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Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Mental Well-being: A Comprehensive Study on Service Providers' Awareness

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Abstract

The correlation between excessive usage of social media and the rise in mental health disorders has long been established. However, there is a lack of information in the existing literature regarding the responses of mental health practitioners/providers to this issue. This research utilized a mixed-methods approach, incorporating two theoretical perspectives - the Ecological Model and the Generalist Intervention Model - to determine the extent to which mental health practitioners/providers assess the impact of increased social media usage on mental health. Through the use of Qualtrics, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from a sample of 95 mental health practitioners. Non-parametric tests and descriptive statistics revealed that factors such as prior training, agency values, and credentials influence how mental health practitioners respond to social media usage and its impact on mental health. Additionally, the qualitative findings highlighted three psychiatric conditions - low self-esteem, heightened depression, and increased anxiety - that are associated with uncontrolled use of social media. The implications of these findings were discussed in relation to theory, research, social work practice, and social work education.

Keywords: Stress, Mental Health, Social work

Introduction

In this era of rapid technological advancements, social media, also referred to as social networking, has emerged as the most widely adopted method of communication and interaction across all age groups worldwide. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tumblr, and others, enable individuals to communicate and share content using various technological means (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Extensive research on the increasing popularity of social media usage indicates that nearly 80% of Americans engage with social media, with 68% using Facebook, 21% on Twitter, 25% on Pinterest, and 26% on Instagram (Greenwood et al., 2018). These statistics highlight the significant amount of time individuals

spend on social media, accounting for approximately 28% of their overall internet usage (Huang, 2018).

The use of social media offers various advantages. It allows for increased awareness and destigmatization of mental health issues, provides additional access to resources, and serves as a platform for individuals to connect with others who share similar mental health symptoms through dedicated applications (Lattie et al., 2019). Moreover, social media can serve as a beneficial outlet to overcome the barriers faced by individuals from diverse backgrounds who are living with a mental health diagnosis (Andrews et al., 2018).

However, the existing literature contains numerous studies linking social media usage to various psychiatric disorders, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Lin et al., 2016; Pantic, 2014). Users of social media often encounter negative experiences such as bullying, shaming, and unfavorable responses to their posts. Additionally, comparing one's self-image and life satisfaction to those of other users on social media can lead to discomfort and dissatisfaction (Belluomini, 2015). Furthermore, negative behaviors observed on social media platforms can contribute to feelings of isolation, depression, and mood changes due to exposure to detrimental content while scrolling (Belluomini, 2015).

In light of the surge in social media usage in the past decade, it is crucial to evaluate the potential effects of social media on mental well-being. Currently, mental health professionals have made limited efforts to address the consequences of social media on mental health. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research investigating the knowledge and readiness of mental health clinicians in dealing with the repercussions of excessive social media use on their clients' mental well-being. The impact of social media on mental health adds complexity to the delivery of social services at an individual level, given the substantial rise in mental health issues. As more individuals experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and similar problems due to their social media usage, there is a growing demand for additional service providers. Mental health professionals must acknowledge the influence of social media on mental health in order to effectively support those affected by this matter. Moreover, there is a necessity for further training on how to assess social media usage and its potential effects on mental health. Gaining a deeper understanding of the impacts of social media use will ultimately result in more efficient and effective treatment for clients.

Critical Analysis of the Theories Guiding This Research

The research is guided by the Generalist Intervention Model (GIM), which has been developed over several decades of social work practice since the establishment of the field. This model focuses on assessing environmental stressors at different levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) and providing interventions to help clients restore balance and enhance their overall well-being (Ebear et al., 2008). Therefore, this model emphasizes the critical thinking ability of mental

health practitioners to analyze the client's immediate systems and environments, gaining a deeper understanding of how these factors contribute to the identified issues or concerns.

The GIM highlights seven key areas of intervention for mental health practitioners, including engagement, assessment, planning, intervention, evaluation, and treatment. These areas aim to support and guide clients in developing problem-solving skills while respecting their right to make decisions for themselves. By applying this model in assessment and treatment, mental health practitioners can gain valuable insights into the effects of excessive social media use on mental health. This perspective encourages clinicians to consider the client's environment and social influences, such as social media, and explore their impact on mental well-being.

