

The Effective Use of Social Media to Promote Positive Mental Health

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Abstract

It is well understood that social media platforms are progressively increasing in use and becoming an effective way to communicate information to a vast group of users. According to Gottfried (2024), the PEW Research Center reported that in Americans' social media use, YouTube and Facebook are by far the most used online platforms among U.S. adults; TikTok's user base has grown since 2021. Adults under 30 are far more likely than their older counterparts to use online platforms. There are also demographic differences in social media use which allows for segmentation of audiences for mental health awareness, mental health literacy, and resources. Even though a growing body of research demonstrates that social media use is negatively associated with mental health and well-being, particularly among young people, there are benefits to moderated social media use that vary across demographic, socioeconomic, and racial population sub-groups. Results indicate that social media can be effective in promoting positive mental health through feelings of connectedness, social support, and early detection of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The use of social media to raise awareness of mental health is also an effective intervention due to high reach, availability, and cost-effectiveness.

Keywords: Review, Social Media, Positive Mental Health, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

Introduction

Mental health contributes to well-being throughout the lifespan. According to Latha et al., mental health is the fifth greatest contributor to the global burden of disease [1]. Mental Health America (MHA) released the State of Mental Health in America report in 2024. The report was based on federal data available for every state from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education. To establish the ranking system, MHA evaluated states on criteria such as the prevalence of mental health and substance use conditions, suicidal ideation, access to care, provider availability, and other metrics. The report confirmed that the United States is in a mental health crisis with nearly 60 million adults experiencing a mental health crisis in the past year. The nation's youth continue to present cause for concern. "One in five young people from ages 12-17 experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year, yet more than half of them (56.1%) did not receive any mental health treatment. More than 3.4 million youth (13.16%) had serious thoughts of suicide" [2].

From a global perspective, statistics from the World Health Organization show similar findings as the United States. "In 2019, 1 in every 8 people, or 970 million people around the world were living with a mental disorder, with anxiety and depressive disorders the most common. Even though anxiety and depression are most common, other mental health disorders should be included such as bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, and eating disorders" [3]. Unfortunately, more than 80% of people with mental illness have not received treatment despite the presence of mental illness for more than 12 months. The stigma surrounding mental illness creates a barrier to treatment with many individuals afraid to reach out for treatment due to embarrassment, shame, and feelings of inadequacy. The individual may not have insurance, or may be underinsured, so access to mental health services and treatment is also a hindrance to treatment. A mental health crisis, or a mental health disorder, can happen to anyone and is quite common. The causes of a mental health crisis may range from biological factors, such as genes or brain chemistry, to adverse life experiences, such as exposure to toxic stress [4]. Although most people are resilient, people who are exposed to adverse circumstances – including homelessness, poverty, victimization, and discrimination may be

at higher risk compared to others . In reviewing the literature, there is inconsistency in terminology related to mental health and well-being. From a general perspective, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), state that “mental health is not simply the absence of a mental health condition—it is also about the presence of well-being and the ability to thrive [5].” Even individuals with a mental health condition can experience positive well-being with access to effective treatment that helps to manage symptoms. People who do not have a mental health condition may still face challenges to their mental health from experiencing adverse events and the influence of risk factors. Risk factors, such as lack of access to health care, housing instability, and social isolation may increase the possibility of mental distress without necessarily developing a mental health condition . Srivastava defines positive mental health as “the state of well-being where individuals recognize their abilities, area able to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and make a contribution to their communities” defines positive mental health as “the presence of general emotional, psychological, and social well-being” [6, 7]. That definition is consistent with the definition provided by Ulvi and colleagues. For this narrative review, positive mental health and mental well-being are used interchangeably. Mental distress is related to challenges to mental health after exposure to stressors and focuses more on symptoms rather than well-being.

