Original Paper

Social Media and 21st-Century Child and Youth Care Practice

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Abstract

The exponential growth of online information and communication technologies such as texting and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat have opened up new possibilities for child and youth care (CYC) practitioners to engage with children, youth, and families. Yet very little is known about the therapeutic use of these technologies as a direct CYC practice method. Hence, this qualitative, course-based research project aimed to explore the use of social media as a therapeutic practice by CYC students at MacEwan University. The Instagram social networking site was used to collect data. A thematic analysis identified four overarching themes: (a) a relationship, engagement, and communication building tool, (b) a source of support and information, (c) a creative space for self-expression, and (d) a safe place. The results of this course-based study indicate that CYC students use social media responsibly in their work with children, youth, and families. The use of social media appears to have a positive impact and beneficial use in CYC as long as it is utilized and maintained in a professional manner. More research into social media is, however, required to help CYC practitioners keep pace with information and communication technologies and become well-informed about their use and misuse.

Keywords

child and youth care, course-based research, qualitative, social media

1. Introduction

In today's society, social media plays an important role in our lives, whether it serves to share personal information, functions as a professional networking tool, or used to communicates ideas. It is estimated that just about every Canadian with internet access use social media to one degree or another. According to a June 2018 report, almost all Canadian youth age 15 to 24 access the internet and use social media on a regular basis. In fact, it is estimated that 89 percent of Canadians between the ages of

18 to 34 use Facebook, 64 percent have Instagram accounts, 46 percent use Twitter and subscribe to various YouTube channels and 55 percent have Snapchat (Stats Canada, 2018). It is evident that social media is ingrained in our society and has become a vital aspect of the lives of children and youth. Connecting with youth through these platforms can, therefore, be a useful tool for building relationships and engaging in therapeutic work for CYC practitioners. As young adults who have entered the field of CYC, we are both confident and adept in the use of information and communication technologies. So why not embrace what social media has to offer, while keeping in mind the professional boundaries and ethical challenges that these sites present for CYC practitioners. The reality is social media and other online technologies have already fundamentally transformed the way in which CYC practitioners and youth interact with each other. As information and communication technologies continues to evolve and expand, the field of CYC must examine the use of these technologies and the use of social media within the realm of professional practice and ethical decision-making in order to remain relevant in the 21st Century. Yet very little is known about the therapeutic use of these technologies as a direct CYC practice method. Hence, this qualitative, course-based research project aimed to explore the use of social media as a therapeutic practice by CYC students at MacEwan University.

1.1 Undergraduate Course-Based Research

The Bachelor of Child and Youth Care program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster criticality, reflectivity, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, the design and implementation of a course-based approach, in contrast with the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate students an opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small minimum-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching.

Use of course-based research in higher education has soared in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille, Ekdahl, Kent, & Kluczny, 2014; Harrison, Dunbar, Ratmansky, Boyd, & Lopatto, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods for child and youth care students are significant. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge obtained in formal education to practice. Previous students have reported that their engagement in course-based research has enabled them to expand their depth of scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a relationship characterized by mentoring, which results in a greater number of students who express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, the results of course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and, thus, contribute to the discipline's knowledge base.

Ethical approval required to enable students to conduct course-based research projects is granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete a REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class, which is then reviewed by the course instructor and a sub-REB committee to ensure each project is completed and in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

2. Method

This qualitative course-based research project is an investigation of CYC students' use of social media as a therapeutic practice method. Qualitative research is a form of scientific inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Creswell, 2013). The basis of qualitative research lies within the interpretive approach to social reality and therefore is positioned within the interpretive research paradigm. While no research paradigm is objectively superior, selection of a given paradigm highlights the particular way the researchers understand the nature of reality and the research design they choose (Creswell, 2013). Interpretivist inquiry is closely associated with qualitative studies because it recognizes the importance of embracing the subjective meaning of participants' experiences and the self-reflective nature of researchers as interpreters of data (Creswell, 2013).

2.1 Research Design

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling strategy widely used in qualitative inquiry as a way to deliberately and strategically select information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). A total of 9 CYC students took part in this course-based research project.

