

Naina Narain

UWP 001

2 September 2020

Cover Memo

Based on the feedback I received after I submitted my second draft, I chose to make the following changes: edit the order of sentences in the abstract; delete a few personal anecdotes; edit a few transitional sentences; add an explanation of Instagram's functions; add a paragraph that explains why interaction online differs from in-person interaction (and explain the benefits that come with it). The most drastic change involves the last item—the additional paragraph about online communication. I chose to add this paragraph toward the end, after all the data was presented and the explanations for certain actions were defined. This way, I was able to elaborate without having to make lengthy and complex changes. This paragraph is also the reason why the last portion of this paper is called “Implications and Conclusion”. Normally, these sections may be separated, or even considered as “Implications and Further Research” however I chose to merge them this way for two reasons: 1) I feel that the paragraph I added segues into the final paragraph well, and 2) I didn't want to touch on ‘further research’ extensively.

The ‘further research’ portion is most definitely the addition I would include if I could revise this paper again. By this, I mean I would elaborate on what research still needs to be done, or what research should follow what I've presented. This is also considering some of the feedback that I was given after submitting my second draft; because the topic I chose to research constantly refers to how the world has changed to promote online interaction, it was suggested that I include different formats of online interaction (like online gaming, for example). I would

have included more forms of online communication in this paper, and I would have also added more connections to different communities (because there are many communities that view mental health and healing differently). Instead, I chose to leave my conclusion paragraph as how I wrote it before, because I do feel that it implies not just how this research is relevant, but also encourages that other research can be done to investigate the efforts to normalize invisible illnesses or differently-abled bodies. Furthermore, I do feel like the topic I chose to write about is quite selective, so there has not been a lot of recent research about this topic. Given more time (like a few more years), I'd hope that I would be able to cite more relevant articles for this paper. With this in mind, I would like to look into more research around this topic in the future. Overall, I am satisfied with how this paper turned out, and despite the changes I would like to make, I feel that the strengths (like the formatting and the argument) make this article compelling.

Communication Over Social Media: The Unlikely Platform for Healing from Social Anxiety

Abstract

Social anxiety disorder, one of the most common forms of anxiety, impacts communicative skills regardless of interactive means. For this reason, this paper explores how symptoms of social anxiety can influence daily life, and how relying on social media as a form of online communication has impacted someone with social anxiety. As time passes by in our constantly evolving world, technology adapts to the needs of humanity, and now more than ever, humans are relying on digital formats and applications to communicate with each other. While many extroverts may experience withdrawal from in-person social interaction, the current reigning belief follows: introverts thrive from online communication. How social media is used as a form of communication varies from person to person, but this article specifically explores how someone with social anxiety has used the mobile application Instagram to heal. In particular, the current findings show that online communication with others can establish a virtual community, as some choose to share their own social anxiety related experiences, or embrace their interests that help them cope with anxiety. Although current societal trends have discouraged the use of social media and supported the idea of “living in the moment” or practicing mindfulness, this article reveals that using social media as an outlet for communication can be healing for a socially anxious person.

Introduction and Background Information

As I have grown older and become more exposed to the world, I have learned the importance of social interaction—especially for establishing connections and maintaining relationships. I have also noticed when people scowl at others who have trouble communicating

despite “appearing normal” on the exterior. I personally have had my share of moments where a voice in my head tells me to stay away from others due to fear of rejection, but I understand that there exists a whole other level of intense feelings against socializing that I do not encounter. Unlike those who do face those extreme feelings, I recognize that I feel shyness rather than social anxiety. Expectations regarding communicative skills have altered as technology merges with our daily lives; comparisons between presentations over social platforms and physical appearance have developed strict social expectations. Those who do face social anxiety in their daily lives are bound to over-analyzing the way they present themselves or communicate with others. Despite this, social media can act as a bridge for those with social anxiety, and now, it can be used as a tool to engage with others or embrace personal interests at a low-stakes level.