Mesfin Bekalu, a research scientist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, performed a study that examined the association of two dimensions of social media use – how much it is routinely used and how emotionally connected users are to the platforms – with three health-related outcomes: social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health [8]. Previous studies have simply looked at social media use as a dose-response relationship looking at the amount of time an individual spends on social media and the number of interactions with other users. Few studies have considered the emotional connections to social media that users have. Positive mental health was determined using the Positive Mental Health Scale (PMH-Scale). The scale consists of 9 items with a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Examples of phrases included in the scale are 1) I am often carefree and in good spirits and 2) I enjoy my life. The PMH-Scale measures a single concept and can compare scores over groups and over time. The PMH-scale, thus, is a brief and easy to interpret instrument for measuring PMH across a large variety of relevant groups . Data for their study came from a nationally representative sample of 1,027 American adults surveyed between June and July 2018. The measures included social media use, social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health. The findings showed that routine social media use, as part of everyday routine and responding to content that others share, was positively associated with all three health-related outcomes. The second dimension of social media use, emotional connection, such as the fear of missing out when not logged into social media, was negatively associated with those same three health-related outcomes . In the measure of positive mental health, specifically, regression analysis showed that age, education, household income, and race/ethnicity were significant predictors of positive mental health. Individuals in the oldest age group (60+), those with some college education and a bachelor’s degree or higher, and those in the lowest income group (<10,000) reported better

positive mental health. Positive mental health is an indicator of well-being and may be shaped by sociodemographic variables and social media use .

Due to the high use of social media, social media platforms provide an effective way to raise awareness of mental health and promote positive mental health and well-being. It is important to consider the users of social media and their routine use in further exploring the associations between social media use and mental health. The purpose of this narrative review is to identify several ways in which social media has been used to promote positive mental health and well-being through a variety of approaches.

Results

The literature search produced an abundance of information related to the use of social media on both positive mental health and negative mental health. Sixteen articles were selected that specifically mentioned positive mental health, but for due diligence, two articles that provided information on the associations between social media and negative mental health were included. It is important to recognize that the negative impact to mental health articles retrieved outnumbered the articles demonstrating the positive impact to mental health — especially involving adolescents. Results from those studies indicated that while social media can create a sense of community for the user, excessive and increased use of social media, particularly among those that are vulnerable, was correlated with depression and other mental health disorders [9]. There is a bidirectional relationship between social media and mental health, and it is important to remember that users who are emotionally connected to social media use might as well be those who have already experienced, or been diagnosed with, a mental health disorder .

The studies in this narrative review employed various analysis methodologies including systematic reviews, qualitative methodology using focus groups and semi structured interviews, and social media content analysis. The variables studied included depressive episodes, manic episodes, suicidal ideation, anxiety crises, social media use, online resources to support mental health, medical conditions, social well-being, positive mental health, and analyses of social media language. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were mentioned most often as the preferred social media platforms used by the participants.

General Social Media Applications

Mental health literacy is “the knowledge and understanding of mental health disorders, which helps individuals recognize and manage symptoms and engage in prevention methods” . Due to the attachment of stigma associated with mental health, people have confusion about mental health information and where to find credible resources. Many individuals who are exhibiting mental health symptoms are hesitant and ashamed to reach out for help. Health promotion programs in mental health awareness encourage help-seeking behaviors and provide supportive interactions with people. A likely place for those interactions to occur is through social media. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp facilitate millions of one-to-many communications daily which provides a practical avenue to raise awareness of mental health. Since social media platforms do not charge a registration fee, the avenue is also cost-effective compared to an in-person, comprehensive program. Social media platforms are

also available 24 hours a day and 7 days a week which gives individuals the flexibility to log-in when convenient and search the platforms in private. Latha and colleagues performed a qualitative study that evaluated the effectiveness of social media platforms in hosting three health promotion campaigns. These programs were observed over a five-month period from May to September 2019. The three campaigns were titled 1) The Buddies for Suicide Prevention, an online campaign to create awareness for suicide prevention; 2) The #Quitobacco campaign which lasted for 21 days with the intent of tobacco cessation; and 3) #Migrainethepainfultruth campaign conducted among social media users interested in participating. For this review, the first campaign, The Buddies for Suicide Prevention, is explored in detail.

The Buddies for Suicide Prevention, an online contest, was conducted for four months from June to September 2019. The theme of the contest was “Action for Suicide Prevention” and was promoted through Facebook and Instagram. Users could compete in four distinct categories which included creating posters, slogans, scripts, and short films. The purpose of the contest was to engage the public in collaborative efforts toward suicide prevention by using social media effectively to educate others. Users were encouraged to follow the campaign and share the campaign with others. As a result, the post describing the contest earned 32 likes and 9 people shared the post with an eventual reach of 2058 people. In the world of social media use, a reach of 2058 people may seem like a small number, but any engagement raising awareness for mental health and suicide prevention is beneficial. The reach of this campaign, and the other two campaigns, increased each year since it began in 2019. The results of this study showed that social media platforms promote social engagement and support. Other advantages include low cost, high scalability, self-tracking, and tailored feedback functionalities. Social media is also able to connect people from long distances reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation. It is understood that social media cannot be the only mode of delivery for health promotion programs since all individuals may not have social media accounts, but it does provide an opportunity to reach individuals, especially young adults and adolescents, who have a higher risk of mental health issues and suicidal ideation. A limitation from this study was that the authors did not collect any type of feedback from users regarding the effectiveness of the campaigns so were unable to draw conclusive associations between the content and behavioral change.

