

Assignment 1: Conference Paper

Topic: The Benefits of Social Media Use Towards Mental Health

Conference Stream: Identity and Online Advocacy

Abstract

The effects of social media have been highly discussed in the contemporary times. In the 21st century, these platforms have essentially become ingrained in the daily lives of many individuals. When it comes to the topic of mental health, there is largely a negative view on how social media impacts an individual's mental state. Most people tend to overlook the fact that social media can be used as a tool to help combat mental disorders. This paper explores how there are many positive effects on mental health that can be gained from the usage of social media through online advocacy.

Introduction

For the youth of today, digital technologies have become a common feature in their lives. Research conducted on children in the US has shown that children under the age of two are already exposed to screens, spending an average of forty-two minutes everyday consuming screen media (Nesi, 2020). Recent statistics representative of US adolescents shows that 88% of them have access to a laptop or computer at home, while 95% of them between the age of 13 to 18 have access to a smartphone (Nesi, 2020). The widespread use and accessibility of new media has caused the growth of complex environment for parents, policymakers, health care providers and the youth. Over the recent years, the conceptualization and definition of mental health has evolved significantly. It has shifted away from the absence of mental disorders being equated with positive functioning and positive emotions. The flexible definition of mental health states that it is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium that enables people to utilize their abilities like basic cognitive and social skills to regulate their emotions, empathize with others, cope with challenges in life and function in social situations (Nesi, 2020). It is a harmonious relationship between mind and body (Nesi, 2020). Studies done recently show that people with mental health issues are using and gaining more access to mobile devices. In 2015, research showed that about a bisection of sample psychiatric patients were users of social media, with higher usage among younger individuals (Naslund et al., 2020). For many people suffering from mental illnesses, social media has become a common fixture in their lives (Naslund et al., 2020). Social media is commonly referred to mobile platforms or web which is used by people to connect with others within the bounds of a virtual network (Naslund et al., 2020). Although this media environment poses some mental health risks, it has brought to light many opportunities and benefits in the 21st century.

Benefits of Social Media on Mental Health

Studies done by the World Health Organisation have shown that around 264 million people in the world suffer from depression. Furthermore, around 800,000 suicides take place every year. These

findings cement how mental health illnesses are a huge global issue (Makita et al., 2020). However, the topic of mental health is still clouded by stigma and discrimination, making it hard for people suffering from these conditions to seek help or talk about it. Social media acts as a public platform where people can discuss these difficult issues, as it reduces the negative connotations that come with face-to-face interaction (Makita et al., 2020). With these social sites, they can find advice and support in an environment without judgement. Twitter is a social network used to create and share many types of digital content and information (Makita et al., 2020). When compared to other sites like Facebook, Twitter gives users the option of remaining anonymous and this creates a “safe” space to share content relating to mental health in the form of images, comments, news, videos and audios. Thus, it creates a non-intrusive and practical way to gather mental health discourse texts, which includes stigmatizing and discriminatory language (Makita et al., 2020). Results of a study done by Naslund shows that people suffering from serious mental issues report that they gain benefits such as feelings of belonging in a group and greater social connectedness from communicating with peers online. They share their own experiences and strategies on how to cope with daily challenges of living with mental illnesses. Online advocacy is seen when individuals suffering from serious mental ailments challenge the stigma attached to this issue by providing hope to others and emphasizing personal empowerment. (Naslund et al., 2016).

In the online environment, interactions among peers can take place at an increased immediacy, intensity and frequency. Unfortunately, this could create potential risk factors towards adolescences’ mental health (Nesi, 2020). The experience of being bullied by peers online, also known as cybervictimization, has shown to be related to higher rates of suicidal behaviour and self-harm, as well as externalizing and internalizing issues (Nesi, 2020). The influence of online peers may be increased online, making it more likely for other users to engage in the risky behaviours being depicted on social media such as alcohol and substance abuse. A study was done on around 400 youth who were hospitalized because of risk of harm to others and themselves (Nesi, 2020). It was found that a small but significant proportion of them stated that they consumed online content that glorified self-injury (16.6%) or suicide (14.8%) during the two weeks before their admission (Nesi, 2020). While these effects are apparent, social media possesses unique features that create new opportunities for assisting the mental health among adolescents. Identity exploration, entertainment, humour and creative expression are some of the benefits associated with social media use (Nesi, 2020). Social connection is one of the more obvious benefits of social media use, with 81% of teens stating that social media helps them feel closer to their friends (Nesi, 2020). Social media is highly-accessible and public, so it also creates the opportunity to establish new connections online. For those without supportive and caring communities around them, they can find social support online and feel more secure in their identity (Nesi, 2020). This online support acts as a protective role for adolescence suffering from mental illness, such as suicidality and depression (Nesi, 2020). Another study done shows that more than a half (57%) of youth who have been psychiatrically hospitalized reported that they received encouragement and social support on social sites during two weeks prior to hospitalization (Nesi, 2020).

