

LET'S TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH!

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Abstract

In today's society, mental health is taking a toll on millions of people, yet it is still not a topic we openly discuss with one another. When one has a mental illness, they are often looked down upon by others or themselves because society has made it seem like the illness makes you weaker. We are living in 2021 and yet we still cannot openly discuss what is going on inside of our heads. This narrative needs to change and normalizing the conversation of mental health needs to continue. This paper outlines research on mental health and mental illness in relation to social media. The findings present within this paper showcase the connections made between the three topics as well as how social media can be used positively in regard to mental health. Social media impacts on mental health, the categories of mental illness, as well as educational aspects of social media will be explored further within this paper. In the end, the hope is that promoting mental health and discussing mental illness online will continue to help normalize these topics on social media platforms as a whole.

Keywords: mental health, mental illness, social media, impacts of social media, educational purposes, promotion of mental health, community, society, Instagram TV series

Introduction

Many people state that spending time away from social media can be the best thing because it causes a negative impact on one's mental health, but is that accurate? Cyberbullying among other negative aspects of social media have been discussed in terms of mental health but to what extent is social media *really* decreasing one's mental health. Mental health is not a common topic of discussion within our society, but social media is a fairly common denominator for most of us; to be specific, research shows that about 7 out of 10 people in the United States use social media (Bekalu et al., 2019, p. 69S). Social media is a place to connect to distant friends and relatives, as well as a place to showcase the highs and achievements of one's life. As stated, many people are on social media and many researchers believe that because of this, it is also causing a decline in people's mental health. But are the two actually connected? Mental health and social media in many cases can go hand in hand but not for all the same reasons that one may think. With further research, it can be determined whether or not it is social media that is the root cause of a decline in one's mental health. As a result, the following questions will be explored:

- What are the attributes of mental health and mental illness?
- What is social media? How and why do we use it?
- Does social media impact mental health? Is it a positive or negative impact?
- Can we use social media as a way to promote the discussion of mental health and mental illnesses?

Literature Review

To start off discussing the connection between the two, it is important to first explain what social media entails. Social media use can be defined as “interacting with others through online electronic forums such as *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube*, etc.” (Berryman et al., 2017, p. 307). Social media is forever changing and expanding through new features and new

platforms, yet all are based around interacting with others online. Although individuals of all ages can be found on social media, it is often more popular among the younger generations. According to Berryman et al. (2017), social media supports the development of adolescence as they discover themselves. Because of this aspect, it is commonly known that social media is often times more central to one's core motivations than it is compared to others. For some, social media is where one posts their whole life whereas for others, it is just a way to distract themselves and see what others are up to. And for some, research even states that "heavy social media use could be masking underlying problems, such as stress, depression, or boredom" (Robinson and Smith, 2020). Overall, research and studies share that social media is used for a variety of different reasons, some healthier than others.

One's mood and mindset can also go into play with the state of their mental health. Research shows that millions of people suffering from depression go untreated (De Choudhury, 2013), so why is mental health still not a topic openly and commonly discussed within society. According to De Choudhury (2013), the World Health Organization (WHO) claims major depression is one of the most burdensome diseases. Now, what exactly causes depression, depressive episodes, as well as other types of mental illness? There are many factors or predictors that come into effect for people developing mental illnesses, for example, "parent/child conflict appears to be one of the stronger predictors of many mental health issues" (Berryman, et al., 2017, p. 313). De Choudhury (2013) also claimed there were other factors as well, stating that reduced energy, disturbed sleep, eating disorders, and stress and tension can also lead to mental illnesses. But can social media directly play a role in decreasing one's mental health like many researchers have discussed?

The answer to the question of whether social media causes mental health challenges is far more mixed than just a simple yes or no; it is often times still a question that is up for debate. There are studies out there, of course, that state that social media can be tied in with mental health issues, but these have been criticized and accused of being clouded. To be more specific, Mindwise Innovations (2019) stated that 70 studies examining how social media affects mental health conducted within the past decade came back with differing conclusions. Clearly showcasing that although many researchers expect to get a black and white answer from their studies, they often end up getting a gray area answer; meaning it is not a solid, clear cut answer. For example, in *Social Media Use and Mental Health*, Berryman et al. (2017) had a study that focused on examining several aspects of social media use among young adults and how it tied in with mental health problems such as loneliness, suicidal thoughts, decreased empathy, and social anxiety. But their findings did not link social media use *directly* to decreased mental health; what they found was that it is more about *how* one uses social media that can cause a decrease in one's mental health.