A qualitative study by Vaingankar et al. explored the lived experiences of youth to gain an understanding of how social media use can contribute to positive mental health. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with male and female youth (15-24 years of age) of different ethnicities residing in Singapore. There were a total of 95 participants in the study — 51 females and 44 males. All the participants had access to smartphones to access various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, LinkedIn, Facebook, and others. Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp were the three being most used by the participants. Five common themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups. The first theme centered around the use of social media to help build positive relationships and social capital. Participants discussed how they enjoyed connecting with friends and family. As a result, they were able to form meaningful rela-

tionships based on mutual trust and reciprocity. The youth also offered support and demonstrated compassion to others who appeared to need assistance. The fact that social media was accessible 24/7 was a reoccurring statement made by the participants.

Another theme that emerged was a deepening self-concept through social media. The participants expressed that by being able to be transparent and be their true selves allowed them to gain insight into themselves and increased their self-acceptance and self-esteem. The aspect of self-esteem was reinforced when participants would share an accomplishment or achievement on social media which was celebrated by their peers. The posts were met by words of appreciation, encouragement, and inspirational emojis. An interesting finding was that participants also enjoyed looking at previous posts or pictures in their feeds that brought up happy memories. Facebook inserts memories in users' feeds and creates photo albums of special events. Participants also explored social media for information related to their own personal interests, such as music or fashion, which distracted them away from negative content. The participants viewed social media as a safe space that allowed for them to openly express themselves promoting positive mental health. The study concluded that social media plays a significant role in the lives of today's youth and can provide opportunities for positive influence, personal expression, and social support.

From a global perspective, Ulvi and colleagues performed a systematic review focusing on the use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Articles were collected from January 2010 to June 2020 to identify studies looking at relationships between social media and mental health. Similar to other systematic reviews, a variety of methodologies were used in the research studies collected. Of the three social media platforms that were studied, Facebook appeared to be the most used. Seven out of the 14 studies provided support for positive relationships between social media use and mental health, while three of the articles included in the analysis found negative relationships between social media use and mental health. Twitter was commonly used to raise awareness of many different mental health issues, help individuals connect, and reduce loneliness. One study found that when addressing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, “Facebook use among adults aged 25-54 had a positive impact on mental health and quality of life following a community disaster”.

The association between Instagram use and social media had limited findings with only one study that found that consistent Instagram use was associated with negative body image and self-harm. The evidence is mixed on this issue since the study by Goh et al. had contradictory results [11]. Goh et al. studied the associations of social media use on body image satisfaction using a daily diary method to objectively measure social media screen time across six major platforms (Twitter, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook). Objective measures were used instead of subjective measures to help address gaps and inconsistencies found in the literature. The participants simply submitted screenshots of their screen time spent on each platform. A key strength of the study was the ability to distinguish between-person and within-person associations. The authors found no consistent significant within- and between-person association between time spent on social media platforms and

body image satisfaction . These findings were similar to findings by Varaona et al. (2024) that explored the relationship between Instagram use and self-criticism, self-compassion, and body dissatisfaction in the Spanish population . A positive correlation was observed between daily Instagram use and self-criticism scores, but no significant relationship was found between Instagram usage time and levels of self-compassion or body dissatisfaction [12].

Early Detection of Mental Health Crises

Monitoring social use activity alerts public health officials to potential infectious disease outbreaks based on words contained in narrative posts and videos. This same process may be used in the early detection of a mental health crisis. Early detection and intervention are critical in lessening the severity and the duration of these crises, unfortunately, traditional identification methods do not meet expectations for timely support [13]. In the United States, specifically, there is a shortage of mental health providers which further delays identification and treatment. Based on the 2024 report by Mental Health America, the United States is indeed in a mental health crisis. Nearly 60 million adults (almost 23% of the total population) experienced a mental health crisis in the past year. The nation's youth continue to present cause for concern. "One in five young people from ages 12-17 experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year, yet more than half of them (56.1%) did not receive any mental health treatment" (Mental Health America, 2024). Barriers to treatment include lack of insurance, cost, and lack of qualified mental health providers (Mental Health America, 2024).

