



Coping with Mental Illness on Tumblr

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People experiencing mental illness may use social media to cope with stress and gain social resources unavailable in person. Social media users experiencing mental illness may identify with different mental health conditions in public. This identification can happen in many ways including posts using hashtags.



Figure 1 Photograph by NoJoFoto. CC 2.0

In contrast to private online support groups, we know little about people who post in public, online communities about their mental health conditions or the responses they receive from online community members. We want to know how often, why, and how people experiencing mental illness use social media to build social capital. In addition, we want to better understand what people post about their mental illness and how the community responds to these posts.

Methods

Over the course of four months in early 2019, blog posts were gathered from 14,626 Tumblr users publicly disclosing different mental health diagnoses with hashtags such as #anorexia, #bipolar, and #autistic.

Highlights

Marginalized groups use social media to build social capital and form communities.

Social media can be a valuable resource for people experiencing mental illness, but the support experienced online varies among #hashtag communities on Tumblr.

We categorized what users wrote by noting which words tended to be expressed together in blog posts about mental illness and finding themes in the content. We analyzed whether users posted more about their mental health condition when they received more likes and reblogs and/or when they were discussing a particular mental health condition. We also examined whether users discussing some mental health conditions received more likes and reblogs than others.

Results

- Tumblr blog posts in online hashtag communities about mental illness were most often related to the emotional experience of mental illness or experiences of relationship loss and life changes.
- In general, Tumblr users posted more often when they received more encouraging responses from their online community. However, this effect was different in different online hashtag communities.
- Tumblr users claiming membership in some online hashtag communities received more reinforcing community response than members of other communities. For example, users tagging their posts with #autistic received the most likes and reblogs on average.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

The empowerment of marginalized communities and the development of social capital are central to Community Psychology. Researching the ways people experiencing mental illness build social capital on social media is critical to understanding online community-building. Marginalized people have easier access to online communities than many in-person communities. Online communities reduce geographic barriers to community-building. These communities also provide relative control over the amount of disclosure and their privacy in ways that are impossible in-person.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice: Social media can be a valuable resource for people experiencing mental illness. The present research suggests ways that mental health practitioners may offer social media as a resource to the people with whom they work. It is also possible that practitioners could deliver community-based interventions within these online communities.

Social Action: Social media can be an asset to individuals experiencing mental illness and is an established resource for community advocates and organizations working to increase empowerment and access to resources for marginalized people. This research may help inform community advocates who seek to implement collaborative social action initiatives through social media with people experiencing mental illness who cannot meet in person due to distance or other factors.

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