The GIM also provides a robust framework for evaluating a client's level of social media usage and its potential impact on their mental health symptoms or behaviors. By using this model as a conceptual guide, researchers can examine the environmental and social factors that influence how mental health practitioners assess and treat individuals with mental health concerns stemming from social media use. In essence, the GIM serves as an assessment tool that helps mental health practitioners gain a better understanding of how social media affects their clients' mental health.

This section offers a comprehensive overview of the approach and actions undertaken to conduct this study. Primarily, the chapter delves into the study's structure, methods employed for sampling, construction of research instruments, procedures for data collection, ensuring the safeguarding of human subjects, formulation of research hypotheses, and the subsequent analysis of the gathered data.

The researchers employed a comprehensive approach to evaluate the extent to which mental health professionals are aware of the impact of social media on mental well-being. The study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component of the study aimed to provide a descriptive analysis, while the qualitative aspect followed the principles of Grounded Theory methodology. The survey, designed with a mixed-methods approach, included a combination of open and closed questions, enabling participants to freely express their thoughts without being restricted to predefined answers.

Given the scarcity of research on how mental health practitioners respond to the rise in mental health issues, the mixed-methods design offered a valuable platform to identify obstacles, gain insights, and potentially gather future feedback for mental health education. However, it is important to acknowledge a limitation of this research design. As mixed-method surveys require more effort and time, some participants may not have provided as much information in the open-ended questions. To address this limitation, the team of 16 researchers limited the number of qualitative questions in order to mitigate the potential impact of this issue.

Sampling

The present study employed a method of sampling that did not rely on probability. This method encompassed both purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques, targeting mental health practitioners who were engaged in evaluating and treating individuals exhibiting symptoms of mental health disorders. The researchers initially approached mental health practitioners within their own professional network, who in turn approached other practitioners within their respective networks. Furthermore, the researchers actively sought participants by requesting their involvement through a social media group called "The Life of Social Work," which was part of the Facebook network. The selection criteria for participants were based on their area of expertise, the specific populations they served, their level of education, and their age. It was mandatory for all participants to be at least 18 years old. Ultimately, the final sample size comprised 95 individuals. Detailed information regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants can be found in the "Results" section.

Hypothesis I: The majority (equal to or more than 75 percent) of mental health professionals hold the belief that there is a direct relationship between excessive use of social media and detrimental effects on mental health, following a monotonous pattern

Hypothesis II: Mental health practitioners will exhibit a significant level of knowledge and understanding (at least 75 percent) regarding the harmful influence of excessive social media usage on mental well-being.

Hypothesis III: Mental health practitioners who have received training on social media will possess a greater understanding of the influence of social media on mental well-being compared to their non-trained counterparts.

Data Analysis

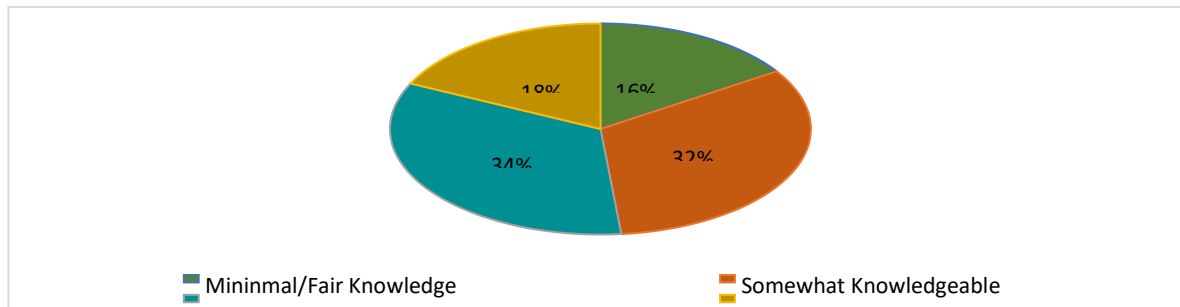
In the quantitative aspect of this mixed-methods investigation, the researchers examined the data using IBM SPSS 26.0. Because the data did not follow a normal distribution, the researchers conducted two non-parametric tests: the Man-Whitney U Test and the Spearman Correlation Test. These tests enabled the researchers to confirm or disprove the study hypotheses. In the qualitative part of the study, thematic analysis was employed. This involved coding participants' responses and grouping them into themes based on similarities.

