
Digital Self-harm - A case study of eating disorders and social media

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Abstract

In this poster, we will review the concept of digital self-harm and how this translates to the HCI community. Using eating disorders as a case study, we articulate how this mental illness is characterized across multiple social media platforms and outline current research focused on gaining ground truth of these online characterizations with patients and providers in addition to investigating aspects of causation between access to negative online support and offline diseased behaviors.

Author Keywords

Digital self-harm, eating disorder, social media, online communities.

ACM Classification Keywords

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Background

In the summer of 2014, we held a series of focus groups with a cohort of teens to assess the different ways they integrated technology into their everyday lives. While we validated national technology use trends with our local cohort [5], we also uncovered behavioral health issues in addition to cyberbullying and sexting which was expected due to national trends [2,3,7]. In one of the groups, several female athletes discussed how they used Instagram to help them loose

“10 pounds in 10 days” for sports. This led to a larger discussion with the entire group about how this wasn’t just an episodic event, but a more sustained practice with this group of young women.

Over the next year, we endeavored to characterize how eating disordered behavior is characterized online. This research led to several key discoveries about this community online. First, the rise of social media has allowed these communities to create ad-hoc communities within the larger platforms which are organized by hashtags [4]. A response to the prevalence of these communities on social media platforms has been an increase in moderation by platform regulators. In reaction to moderation, these communities have adapted and modified their lexical patterns which have pushed their content even further underground [1]. Finally, we developed a set of media archetypes based on the content found associated with posts tagged with disease-specific terminology [4].

Building upon a large corpus of research focused on many behavioral health presentations online, we devised a definition for digital self-harm. We posit that digital self-harm is the “online communication and activity that leads to, supports, or exacerbates, non-suicidal yet intentional harm or impairment of an individual’s physical wellbeing” [6].

Next Steps

The next steps of our research is focused on two key steps: obtaining ground truth for online media archetypes we uncovered and unpacking causation factors between an individual’s use of social media and mobile technology and their offline eating disordered behaviors. We have partnered with the Parkview Health

Center in Fort Wayne, IN to conduct a series of investigations with care providers, patients, and patients’ families. Additionally, we will review a 12 month log of social media content to gain direct knowledge of how these tools were utilized by patients with a clinically diagnosed eating disorder.

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