Online self-harm content might provide peer support to young people

By Dr. Jessica Edwards

Youth today find themselves living in an era of social media, with easy access to a wide range of social networking sites. Unfortunately, emerging evidence suggests that some social technologies might cause more harm than good to some young people's mental health.[1,2] Specifically, concern about online self-harm content and its influence on young people is growing, with calls for influential online platforms to tackle this problem by removing self-harm posts.[3]

Now, Anna Lavis and Rachel Winter have published their findings from an ethnographic study that aimed to understand why young people might view online self-harm content and *how* they engage with it. The researchers collected and analyzed >10,000 posts and >36,000 comments on social media between 2018 and 2019. They also conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 young people who have engaged with self-harm content online.

Lavis *et al*. made a striking finding: many young people engage with online self-harm content to better understand their actions, find peer support and seek help. Indeed, many young people who are accessing online content regarding self-harm are already self-harming and are looking for support and understanding that avoids the stigma found offline both in services and society more widely.

"These findings demonstrate the need for a franker consideration of how we respond to self-harm, both in services and as a society", explains Lavis. "Rather than focusing on the impact of social media on young people, there is a need to listen to their reasons for turning to social media for support with their self-harm. It is against a background of offline stigma and support gaps that online peer support takes on importance; this is crucial for understanding the positive impact that online content, even that habitually framed as 'graphic' and thus 'harmful', may have on a young person".

Based on their findings, the researchers believe that we should move beyond a model of contagion, which assumes that online self-harm content encourages or causes acts of self-harm. Instead, we should consider the potential benefits as well as other negative consequences of online self-harm content. "Moves to eradicate self-harm content risk being harmful", says Lavis. "As such, any approaches must be underpinned by evidence that places the priorities of young people themselves at its heart".

References:

[1] *Kelly, Y. et al. (2019), Social media use and adolescent mental health: Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. EClinicalMedicine. 4, 59 –68. doi: 10.1016/j.eclinm.2018.12.005*

[2] *Field, T. (2018). Cyberbullying: A narrative review. J. Addict. Ther. Res. 2, 010–027. doi: 10.29328/journal.jatr.1001007.*

[3] *Lumley, S. (2019, 26th January) Matt Hancock tells social media giants to remove suicide and self-harm material. The Telegraph, Available from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/ne ws/2019/01/26/matt-hancock-tells-social-media-giantsremove-suicide-self-harm/*

Glossary:

Ethnography: the systematic study of individual cultures in terms of their customs, habits, and mutual differences.

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