In this study, I sought to understand how someone with social anxiety uses online social platforms for communication—in addition to learning how they use social media as a tool for healing from their conditions. Therefore, I chose to interview an old friend of mine, who struggles with social anxiety, and gain insight on her perspective of the world. From this interview, I collected data regarding the symptoms of these social anxiety, and how online communication has acted as a healing alternative to therapy or counseling for her. It is important to recognize that severity of social anxiety differs in each person who experiences it, and although this paper explores an alternative form of healing, it is not likely that this can apply to everyone who faces social anxiety. The person I interviewed went through many phases before taking on the steps to heal; there are many different forms of healing available, so what works for the interviewee may not work for someone else who feels similarly. This paper is not meant to

offer medical advice, rather it is meant to explore the overlooked positive side of using digital communication platforms for healing.

Literature Review

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, social anxiety disorder is one of the most common forms of anxiety. Fear induced by social anxiety disorder often causes enough stress to impede with everyday routines or attending school or work (National Institute of Mental Health). Typically, social anxiety causes one to feel anxiety during social situations such as talking, interviewing, answering questions, or even communal settings like eating in public or public speaking. Social anxiety disorder is often diagnosed by a mental health specialist; however, in research, social anxiety is often determined by results from self-reports or scales. Generally, Likert Scale questionnaires such as the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (Caplan 2006) are commonly used to identify levels of anxiety in social situations. Additionally, the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Apaolaza et al., 2019), for example, can be used to determine related symptoms of social anxiety like low self esteem or high stress in social environments. Over the past few years, many have relied on social media to establish connections with other people, so the question remains: how do people with social anxiety handle communication online?

In a digitally-dominated society, reliance on social media for interaction has skyrocketed; however, it remains unclear whether usage of social media promotes healing or suffering from mental disorders like social anxiety or depression. Over the past few years, many articles have supported conflicting views regarding the correlation between social anxiety levels and interaction with social media. Understandably, social media can serve as a distraction to many,

particularly to those who disfavor in-person interaction; according to Caplan (2006), socially anxious people may favor using online interaction as they feel more confident presenting themselves through an online buffer over an in-person interaction. Despite this possibility, however, Caplan (2006) found that those who prefer online social interaction are negatively impacting their ability to socialize. Conversely, Harman et al. (2005), found that the amount of time spent online had no negative effect on social anxiety levels, but rather that children who purposefully fake their identity online are likely to report lower self-esteem and higher social anxiety levels. Due to these results, I plan to compare how my interviewee uses social media with this metric; I will define how her truthful interactions over social media impact her healing process as opposed to a child who uses social media dishonestly (and steps away from anxiety healing as a result). Considering this information, one can conclude that the particular way adolescents use social media can impact their social skills, regardless if communication occurs online or in person.

Recently, societal trends have advocated for mental health care, in an attempt to normalize taking care of the mind, body, and soul. According to Apaolaza et al. (2019) the practice of mindfulness techniques have shown to correlate negatively with stress, and positively with self-esteem. Furthermore, “self-esteem correlated negatively with social anxiety ($r = -0.56$) and the latter related positively to compulsive mobile social media use ($r = 0.44$)” (Apaolaza et al., 2019). In essence, this research promotes mindfulness practices to cope with social anxiety, rather than reliance on social media. While this correlation is significant, the research fails to discuss any type of positive way social media can be used for social anxious people. With this under consideration, Pierce’s 2009 study focussed on teenagers who relied on technology for

communication purposes like messaging and using social media. Accordingly, teenage girls appeared to be more active on technology than teenage boys; as a result, girls were more likely to report feeling comfortable communicating online rather than in person (Pierce, 2009). In my personal research, my interviewee used social media to communicate with others about the importance of mental health, in addition to using a platform to find a “happy place.” Considering this research, though the chances are slim, it is still possible for some to use social media as a tool for healing from social anxiety by finding a community.

Method and Data Collection

Having witnessed one of my close friends suffer from anxiety and depression, I decided to look further into these conditions, particularly from a new perspective. Over the past few months, I noticed my interviewee post on her Instagram stories more frequently, and these posts stood out to me due to their relevance toward mental health care. I became aware of her personal experience once she began speaking about the importance of self-help and acknowledged mental illness on social media. Because of her voluntary and sincere posts, I chose to reach out to my interviewee and asked her if she would be comfortable sharing her story for my research. She responded back positively, but requested that her name remain anonymous, as she had privacy concerns. For this reason, I will refer to my interviewee under the alias, Katie.

