

Chapter 24

Social Media for Mental Health Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Social media has added a new dynamic for those living with mental illness. There are several benefits to using social media to obtain information and support for mental health issues, but there are also new challenges and drawbacks. This chapter explores social media for mental health initiatives, with a focus on two case studies: Facebook's suicide prevention tools and the Bell Let's Talk campaign. These case studies highlight the unique ways that social media can be harnessed to raise awareness and provide support and resources to vulnerable populations, while also providing insights into the challenges of utilizing these platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media platforms has inevitably had an impact on online help seeking for mental health issues. Asynchronous message boards have been used since the early days of the Internet for mental health support and information seeking, but social media platforms have added a new dynamic. On the one hand, these platforms can be heralded as welcome ways to break down the barriers for those seeking help in several ways due to the accessibility, convenience, and geographical reach of these platforms. Some social media sites also offer user anonymity, which can potentially alleviate some of the fears around stigma. On the other hand, however, there are several problematic aspects to using social media platforms for mental health initiatives, including the potential for trolling, bullying and other negative interactions, and the potential for online communication to increase isolation through minimizing face-to-face social interactions. There are increasing concerns that use of social media may in fact be *contributing* to mental illness, especially among vulnerable youth.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8544-3.ch024

In light of these challenges, several social media platforms have initiated mental health initiatives for users. Other organizations have decided to harness the power of social media to increase awareness and dialogue on mental illness. In this chapter, the evolution of some of these initiatives is discussed, with a particular focus on Facebook's suicide prevention efforts and the Bell Let's Talk campaign. In the summer of 2016, Facebook made its updated suicide prevention tools available globally. Users of the platform can flag posts from friends if they are worried about the potential for self-harm and several options then appear in a drop down menu (including a list of resources, sending a message of support or having the post reviewed by someone at Facebook who can then reach out with helpful information). This initiative and some of the responses to it are examined in this chapter.

The Bell Let's Talk campaign is also explored. This campaign has generated a massive amount of support in Canada each January through the use of social media platforms (and in particular hash tags) to open up the dialogue on mental health (and ultimately raise money for mental health programs with each social media share or post using the #BellLetsTalk hashtag). These two particular case studies provide insights into the involvement of social media in mental health initiatives, both the positive aspects and the criticisms arising from them. The chapter concludes with a look ahead to what is needed and how there may be a continuing evolution in how these platforms are utilized for mental health initiatives.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES

While social media adds new dynamics and possibilities for mental health initiatives, the use of the Internet has long had strong appeal to people with stigmatized illnesses who wish to obtain information or assistance (Klein & Wilson, 2002; Berger, Wagner & Baker, 2005). Some forms of stigma can be avoided through anonymously seeking information online about mental illness. There are social media sites that build on this appeal by allowing created identities if the user desires (including Twitter, Instagram and Reddit) while others seek to remove anonymity (including Facebook, where users are strongly encouraged to use real names and have friends and family attached to their account who can see their posts and Facebook-related affiliations).

Now not only are those living with mental illness using social media to obtain information and support, but health care providers are also turning to these platforms. Most major mental health organizations have some form of presence on social media and use these platforms for outreach. Research into how social media can be utilized by health practitioners and organizations is also gaining in popularity. The National Institutes of Health in the U.S. has awarded several million dollars in research funding to explore using social media to advance prevention and treatment of addiction (National Institutes of Health, 2014). This builds on previous research in this area, such as that from a team of Microsoft researchers who explored how social media posts could be used to detect depression in users. De Choudhury, Gamon, Counts and Horvitz (2013) found that social media posts made by Twitter users in their study contained useful information to identify the onset of major depression—opening the possibility for the development of tools for use by healthcare agencies or individuals. Their study indicated that volunteers with moderate to severe depression were more likely to post negative messages, were less socially active on Twitter and were more concerned with health and relationships.¹

There are some clear benefits to using social media for mental health initiatives. According to the Pew Research Centre (2017), 77% of adults in the U.S. own smartphones (for adults under age 49 this percentage is much higher). This means many people have smartphones on them at all times, allowing

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