

Chapter 2

Socialization or Social Isolation? Mental Health Community Support in the Digital Age

Kim Heyes

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

ABSTRACT

This research project specifically examines the experience of online community support groups as reported by users. The project began out of concern that healthcare providers in the Global North are directing people with mental health problems to online services, without seemingly understanding the impact that this may have on the individuals. The research findings will be of particular interest to mental health practitioners and service providers in the UK and elsewhere in the Global North, and aims to influence decisions made for policies around developing new online mental health services.

INTRODUCTION

There are many people living and surviving in the community with mild to severe mental health problems who do not have easy access to professional health and social care services. Globally, we have started to see a demand for more choice in how healthcare provision is provided, however constant cuts to healthcare budgets in the Global North mean that options such as telehealthcare and online services are seen as a cheaper alternative, and are often billed as a more effective solution

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Socialization or Social Isolation?

(Chambers *et al.*, 2016). This is despite much research showing that there is little to no benefit of this method of support, particularly that of peer to peer online support communities (Eysenbach *et al.*, 2004).

This chapter specifically examines the experience of online community support groups as reported by users. Twenty-five participants answered between one and six open questions posted on three different mental health forums. The research began out of concern that healthcare providers in the Global North are directing people with mental health problems to online self-care or peer to peer support services, which may not be suitable for all mental health patients. Despite a paucity of research showing completion rates of professional online therapeutic support interventions are rare (Simco *et al.*, 2014), those that do complete the set programmes have been found to benefit from the support (Learmonth *et al.*, 2008). However, statistics released in January 2017 by NHS Digital (the UK National Health Service) show that more people than ever are turning up at hospital emergency departments in the UK to receive support for mental health issues (NHS Digital, 2017). Since 2011, the numbers of people going to emergency hospital departments because of their mental ill health has increased by over 50%, and this is also the case for those under the age of 18 (NHS Digital, 2017). This shows that despite a growing number of professional and peer to peer online support services, there may still a growing need for face-to-face intervention.

This chapter suggests that through the identification of positive experiences of online mental health support forums, suitable resources can be developed cheaply and effectively in order to reduce the effects of mental illness, and support those who are unable to find support elsewhere.

BACKGROUND

Worldwide the spending is disproportionately low on mental health (between approximately 2 and 50 USDs per capita), and the lack of financial support has resulted in cuts to services, especially public sector services that support people with mental health problems within their local communities (WHO, 2015). Others are unable to access such support, perhaps due to living arrangements, or because of the negative stigma associated with mental health (Corrigan *et al.*, 2005; Link *et al.*, 1999; Star, 1955). Globally, one in ten people are estimated to have a mental health issue, yet up to two thirds of these do not access any type of support services (WHO, 2015). It is of great concern that budget cuts and negative attitudes to mental health issues may lead to an increase in people isolated through lack of professional service support, so it is vital to understand the social factors that shape the way people may seek support in different formats.

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