Mansoor and Ansari explored the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in analyzing social media data to recognize early signs of a mental health crisis. The authors developed a multimodal deep learning approach integrating natural language processing and temporal analysis techniques . The model was subsequently trained on a dataset of 996,452 social media posts in three other languages besides English: Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic. The social media posts were collected from Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook for a duration of 12 months. For this study, the authors defined a mental health crisis as "a situation in which an individual experiences an acute exacerbation of symptoms related to mental health disorders, potentially leading to impaired functioning, self-harm, or harm to others" . Three phases of the study included data collection, model development, and validation. A total of 1.5 million posts were initially collected, but after applying the inclusion criteria and removing duplicates, the final dataset consisted of 996,452 posts. Only public posts were collected, excluding any private or restricted content .

The results of the study were fascinating with the multimodal approach demonstrating an impressive performance in detecting early signs of a mental health crisis – both across various languages and across social media platforms. "The model itself achieved an overall accuracy of 89.3%, a precision of 86.7%, a recall of 84.5%, and an F1 score of 0.856" . Since the model's performance remained consistent across different languages, the global potential for the recognition of a mental health crisis is evident. Even though the model was used on three different platforms, it tended to perform better analysis on Twitter data, followed by Reddit and Facebook . With the emerging use of AI applications, this study revealed the potential of AI-powered

social media analysis for the early detection of mental health crises. The crises may result from exposure to political unrest, prolonged pandemics, or a reaction to adverse community events. Early data collection leads to early recognition and the need to ramp up resources, such as the organization of mental health professionals and support systems. In addition, using AI to detect early identification of individuals at risk of mental health crises, days before the use of traditional methods, may facilitate a timelier intervention, lessen the severity, and reduce the length of the crises . This research was corroborated by the study from Saha et al. who used a similar approach in identifying early signs of mental illness in college students.

Reddit is another social media platform that does not receive as much attention as Instagram or TikTok but is worth mentioning. Individuals can engage in the Reddit community by posting stories, images, links, and videos. According to their website, Reddit has over 100,000 active communities and over 16 billion posts as of September 2024 (Reddit, n.d.). Saha and colleagues used the Reddit platform to study "how assessing the mental health of college students using social media data corresponded with ground-truth data of on-campus mental health consultations" [14]. This construct of validity of data has not been explored in detail. The social isolation from COVID-19 exacerbated mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation . According to the National College Health Assessment conducted in Spring 2024, "35.1% of students reported having received psychological or mental health services in the last 12 months; high rates of psychological distress; high number of students reporting high stress, and high rates of loneliness". These conditions were much higher among college students that identified as transgender/gender-non conforming [15]. Saha et al. collected ground-truth data of on-campus mental health consultations between 2011-2016 and compared those data to 66,000 collected posts from the university's Reddit community .

After complex data analyses, the study showed that social media interactions of college students can help predict ground-truth data of on-campus mental health consultations. Together, social media enhances the ability to capture the language and social interaction of college students in "real time", and therefore can function as a "verbal sensor" in proactively assessing the mental health needs of college students . An additional application that evolved from the study centered around facilitating improved preparedness in campus resources in case of an emergency or crisis. Seeing that uptick in social media activity may serve as a marker to ramp up resources. In the event of a mental health crisis, student wellness centers may need to increase the number of clinicians and therapists, expand alternative sources of mental health assistance, such as peer-to-peer counseling, or possibly organizing awareness and educational campaigns .

In addition to early recognition of a mental health crisis, Merchant and colleagues evaluated the predictability of medical conditions from social media posts. Even though 21 broad categories were studied, this review only focuses on the categories that included mental health conditions. "The authors linked consenting patients' electronic medical records (EMR) with their social media data to produce two research questions: 1) Can we predict individuals' medical diagnosis from language posted on social media? And 2) Can we identify specific markers of disease from

social media posts?” . Participants were pulled from an ongoing Social Mediomie study that began recruitment in March 2014 [16]. Adult patients that sought health care in an urban academic health system were asked to share both their past social media activity and data from their electronic medical records (EMR) . Social media posts, including status updates, were analyzed from Facebook accounts from March 2009 through October 2015. In addition to demographic information, prior diagnoses by International Classification of Diseases [ICD-9] codes were collected . The categories related to mental health included depression, anxiety, and psychoses. Predictive modeling were used with each diagnosis. Of the medical conditions for which Facebook statuses showed the largest prediction accuracy gains over demographic variables included diabetes, pregnancy, and the mental health categories of anxiety (AUC = .66), psychoses (AUC = .58) and depression (AUC = .64). Prediction accuracy was evaluated using the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC), which is a measure of discrimination in which a value of 0.5 is expected due to chance, 0.6 is considered moderate, and above 0.7 is considered a strong prediction from a behavior .

