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Secret Society 123: Understanding the Language of Self-Harm on Instagram


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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) content is present on social media and may influence adolescents. Instagram is a popular site among adolescents in which NSSI-related terms are user-generated as hashtags (words preceded by a #). These hashtags may be ambiguous and thus challenging for those outside the NSSI community to understand. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the meaning, popularity, and content advisory warnings related to ambiguous NSSI hashtags on Instagram.

Methods: This study used the search term “#selfharmmm” to identify public Instagram posts. Hashtag terms co-listed with #selfharmmm on each post were evaluated for inclusion criteria; selected hashtags were then assessed using a structured evaluation for meaning and consistency. We also investigated the total number of Instagram search hits for each hashtag at two time points and determined whether the hashtag prompted a Content Advisory warning.

Results: Our sample of 201 Instagram posts led to identification of 10 ambiguous NSSI hashtags. NSSI terms included #blithe, #cat, and #selfinjury. We discovered a popular image that described the broader community of NSSI and mental illness, called “#MySecretFamily.” The term #MySecretFamily had approximately 900,000 search results at Time 1 and >1.5 million at Time 2. Only one-third of the relevant hashtags generated Content Advisory warnings.

Conclusions: NSSI content is popular on Instagram and often veiled by ambiguous hashtags. Content Advisory warnings were not reliable; thus, parents and providers remain the cornerstone of prompting discussions about NSSI content on social media and providing resources for teens.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study evaluated ambiguous self-harm hashtags on Instagram. We found that NSSI hashtags were popular and content advisory warnings were unreliable. Findings suggest that opportunities exist for social media sites to better calibrate content advisory messages and resources and for parents and clinicians to discuss safety strategies with teens.

Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is defined as the deliberate destruction of one's body tissue in the absence of conscious suicidal intent [1]. NSSI is also known as self-harm or self-injury and includes behaviors such as cutting, burning, and scratching

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[2]. Estimates of NSSI prevalence among adolescents typically range from 7% to 24% [3,4]; initiation is typically during middle school [5,6]. Rates of NSSI are higher among adolescents who have experienced childhood maltreatment [7] and among females, although some studies find equal rates across gender [5]. NSSI is associated with comorbid psychiatric illnesses such as depression and serious consequences such as suicide [2,8].

Exposure to peer NSSI may increase the risks of engaging in these behaviors via social contagion or normalization of these

behaviors [2,9]. Social contagion can occur both offline and online; previous studies have illustrated NSSI content in online forums and on social media such as YouTube [2,10,11]. In one study, online NSSI content was a trigger for offline NSSI behaviors [12]. NSSI on social media is of particular interest given that social media content is typically peer generated and thus combines the influence of peers and media [13]. Social media also allow users to create online identities that may reflect their existing identity or a newly developing identity. Social media users can thus gain exposure to other users' online identities and posted content and build online communities around shared interests [13].

Recently, the social media site Instagram has received media attention regarding concerns about NSSI content [14,15]. Instagram is a photograph sharing site wherein information is shared by uploading a photograph labeled with a caption and with one or more hashtags. Hashtags are words or phrases without spaces between that are preceded by a # and are used on other social media sites such as Twitter. Hashtags allow content to be linked to larger online communities who also use the hashtag. Instagram also allows for individual anonymity by choosing a username, in contrast to some social media platforms such as Facebook where the terms of use specify that real names must be used. On Instagram, a user could maintain one account using their real name and a second NSSI-related account using a different username. Maintaining two Instagram accounts may allow a teen to feel that they can develop or maintain a separate "anonymous" NSSI-related identity. Content on Instagram is typically highly visual, public, personal, and easily accessed on any Internet accessible device. The visual nature of this site allows NSSI behaviors such as cutting to be viewed clearly and potentially imitated. Because most Instagram users are high school–age adolescents [16], and this site is currently considered a popular and "prestigious" social media site for this age group [17], the potential creators and consumers of NSSI-related content on this site are likely adolescents.

Instagram's terms of use discourage NSSI displays and describe that they will place warnings about dangerous content [18]. However, Instagram has come under media scrutiny for the presence of harmful material including content promoting eating disorders [15]. The hashtag #selfharm was previously used to build an Instagram community dedicated to NSSI [14]. After that, hashtag was reported to Instagram, the site blocked users from searching for content linked to that hashtag. The revised hashtag #selfharm then emerged and was used in this same community. At present, this second hashtag has been blocked, and the term #selfharmmm is now a popular hashtag. Parents, educators, and clinicians may struggle to understand how to interpret hashtags and social media displays. Layperson media, such as blogs, report well meaning but nonempiric and often inaccurate interpretations of common NSSI terms [19].

The purpose of this study was to investigate ambiguous NSSI-related terms on Instagram including evaluation of meaning and consistency. Our goals were to (1) present current data on ambiguous hashtags that may be common parlance related to NSSI; (2) test a process to investigate ambiguous NSSI terms; (3) evaluate the popularity of NSSI-related hashtags at two time points; and (4) assess the precision of Instagram's warning labels for concerning content, by testing whether NSSI terms triggered Instagram's "Content Advisory" warning.

Methods

This study took place on the social media site Instagram (www.instagram.com). Using a commonly used NSSI hashtag of #selfharmmm as a search term, we identified a sample of content posted on Instagram between the dates of June 18, 2014 and June 30, 2014 for evaluation. From this sample, we identified and investigated a list of ambiguous hashtags that were potentially linked to NSSI. We investigated that these selected hashtags to determine meaning and consistency using a structured approach including triangulation of data. Triangulation of data is a critical concept in qualitative research described as using more than one approach to collect or evaluate data [20–22]. The triangulation approach is designed to enhance validity and minimize the risk that conclusions reflect only the biases or limitations of a single approach.

This study was determined to be exempt from Human Subjects Review by the Seattle Children's Institutional Review Board with the provision that no identifying information regarding potential minors was reported.

Search criteria: Identifying nonsuicidal self-injury posts on Instagram

Every photograph uploaded to Instagram, typically called a "post," includes a caption and can be labeled with one or more hashtags. The main way to search on Instagram is by using a hashtag; searching for a particular hashtag allows one to access the community of public users who have labeled photographs with that hashtag. For this study, we used the search term "#selfharmmm" as it was among the most common NSSI search terms on Instagram that evolved from the initial term #selfharm [14].

Using the search term #selfharmmm, we assessed search results to identify a goal sample size of 200 publicly available relevant posts. This number was selected based on previous descriptive studies on social media suggesting that 200 posts allow for appropriate breadth of evaluation and saturation of themes in content analysis [23–25]. We selected a sample of 225 posts to evaluate for eligibility based on estimates of approximately 10% of posts being excluded after our pilot evaluations. We evaluated publicly available posts as we were interested in what NSSI content was available to the general public of adolescent Instagram users. We excluded non-English posts. Based on Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions, we excluded posts from users who specifically reported age less than 18 years. The focus of evaluation for this study was hashtags represented within Instagram posts; thus, demographic information about the profile owners was not recorded.

Selection of nonsuicidal self-injury–related hashtags for evaluation

For each post that met inclusion criteria, we examined the post and assessed all hashtags to select ambiguous potential NSSI-related hashtags for our structured evaluation process. We focused our study on NSSI as an understudied area of social media research; thus, we excluded hashtags related to eating disorders (e.g., #thinspo and #proana) or substance use (e.g., #legalizeit and #bupe) for two reasons. First, previous studies have examined social media content related to eating disorders [26,27] and substance use [28–33]. Second, in contrast to ambiguous NSSI terms, there are other resources (i.e., www.urbandictionary.com)

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