

Chapter 8

Mindful Use of Facebook as a Self-Help Therapeutic Tool in Psychological Settings

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook have gained popularity over the years, acquiring billions of active users worldwide. There is much debate about the potential harm and benefits of using SNS. While some studies show that SNS such as Facebook can adversely affect the mental wellbeing of individuals, others show that Facebook use in therapeutic interventions can bring about positive results. According to past literature, ‘seeking gratification’, particularly searching for positive emotions, is a key reason for using SNS. In this chapter, it is argued that SNS can be used mindfully to seek content that triggers positive emotions. The practical application of Facebook as a self-help tool to promote psychological well-being is explained through a hypothetical scenario. Further, a framework to educate individual users about the therapeutic potential of SNS is proposed. Practitioners in the fields of counselling and psychology may find the ideas presented in this chapter useful to their work with their clients/patients.

INTRODUCTION

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have become omnipresent in people’s lives, with one in three people across the world using social media platforms (Roser et al., 2015). Facebook remains the biggest SNS worldwide with over ‘2.7 billion monthly active users as of the second quarter of 2020’ (Clement, 2020). With the increase in popularity and usage of such sites, it is unsurprising that researchers have taken an interest in the impact of social media on individuals’ wellbeing. There have been numerous studies conducted on the adverse effects of SNS on mental health, with mixed results. For instance, Labrague (2014) found that the intensity of Facebook usage in adolescents is not directly related to negative emo-

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tional states but that spending more time on Facebook could increase anxiety and depression. Contrary to this, Jelenchick et al. (2013) found no risk of 'Facebook depression' in adolescents, arguing that the evidence does not support a relationship between Facebook use and clinical depression. Further, Facebook use by study participants has varying degrees of impact depending on the psychological disorders considered (e.g., mood disorders versus personality disorders) (Rosen et al., 2013).

Despite these mixed findings, the evidence supporting the view that SNS are detrimental to mental health cannot be ignored. In one of the first studies published by Kraut et al. (1998) on Internet use and its effects on social relationships, it was found that time spent online is negatively related to social interactions with family and friends, leading to feelings of depression and loneliness. Since the launch of Facebook in 2004, many studies have been conducted on the negative impact of SNS on mental health. For example, Pantic et al. (2012) found that a statistically significant positive correlation between depressive symptoms and time spent on SNS. In a more recent study, Matthes et al. (2020) found that the use of certain types of SNS (e.g., YouTube, WhatsApp, and Snapchat) increased perceived information overload, which is significantly related to depressive symptoms over time. Undoubtedly, SNS can have adverse effects on individuals' wellbeing under certain conditions such as social media addiction and problematic Facebook use (Cudo et al., 2020; Ruggieri et al., 2020). For example, Rajesh and Rangaiah (2020) found that loneliness was positively related to Facebook addiction. SNS addiction was also found to be positively associated with perceived stress (Balcerowska et al., 2020). Hawes et al. (2020) argue that social media use can lead to social comparison, resulting in emotional problems such as depression and social anxiety. In their study involving 763 adolescents and young adults, it was found that social media use was positively associated with symptoms of depression, social anxiety, appearance anxiety, etc. Other studies show that addiction to SNS can affect sleep quality, lead to emotional illness, and affect mental health (Andreassen, 2015; Augner & Hacker, 2012; Kraut et al., 2002; Panda & Jain, 2018) and that reducing the time spent on Facebook leads to better well-being and a healthier lifestyle (Brailovskaia et al., 2020).

However, in contrast to the abundant research on the negative effects of SNS on mental health, there is also evidence that interactions on SNS can be beneficial to individuals and their mental health. For example, application of the Uses and Gratification Theory (U>) in past research shows that SNS usage gratifies certain needs of individuals, such as keeping in touch with friends, communicating with others, and meeting social needs; such usage is therefore of emotional benefit (Habes, 2019; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Rubin, 2002). From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, health-based SNS such as Online Health Communities (OHC) are becoming valuable platforms enabling patients to communicate, share knowledge, and find support (Yan et al., 2016). Moreover, a global study evidenced that social media can have therapeutic value as part of a self-management programme for people with chronic pain (Merolli et al., 2015). In a more recent study, Rosenberg et al. (2020) found that youth care workers can use social media communications to form therapeutic relationships with youth at risk. In particular, it was found that the 'principal psychosocial usages of social media' include '(1) Reaching out and maintaining reciprocal and meaningful therapeutic relationships with youth at risk over time; (2) Identifying risks and emotional distress; and (3) "stepping in" and providing psychosocial assistance, when needed.' (Rosenberg et al., 2020, p.4).

Thus, it is clear that SNS can be a double-edged sword depending on how it is used. While the misuse or problematic use of SNS can negatively affect an individual's mental health, it can, if used wisely, act as a useful tool for managing mental health issues. The extant research predominantly explores the negative consequences of SNS on mental health, with its therapeutic use being largely ignored. This may in

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