More specifically, Berryman et al. (2017) stated, "the best evidence suggests that quality [of social media use] rather than quantity of use is more crucial" (p. 308). If someone is spending a lot of time on social media, that is not what is hurting them. What is hurting them is scrolling through another person's supposedly perfect life and negatively comparing themselves repeatedly. The article explored this concept more and said, "For instance, research indicates that one mechanism is the use of social media for negative social comparison which, alongside rumination, leads to later depression. By contrast, other research has found that positive use of social media, such as through authentic self-presentation, is associated with positive well-being in users" (Berryman, et al., 2017, p. 308). For example, in *Role of Social Media in Tackling*

Challenges in Mental Health, this author discussed how looking at some postings on social media might be able to indicate feelings of worthlessness, guilt, helplessness and self-hatred which can turn into depression (De Choudhury, 2013). But again, this piece connects with the findings of *how* one spends their time on social media. If someone is constantly comparing themselves to others on social media and only looking at posts that will trigger constant self-consciousness and self-doubt, this action is obviously going to cause more of a decrease in mental health compared to if they were just scrolling through posts that made them happy and positive.

Many researchers state that finding a healthy balance between social media and mental health is crucial. Because, again, the person doing the actions on social media is the one who is in control of how social media is impacting their mental health by what their actions are online. According to MindWise Innovations (2019), people need to develop healthy habits on social media in order for it to have a positive presence within their life. Other researchers even found that using social media as a way promote and educate others on topics like mental health and mental illnesses can lead to positive outcomes as well. Although there are small amounts of research done on this specific topic, it has been stated by O'Reilly et al. (2019) that social media can be viewed in a positive light in terms of being a resource, reducing stigma as well as encouraging networking with others. The same authors even went on to say, "while risks were associated with social media use, it was also regarded as a positive environment, and it is this that could be exploited to educate adolescents in strategies to protect their mental health as well as inform them about mental disorders" (O'Reilly et al., 2019). Which solidifies that using social media for educational purposes regarding mental health and mental illness can start to open the door for normalizing these topics and discussions as well as informing others on how to protect

themselves. Which, again, ties in with the concept of it is all about how we are using social media in terms of whether or not it will negatively impact our mental health. Educating others can lead to normalizing mental illness and the importance of mental health which in return can hopefully lead to the decrease of the negative stigma regarding these two topics. Social media often times has a negative connotation, especially when it comes to mental health, but that does not always have to be the case.

With social media and mental health, there are a lot of gray areas; it is not always just a solid black and white. Yes, social media has been found to cause a decrease in one's mental health, but it is not so much social media itself, it is more based off *how* people are focusing their time on social media. If people take the time to scroll through content that is positive, empowering and educational rather than negative or something that can cause self-doubt, comparisons, the feeling of worthlessness, etc. than that can change the negative connotation that social media has when it comes to mental health and mental illnesses. If people learn to navigate through social media in a happy and healthy way, in terms of mental health, then this narrative can really change and make social media be used for the better.

Methodology

To further the research and explore the connection between social media and mental health, an Instagram (IG) TV series was created. It is dedicated to opening up the conversation about mental health, mental illness and the impact that social media can have on both. An IG TV series was created on my personal Instagram account and consisted of eight videos; the series is called "Let's Talk About Mental Health!". All episodes revolved around this concept of using social media in a positive way to help positively impact one's mental health. The series was

based off the research explained above and each episode had a different main topic. The series included the discussion of mental health and mental illness, social media, impacts of social media, using social media for educational purposes, and positive and healthy ways to spend time online.

Qualitative Research and Design

The first episode was titled “Why Am I Doing This?” and was the introduction to the whole series as well as the project overall. The main purpose of this episode was to inform people of the reasons why I am bringing up this topic and the research that has been put into this project.

The second episode was titled “What is Mental Health?” and it shared the research conducted on mental health and mental illness. It is also where I personalized the series and discussed my own mental illness, anxiety.

The third episode was titled “How Does Social Media Impact Mental Health?” and it is where I started to discuss my findings on the impact social media has on one's mental health.

The fourth episode was titled “It's All About the How and the Why” and it was a follow up of the findings presented within the third episode of this series. The purpose of this episode was to further discuss the concept of how you are using social media is what is going to positively or negatively impact your mental health, not so much social media as a whole.

Halfway through the series there was a shift in the direction of sharing how people can positively use social media. The fifth episode was titled “Let's Educate Our Feeds”. In this

episode, the reason for creating the series as well as the findings regarding the use of social media as an educational platform were shared.

The sixth and seventh episodes were a two-part piece regarding “Healthy Balances on Social Media”. In these two episodes. Details from the secondary research helped to create a framework for a healthy balance for oneself while being on social media.

And finally, the last episode, was titled “What I’ve Learned from This Project!”. This is where I sat down and had a conversation about what I learned from this project as well as what I hope others took away from this series.

The primary purpose of this series that was created was intended to spread educational information regarding mental health and mental illness as well as to continue to normalize the conversation of these topics. These findings within the research are the main piece of this project, hence why they were the largest piece to the series as a whole. Finally, descriptive metrics were presented in the research as well. Specifically, the metrics explored included views as well as engagement from viewers of this series.

