Intersections of Mental Health & Digital Media in Young Lives

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Background

- Emerging technologies have the potential to support mental health promotion and treatment for youth
- Technologies also introduce new challenges for youth mental health

Research data from 2 qualitative projects provide insights from youth:
1. *Atlantic Canada Children's Effective Service Strategies in Mental Health* (ACCESS-MH), funded by CIHR
2. *Digital Media and Youth Over Time and Place (Digital Media – DM)*, funded by SSHRC

Methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews with youth 10-25 years of age:
1. ACCESS-MH: 46 youth with mental illnesses (including depression, anxiety, eating disorders), 35% discussed how digital media figured in their mental health journey
2. Digital Media: 99 youth answering questions about digital media use, 26% spoke about its intersections with mental health

Thematic analysis of interview data

How do digital media (e.g., the internet, smart phones, social media) impact the lives of young people with respect to mental health?

Early Findings

Speaking with young people about their experiences with digital media or their mental health reveals both anticipated and unexpected interconnections between the two.

Digital media in youth mental health journeys (ACCESS-MH)	Impacts of digital media use on youth mental health (Digital Media - DM)

- Information Seeking
  o Supportive and useful information
  o Increased education can reduce stigma
  o Information about available services
  o So much information=overwhelming
  o Can contribute to obsessive behaviours
  o Harmful/false/unhealthy information
- Relationship with Service Providers
  o Easier to communicate and ask for help/resources
  o Good experiences with providers that use digital media to engage or communicate (text, email, TV/movies)
- Use in Emergencies
  o Ability to phone or text
  o GPS tracking
- Media representations of mental health
  o False impressions or sensationalized portrayals
  o Can normalize unhealthy behaviours
  o Can complicate sense of what's 'normal' and when to seek help
  o Stigma – can help or hinder
- Technology can make communication easier and increase privacy
- Access to classes/education outside of traditional classroom
	Digital Media
	- Addiction/Dependence
	  o A lot of time spent using digital media
	  o Always expected to be connected and responsive
	  o Screen media ubiquitous
	  o Relationships dependent on mediated communication
	- Social Interaction
	  o Primarily mediated (through digital media)
	  o Digital media can act as a shield (for good or bad)
	  o Feeling of disconnection between online and offline selves/relationships
	- Emotional Affirmation
	  o Can find others to validate your feelings (good or bad)
	    ■ Can be a toxic environment
	  o Helps to avoid loneliness (but can also create it)
	  o "likes" feel good
	- "Drama" & Bullying
	  o Most drama is mediated through technology – word spreads quickly, can be more visible online

"I have a lot of friends who can't open up to me unless they're on their phone" (DM, youth participant)
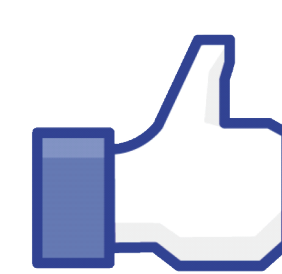
"getting 45 likes on a photo makes you feel so special momentarily and then it's back to the drawing board, you gotta think of a cooler picture to top off the last one to get more likes to get more recognition" (DM, youth participant)

"If I put this out, how many people will see it?....A lot of people just searching for, you know, other people" (DM, youth participant)

"it can be a very toxic environment [on social media] because if you're depressed and half the people on your site are depressed, everyone's depressed together...and no one can lift it" (DM, youth participant)

*"P: The computer seems relevant I just don't know where.
I: How does it seem relevant?
P: Because research is the key to everything....Being educated is being powerful....And that's a big problem with stigma. People are uneducated."* (ACCESS-MH, youth participant)

"Sometimes people don't like phone calls and making appointments. I think they should have a thing where you can text somebody because some people, if you're in the middle of a panic attack, you're not going to want to call someone, because you can't really talk in many cases. So I feel like texting is more helpful" (ACCESS-MH, youth participant)

"the reason [I first thought I needed support with mental health] was because I was seeing all these different things on social media of people who have gone through different things. And I started to realize, 'Wow, there are people out there who have kind of been through the same thing.' And at the time, I was cutting myself....but that's when I was like, 'I need to go to mental health'....[I thought] Maybe I'm, like, not crazy, I'm not the only person that this [happens] to, it's okay to talk to people" (ACCESS-MH, youth participant)

"I was home alone and I was really sad and of course I was on my iPod and like, on social media and like, reading all of these sad tweets and stuff and that got me down, and I was already like, bawling anyway" (ACCESS-MH, youth participant)

Conclusion

- Young lives continue to be marked by increased use of technologies – it's part of everyday
  - Seeking information; communicating with friends, family, service providers; building and maintaining friendships; entertainment
- Youth (& families) struggle to find relevant and appropriate mental health information and supports
- Many challenges when balancing 'real' and 'virtual' selves/lives
- Youth feel the pressures of constant connectedness

Critical for service providers to understand the many role(s) digital media play in young lives and take advantage of the possibilities digital media offer

Need a better understanding of the contradictions presented by digital media for youth mental health AND how youth are dealing with them