### 2.2 Statement of Research Question

Our main research question was the following: What role does social media play in CYC therapeutic intervention? The following 4 sub-questions guided the inquiry:

1. What types of social media therapeutic interventions are CYC practitioners using?

2. What are the implications using social media as a therapeutic intervention?

3. How does the use of social media therapeutic interventions affect the efficacy and outcome of CYC interventions?

4. What roles does social media play in the therapeutic alliance?

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Participants were given the option to participate in a brief face-to-face interview or complete an online Instagram questionnaire. Both options included the same set of questions. In addition, participants were given the option to participate in a web-based Instagram Mood-board (see Figure 1 below) as a creative way to describe their use of social media with children, youth, and families. A mood board is a digital collage or composition of images, text, and samples of objects in a composition. Electronic data collection methods have increased in popularity among academic researchers because they offer

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innovative ways to collect data (Ahern, 2005; Griffis, Goldsby, & Cooper 2003; Illingworth, 2001; McConkey & Robinson, 2009; Stevens & Loudon 2003; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012; Wright & Ogbuehi, 2014).
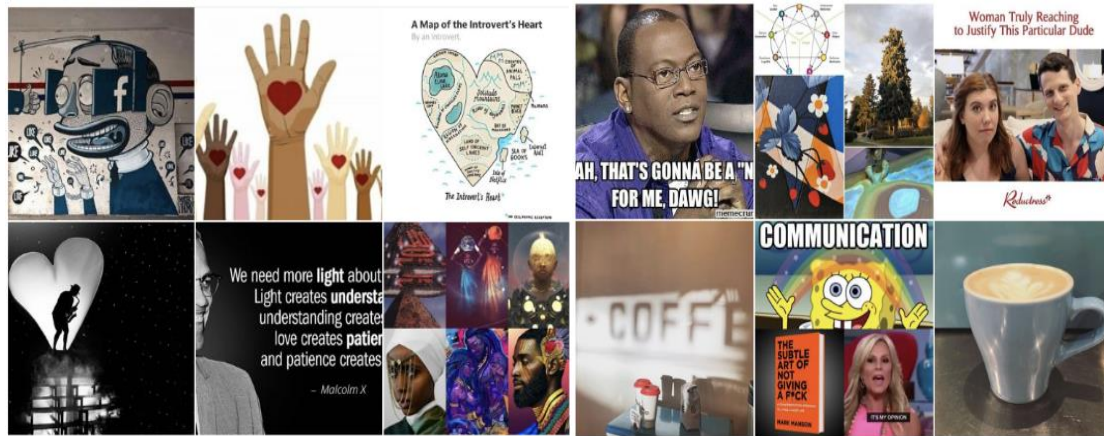
Figure 1. Mood-board

A password-secure Instagram account was established for use in this course-based research project to ensure anonymity and maintain confidentiality. The use of online data collection methods through e-mail, social media sites, online discussion boards, and other tools are increasingly used as data collection methods (Chee, 2003; Fawcett & Buhle, 1995; Hsiung, 2000; Lakeman, 1997). As Das explains:

Technological developments not only make Internet interviewing cost-effective but also flexible and forward-looking—emerging technologies and new approaches can be accommodated easily, quickly, and efficiently. This greatly increases the efficiency of scientific research, while also allowing for a quick response to societal developments. Moreover, Internet interviewing creates opportunities for innovative ways of asking survey questions, e.g., exploiting visual tools on the screen or collecting data in ways other than survey questions (p. 8).

Online forums also provide a more comfortable forum for some people to discuss sensitive personal health issues and as a result present a feasible alternative to traditional face-to-face focus groups (Kramish et al., 2001). In addition, Murthy (2008) reports that the use of digital technologies such as blogs and social media networking sites are particularly amenable for use with a younger demographic.

2.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was completed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method to make sense of the data and create themes These steps included (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Thematic analysis is viewed as a reliable qualitative methodology that researchers employ to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) across data (Creswell 2013, Patton, 2003). The

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thematic analysis identified four overarching themes: (a) a relationship, engagement, and communication building tool, (b) a source of support and information, (c) a creative space for self-expression, and (d) a safe place.

3. Results

3.1 A Relationship-, Engagement-, and Communication-building Tool

Participants reported that numerous social media sites are used in their workplaces as a way to maintain and build relationships with youth. These sites included Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. It should be noted that a few of the participants stated that they did not use social media due to agency policies that prohibit the use of such sites, and a few other participants stated that they consciously choose not to use social media because of privacy concerns and uncertainty about crossing professional ethical boundaries. Participants who made use of social media in their work indicated that it provided an additional means to connect, engage, and communicate with youth. For example, one participant commented, "*social media is a means to connect with youth 24/7 and therefore, helps to foster relationships with them*". Several participants noted that social media is an effective tool for providing instant feedback, sharing ideas, and maintaining contact with youth. One participant commented, "*It would be really neat if you were just to have a thought or an event [with a youth in mind] and just post it and it is just going out automatically rather than by email or text message*". Another participant commented that their agency uses social media as a way for "*youths to let staff know where they are at and how they are doing*". This participant went on to explain that many of the youth do not have steady phone contracts or sufficient phone minutes. Thus, communicating with them via social media is more reliable and can help CYC workers engage with the youth in a more consistent manner. As one participant stated, "*It can be used to reach out and find out where they are, if they are okay*". Several participants also reported that using social media with youth was an effective engagement-building strategy. One participant said, "*YouTube serves as a way to open up conversations about the real world, what would you do differently and how society is right now*". As one participant explained, "*YouTube videos help to create a relational connection as they are something to talk about; whether it is a funny video or something of similar interests, such as genre of music. Quite often youth will show me something on YouTube of a video of their interest, so I think it can be therapeutic as a way of an escape or relaxation*". Other comments included, "*I feel like there are ways to engage youth to stay in the program, motivate them after the program and just to keep in contact, so they feel like someone acknowledges and cares. A simple like on their photo is something we can't do but could be super encouraging*". Overall, participants viewed social media as a potential valuable tool to further their therapeutic connection with the youth they serve.

