

Chapter 4

Use of Social Networking Sites by People with Health Issues

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have found that the use of social networking sites (SNSs) is associated with the user's positive outcomes such as perceived social support and psychological well-being (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2012). To seek those positive influences, those with health issues such as physical illness or mental illness actively use SNSs (e.g., Shpigelman & Gill, 2014a; Gowen, Deschaine, Gruttadara, & Markey, 2012). The first aim of this chapter is to describe previous studies on the use of SNSs by those with health issues such as mental illnesses, HIV/AIDS, cancer, intellectual disabilities, and diabetes. The second aim is to propose a new direction of research on the use of SNSs by those with health issues: the impact of stigma on communication on SNSs.

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is difficult to find people who do not use any social networking sites (SNSs). In 2015, 90% of American young adults (18 to 29 years) used at least one SNS, compared with 12% in 2005 (Perrin, 2015). The time spent on SNSs among emerging adults is high, around 52 minutes every day (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). Emerging adults use SNSs for various purposes, such as maintaining friendships (Barker, 2009) and developing romantic relationships (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013). Thus, the use of SNSs is associated with various positive outcomes for the users. In particular, the number of Facebook friends is related to perceived social support, reduced stress, and less physical illness (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013). The use of Facebook is also related to psychological well-being, especially for those with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Consequently, it is not surprising that people with health issues use SNSs with the intent to improve their quality of life (e.g., Gowen, Deschaine, Gruttadara, & Markey, 2012; Horvath et al., 2012; Shpigelman & Gill, 2014a). Shpigelman and Gill (2014a) surveyed individuals suffering from disabilities, such

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as physical disability, Autism, hearing disability, and mental illness, to examine these individuals' use of Facebook. Results showed that 69% of the participants visited Facebook at least once a day and 48% of them reported having up to 200 Facebook friends. In addition, 10.1% of them reported that they did not have Facebook friends with disabilities, while 89.9% of them indicated that they had Facebook friends with disabilities. Furthermore, findings from this study also revealed that the participants mainly used Facebook to connect with nondisabled friends rather than to connect with disabled friends. Qualitative analyses of responses to the open-ended questions suggested that people with disabilities use Facebook to seek support and advice from other users. These findings revealed that SNSs play an important role for those with health issues in maintaining and developing interpersonal relationships.

However, when using SNSs, those with health issues might experience stigma associated with their health issues, similar to the stigma they might experience offline (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Imai & Dailey, 2015; Schneider, 2005). The stigma those with health issues experience may threaten their identity (Newman, Lauterbach, Munson, Resnick, & Morris, 2011; Schabert, Browne, Mosely, & Speight, 2013). For example, some individuals struggling with diabetes may want to share their health condition on SNSs to seek emotional support (Newman et al., 2011). However, they are concerned about the possibility that disclosing their health issue threatens their socially desired identity. This might be particularly concerning for emerging adults, whose main task is to establish a sense of identity (Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2013).

Despite the significant effect of stigma associated with health issues on SNSs, little research has been conducted on this topic. Thus, this chapter describes the current state of the literature on SNSs use by those with health issues and the stigma associated with various health issues. This chapter first introduces past studies investigating how those individuals with various health issues use SNSs for different purposes. Next, the effects of stigma on SNS users with health issues are considered. Finally, this chapter describes future research directions on stigmatizing effects of SNSs on emerging adults with health issues.

USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES BY THOSE WITH HEALTH ISSUES

Past studies have investigated the use of SNSs by people with health issues utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. These studies have focused on the use of SNSs by those with a mental illness, HIV/AIDS, cancer, an intellectual disability, and diabetes.

Mental Illness

Five features of mental illnesses are described by Stein et al. (2010). First, a mentally ill individual demonstrates a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern. Second, the syndrome or pattern is related to present distress or disability or to a considerably increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom. Third, the syndrome or pattern is not an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a specific event (e.g., the death of a loved one). Fourth, the individual shows a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction. Finally, neither deviant behaviors nor conflicts between the individual and society can be classified as mental illness, unless the deviance or conflict is a symptom of dysfunction in the individual. Fitting these criteria, there are a variety of types of mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, substance-related disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disor-

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