

Poster Presentation Title: A case study of informal mental health communities on Reddit

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Background: The internet has given rise to massive informal online communities where individuals gather to share experiences and information about mental health. These communities continue to grow rapidly regardless of the opinions of experts, and academic understandings of them are needed in order to inform public mental health in the digital age. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of informal online mental health communities through a case study of depression and anxiety "subreddit" communities on the discussion platform Reddit.

Methods: Case study methodology informed the use of three primary methods: 1) a scoping review of academic studies of depression and anxiety using data collected from Reddit, 2) a qualitative content analysis of all user posts containing the term "medical" posted in case communities over a one-month period, and 3) a reflexive thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with volunteer moderators of case subreddits.

Results: The full dataset consisted of 54 academic studies, 233 user posts, and 8 in-depth interviews. The scoping review showed that research in this area mostly adopts a methodology that combines machine learning and the medical model of mental health, resulting in a technical, solution-based approach to depression and anxiety. In contrast, the content analysis illustrated expansive naturalistic usages of the term "medical" by users. Finally, the analysis of interviews highlighted the critical function of moderation in the quality and sustained functioning of Reddit's mental health communities.

Discussion: Case-level findings elucidate the unique nature of Reddit's mental health communities as a source of connection and text-based peer support among a vast, fluid, and pseudonymous public of users. Critical implications of informal online communities for mental health are discussed in terms of intersections with research practice, social media businesses, professional mental health care, and institutional public health in the digital age.