Chapter 17
Analyzing Online Social Support Within the Type 1 Diabetes Community

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ABSTRACT

Social support has been linked with many health outcomes, ranging from heart disease to depression. Although its importance has been recognized, less is known about how individuals with chronic illnesses may use social media to provide and seek social support. This chapter's focus is on the way in which people with Type 1 diabetes (T1D) use social media to provide and solicit social support. A mixed-methods approach is utilized. First, posts from two social media platforms were qualitatively content analyzed. Second, the data were quantitatively analyzed to provide a finer-grained understanding of the messages. The results show informational support as the most prevalent on both sites, although there are some differences in content and use. This chapter's implications highlight the importance of social media as a conduit for social support among caregivers and individuals affected by T1D.

INTRODUCTION

Social support has been studied and defined in a number of ways. In general, social support is reflected as receiving help, comfort, or information from other people (Wallston, Alagna, DeVellis, & DeVellis, 1983). Previous research has established a link between social support and health outcomes for patients with chronic illnesses (e.g., Gallant, 2003). Sources of social support typically include family members, friends, and members of one's community. As can be expected, individuals may receive different types of social support from each source (e.g., Wallston et al., 1983). In turn, the relative importance of each source may vary across one's lifespan (e.g., Heinze, Kruger, Reischl, Cupal, & Zimmerman, 2015). For instance, in a community-based survey of adults living in Michigan, researchers found better emotional

health among young adults who received social support from their family members. In contrast, support from one's community and friends was related to better emotional health for older adults (Heinze et al., 2015).

In addition to age-based differences in social support's impact, individuals with a chronic illness may reap the most benefit from disease-specific support (e.g., Aalto, Uutela, & Aro, 1997). For instance, participants who reported diabetes-specific psychosocial factors also reported better well-being in perceived health and mental health (Aalto et al., 1997). Likewise, another study examining the effects of perceived and utilized social support on diabetes control found that both were significantly related to patient outcomes. Specifically, participants who perceived and used their social support sources showed good control of their diabetes (Fukunishi, Horikawa, Yamazaki, Shirasaka, Kanno, & Akimoto, 1998). One explanation could be that patients with a chronic illness desire a community in which to discuss their illness, provide clinical information, and receive support for their treatment (Greene, Choudhry, Kibuk, & Shrank, 2010). Further, in a review of six controlled diabetes intervention studies, researchers found that receiving the right amount of social support from varied sources is important for diabetes patients (van Dam, van der Horst, Knoops, Ryck, Crebolder, & van den Borne, 2005).

The present research builds on these findings and applies it within an online setting. Specifically, this chapter discusses findings from a content analysis of two social media platforms centered on providing support and information for people with Type 1 diabetes (T1D) as well as their family members and caregivers. The messages included in the present study illustrate both action-facilitating and nurturing support, both of which are important from a communication standpoint (du Pré, 2005). This chapter's aims are three-fold: 1) provide an overview of the relevant literature and theoretical framework; 2) introduce the studies' methodology and results; and 3) discuss the contributions and future implications of this research.

BACKGROUND

Social Support

Over time, many dimensions of social support have been identified and discussed (e.g., House, 1981; House & Kahn, 1985). Using a communication scholar's lens, however, social support is built on two pillars: action-facilitating support and nurturing support (du Pré, 2005). To summarize, action-facilitating support consists of instrumental and informational support. Instrumental support refers to tangible or material support to help with specific situations or merely as an act of affirmation (Taylor, Klein, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Fernandes-Taylor, 2003). Informational support can also involve a range of interactions--varying from suggesting a new restaurant for a friend to try to making referrals for helping agencies, such as job placement firms--to other individuals as they adjust to major transitory periods of life (Chen & Choi, 2011). In contrast, nurturing support involves emotional support such as acceptance, caring, and encouragement. A sense of belonging is also incorporated with nurturing support (du Pré, 2005).

In a review of family communication behavior's effect on patients with chronic illnesses, Rosland, Heisler, and Piette (2012) found varied outcomes. For instance, attentive reactions, emphasizing self-reliance and achievement, and cohesiveness among the family were related with more positive health outcomes. In contrast, critical, controlling, distracting, and overprotective actions from family members were related to negative outcomes among the patients (Rosland et al., 2012). Similarly, parental interac-

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