Presentation of the Findings

The researchers had a hypothesis that due to the rise in mental health symptoms linked to extensive use of social media, a significant proportion of mental health practitioners would hold the belief that there is a direct and consistent relationship between heavy social media usage and negative mental health outcomes. They anticipated that this proportion would be equal to or

greater than 75 percent. Figure 1 illustrates that all 95 participants affirmed their belief in the impact of social media on mental health, confirming the validity of Hypothesis I.

Hypothesis II postulated a heightened level of consciousness (at minimum 75 percent) among mental health practitioners regarding the detrimental effects of excessive use of social media on



mental well-being, resembling yet differing from Hypothesis I. In Figure 1, the extent of participants' awareness concerning the negative influence of heavy social media usage on mental health is depicted. Approximately half of the respondents perceived their knowledge as minimal or somewhat limited, while the remaining half considered themselves to be average or highly informed. The majority of participants (around two-thirds) possessed a moderate understanding of the impact of social media on mental well-being, whereas less than one-fourth rated themselves as highly knowledgeable, and the rest identified with minimal awareness. Consequently, Hypothesis II failed to receive support.

Knowledge of Social Media Impact on Mental Health

Hypothesis III. The findings for the Mann-Whitney Test regarding the correlation between the previous training of mental health practitioners and their knowledge about the influence of social media on mental health are presented in Table 3. As depicted in Table 3, there was a significant difference in the level of knowledge regarding the impact of social media on mental health between mental health practitioners who received training on social media and those who did not ($Z = -3.353$, $p < .001$). The relationship between prior training and knowledge was moderately strong ($r = .34$). In other words, the training accounted for 12 percent of the variability in the dependent variable ($r^2 = .12$). Consequently, Hypothesis III was supported. Since the Mann-Whitney U Test does not allow for simultaneous analysis of variables, separate tests were conducted by the researchers to control for other predictors. As shown in Table 3, only education demonstrated a significant relationship with the dependent variable, namely the knowledge mental health practitioners possessed about the impact of social media on an individual's mental health ($Z = -2.469$, $p < .014$). The strength of the relationship between education level and social media knowledge ranged from minimal to moderate ($r = .25$). Additionally, education explained 6 percent of the variance in the dependent variable ($r^2 = .06$).

Knowledge of Social Media Impact on Mental Health

Variables	2-tailed α * Z-Scorer		<i>r</i>	2
Race	.125	-1.535		
Gender	.948	-.065		
Age	.473	-.717		
Education	.014	-2.469	.25	.06
Years in practice	.676	-.418		
Region of practice	.223	-1.219		
Prior training	.001	-3.353	.34	.12
Agency values	.198	-1.289		
*Alpha level ($p < .05$)				

Asymptotic significance results for variables in Mann-Whitney U Test (N = 95)

Limitations and Recommendations

Despite making every effort to address limitations, this study was not without its drawbacks. The primary limitation was the relatively small sample size ($n = 95$), although considering the exploratory nature of the research, the sample size can still be considered satisfactory. Additionally, the non-parametric method employed for data analysis may not have been the most robust approach. However, given the non-normal distribution of the data, it was the appropriate choice for this study. Moreover, due to the cross-sectional design of the study, there was a lack of longitudinal observation. The absence of randomization also precludes any inferential interpretation of the findings, as this was solely a correlation study. Lastly, it is important to note that this research did not encompass all potential predictors, leaving a significant portion of the variance in the key dependent variables unexplained. Hence, considering these aforementioned limitations, it is advisable to interpret the results cautiously.

Future investigations should aim to rectify the limitations inherent in this study. Researchers interested in expanding or replicating this research should incorporate a more robust method for recruiting participants, as well as adopt a longitudinal approach to observe participants' responses over time. To address potential issues with internal

validity, a larger sample size and a stronger data analysis method could be employed. Subsequent research could build upon the findings of this study by examining the obstacles faced by agencies when integrating social media use into mental health treatment. The primary objective of future investigations should be to generate knowledge that can be applied more broadly. In the meantime, the findings of this study serve as a pivotal resource for scholars and researchers seeking to understand the behaviors of mental health providers regarding the inclusion of social media content in assessment and treatment planning.

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