

Chapter 5

The Use of Social Media, Online Support Groups, and Apps for Pregnant Women During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

At the start of 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Pregnant women were deemed a vulnerable group globally and advised to shield. Due to social distancing and the changes in maternity services, it was a reasonable assumption that pregnant women would turn to the online platform for advice and guidance. Using reflexive thematic analysis, this chapter explored the effect of social media, support groups, and app usage on pregnant women during the outbreak. Results evidenced that pregnant women utilised social media, support groups, and apps for information and support. Positive aspects were maintaining social connections whilst adhering to social distancing guidelines, access to support groups and people in similar situations, and ease of access to information. Negative aspects were excessive amounts of and overwhelming information, misinformation, judgement from others, and increased anxiety. Apps were deemed positive for general pregnancy but lacked COVID-19-related information.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7991-6.ch005

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aimed to explore the positive and negative effects of social media usage, support groups and app usage in general and in a pandemic. The chapter achieved this by providing the reader with context regarding the global outbreak of COVID-19 and how this encouraged the use of social media for connection and information. Within the chapter, the results of an exploratory, qualitative study are reported and interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis.

BACKGROUND

This study is the qualitative arm of a larger one. The initial quantitative research explored diagnosed and perceived, levels of generalised anxiety disorder and health anxiety in pregnant women during the COVID-19 outbreak. A sample of 674 participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of demographic and pregnancy-related questions, the GAD-7 and HAI. Results evidenced that the COVID-19 outbreak had indeed increased self-reported levels of general anxiety and health anxiety in pregnant women.

In light of social distancing guidelines, and the recommendation that pregnant women shield as a precautionary measure, it was reasonably assumed that social media and apps would be further frequented due to increased isolation. This necessitated an exploratory, qualitative study to explore the positive and negative effects of social media usage, support groups and app usage in light of COVID-19 for women during pregnancy.

LITERATURE

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel strain of coronavirus (2019-nCoV; COVID-19) a global pandemic on the 11th March 2020 (WHO, 2020). By the end of March 2020 over 100 countries had declared a 'lockdown' (Dunford et al., 2020) to control the exponentially increasing rates of infection. Initially defined as "*pneumonia of an unknown cause*" (Hui, Madani, Ntoumi, Koch & Dar, 2020), COVID-19 is an upper respiratory disease which is estimated to have infected 140 million and caused the death on 3 million people in over 200 countries (BBC World, 2021). Governmental agencies and health organisations released and updated information daily; best advising individuals on how to avoid transmission. Globally, individuals with specific underlying health issues were categorised as 'vulnerable,' highlighting their susceptibility of contraction. In the UK those who fell into this category were formally contacted in writing by the government and advised to 'shield' (Gov.uk, 2020), which is the practise of protecting one's self and others by avoiding direct contact with others by remaining inside the home. As a precautionary action, those over 70 and pregnant women were deemed a vulnerable category globally. Dashraath et al. (2020) stated that, "*pregnant women represent a uniquely vulnerable group in any infectious disease outbreak because of their altered physiology, susceptibility to infections, and compromised mechanical and immunological functions.*" This was not evidence of higher rates of contraction during pregnancy, rather a cautionary measure due to pregnancy altering physiological responses to severe viral infections (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; RCOG, 2020). Further research has since evidenced that if COVID-19 is caught during pregnancy, individuals may become more ill than non-pregnant women, especially in the third trimester (RCOG, 2021). As pregnant

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