Social media can also be a medium for people suffering from mental illnesses to advocate and share anecdotal information, illness and treatment experiences. Witnessing the experiences of other people through their social media posts influences the choices made by patients, especially when deliberating treatment options (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). Furthermore, hearing how other individuals who suffered from similar mental ailments coped through the disease can change their

negative perception towards it and offer a framework on how to manage uncertainties (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). Unfortunately, if online peers have faced poorly against mental illness, it may cause feelings of despair to increase in individuals. Moreover, constantly looking at others health experiences may reinforce unhealthy habits (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). In order to overcome this, the content on social media is moderated with the use of “content advisors” that appear when a user tries to search or post using certain tags (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). A study done by Gupta and Ariefdjohan regarding trends of antidepressant use uncovered that Instagram can provide useful insight into the perceptions and attitudes of people towards the use of antidepressants. Antidepressant use increased by about 65% between 1999 and 2014 (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). This observation mostly matched the inspection of growth of posts about antidepressant use published on Instagram from 2010 to 2017 (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). This trend, along with the study results, prove that people being prescribed with antidepressants are using social media to share their experiences with mental illnesses and the proper treatment (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2020). In this situation and many other similar ones, online advocacy was used to encourage people with mental issues to seek the care they need.

Healthcare and education systems globally face challenges from the growing pervasiveness of adolescent mental health problems. Between 10 to 20% of adolescents suffer from a mental disorder globally (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). Adolescents tend to spend a large amount of time on social media, with over 90% of them using it regularly (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). Thus, it can be a useful tool in carrying out prevention strategies designed to decrease the prevalence and recurrence of mental issues among them. Adolescents’ social connection, communication and technical skills can be facilitated by the information- dimension, social- dimension and media- related dimension of social media (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). Social media is traditionally used by adolescents to broaden social relationships, increase connectivity and a source of entertainment. However, it is an inexpensive way to get them to have start conversations on, challenge stigma and share information regarding mental health disabilities (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). Moreover, the information found online can be tailored to match the priorities of intended users, due to how versatile it is (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). This is especially important for adolescents because most of them are exposed to media online at a very young age. The normalisation of online media consumption may cause them to lack the skills to critically assess the credibility of this information (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). The internet can be used as an educational tool if used carefully and monitored by appropriate adults, such as teachers. In the 21st century, adolescents are already very familiar with how to navigate these social sites and it has become a part of their identity. They are already using it to educate themselves on mental illnesses and to seek support with complex emotions of stress, anger or sadness (O’ Reilly et al., 2018). Thus, educational and healthcare organisations should take this into account and start using social media to promote wellbeing, mental illness prevention and support for adolescents with diagnosed conditions (O’ Reilly et al., 2018).

The internet and social media use are ever- present for adolescents, it is ingrained in their daily lives. Studies done in the UK have shown that 99% of them are online for a minimum of 21 hours per week and 83% own a smartphone. Similar figures have been reported across Europe and in the US (O’ Reilly, 2020). Naturally, society is concerned of possible negative consequences of social media platforms on the minds of adolescents, because there is evidence that links social media use to anxiety, depression and low self- esteem (O’ Reilly, 2020). However, the way social media effects and helps these young minds is worth looking further into. Adolescents living in the contemporary

society face significant amount of pressure and stress, which can have a negative impact on their mental health. Protecting the mental health of adolescents requires active participation in ventures that decrease stress and help them manage the more difficult aspects of their life (O' Reilly, 2020). A study done by O' Reilly on social media and adolescent mental health uncovered the different ways being connected to an electronic device have helped them build resilience against stress. Some participants of this study have stated that social media "can be a distraction from the things around you and makes you less stressed" and "I usually like to go on YouTube, it relaxes me" (O' Reilly, 2020). Most adolescents also experience similar issues that pose a risk to their mental health. External stressors such as deadlines, exam pressure, school work, maintaining friendships and parental interference may negatively impact adolescents' mental health. Thus, social media is used as a distraction from those aspects of life viewed as negative forces and actively helps to reduce stress levels (O' Reilly, 2020).

In summary, this paper discusses how social media presents various benefits towards people suffering with mental disorders despite the negative rhetoric imbued across mental health practices and government concerns (O' Reilly, 2020). There is no black and white way of viewing it, as social media and mental health have a multidimensional and complex relationship. However, if used correctly, it will most likely be able to help these individuals deal with their mental struggles. Social media networks create safe and non-judgemental spaces for people struggling with mental disorders to find support and kindness from other individuals. Furthermore, social media allows people with mental disorders to form communities with these supportive people, which is especially beneficial if they do not have these communities in their physical surrounding. Experiences with mental disorders and treatment information can also be shared online, helping spread awareness on the stigmatised topic of mental health while also helping the people struggling with it to feel less alone and more secure in their identity. Adolescence is a stage in one's life where they will face a heightened risk of developing a mental illness. Given the correct guidance, they can use social media to form healthy relationships, as a source of entertainment and to destress. The presence of new media continues to grow and become more relevant in our daily lives, so it's important to seek out the benefits to effectively use these tools for mental health intervention and screening.

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