I conducted Katie’s interview over Google Hangouts and obtained her permission to voice-record the interview for my reference. Katie’s primary source for communication is the mobile social application, Instagram. Instagram is a social media platform where users can upload pictures, videos and messages and share their content with many to develop or join a

diverse online community. Considering the many features this application provides, Katie uses Instagram to indirectly share her personal story and inform others of healing strategies.

In total, the interview lasted almost 45 minutes; I noticed that Katie provided longer and more personal answers as the interview progressed. Some notable questions from the interview include the following:

How do you describe your condition?

How has your condition impacted your life?

What is your current outlook on the future with healing?

How do you convey what you wish people knew about your condition to others?

Do you feel obligated to speak about your condition online?

What online resources have you found that encourage you to communicate with others?

Data Analysis and Discussion

Through this interview, I recognized a constant recommendation for “find[ing] a community,” and “having support,” which Katie found online. Based on the information Katie provided, I chose to break down my research into three questions: 1) How does social anxiety impact daily life? 2) What forms of healing are available and recommended? 3) How does social media act as a form of healing?

According to Katie, social anxiety and depression impacted her life in more ways than one; social anxiety influenced the way she acted while depression influenced the way she thought. Social anxiety first became prevalent in her life around the beginning of high school, when she was exposed to a new environment. At school, talking to others proved to be a challenge; socializing with new people and making new friends posed as a difficulty. This fear of

talking even affected her participation in school, especially when it came to presenting in front of a class, or talking to a teacher. Katie referred to one specific example where she “actually cried during [her] presentation,” and proceeded to explain that people would talk about her behind her back because they assumed she was too scared. Her fear posed as a hindrance outside of school as well, like when talking on the phone to someone other than her mom or grandma. Social anxiety also affected Katie physically; she would either create excuses related to pain or sickness to get out of social situations, or she would actually face anxiety attacks and stomach aches due to panic. Anxiety also came in the form of negative mentality, which initiated feelings of self doubt; Katie pointed to a time where she struggled to enjoy herself at Disneyland, because she was “worried about what people in line were thinking” or that groups of people laughing in line were laughing about her “even though that’s probably not what they were doing.” Finally, Katie shared that as her social anxiety became more severe and as her feelings “spiraled out of control,” into depression, she felt less of a will to go to school, or even live. According to these findings, people like Katie, who face a mental disorder, experience struggles in a variety of ways. Based on her description, Katie found herself caught in a mental decline, inflicting blame on herself and remorse for her actions.

Healing from social anxiety was not simple, and took a lot of time for Katie. The healing process started before she went to high school, when her mom took her to see a therapist because she noticed Katie interacted with friends less; Katie’s mother believed that there was “something wrong” with her. In high school, Katie noticed she would “lash out” at her family after “a week of not talking to anyone” in school, which indicated to her and her family that Katie was “not normal.” Katie recognized that her family and “normal people” would recommend common

societal forms of healing, like attending therapy sessions or medicating; however, her preferred forms of healing adapted over time to favor journaling, going to Disneyland, and staying close to home. Furthermore, when Katie discussed the found her preferred methods for healing, she used the words “enjoy,” and “de-stress” more frequently, in comparison to her use of words like “worried” and “nauseous” when discussing medication. In her discussion of Disneyland, she referred to the popular amusement park as her “safe haven.” When she realized the positive mentality that resulted from her trips to Disneyland, Katie took advantage of this energy, and felt ready to spread positivity publicly. She took to Instagram and started posting about her admiration for Disneyland; eventually, she created an account solely to express her joy for the park. As a result, she “found a community of other Disney-lovers,” and confided in the platform as a source of positivity during times of stress. Through this account, Katie established a portable “source of happiness,” and began to use Instagram less like a distraction or more like a tool for healing.

