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The influence of online images on self-harm: A qualitative study of young people aged 16–24

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ABSTRACT

To date, research on the role of the Internet in self-harm has focused on young people's interaction via the medium of text, with limited consideration of the effect of images. This qualitative study explores how young people understand and use online images of self-harm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a community sample of 21 individuals aged 16–24 living in Wales, UK, with a previous history of self-harm. Interviewees reported the role of the Internet in normalising young people's self-harm. Images rather than textual interactions are the primary reason cited for using the Internet for self-harm purposes. Images invoke a physical reaction and inspire behavioural enactment, with Tumblr, which permits the sharing of images by anonymous individuals, being the preferred platform. Viewing online images serves a vital role in many young people's self-harm, as part of ritualistic practice. Online prevention and intervention need to attend to the importance of images.

1. Introduction

Self-harm is a major public health concern in relation to young people. It can be defined as a non-fatal act where an individual engages in a behaviour or ingests a substance with the intention of causing harm to themselves (Owen, Hansford, Sharkey, & Ford, 2016). The underlying suicidal intent associated with the behaviour has been contested, with increased differentiation between non-suicidal self-injury [NSSI] and acts with an associated suicide intent (Muehlenkamp & Kerr, 2010; Nock, 2001; Ougrin, Tranah, Leigh, & Asarnow, 2012). However, both non-suicidal and suicidal self-harm share a range of risk factors (Mars et al., 2014), indicating location along the same continuum (Kapur, Cooper, O'Connor & Hawton, 2012). Community samples of non-clinical populations estimate the prevalence of self-harm in young people in the UK to range from 6.9% to 18.8% (Hawton, Rodham, Evans, & Weatherall, 2002; Kidger, Heron, Lewis, Evans, & Gunnell, 2012; Morey, Corcoran, Arensman, & Perry, 2008; O'Connor, Rasmussen, Miles, & Hawton, 2008).

A number of risk factors associated with self-harm in young people have been identified (Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012), with research increasingly attending to the role played by online spaces (Daine et al., 2013). Evidence indicates that 51.3% of young people who report self-harm have previously engaged in related Internet searches for self-harm or suicide

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related material (Mars et al., 2015). Positive influences associated with Internet use include the development of relationships with others, with connections offering empathy and support (Baker & Fortune, 2008; Lewis & Seko, 2016; Smithson et al., 2011). Online forums may reinforce positive behaviours and encourage help-seeking (Smithson et al., 2011). They have also been cited as a source of stress alleviation and coping (Harris & Roberts, 2013; Jones, Sharkey, Ford, & Owen, 2011; Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006). Conversely, Internet use may confer harm due to the normalisation of self-harming behaviours, the sharing of practices and techniques, and the encouragement of concealment (Dunlop, More, & Romer, 2011; Eichenberg, 2008; Lewis & Seko, 2016; Smithson et al., 2011). It may promote self-harm enactment, with a community study by O'Connor, Rasmussen, and Hawton (2014) reporting that 18% of secondary school-aged students were influenced to self-harm by social networking sites.

Despite increased empirical consideration of the prevalence of Internet use, and the mechanisms through which it influences self-harm in young people, the evidence-base remains limited. Firstly, existing research is predominantly characterised by online surveys or content analysis of community forums (Eichenberg, 2008; Harris, McLean, & Sheffield, 2009; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2007; Whitlock et al., 2006), with only a small number of qualitative studies exploring the meanings young people attach to the Internet (Baker & Fortune, 2008). Secondly, despite emerging evidence reporting on the influence of the range of content hosted by various online media platforms (Harris & Roberts, 2013), there is a lack of research addressing how young people respond to different mediums of communication within these platforms. Notably, research has focused on the textual interaction of individuals, paying scant attention to imagery. In the small number of studies that have explored user-generated images, these have been said to reduce loneliness, mitigate self-harm enactment, and offer a means to support others (Baker & Lewis, 2013; Seko, Kidd, Wilier, & McKenzie, 2015). Equally, they have been reported as a behavioural trigger (Baker & Lewis, 2013). Thirdly, there is a paucity of research on the online sites and platforms utilised as part of self-harming practices, and the perceived strengths and limitations associated with different online spaces (Lewis & Michal, 2016). The present study further progresses research on the influence of the Internet on young people's self-harming behaviours, reporting qualitative data exploring the distinct appeal of different media of communication, notably the visual medium, and the preferred online platforms that support the use of imagery.

2. Methods

Participants were purposively sampled for the study. The inclusion criteria were: young people aged 16–25; and previous experience of self-harm. The definition of self-harm was not determined a priori, but conceptualised by the participant. Recruitment was conducted through the social networking site Facebook. This website was utilised as the study aimed to elicit the lived experiences of a diverse range of individuals, including those who were not proactively engaged in online self-harm communities. Adverts were deployed to the Facebook pages of individuals aged 16–25, listed as living in Wales, UK, and who presented a specific set of interests or 'likes'. Individuals who had 'liked' pages relating to the improvement of wellbeing and mental health, specifically charities and youth groups based in Wales, were targeted alongside those who had also listed 'self-harm' and 'suicide' as an interest. Groups assembled around particular music subcultures ('Goth' and 'emo') were also targeted due to established associations with self-harm (Whitlock et al., 2006; Young, Sweeting, & West, 2006). An advert was posted on the pages of identified Facebook accounts for a period of four weeks, with the advert containing brief information on the research study and a link to the study website.

A total of 41,988 accounts displayed the advert, with 744 people (1.8%) clicking through to the main study website. Of these individuals, 49 (6.6%) indicated interest in study participation by leaving their contact details. This response is comparable to other studies that have utilised Facebook for recruitment (Fenner et al., 2012). Whilst the inclusion criteria was up to age 25, twenty one individuals aged 16–24 participated in the study. The mean age was 19, three were male and 18 were female. The mean age for commencement of self-harm behaviours was thirteen. Sixteen participants (76%) had sought professional help for their self-harm and 8 (38%) had presented to the Accident and Emergency department for their injuries. The vast majority of the sample engaged in cutting as the principle means of injury, although a range of behaviours were described including burning, bone breaking, skin picking and overdosing. That said, these practices were not static, with behaviours often presented as evolving and contradictory. Of the remaining twenty-eight individuals who registered interest, communication could not be established with ten young people and communication ended with the remaining eighteen before an interview could be arranged. In most cases, despite initially indicating interest in participating in the study, all further contact was not responded to. Subsequent contact from the researcher was limited to three attempts. In two cases, potential participants misjudged their required involvement, assuming it was an online survey and so declined participation. One further potential participant did not turn up to an arranged interview and did not respond to subsequent contact. Demographics for this group were similar to those recruited; two male and 16 female. In all cases, the researcher expressed appreciation for their interest via email, and also signposted on to relevant services.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Nineteen were conducted individually, and one was conducted in a dyad. Interviews were led by the primary researcher [NJ]. The interview setting was decided through discussion between the researcher and participant. Interviews were conducted at a university, library, or café. The interview topic guide explored young people's lived experiences of self-harm, notably: motivations for self-harm; receipt of formal and informal support; use of the Internet; navigation of the Internet prior to, during, and following engagement in self-harm; perceptions and experiences of different online content and mediums of communication; and the interaction of online behaviour with real world behaviour. Data were recorded using a digital audio recording device and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription