

# Assignment #1

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**Title:**

*Conference Paper SP1 2021*

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**Date Submitted:** 8/4/2021

**Word Count:** 1837 words

**URL (if applicable):**

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## Introduction

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow users to create peer to peer support groups which can cater to diverse communities, such as people with severe mental illnesses or chronic diseases and their carers, parent support groups and early career teachers. In the context of peer to peer support, social media platforms allow users to connect over large geographical distances at times that are convenient for them (Niela-Vilén et al., 2014, p. 1534). This is a significant advantage over traditional peer to peer support groups, which rely on members to be within reasonable proximity to each other and where meetings may be scheduled at times which may not suit all members.

Research indicates members of peer to peer support groups on online networks can achieve positive benefits whether they choose to engage with other members and share their experiences, or choose to use the group as a source of information and not engage with other members (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 114). This conference paper focuses on the Communities and Social Media stream and explores the benefits of using social media in a peer to peer support setting and whether these benefits outweigh the risks of potential negative attitudes and misinformation.

**Because peer to peer support groups on social media offer anonymity and the choice to selectively disclose information, the benefits of accessibility and overcoming distance and time barriers outweigh the risks of potential negative attitudes and misinformation.**

For some people, such as those with serious mental illnesses, there are barriers to accessing traditional peer to peer support, such as being socially isolated, having mistrust in the healthcare system and overcoming trauma (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 114). For these users, who are often labelled and stereotyped by their

illnesses, social media peer to peer support groups provide them with a platform where connections can be made with others who experience the same illnesses (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 114). Social media allows these users to share their experiences with other group members without the need to disclose their identity and also avoids some communication challenges, such as misinterpreting body language or social cues from other people. (Naslund et al., 2016, pp. 114-115). Peer to peer group members report experiencing a greater sense of belonging and being able to form strategies to cope with the challenges of living with mental illnesses (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 113).

Anonymity in social media peer to peer support groups can create other challenges such as being unable to confirm the validity of information being posted by group members (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 118). Some social media users in peer to peer support groups believe the information provided by other group members is better tailored to their needs when compared to information received from professionals (Niela-Vilén et al., 2014, p. 1534). Niela-Vilén et al. argue peer support must not replace evidence based professional support, but rather that it be considered a supplemental source of low cost health communication (Niela-Vilén et al., 2014, pp. 1534-1535). Similarly, Tan et al. argue users of social media peer to peer support groups without social support and mental health support networks in place may be more likely to experience negative experiences online (Tan et al., 2021, p. 670). However, studies suggest after searching for, or discussing mental illnesses online, people are more motivated to engage professional mental health care services (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 117). In some instances, this may also create an environment where a patient feels empowered to advocate for their healthcare needs and make their own, better informed decisions (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 117).

Anonymity can also provide a sense of safety to people with serious mental illnesses, and alleviate concerns about how they will be viewed by others (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 115). Studies suggest anonymity provided by social

media peer to peer groups allow a person's true self to be expressed as anonymity creates a barrier to feeling disapproval from others or being judged for making mistakes (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 115). In face to face settings, people with serious mental illnesses are at higher risk of being subjected to discrimination, violent crimes and abuse and social media peer to peer support groups may be the only way to reach some of the most isolated people in this cohort (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 118). For teachers, anonymity in social media peer to peer support groups provides a sense of privacy when they are seeking feedback as they could potentially be seen as unskilled by their employer (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018, p. 64).

Carers and patients with chronic illnesses may be geographically isolated from other carers or patients who understand what they are experiencing and may only be receiving support from their medical professionals (Gavrila et al., 2019, p. 495). For some patients this creates an environment where they feel isolated and connecting with others through social media peer to peer support addresses the issues of geographical isolation and not feeling understood by others (Gavrila et al., 2019, p. 497). Studies suggest people who contribute and help others in online peer to peer support groups feel empowered, more optimistic and better informed, which can improve their self-esteem (Gavrila et al., 2019, p. 496). In some instances, carers and patients with chronic illnesses have been able to connect with people in person and have given or received emotional, medical or technical support after being introduced online via a social media peer to peer support group (Gavrila et al., 2019, p. 496).

Previous studies have shown users of social media peer to peer support groups with health conditions report “(1) being better informed of their health condition; (2) feeling more confident in navigating the health system and their social environment; (3) feeling more able to accept their health condition; (4) feeling more optimistic and in control of their situation; (5) increased self-esteem; and (6) acting to improve their situation” (Tan et al., 2021, p. 662). For

caregivers, social media peer to peer support groups provide an avenue to discuss the health outcomes of the person they are caring for and to receive encouragement and positive support (Wilkerson et al., 2018, p. 110). Early career casual teachers find a sense of community in social media peer to peer support groups, which is unavailable to them due to the casual nature of their employment (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018, p. 71). This group of teachers often lack access to mentors, having permanent assigned spaces or being part of learning teams and social media peer to peer support groups can fill this gap (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018, p. 71).

Some individuals in social media peer to peer support groups may feel empowered in sharing their lived experiences and challenging stigmas with facts relating to their mental health conditions (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 116). There are concerns about the privacy of medical information shared online either by a patient or carer (Wilkerson et al., 2018, p. 110) and this poses a greater risk when social media peer support groups are not private and open to the general public for sharing and comments (Tan et al., 2021, p. 662). Administrators of social media peer to peer support groups need to consider the risks of exposing vulnerable groups of people to negative comments and misinformation (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 113). Users should also be made aware if their social media peer to peer support group is not moderated and where there are no professional healthcare workers or trained volunteers to assist with issues (Tan et al., 2021, p. 661). Tan et al. suggest social media peer to peer support groups are often managed by people who have lived experience of the same issues they are providing support for (e.g. mental health) (Tan et al., 2021, p. 661).

Some social media peer to peer support groups have positive downstream effects either for their members, or for communities connected to their members. Teachers who are unable to participate in professional development can be supported by their peers who may provide resources or ideas they would not have otherwise been exposed to (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018, pp. 71–72). In this

instance, their students benefit from having access to better teaching/learning resources and different approaches to learning from teachers in other schools supporting their teacher (Mercieca & Kelly, 2018, pp. 71–72). Gavrilă et al. identified in some groups there is a sense of altruism where members of social media peer to peer support groups feel the need to pay help forward to other members (Gavrilă et al., 2019, p. 495). Studies have shown people with serious mental illnesses have benefited from social media peer to peer support groups by supporting others, which resulted in them feeling less alone and feeling a greater sense of hope (Naslund et al., 2016, p. 114).

## **Conclusion**

While social media peer to peer support groups can expose their members to negative attitudes and misinformation, these issues can be mitigated with the appropriate use of group privacy settings and understanding peer to peer support groups are supplementary to having strong social and mental health supports in place. Administrators of these social media groups should promote this by being transparent about what users can expect from the group, having clear rules around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and listing any relevant support services if the group is based in a specific country or region.

In many instances, anonymity gives users a sense of protection from discrimination, judgement and stigma. Many users are empowered to speak openly about their experiences in a social media peer to peer support group setting where they would feel uncomfortable to do so face to face, or with their identity known. Similarly, the choice to disclose or not disclose information is entirely up to the user and this also offers some protection. Care needs to be taken when the information being disclosed is related to a third party (e.g. a person receiving care) and social media peer to peer support groups need to ensure there are rules in place to protect the privacy of vulnerable persons.

One of the greatest benefits provided by social media peer to peer support groups is the ability to overcome barriers in geographical distance and time. This flexibility encourages members to connect with content at times that are suitable for them. In some instances, a person's only support may be a social media peer to peer support group due to geographical distance and time limitations.

While there are many studies relating to social media peer to peer support groups, these groups are extremely diverse in nature and the focus is usually on a specific group. Areas of further research could include the collection of data from several social media peer to peer support groups to better understand the needs and motivations of these diverse groups.

In conclusion, it is my belief the benefits peer to peer support groups provide on social media far outweigh the negatives discussed in this conference paper.

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