3.2 A Source of Support and Information

Participants viewed social media as a source of support and information. They expressed that there is an abundance of information online that can be useful to the youth they serve. For example, one participant

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stated that social media sites "*provide information on parenting, addictions, mental health, and gender issues*". One participant noted how "*youth are finding resources to things that would be a benefit to them online*". Information is not only easy to access, but social media also makes it easy for one to share their thoughts and ideas. For example, one participant explained how "*on a more-broad scale you could start an outreach group for people with mental illness. They can gather, they gather on Instagram and discuss*". Social media has also been used as an emotional support for youth and families.

3.3 A Creative Space for Self-expression

Participants found social media to be a creative space for self-expression. One participant noted, "*It can be connecting with friends, family, even people you never met but you can connect with over common interests. Like calligraphy or acrylics or sports, or whatever. You can learn new skills; you can get inspiration from anything like poetry to artwork. You can use it as a motivator for like fitness goals*". They talked about how social media is a platform that allows people to connect with others in creative ways as compared to traditional methods of communication. Another participant agreed that "*it may be an easier outlet for people to identify with and utilize...Many people spend a lot of time within the digital world and feel more comfortable with things that are linked to that*". The participants all agreed that social media and self-expression go hand-in-hand. They talked about how social media users display their creative talents and hobbies. For example, one participant explained how "*social media can serve as an escape. Especially with how big it is now, it definitely is a platform for one to express. On Instagram, I often see photography accounts, art accounts, and even video edit pages (of a celebrity, a tv show, working out, etc.)*". Participants also found that social media can be used therapeutically. For example, one participant explained, "*In regard to it being a therapeutic intervention, I believe it can be helpful because of the ability to express and have an escape within something that's 'cool' and popular - especially working with youth*". Another participant stated, "*Many view social media as something that negatively affects us but at the same time, it can be something we can utilize if we are creative and cautious of the potential dangers of it. It's hard to completely avoid and get rid of social media, so we must try our best as practitioners to utilize something that has a lot of relevance to the people we work with*".

3.4 A Safe Place

Participants generally agreed that social media sites offer a safe space to engage with youth. One participant labeled it as an "*online life space*" where a therapeutic relationship can exist without the assumption of a physical presence. Another participant said, "*It is a good way for people to communicate with each other if they are far away*". Another participant explained that social media is an important resource for youth "*whose phones are disconnected, or they are out partying, and they have lost their phones*". Several participants also noted how social media can be utilized as an "extension of support" for those who need a "*bridge to face-to-face support*". They also cited how social media could be used with certain street youth who prefer connecting online versus face-to-face. Finally, the majority of participants noted that social media platforms allow users to control who gains

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access to their accounts. With this form of authorization, social media provides an avenue for cultivating a space to convey their thoughts, feelings, and experiences that is protected from identified intruders. A participant said, "*people often make second accounts or ones that are more private which I believe is much more therapeutic as they can fully express and not put on some façade*".

3.5 Public Course-Based Research Poster Display

The results of the course-based research project were shared at a public research poster presentation at MacEwan University in December of 2018.

Figure 2. Student Research Team

(From left to right, Kevin, Sadia, Jennifer, Simone, Tipenga, Dominique, Tahany).

4. Discussion

It is no longer acceptable to ignore the role that social media plays in CYC practice. Quite simply, social media has infiltrated the lives of everyone and we need to expand our capacity to meet children youth, and families "on their technological turf". The exponential growth of information and communication technologies is forcing the field of CYC to redefine how CYC practitioners interact with their clients. There are often many boundaries, either professional or personal, which largely influence the use of social media in child and youth care work. However, social media is now becoming increasingly relevant with CYC concepts such as life-space. The issue to be considered now is not whether social media is being used, but how these platforms are used. However, it is paramount to note that interventions using social media must be purposeful to be effectively executed. CYC practitioners cannot avoid the

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emergence of social media and the scope of practice must consider the impact. Thus, CYC educators need to develop a new curriculum that addresses the line between proper and improper use, and even abuse, of social media. This curriculum could further explore areas of intervention and creative work for CYC practitioners. It could address the importance of the virtual life-space which has been an ever-growing dimension that is a critical point that is now shaping many aspects of the lives of children, youth and families.

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