

Information-seeking Behaviors of Adolescents and Young Adults with Anxiety or Depression

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Abstract

Young people suffer from mental health issues at higher rates than any other age group, yet they are the least likely to seek help from mental health professionals because of the stigma surrounding mental illness and a lack of awareness and education. When young people do seek information and help, they overwhelmingly choose informal sources within their social networks and potentially unreliable sources of information on the Internet from search engine results and anonymous social networking sites. The latter sources do protect young people's privacy, but potentially at a cost to their well-being. Innovative e-mental health websites have come online recently and are gaining some traction within the community, however the level of engagement with informal information sources dwarfs the usage of these more reliable sites. The solution may lie in the K-12 educational system with school-wide efforts to help students gain the information literacy skills necessary to successfully evaluate and use information sought on the Internet.

When Jean Twenge describes the findings of her most recent research, there is alarm in her voice. She describes a significant increase in levels of depression, suicide attempts, and suicide across young people of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds. She concludes that “iGen,” young people born after 1995, are “much more likely to experience mental health issues than their millennial predecessors” (2017, para. 3). It has been well-documented that the onset and highest incidence of many mental health disorders come during adolescence and young adulthood, the period of time defined as 12-26 years of age (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Now, it appears, the situation has grown even more dire.

Anxiety and depression are two of the most common mental health issues young people face, with nearly 32% of teens suffering from anxiety disorders and over 14% from mood disorders (Merikangas et al., 2010). Unfortunately, because of the stigma surrounding mental illness and a lack of awareness and education, the majority of young people do not seek professional help (Merikangas et al., 2011). This is of great concern as untreated and undertreated mental health issues are costly to economies and society in terms of diminished employment opportunities and poorer education outcomes. They are also associated with higher likelihoods of drug and alcohol abuse and antisocial behavior (Burns & Birrell, 2014, p. 303).

Young people suffering from anxiety or depression can be considered an information community based on Fisher and Durrance’s (2003) definition. From the message boards of a decade ago to keyword searches on Tumblr today, one can find community members focused on specific topics related to mental health. These youth are transcending geographical barriers and making use of technology to seek, create, and share information, and to build connections within the community. Many ‘places’ where youth hang out online allow for anonymous interaction, overcoming the trust barrier that is associated with revealing sensitive personal information.

This paper will discuss the scholarly literature by researchers in both the library and information science (LIS) and mental health professions which addresses the information needs of young people with mental health issues, the information sources they commonly use, barriers to accessing information, and how the Internet is changing the ways young people seek and share information about their mental health. This paper will also discuss why young people overwhelmingly choose informal sources of information, new approaches to supporting youth with mental health concerns, and the role of libraries and schools in helping young people effectively access the information and help they need.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

The information-seeking process is often referred to as help seeking which is defined as “obtain[ing] help in terms of understanding, advice, information, treatment and general support in response to a problem or distressing experience” (Rickwood et al., 2005, p. 4). The literature and community resources demonstrate that young people seek all of these types of information. Dervin’s (1983) sense-making model of information seeking, in which a desire to seek information arises out of a troublesome situation and causes a gap in knowledge to become apparent (as cited in Savolainen, 2010), can be used as a framework for understanding the information-seeking process of this community. Feelings of anxiety or depression or recognizing a desire to inflict deliberate self harm (DSH) can be the situation that initiates the process.

Information Needs

The literature reveals that young people seek a variety of types of information regarding mental health. At times these needs are content-based, related to symptoms, interventions, treatment and advice (Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi, 2017; Wetterlin, Mar, Neilson, Werker, &

Krausz, 2014). At other times, they qualify as emotional needs (Shenton & Dixon, 2003).

Inductive studies have revealed that young people seek empathy from those they perceive as understanding their plight (Rodham, Gavin, Lewis, St. Denis, & Bandalli, 2013) and also a sense of belonging to a community (Baker & Fortune, 2008). Because young people suffering from anxiety or depression have non-traditional information needs, many of them leverage the Internet to seek and share information. Community resources like Tumblr and YouTube resemble Elfreda Chatman's "small worlds" where young people "participate in different and potentially fringe information worlds." Their need for information related to experience makes traditional sources of information like the library less relevant (Fulton, 2010, p. 241).