The medical condition of anxiety had the highest prediction accuracy of mental health conditions. Individual language markers used to identify depression described symptoms of depression such as “stomach hurts” and “head hurts” and emotional distress such as “pain” “crying”, and “tears.” These patterns of language can be associated with diagnoses to reveal similarities and differences between diagnoses . Social media platforms also contains artificial intelligence (AI) features that analyzes the text of a post. Facebook now allows users to flag posts with their network that they think may suggest suicidal ideation or self-harm. Facebook then anonymously provides resources for those individuals at risk . An individual’s personality, mental state, and health behaviors they engage in are reflected in their social media posts and have a significant impact on health. It is important to note that predictive associations of language vary across populations, however, this study provided another example of the potential of social media to personalize health care based on language markers in Facebook posts . The increased efficiency of AI to possibly predict mental illness opens the door to innovative approaches in health care.

Screening for Depression

In addition to the early detection of a mental health crisis, social media has proven to be a valid measure for depression screening. Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is a debilitating condition that affects over 5% of the adult population globally. “An estimated 3.8% of the population experience depression, including 5% of adults (4% among men and 6% among women), and 5.7% of adults older than 60 years. Approximately 280 million people in the world have depression” (World Health Organization, n.d.). Depression is a common condition that impacts daily living and can be crippling for some – especially those who do not receive treatment. Given the profound negative impact that depression has on people’s lives, it is important to diagnose and treat early. One potential mechanism to recognize depression more rapidly is via social media. Kim et al. performed a systematic review examining the validity of screening for depression through social media posts found in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. LinkedIn was not included since its purpose is focused

more on professional interactions rather than more informal, social content. Fifteen articles were collected for review that met the inclusion criteria, but no Snapchat studies were found. The purpose of their review was whether social media markers can validly be used to screen for depression by cross-referencing with validated depression screening tools, and if so, what those markers were [17].

The operational definition of “depressive social media marker” used in the study was a marker that was deemed to be indicative of depression because it positively correlated with depressive systems of the social media users who produced the marker . A standardized scale of depression was used to analyze certain users of social media to verify the promise of social media as a screening mechanism for identifying signs of depression . Examples of social media markers were the number and content of messages on Facebook. The authors determined that having fewer Facebook friends, fewer mutual friends, posting frequently, and using fewer location tags positively correlated with depression symptoms . Depression in Facebook users was also predicted by posting about depressive symptoms, use of personal pronouns, words in their posts related to aggressive emotions, and routinely displaying negative thought patterns. In Twitter, linguistic variability in tweets and word count were used. Lastly, on the Instagram platform, number of followers, frequency of Instagram use, and the content of message were used as social media markers. For the chosen studies including Twitter usage, ‘Twitter showed that the use of “past focus” words, negative emotions and anger words, and fewer words per Tweet positively correlated with de-pression’ . Therefore, screening social media profiles on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook may be a valid way to detect depression but different methodology was used in the articles that were collected which may question the validity of the findings. Some profile settings are also set to “private” which does not capture all users of social media platforms and their personal posts .

Social Support

Social support is “the extent to which an individual feels a sense of belonging to a social network that is based on communication and reciprocity” [18]. The relationships between family members, significant others, co-workers, and friends may have a significant impact on the health and well-being of an individual. If a person is exposed to negativity because of financial status or stressful working conditions, a supportive social network may help to offset the negatives . If social media users are diagnosed with a mental illness or suffering from a stressful life change, social media has numerous support groups for users to make connections and seek help. A support group provides the opportunity for people to share individual experiences and feelings, or personal knowledge of available treatments and coping mechanisms. A support group may also serve as a bridge between medical and social needs. There are many benefits of support groups such as feeling less lonely, reducing distress, depression, and anxiety, and improving skills to cope with challenges [19]. Research related to social support retrieved from Facebook has found that social support can have a positive effect on various outcomes such as depression, anxiety, well-being, physical health, and loneliness. An abundance of research demonstrates the negative effects of social networking sites on mental health, but the body of evidence continues to grow for the positive ef-

fects related to social cohesion and social support. Gilmour and colleagues performed a systematic review of the literature examining Facebook-based social support. Their research question was ‘Does the current literature indicate that social support drawn from Facebook translate into positive physical or mental health outcomes’? As mentioned earlier, a limitation of conducting a systematic review stem from the use of inconsistent methodology even though the studies have similar research questions [20].

