Chapter 23

Social Support Through Digital Media?

Breast Cancer Groups at Facebook

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to analyze the use of online support groups for breast cancer in Turkey. After describing the general characteristics of such groups, the authors closely analyze the two Facebook groups on breast cancer. The analysis focuses on how the patients read the illness and their struggle to cope with the illness; how social support mechanisms are used; and which aims and motivations are foregrounded. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques are used in the research. Informed by the international research literature, the chapter also tries to underline the similarities and differences of online social media in the Turkish context. Although the main purpose of the groups is to share information, emotional empathy and shared personal experience are also obvious.

INTRODUCTION

It is full of friends here, "fate" friends who worry about each other, pray for each other and share recommendations. (Breast Cancer Information Group)

Cancer is one of the common diseases in Turkey following the increasing industrialization, urbanization and the changes in life-styles in the last few decades. Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in both Turkey and the world. One in four female cancer patients in Turkey has breast cancer. 42.5 per cent of breast cancer patients are aged between 15 and 49, according to the Department of Health records (Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2014, p 40). The decreasing role of the state in public health and the rising

privatization have been especially associated with the "reform" processes in the age of globalization and neo-liberalism (Keyder, 2007, p 23). The inequalities increased further with a new understanding on health, according to which health is no longer seen as part of human rights, the responsibility of the state, but, instead, is reduced to an issue of individual responsibility. Thus, protecting health, avoiding harmful habits, evaluating treatment types during illnesses, achieving correct information and appropriate treatment are all seen as the responsibility of the individual. The media is a prominent sphere in which this new understanding and the discourse of health finds space. Since the 1990s, the media has become particularly important for information on protection from illnesses (Terzioğlu, 2011, p 114). In the last decade the Internet has become a space for patients to search for and share information on health issues (54.1 per cent in 2011 and 65.9 per cent in 2016) (TUIK, 2011; 2016). In parallel with global trends, the use of the Internet and the social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Linkedn increased in recent years in Turkey. According to Turkish Statistics Institute (TUIK), Internet use in the whole population was 45 per cent in 2011 and 61.2 per cent in 2016. Facebook is the most used social media network in Turkey, with 32 per cent of all social media use in 2016 (Ayvaz, 2016).

This chapter aims to analyze the use of the online support groups on breast cancer through their Facebook pages by focusing on how the patients read the illness and the struggle to cope with the illness; how social support mechanisms are used. The study is not gender blind; on the contrary, it has a gender perspective in the analysis.

BACKGROUND

Online Health Communities: Breast Cancer Groups on Facebook

The use of social networks in seeking social support has been an issue much investigated in recent years (Shpigelman and Gill, 2014, p. 610). Social support groups can be useful for patients in several ways: First, they provide an opportunity for patients to share their experiences. The doctor has limited time to listen to patients and the increasing neo-liberalization and commercialization processes and the current power hierarchies also play a part. For private hospitals and clinics, patients are seen as customers. The doctors are not only responsible for saving lives but also for increasing profit. For public hospitals and clinics, the doctors do their job in its narrowest sense, but neglect the psychological aspects and sufficient communication with the patients. The accountability of the public system to citizens overall is not sufficiently developed in Turkey. The doctors do not share their patients' experience. When patients meet others with the same illness, they feel less lonely in their battle. The main function of social support groups is information exchange which can increase their knowledge and strengthen them in the treatment process. The patients are not only receivers of social support; they also help others, which affects their psychology positively (Van Uden-Kraan, 2008, p. 10). However, active participation in such groups is not always possible because of reasons such as geographical distance, fear of stigmatization or even the lack of such groups. Currently there is a general lack of social support in Turkish hospitals, both public and private.

Since the 1990s, online social support groups have got around such obstacles through chat rooms, listservs, bulletin boards, newsgroups and web forums and now probably outnumber face-to-face groups; they are accessible 24 hours a day; and are economically advantageous and anonymous (Van Uden-Kraan, 2008, p. 11). Social network sites can be used to support relationships in contexts where life conditions

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