Results

Table 1: “Let’s Talk About Mental Health” Series and Metrics

<i>Metrics as of 4/7/2021</i>	Views	Likes	Comments
Episode 1: “Why Am I Doing This?”	330	57	16
Episode 2: “What is Mental Health?”	165	39	0
Episode 3: “How Does Social Media Impact Mental Health?”	109	28	0
Episode 4: It’s All About the How and the Why”	144	25	0
Episode 5: “Let’s Educate Our Feeds”	84	26	0
Episode 6: “Healthy Balances on Social Media (pt. 1)”	62	28	0

Episode 7: “Healthy Balances on Social Media (pt. 2)”	87	17	0
Episode 8: “What This Project Has Taught Me!”	116	19	3
Total	1,097	239	19

The results for this series differed from episode to episode; the comments, likes, and views ranged as the series went on. The first episode, which was the introduction to the series, received the most engagement compared to the rest of the episodes. It received 330 views, 57 likes and 16 comments. The second episode did well but not as well as the first one; it ended up with 165 views, 39 likes, 0 comments but did receive one save from a viewer. As the series went on, the views began to drop but fluctuated from episode to episode; the likes also seemed to fluctuate but for the most part remained within the 20s range. The last episode, where I sat down and shared my thoughts on the series, spiked back up in terms of views, ending up at 116 views, but had a lower number of likes.

Overall, the total amount of views the series has received thus far is 1,097 and the total amount of likes thus far is 239. Each episode was shared to my own Instagram story, which definitely helped with expanding the reach of the series. SNHU's Wellness Center, SNHUOnCampus and Dr. Leila Samii, my mentor for this project, were all kind enough to periodically promote the series on their accounts as well. With almost every episode, all three would repost the episodes to their Instagram stories in hopes of expanding the series' reach online. This extra promotion of the series helped to not only expand the reach of the account but also helped to increase the number of views on certain episodes. There was a noticeable increase in the views on certain episodes that were promoted and shared among various accounts, not just my own.

The results of the series varied from episode to episode, something that was suspected of happening going into creating this IG TV series. The insights of the views and likes changed throughout the series; even dropping and fluctuating as the series went on. The first episode, as stated above, reached the most engagement, specifically views, out of the whole series but the views metric slowly dropped until about halfway through the series. Although the fourth episode did not receive as many views as the first episode did, it was still the third most viewed episode out of the whole series. Then the views drastically dropped until the last episode, when they went back up in to triple digits, 116 to be exact. Making this last episode the fourth most viewed episode out of the whole series.

In terms of the likes on the episodes, the common trend of the first episode doing the best still reigns true. The first episode of the series received 57 likes but then the likes drastically dropped down to the 30s and 20s as the series continued on. The last two episodes even got as low as 17 and 19. The assumption behind these insights are the fact that the series and the episodes were longer than most IG TV series so interest might have been lost as the episodes continued getting posted.

Discussion

Throughout the experience of using IG TV, knowledge on the promotion aspect tied into social media was explored. It was learned that without the constant sharing on various accounts' stories, the series and different episodes would not have reached as many people. But because of the promotion across different accounts with differing audiences, the series was able to catch people's attention because it can be viewed as an "out-of-the-box" conversation to be having,

especially online. It is this aspect of social media that I am happy to have learned because the promotion aspect is definitely a key takeaway from this project overall.

After months of research on mental health and mental illness, there is a clear connection and framework that can ultimately tie social media and mental health together. Within the researching phase, more and more studies began popping up with varying results given. It is this that pushed me to do more research and to gather a better understanding of all the data and facts so the series could be as fact driven and educational as possible. As a student with a Social Media Marketing minor, it was very interesting to be able to learn more about the psychological aspect of social media. This psychological aspect leans more towards the fact that as people, we are in control of social media and its impacts on us, not social media being in control of us. The research done within this project also showcased that just like mental health and mental illness, social media has a lot of layers to it as well. And until, we, as a society, take the time to educate ourselves and one another, this can be a hard concept to comprehend. Which is why it is important to keep having these conversations about mental illness and mental health.

Recommendations for Normalizing Mental Health on Social Media

- Share real-life content on social media platforms, not just the highlights of one's life
- Continue to put out informational and educational content on social media platforms regarding mental health and mental illnesses
- Promote a positive and empowering environment on social media platforms so everyone can feel included and accepted

Reflection

Overall, this project opened my eyes to the bigger picture of social media, but more importantly mental health. Although we are not always in control of our mental illness, mental health is definitely different, especially when it is tied in with social media. How we view social media, how we use social media, how we treat and view ourselves online, etc. is something we can gain control of overtime so that we are not negatively impacting our own mental health continuously. To those who want to step up and educate themselves as well as friends and family on mental health and mental illness, it is this piece that you need to put out for everyone to know. Having an understanding of you being the one who's in control of whether or not social media impacts your mental health negatively or positively is beyond important. This is because, having a better understanding of your own control will make you more conscientious and careful about what you do online and how it is making you feel in the moment and overtime. Giving people this knowledge of control can also possibly lead to social media being a positive environment overall for all parties involved. Which can not only get rid of the negative connotation social media has but also hopefully, with time and knowledge, continue to normalize the conversations of mental health and mental illness online and in person.

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