When discussing the use of social media for healing, Katie described Instagram as a tool to help herself and others speak up about mental health and “reduce the stigma” associated with mental disorders. She hopes “people can relate to” experiences online and learn to be less judgemental “and more open” about struggles related to mental health. Katie firmly believes that healing revolves around acceptance, and social media can act as a bridge from loneliness to “an understanding community.” Her outlook on social media becoming a safe space has remained positive, as Katie manages to filter her feed to include posts that inspire her. In this way, Katie claims, she controls the content she involves in her life. On Instagram, Katie follows and interacts with accounts that look to “reduce the stigma” about mental disorders like

@socialanxiety and @anxiety_wellbeing, in addition to following other people who are open about their mental struggles like @nakedwithanxiety, and a certified social anxiety coach @anxietycoachleigha. These accounts, rather than deprecate mental struggles, aid in creating a mental health-positive and educated atmosphere. Katie uses these accounts to heal by engaging in online activities, immersing herself in the community, and applying helpful tips into her daily life. Furthermore, Katie takes advantage of the features Instagram provides by reposting helpful photos and information from these accounts. She chooses to share posts she finds beneficial to her healing journey such as self-help books recommendations and personal stories acknowledging struggles and growth. Since joining the community online, Katie believes she has become more comfortable sharing her own experience, in hope to “impact someone else.” She continues to share about her experience online by posting her progress with popular forms of healing she found online, like journalling and reading. I admire that Katie chose to express her struggles with mental disabilities over social media; I believe she has achieved the most effective part of healing: acceptance.

Implications and Conclusion

Through this pilot project, I was able to examine the impact of social anxiety on my friend Katie, who undoubtedly found a supportive community through Instagram to assist her with healing from the mental obstacles she faced for years. In particular, using social media alleviated social anxiety for Katie as she found an online community where she felt comfortable sharing her personal journey. The current research implies that social media can be used as a healing platform because online communication nowadays eliminates the potentially pressuring tasks involved with in-person interaction: responding immediately in a conversation and

presenting oneself in a professional or confident manner. Unlike face-to-face socializing, communicating over Instagram for establishes a figurative barrier, since conversing occurs indirectly through shared pictures and captions. Additionally, this communicative medium encourages people from all around the world to share their stories and interests and, as a result, a unique community forms. In general, communicating online presents advantages that in-person discussing tends to neglect, including fairly instantaneous and precise group formation. The ability to search and identify exactly what one needs at a rapid pace proves to be far more convenient than potentially spending an indefinite amount of time looking for an in person community. Furthermore, as time advances, so does societal reliance on technology; young adults most likely turn to online platforms to present themselves—and potentially find communities that endorse their interests. Ultimately, Katie takes advantage of Instagram not just to alleviate the pressures involved with face-to-face interaction, but also to find people just like her; this online community assures her, and the people she encounters, that they are not alone.

Overall, it is clear that interacting with others through online communication has helped Katie grow. Although each person with a mental condition experiences differing hardships, and effective forms of healing are dependent on experiences, the community that one immerses themselves in highly impacts their journey. Using online platforms to communicate has simply been overlooked as an effective form of healing; although mindfulness practices have popularized today, as we continue to rely on social media to connect with others, support for mental healing should be spread through digital platforms. As time moves forward, the stigma against mental health and support for healing remains stagnant unless we take action and share experiences. Using online communication, we can not only make a positive difference in the

mental health community, but we can also move a step closer to normalizing differently-abled bodies.

References

- Apaolaza, V., Hartmann, P., D'Souza, C., & Gilsanz, A. (2019). Mindfulness, compulsive mobile social media use, and derived stress: The mediating roles of self-esteem and social anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 22(6), 388-396.
- Caplan, S. E. (2006). Relations among loneliness, social anxiety, and problematic Internet use. *CyberPsychology & behavior*, 10(2), 234-242.
- Harman, J. P., Hansen, C. E., Cochran, M. E., & Lindsey, C. R. (2005). Liar, liar: Internet faking but not frequency of use affects social skills, self-esteem, social anxiety, and aggression. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 8(1), 1-6.
- National Institute of Mental Health. (n.d.). Social Anxiety Disorder. Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/social-anxiety-disorder-more-than-just-shyness/index.shtml#pub2>
- Pierce, T. (2009). Social anxiety and technology: Face-to-face communication versus technological communication among teens. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25(6), 1367-1372.