In their systematic review, several databases were searched between 2007 to 2018 with various search terms to gather articles related to Facebook, mental health outcomes, and physical health outcomes. The year 2007 was selected since Facebook became open to the public in 2006. As part of the inclusion criteria, “studies were re-quired to measure social support, specifically in either the context of Facebook-based social support or online social support”. Studies were also required to measure at least one of the following: mental health-related outcomes, general mental well-being, or general physical well-being . After confirming the quality of the methodology, findings suggested that Facebook-based social support had effects on three broad categories: general health, both physical and mental, mental illness, and well-being. The associations between social support, mental health, and mental illness are addressed since they relate to the topic of interest. “Studies containing the general health category focused on the effects of Facebook-based social support in improving health which included the mental health component. Studies that focused on the use of Facebook-based social support in the reduction of mental illness symptoms were included in the mental illness category and included depression, anxiety, online victimization, loneliness, and Facebook addiction” .

In the mental health category, it was found that “Facebook-based social support was predictive of better mental health, as well as decreased levels of mental distress” . Emotional support stemming from Facebook was also found to reduce perceived stress, although greater physical and social attraction to Facebook friends was a factor that improved levels of support . Providing emotional support may seem challenging through social media, but something as simple as showing concern, encouragement, or reassurance is beneficial. That may be in the form of responding with words or an emoji to make them feel heard and valued. Although Facebook-based social support was found to predict better mental health, social comparisons to others impacted mental health negatively. Another study found that the number of Facebook friends a user has was negatively associated with bonding social capital or the development of reciprocal relationships. Having a large group of friends or followers does not necessarily equate to higher levels of social support since many of those friends are not close to the user . They may merely be acquaintances or distant relatives and unable to provide the types of social support needed, especially emotional support. Out of the four conceptual types of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal), emotional support was most strongly associated with improved health outcomes . Lastly, the intent to self-disclose, and the amount of honesty of self-disclosure yielded greater acts of social support from Facebook friends.

In the mental illness category, studies that explored Facebook-based social support and its relationship to depression found that social support drawn from Facebook was predictive of lower levels of depression, depressive mood, and symptomology . One study found that “Facebook-based social support only predicted lower levels of depression in adolescent girls, not boys”, which is an interesting finding . In adolescent boys, active Facebook use was associated with higher levels of depression.

In the symptom of anxiety, in Facebook users that were categorized as high socially anxious, “Facebook-based social support significantly predicted greater psychological well-being, whereas face-to-face social support did not. The results generally demonstrated that higher levels of Facebook-based social support predicted greater positive mental and physical health outcomes. Higher levels of support also predicted lower levels of a wide range of negative outcomes including depression and loneliness” . According to Gilmour et al., although general Facebook use has been shown to negatively affect mental health, these results show that Facebook, when used to seek and provide social support, is beneficial across several mental health outcomes. Mental health workers should consider the use of Facebook and other social networking sites, such as Instagram, as additional ways to improve mental health outcomes .

While most of the articles collected for this review focused on adults, Pretorius and Coyle examined young people’s use of digital tools to support their mental health during COVID-19 restrictions, particularly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat [21]. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2019 caused many countries around the world to restrict travel and isolate at home to reduce the risk of transmission. Employees worked from home and schools transitioned to virtual learning. Even before the pandemic began, “the prevalence of mental illness in the younger population was staggering with a reported 25% of young people aged between 12 and 25 experiencing a mental illness”. Those lockdown procedures exacerbated the presentation of symptoms of mental illness, including acute stress, anxiety, and depression. The ability to seek help is a protective factor in young people’s mental health, and many prefer informal sources of support including friends, peers, and family. Without having direct contact with classmates, friends, and peers, many young people sought out online resources to support their mental health .

