

## Chapter 85

# Benefits and Risks Associated With Use of Social Media by People With Health Issues: Focusing on Mental Illness, HIV/AIDS, Cancer, Intellectual Disability, and Diabetes

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### ABSTRACT

*Previous studies have found that individuals with various health issues use social media for various purposes. Social media help them obtain support from other users and manage identity. However, past research also pointed out risks and challenges associated with the use of social media by those with health issues. One of the risks is stigmatization they could experience when using social media. Even though previous studies revealed serious issues related to stigma in face-to-face settings, the negative effects of stigmatization on social media are left unexplored. To facilitate research on the issues, first, this chapter reviews past works focusing on the use of social media by those with various health issues. Next, previous studies on stigma associated with these illnesses and disabilities are reviewed. Finally, this chapter proposes future directions of research on the issues.*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the number of social media users worldwide was 3.534 billion, up 11% from the prior year; 46% of people actively use social media around the world (We Are Social, 2019). The number of users is expected to continue to increase in the future (Statista, 2019a). Compared to other regions, the United States (U.S.) has the top social media penetration rate, roughly 70% (Statista, 2019b) and most emerging adults in the U.S. use social media (Bjornsen, 2018). Also, 90% of American young adults (18

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to 29 years) used at least one SNS (social network site), which is one form of social media, compared with 12% in 2005 (Perrin, 2015). The time spent on SNSs among emerging adults is high, around 52 minutes every day (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Emerging adults use social media for various purposes, such as maintaining friendships (Barker, 2009) and developing romantic relationships (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013). Previous studies showed that the use of social media is associated with various positive outcomes for the users; in particular, the number of Facebook friends is related to perceived social support, reduced stress, and less physical illness (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013) and the use of Facebook is also related to psychological well-being, especially for those with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Consequently, it is not surprising that people with health issues use social media with the intent to improve their quality of life (e.g., Househ, Borycki, & Kushniruk, 2014; Moorhead et al., 2013; Shpigelman & Gill, 2014a). Househ et al. (2014) reviewed 12 studies on the use of social media by patients with various health issues and found that social media empowered the patients in various ways. For example, people with health issues used YouTube to share their experiences regarding their illness and coping methods, and other people with the same illness can gain useful knowledge and information by viewing the video. Similarly, Moorhead et al., (2013) reviewed 98 studies on social media use for health communication among patients, general public, and health professionals. The findings indicate that social media could provide patients with opportunities to interact with others such as other patients and health professionals and could help them gain emotional support from other patients. Further, Shpigelman and Gill (2014a) surveyed individuals suffering from disabilities, such as physical disability, Autism, hearing disability, and mental illness, to examine these individuals' use of Facebook. Results showed that 69% of the participants visited Facebook at least once a day and 48% of them reported having up to 200 Facebook friends. In addition, 10.1% of them reported that they did not have Facebook friends with disabilities, while 89.9% of them indicated that they had Facebook friends with disabilities. Qualitative analyses of responses to the open-ended questions suggested that people with disabilities use Facebook to seek support and advice from other users. These findings revealed that social media play significant roles for those with health issues in maintaining and developing interpersonal relationships as well as obtaining support.

However, when using social media, those with health issues experience stigma associated with their health issues (Imai & Dailey, 2015; Newman et al., 2011), similar to the stigma they might experience offline (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Schneider, 2005). The stigma those with health issues experience may threaten their identity (Newman, Lauterbach, Munson, Resnick, & Morris, 2011; Schabert, Browne, Mosely, & Speight, 2013). For example, some individuals struggling with diabetes may want to share their health condition on social media to seek emotional support (Newman et al., 2011). However, they are concerned about the possibility that disclosing their health issue threatens their socially desired identity. In fact, most teenage hospital patients in a study (van der Velden & El Emam, 2013) answered that they tried not to show their health information on Facebook such as their diagnosis and treatment because SNSs are places they want to act as "regular" individuals. The issues related to the identity of patients might be particularly concerning for emerging adults, whose main task is to establish a sense of identity (Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2013).

Despite the significant effect of stigma associated with health issues on social media, little research has been conducted on this topic. To address the issue, this chapter describes the current state of the literature on social media use by those with health issues and the stigma associated with various health issues. This chapter first introduces past studies investigating how those individuals with various health

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