Pathways and Privacy

Within the literature, information sources are often referred to as informal or formal pathways. Informal pathways include a young person's social network: their family, friends, and others close to them. Young people overwhelmingly prefer to seek help from informal sources, especially their friends and parents (Goodwin, MocarSKI, Marusic, & Beautrais, 2013; Rickwood et al., 2005; Wetterlin et al., 2014; Wilson & Deane, 2001). Young people also utilize the informal pathways on the Internet to a high degree. These include the use of search engines and anonymous social networking sites. (Best, Gil-Rodriguez, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2016; Montagnani et al., 2016; Wetterlin et al., 2014; Younes, Chollet, Menard, & Melchior, 2015). These latter pathways offer an increased level of privacy and confidentiality and a decreased fear of stigma associated with mental illness, both shown to be facilitators to information and help seeking (Best et al., 2016; Burns, Davenport, Durkin, Luscombe, & Hickie, 2010).

Recent trends suggest that young people are opting to use social networking sites which allow users to post content and engage with others using a screen name to which very little or no

demographic information is attached. Studies show a high level of engagement with user-created content related to depression and anxiety (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017; Oliphant, 2013). This highlights how young people are operating in “small worlds” on the Internet, in search of information based on others’ experiences. Young people tend to avoid information seeking on social media sites like Facebook because of the lack of privacy and the fear of losing control over information they might share (Best et al., 2016; Wetterlin et al., 2014).

Other Facilitators and Barriers

Emotional competence and positive past experiences with a mental health professional are two facilitators to information seeking beyond confidentiality (Rickwood et al., 2005). The lack of research about what facilitates information seeking is a large gap in the literature, but because so many young people don’t seek help, the fact that this gap exists makes sense. Studies related to barriers, however, are abundant. These barriers include the need to feel self-reliant (Best et al., 2016; Rickwood et al., 2005; Wilson & Deane, 2001), being male (Best et al., 2016; Rickwood et al., 2005), and a lack of well-developed information and health literacy skills necessary for effective information and help seeking (Best et al., 2016; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; see also boyd, 2014).

Methodology

I began my initial research into young people’s information-seeking behaviors by searching several of the background sources provided in the INFO 200 Lib Guide. These included the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, the *Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior*, and the *Pew Research Center*. These sources helped me to understand important aspects of young people’s information needs and behaviors and gave me a glimpse into what types of technology prevail in the lives of young people. Dr. Stephens also recommended danah

boyd's book, *It's Complicated*, which provided insights into the privacy needs of young people and their lack of information literacy skills.

Once I was ready to narrow my scope and begin gathering sources for a literature review of the community's information needs and behaviors, I turned to the Library and Information Science Source (LISS) database. I identified keywords related to the community such as adolescence, Internet, mental health, help-seeking, and barriers. As I gathered research and began to define the community more clearly, it became apparent that surveys and studies often combined adolescents and young adults. To account for this, I broadened my focus to include keywords such as young people and youth. The PsycINFO database, which is curated by the American Psychological Association, was also instrumental in my research with its wealth of literature on this community's information and help-seeking behaviors.

I conducted close reads of the literature reviews of each promising article and further examined their reference lists which proved to be an invaluable tactic. SJSU's OneSearch helped me locate specific articles from these reference lists, as did ILLiad, whose timely responses to article and book chapter requests kept my research timeline on target. I also found OneSearch's "find sources citing this" function to be of great help in uncovering some of the latest research in the online information behaviors of young people.

To search for community sources, I used Google's search engine. A blog post by Dr. Sameer Hinduja for the Cyberbullying Research Center detailed a variety of social networking sites (SNS) young people use for seeking and sharing information. I explored these sites on my own, confirming anecdotally what much of the literature says about youth seeking and providing empathy and a sense of belonging in online settings.

Discussion

Informal Pathways and the Internet

Why do young people overwhelmingly choose informal sources of information when there is no lack of trained professionals and reliable information resources at the ready? To frame the answer to this question, I will begin with earlier models of everyday life information seeking (ELIS). Reijo Savolainen cited an extensive 1979 survey in which three out of four respondents stated a strong preference for human sources of information, be it their own personal experience or knowledge relayed by friends, neighbors, and relatives (Savolainen, 2010, p. 1782). Nearly forty years later, the same general preferences exist for young people. They choose to seek information, by and large, from their friends and parents, typically their mothers (Rickwood et al., 2005; Rickwood et al., 2015). In some cases, this might be attributed to the high degree of trust that exists in these relationships (Wilson & Deane, 2001). In other cases, Elfreda Chatman's theory of information poverty offers an explanation by demonstrating that information from outsiders was viewed suspiciously and often ignored by members of a "small world" (as cited in Savolainen, 2010, p. 1783). Later, Kirsty Williamson's (1994) ecological model of ELIS demonstrated a hierarchical preference for information sources, with information from one's personal network deemed more important and seen as the most accessible, and information produced by institutions regarded as very distant or removed from the information seeker (as cited in Savolainen, 2010, p. 1784).