For the study, an online cross-sectional survey was distributed between April 22 and May 22, 2020, when the number of COVID-19 cases were increasing and the Irish government issued level 5 lockdown restrictions to limit the spread of the virus. The inclusion criteria was 1) being a resident of Ireland, and 2) aged between 18 and 25. The survey contained demographic questions and open- and closed-response questions related to online resources currently being used to support mental health. When the survey closed, a total of 393 participants took part in the study, of which 81.7% identified as female, 12.5% as male, and 4.1% as non-binary (Pretorius & Coyle, 2021, p. 3). A little over half (51.4%) of the sample indicated that they were using social media to support their mental health . There were distinct differences in the types of accounts and social media platforms that participants used that varied from following influencers focusing on health and fitness to accounts providing inspirational

quotes. In this study, Instagram emerged as the most popular social media platform while messaging applications was the most popular digital tool with 71% of respondents disclosing they used a messaging application to support their mental health during the lockdown at the height of the pandemic .

Participants used Facebook often to access support groups focusing on specific issues such as eating disorders or ADHD. “Of the overall sample, 26% indicated that they were using a health service or charity website to support their mental health. The most accessed resource was a charity organization called SpunOut. Nearly a third of the sample, 32.6%, indicated they were using a mental health app to support their mental health. The majority of participants indicated that they made use of Google search to locate online mental health resources” (Pretorius & Coyle, 2021, p. 7). Less popular options to support mental health were discussion boards and professional services .

The findings from this study included documentation that young people used a variety of online resources to support their mental health during the COVID-19 lockdown. The loneliness stemming from the lockdown was felt across the globe and not strictly to the young people in Ireland. Of importance to note is that not just one resource was used exclusively, but a variety of resources from messaging applications to Google searches for mental health resources. It is important that service providers become familiar with the different social media platforms and how they may be used to support the mental health of youth. Many online resources are underutilized because of a lack of awareness or simply not knowing where to search. It appears that for some of the respondents, this was the first time they had the need to use online mental health supports and stated they would continue to use them even after the lockdown ended .

Peer to Peer Support

In addition to social support and support groups, Facebook groups are used for online peer to peer support. Prescott, Rathbone, and Brown conducted a systematic search of mental health related open Facebook groups to gain further understanding of how these groups are used and to compare U.S. groups to groups from the UK [22]. A Facebook search for open groups yielded a total of 154 groups using key words such as mental health, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, stress, bipolar, and psychosis. The highest number of open Facebook groups were related to the topic of depression. After examining 20-525 pages of comments and posts from the respective groups, the data had six main themes: Sharing experiences, informational support, emotional support, direct requests for advice, how information is received, and benefits of social media .

The authors found that overall use of the Facebook groups were positive in nature with posts that were friendly, support, and informal. Users shared their individual experiences with mental health with others that may not have occurred within their own social networks outside of Facebook. Users also made direct requests for information and advice not only for themselves, but for close family members or friends. They were appreciative of the advice and discussed their intended actions related to mental health and well-being. The authors also discovered that the use of Facebook for mental health support was similar across both the UK and the US, with both countries bringing to attention the

same issues such as stigma, lack of awareness, and barriers to accessing services. These issues are consistent throughout the literature. The use of social media to promote positive mental health is not a replacement for clinical intervention but provides supplemental ways to provide support and resources .

Discussion

The results uncovered in this narrative review showed mixed findings regarding the use of social media platforms and mental health. Even though evidence tends to lean toward negative associations, there were several studies that showed the promising use of social media to promote positive mental health. Social media users tend to develop an emotional connection to the platforms they are using and have a fear of missing out when they are not able to access a particular platform, such as Facebook or Instagram. This connection was apparent at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when social media platforms became a lifeline for many who were isolated in their homes without in-person human interaction. The fear of missing out is negatively associated with the dimensions of social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health . Routine social media use, such as everyday use and engaging in the content that other users are sharing, was shown to be positively associated with those same three dimensions . Social media users tend to feel connected to others through social media which improves mental health and reduces mental distress. It is important to note that these associations may fluctuate based on the amount of time spent on social media and the type of content that users are accessing.

Social media is also an avenue to build positive relationships and social capital with others who share the same interest. In the qualitative study by Vaingankar et al., one theme that emerged from the semi structured interviews of youth residing in Singapore was centered around the use of social media to build positive relationships and social capital. In addition to building social capital, the connection with friends and family result in the development of close relationships built on mutual trust, recognition, and a sense of belonging. Studies have also found that individuals with serious mental disorders appear to form online relationships and connect with others on social media as often as social media users without a diagnosed mental disorder.

