduja and Patchin, 2011) and (iii) a limited professional understanding of or control over students' social media use (Hjetland *et al.*, 2021a).

To sum up, social media can be seen as a noteworthy societal phenomenon that can no longer be ignored in school HP contexts. The progressive increase in social media use is gradually instigating a reconfiguration of school HP practices in terms of revised professional understandings and actions (Schatzki, 2019). However, this reconfiguration is not yet mainstreamed in daily HP work, possibly because it is not grounded in explicit institutional directives, and thus cannot be seen as a full institutional reorganization of the practice. We argue that these tentative practice reconfigurations can spur a larger-scale structural reorganization, but this will probably take more time and require professional as well as institutional development.

### Implications

The current findings signal a need for policy development in ways that can accommodate dynamic student needs and support relevant professional development. In the absence of supportive institutional structures (particularly policies), there is a risk that professional potential (e.g. initiative taking, willingness for development) will not be fully exploited. The innovative and societally responsive HP initiatives taken by professionals may remain isolated and fragmented rather than being an object of institutional commitment and collegial collaboration thus challenging the efficiency, sustainability and social relevance of school HP.

### Critical reflections

One strength of this study was the diversity of interviewed professionals (professional background, school type) which allowed for a multi-perspective understanding of professional responses to increased social media use. This was particu-

larly important in the context of the Swedish school where the absence of explicit policy directives (that prescribe how social media should be addressed in HP) calls for an exploration of the range of professional initiatives and understandings developed in this absence. The examination of HP as an institutional practice can also be seen as a strength. Practice approaches support a dynamic view of institutions (Nicolini, 2012), and can provide a better understanding of how HP performances evolve in response to human and material factors (Maller, 2015). Moreover, we capitalized on the plurality inherent to practice theory to develop a better understanding of the research interest, an approach that renowned theory proponents recommend (Nicolini, 2012; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Welch and Warde, 2016; Schatzki, 2019).

Although the findings are framed within the institutional context of the Swedish school, the professional challenges highlighted here are not necessarily unique to Sweden. Similar issues have been problematized in other countries (O'Reilly, 2020; Hjetland *et al.*, 2021a). Moreover, the findings can be conceptually informative to a broad range of HP practices not just those related to social media. Social media represents a societal development that school professionals had to account for in the absence of concrete institutional directives that prescribed institutionally required (or accepted) actions. Millennial societies are quite dynamic and other developments are probably forthcoming (e.g. the progressive use of artificial intelligence may contribute to health misinformation). Hence, schools need to stay in tandem with societal developments to provide upgraded socially meaningful practices. It is also important to concretely acknowledge the fostering of critical thinking in health (i.e. health literacy) among students (in physical as well as in virtual settings) as an institutional domain of action in modern schools.

## CONCLUSION

School professionals are reconfiguring their HP practices around the increased student use of social media. However, this reconfiguration has not yet amounted to a full reorganization of the practice possibly because it lacks a clear institutional directive to regulate it and support formal professional development opportunities. Professional attempts at harnessing the health-promoting potential of social media are still confined to individual initiatives. School professionals recognize a need for professional learning and development to keep abreast of students' highly dynamic use of social media. One important implication of our findings is that decision-makers need to expeditiously formulate clear directives that inform HP practices in relation to social media. Filling this policy void can ensure that practice reconfigurations be mainstreamed and accounted for in everyday school life. It can also provide an institutional framework for professional development and interprofessional collaboration. Potentially informative next steps could be exploring the intersections between professionals' institutionally informed HP practices (e.g. counselling) and students' socially oriented social media practices (e.g. posting, sharing) and how both sets of practices may co-shape each other.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Sixteen interviews were conducted by Hadil Elsayed and one



interview was conducted by Hadil Elsayed and Linda Bradley. Data coding and analysis were conducted by Hadil Elsayed. All authors revised and approved the generated themes. The first draft was written by Hadil Elsayed. The draft was revised by Linda Bradley, Mona Lundin and Markus Nivala. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our genuine gratitude to all the participants for taking the time to be interviewed and for providing us with valuable insights into their practices. We are also deeply grateful to Prof. Thomas Hillman for a very stimulating and inspiring theoretical discussion.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly because of the privacy of individuals that participated in the study and the conditions of the ethical approval granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Board (Dnr 2021-03699).

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