"Mom" and "friends" on the Internet. While young people with mental health concerns exhibit low levels of help seeking, they are active users of the Internet (Horgan & Sweeney, 2009). The *Pew Research Center* found that 92% of teens go online daily, with nearly one-quarter of teens online "almost constantly." The majority of teens have access to at least one

Internet-enabled device (Lenhart, 2015). Using a smartphone, computer, or tablet, young people are expanding their social networks online, seeking out nurturing and friendly relationships, by accessing a variety of innovative resources now available to support them with their mental health and well-being. The landscape consists of SNS created expressly for these purposes and spaces or “small worlds” within SNS carved out by young people to create and share information about anxiety and depression.

Made for the community. Many of the SNS created to support the mental well-being of young people have taken a peer-to-peer counseling approach. Sites like Kooth and 7 Cups of Tea have trained counselors available to chat or email regarding a variety of mental health issues. These sites are careful to warn that only doctors or trained mental health professionals are equipped to offer medical advice. Instead, their “listeners,” as 7 Cups calls them, can offer a confidential, non-judgmental ear to support a young person during a trying situation, just like Mom might. These sites also foster connectedness via forums. Analysis of a year’s worth of posts in Kooth’s forum revealed that youth often discussed issues related to their mental health, including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Within these discussions were direct requests for advice and information, as well as support offered through personal anecdotes, often “in a cautionary way for others to learn from” (Prescott et al., 2017, p. 6).

These types of sites greatly benefit the community. As of December 2017, over 12,000 “friends” had registered with the anxiety support forum on 7 Cups of Tea (“Anxiety support,” n.d.) and nearly 15,000 members had registered in the depression support forum (“Depression support,” n.d.). The website has also helped over 25 million people globally through member-listener conversations, with 90% of these members reporting feeling better after talking to a listener (“Research and impact,” n.d.). Besides providing information and help to individuals

within the community, the 7 Cups team also publishes its data in several peer-reviewed journals, including the *Journal of Mental Health* and the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (“We are making the world,” n.d.). By supplying large quantities of data about the help-seeking behaviors of young people, 7 Cups may further stimulate innovations in the creation of online environments to support youth with their mental health information needs.

Made by the community. When young people turn to others for information or advice, they are often seeking empathic understanding (Baker & Fortune, 2008). To do so, young people have created niches on major SNS like Tumblr and YouTube where they connect as friends around the topics of anxiety and depression. While some use the forum for self-expression, many seek advice or reach out to help others struggling with similar experiences. Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017) studied popular depression-related Tumblr blogs and found high levels of community engagement (re-blogging or liking) with the content. Similarly, search results for the keyword “depression” on YouTube revealed that videos produced by individuals with personal experience with depression had the highest levels of engagement (Oliphant, 2013). Since users can choose to employ a screenname, they can remain anonymous, a characteristic that appeals to those concerned about the confidentiality or stigma associated with disclosing sensitive information regarding their mental health.

Anonymity also allows users to post language and images of a graphic and disturbing nature. As a result, Tumblr, in particular, occupies a controversial place within the community. While community members in forums like Tumblr’s may attest to their supportive value (Baker & Fortune, 2008), they can also be a dangerous place where suicidal ideation and DSH behaviors are normalized, and even encouraged, by the community. Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2017) found that 25% of direct interactions between Tumblr users on these depression-based blogs actually

offered harmful advice. In contrast, only 13% of the interactions suggested seeking professional help (p. 48). One indication that Tumblr is aware of the potential dangers of its lenient posting practices and is taking steps to mitigate them while protecting its users freedom of expression is its commitment to providing targeted mental health resources to users searching for blogs related to depression, anxiety, cutting, and suicide (Hinduja, 2016). When a user searches these keywords he or she is met with a screen asking, “Everything OK?”, followed by a list of several supportive websites, including 7 Cups of Tea.

More reliable pathways. In studies done in Canada and Northern Ireland, youth rarely reported actively seeking out government-based health websites (Best et al., 2016; Wetterlin et al., 2014) even though these were perceived as offering high levels of privacy and confidentiality (Best et al., 2016). Instead, many studies highlight the use of search engines as a first step in sourcing information online (Best et al., 2016; Burns et al., 2010; Montagni et al., 2016).

There is one bright spot in this worrisome trend. Burns et al. (2010) found that even though youth “googled” mental health information rather than directly accessing reliable sites, they reported a preference for health-related sites and fact sheets over forums and discussion groups (p. S25). This is fortunate because users of e-mental health care sites are also more likely to take later steps toward seeking mental health care through more traditional pathways (Younes et al., 2015). Yet, these survey results do seem to contradict the actual behavior of young people. The sheer number of views of YouTube videos about depression dwarfs usage statistics for e-mental health websites like Kooth (Oliphant, 2013; Prescott et al, 2017).