A promising result from the review shows that social media is an effective tool for health promotion outreach and education. The success of the Buddies for Suicide Prevention, through sharing and linking to resources, supports the use of social media as an opportunity to engage others in collaborative efforts to reduce the stigma associated with mental health . Since social media platforms are available 24/7, the content will always be available to users at their convenience. Another advantage of using social media to promote mental health is the number of people who can be reached, cost-effectiveness, high scalability, self-tracking, and tailored feedback functionalities. For individuals living in rural areas, the availability of social media may be their only channel of information regarding mental health . Many individuals living with mental health disorders have communicated their interest in using social media to obtain information on mental health and connecting with mental health providers . Even though there are several studies showing the effectiveness of social media for health promotion, there are challenges that need

to be considered. The accuracy, authenticity, and credibility of the information published on social media should be evaluated through a structured process so users are not being misled with inaccurate information. Health literacy and language barriers should be considered with information being presented in a way that is understood and easily translated to other languages.

Early detection of mental health crises, and a screening mechanism for depression. Algorithms analyze user behavior, such as likes, shares, comments, and watch time, to recommend content that users are likely to engage with. This includes posts, videos, and articles that appear in feeds. Researchers and clinicians can analyze these data to identify an increase in posts related to feelings of depression, anxiety, worry, and requests for support. This information may be particularly useful after a catastrophic event such as a school shooting, loss of classmate, natural disaster, or adverse community event. Since there is a global lack of mental health providers, schools and workplaces can be proactive and ensure resources are available, such as counselors and other support systems.

Conclusions

This narrative review shows that the use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, may be beneficial in promoting positive mental health. The associations between emotional support, social support, social capital, and positive mental health were mentioned frequently throughout the literature [23]. Social media platforms should continue to take advantage of high usage to offer resources and connect users to social support and mental health resources. Social support may include public or private groups where users feel a positive impact to mental health based on shared experiences. Due to the convenience, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility of social media use, most social media platforms provide opportunities for health promotion programs bringing awareness to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, suicide, and eating disorders. Resources may be shared and targeted toward specific groups that may be at higher risk – such as adolescents. Adolescents are a vulnerable population whose time spent on social media should be monitored, as well as the content viewed. Excessive social media use, especially in adolescents, is associated with depression and other mental health disorders. Algorithms can assist in moderating content by flagging inappropriate or harmful posts for review. This helps maintain a safe and respectful environment on the platforms (Thompson & Basir, 2023). Lastly, an important finding from this review is the promising use of social media to detect early signs of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, mental health crises, and suicidal ideation [24-26].

Future Directions

Mental health professionals, primary care providers, educators, high school counselors, and public health practitioners can benefit from learning more about how social media can promote positive mental health. Based on the literature collected, many individuals use social media to search for information and resources on mental health. They may want to ask their mental health provider if the information is reliable, factual, and trustworthy. Since there remains a stigma associated with discussing mental health, the clinician may want to initiate the conversation about social media and direct them to appropriate sites. The increased

use of social media use also paves the way for reaching or offering support to patients. If a hospital is affiliated with a medical school, the connection between research and health care may create new opportunities for integration of digital tools in the patient's care plan and advancing the use of social media platforms for positive mental health. Additional research is needed to further examine ways in which social media can be leveraged as an accepted clinical tool and public health intervention.

There is an emerging field of research referred to as “digital phenotyping” aimed at capturing how individuals interact with their digital devices, including social media platforms. Advanced technology in machine learning makes it possible to study massive quantities of data from social media interaction to possibly study patterns of disease, including mental illness. A more comprehensive digital phenotype may be necessary to predict relapse and identify high-risk health behaviors among individuals living with mental illness. The use of AI-powered analysis of social media data shows promise for early detection of mental health crises but ethical challenges should be noted, such as privacy concerns.

The dose-response relationship between social media use and mental health needs to be further explored, as well as the associations between race/ethnicity and population subgroups social media use and mental health and well-being. Findings could inform public health policies or mental health promotion measures focusing on interventions in youth and adults who are connected to social media in schools or other settings. The use of social media will continue, so it is advantageous to create ways to monitor and limit use, such as a heavy usage notification that pops up after too much time is spent online and create innovative ways to connect people, provide mental health resources, and identify users who may be in a mental health crisis.

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