Literacies, Libraries, and Librarians

As noted above, young people’s heavy reliance on search engines to provide mental health information is worrisome. One reason for this is the well-established fact that young

people have poor information literacy skills. The Stanford History Education Group (2016) reported that young people have difficulties judging the reliability of websites and are likely to believe false claims. Best et al. (2016) found that young men typically used a page's position in the results list and its appearance to judge validity. As danah boyd (2014) points out, "Teens view Google as the center of the information universe even though they have little understanding of how the search results are produced..." (p. 186). In terms of mental health and well-being, the dangers inherent in these practices are troubling, to say the least.

Couple this lack of skill with a lack of health literacy (Gray et al., 2006), and it is clear that we need to leverage the K-12 education system to remedy the problem so that young people access reliable information and the help they need. The *NMC/CoSN Horizon Report: 2017 K-12 Edition* points to the importance of information literacy and challenges schools to help students develop these literacies by creating their own content (p. 28). The report further points out that this will require a school-wide effort. While librarians must play an instrumental role, they cannot accomplish this Herculean task alone. Cross-curricular collaboration between teachers of different disciplines alongside a librarian has been shown to have a positive effect on young people's information literacy skills (Chu, Tse, & Chow, 2011).

Libraries and librarians can also assist young people in their mental health information seeking by helping to maintain privacy and confidentiality in the search. The public libraries in Albany, Maine had the ingenious idea of placing posters in bathrooms that directed teens to the call numbers of often-stigmatized topics they might have difficulty asking for in person, including depression and suicide. Books on these topics were going missing from the libraries, presumably because young people were too embarrassed to check them out. When the posters were challenged by a local parent, the library refused to take them down, insisting that

teens had a right to this information (McCloy, n.d.). Libraries can further enhance young people's privacy by employing self-checkout stations and keeping circulation records confidential.

The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) is another threat to young people's privacy. Congress passed the law in 2000, and it was upheld in 2003 by the Supreme Court after the American Library Association (ALA) filed a suit to repeal it (Batch, 2014). CIPA violates Article V of the ALA's Library Bill of Rights which acknowledges a person's right to access information without restrictions, regardless of age, by requiring school and public libraries to use software filters on library computers to block obscene images (Batch, 2014). Software filters may affect teens' and young adults' mental health information seeking by over-filtering information. Batch reports that numerous studies have demonstrated the blocking of legitimate information sources including those related to public health and prescription medicines (2014). Despite the fact that CIPA allows authorized library personnel to disable filtering devices, the information needs of the community may still not be met. Individuals searching for mental health information and finding a particular site blocked are faced with the burden of asking a staff member for help in accessing information. Patrons may be disinclined to do so because of the stigma related to mental health issues and the infringement on their right to privacy in these matters.

The over-implementation of the law also disproportionately affects young people in poor or rural communities whose internet access needs are more often met by libraries and schools (Peet, 2015). As of 2014, 60 million Americans still did not have access to a broadband Internet connection in their homes or to a smartphone (Batch, 2014).

Because all library terminals are subject to filtering as a result of CIPA, the ALA suggests several disabling protocols for libraries to limit the invasion of a user's privacy. Libraries could install a browser extension which would enable adult users to activate a web proxy that bypasses

the filtering software. Alternatively, libraries with computer sign-in software could allow adults to use an authentication code that gives them the ability to turn off filtering during their information searching (“Guidelines to Minimize,” 2017). Unfortunately, all of the above do nothing to thwart the infringement on the rights of minors to privacy and the same free access to information, meaning libraries are failing to meet all of the community’s information needs.

Conclusion

A wide range of information sources exist for young people seeking information about depression and anxiety, and there is plenty of evidence that young people are willing to use the Internet to seek information about these disorders. While many sources are trustworthy, they are under-utilized. Young people prefer information from those that are close to them, and when those are friends, the information can often be unreliable. When this information comes from anonymous people on SNS, it may even be dangerous. To encourage young people to access reliable sources of information, schools will be instrumental. Young people need to understand how prevalent mental health issues are, to be able to recognize the signs, and to know they are not alone. They also need the information literacy skills that enable them to navigate the Internet safely and effectively. Information professionals at the K-12 level are positioned to be leaders in developing rigorous curricula in the area of information literacy. This education can, and should, continue in undergraduate studies and in the halls of our public libraries. It is also the information professional’s job to raise awareness about the negative impacts of information filtering and to advocate for this type of teaching for youth so that the needs of every member of this community can be met.

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