Social Media and Counseling: Opportunities, Risks and Ethical Considerations

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Abstract—The purpose of this article is to briefly review the opportunities that social media present to counselors and psychologists. Particular attention was given to understanding some of the more important common risks inherent in social media and the potential ethical dilemmas which may arise for counselors and psychologists who engage in their practice. Key considerations of issues pertinent to an online presence such as anonymity, privacy, maintaining ethical principles and professional boundaries are being discussed.

Keywords—Social Media, Counseling, Risks, Ethics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media are becoming more embedded into our everyday lives, changing how people interact both personally and professionally. Most mental health practitioners are being overwhelmed by the constant changes in digital technology and finding that helping clients navigate their offline as well as online challenges. A large divide exists between young people that are considered “digital natives” as they have been interacting with digital technology from an early age and have a better understanding of its concepts, compared to a great number of “digital immigrants” mental health professionals who have adopted these technologies to some extent later in their lives [1]. The purpose of this paper is to review some of the innovations the thriving development of Social Media has brought, as well as discuss important risks and the potential ethical dilemmas which may arise for counselors and psychologists who would be willing to embrace them in their practice.

II. OPPORTUNITIES

The advancements of technology and Social Media have afforded mental health practitioners the opportunity to do research and provide services in more unique and far reaching ways than before. Researchers can recruit subjects and easily extract data without specific geographic, time and/or mobility constraints. Furthermore, the use of confidentiality protocols and anonymity features makes online psychological research simpler and facilitates healthcare surveys by reducing the stigma that is often associated with completing such questionnaires [2]. Social Networking Sites, for example, hold promise for improving their ability to screen depressive symptomatology [3], as they have become a venue for people to disclose and explore depressive feelings [4] and announce possible suicide attempts [5].

Social media such as Facebook have the possibility to become not only a personal tool, but also a professional one. Their use as possible sources of health information is rapidly growing [6] therefore creating an online profile for professional reasons has the potential to be used as an extension of a counselor’s practice. An online page can be strictly professional, displaying a therapist’s philosophy, upcoming seminars, books, and other information. Clients in the comfort of their own chosen location (home, work, etc) have the opportunity to search and contact a therapist and work in resolving life and relationship issues, unhindered by barriers related to geography, guilt, shame and stigma. Practitioners are able to conduct sessions with patients that are homebound or do crisis interventions between in-person sessions [7].

Social Media could be utilized for the clients’ benefit and be a valuable tool for counselors and psychologists in creating intervention initiatives for young adults who utilize Social Networking Sites in their daily lives. The sharp rise in texting help lines (communicating through text messages from cell phones or chatting online on Social Networking Sites) rather than calling the traditional 800 hotline numbers shows that digital technologies and Social Media help improve not only the access to therapeutic interventions, but also the therapeutic experience [8]. Therapists are able to create and provide follow up programs and protocols that can be sent out to people daily, weekly, or monthly via text, audio, or video, for example reminders to take medication, exercise, use a journal, etc. Therapeutic sessions online can assist in delivering care for anxiety, depression and other disorders via the Internet or mobile phones as well as via computer programs that can be used as alternative for face-to-face therapy, or in combination with other treatment modalities [9].

Traditionally, counselors obtain information about a client through face-to-face communication. Social Networking Sites such as Facebook create an environment that can foster in-depth self disclosure [10], therefore becoming a source of vital information in understanding the client’s behavior, as well as a more intimate depiction of what the client is experiencing. Having access to the online profile or openly discussing Facebook and the client’s online interactions during counseling sessions could be used not only to gain further insights into their thoughts and behaviours [11], but also as feedback for the course of the therapeutic process.

III. RISKS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As the online world often overlaps with real life,
professional and ethical issues increasingly arise and will inevitably invade the practice of counseling and therapy. Mental health practitioners should be aware of the potential risks if they choose to interact with clients online, as there is little agreement on whether it is appropriate to have relationships with clients via Social Media. Traditionally, clients know little about their therapists outside the consulting room, but complications could arise should a client seek information about the therapist online or pursue a relationship on Facebook or via other social networks. Young clients may easily send an e-mail or text with intimate details, or post a Friend Request to their counselor’s Facebook page. On one hand, denying a client’s invitation could potentially lead to feelings of rejection and abandonment, but on the other hand, approving Friend requests from clients and allowing them access to sensitive personal information could lead to the development of dual relationships [12].

Psychotherapists must explore their own feelings, wishes, as well as counter-transference reactions to the client, his or her Friend Request, and technology. The possible impact on trust and potential harm to the therapeutic relationship are great if there is no specification of the parameters of such involvement and if therapists do not make clear distinctions between their professional and personal lives online. The APA Ethics Code [13] cautions against entering into multiple relationships with clients that face an increasing variety of technology-related problems (e.g. trolling, cyberbullying, Internet and Social Media addiction, the barriers between kids/teens and parents, online interactions between teachers and their students) [21]. The fact that psychologists are working with clients that are embracing Social Media in their practice [5], [6]. The possible impact on professional and ethical issues increasingly arise and will inevitably invade the practice of counseling and therapy. The potential effectiveness of online counseling, the establishment of a therapeutic relationship in cyberspace, as well as the potential benefits and challenges of working online with clients are still the topics of major debates [20].

In conclusion, regarding the use of Social Media in online therapeutic interventions, the body of knowledge concerning the process and outcome, the relationship between counselor and client, the characteristics of online counseling, and the ethical considerations for delivering therapeutic interventions online is constantly growing. However, there are various issues that should be taken into consideration; for example the levels of skills regarding technology usage, confidentiality and privacy online, the lack of non-verbal cues when using text messages, as well as the possible feelings of boredom that clients might experience in online sessions. The potential impact on the process and outcome, the relationship between counselor and client, the characteristics of online counseling, and the ethical considerations for delivering therapeutic interventions online is constantly growing. However, there are various issues that should be taken into consideration; for example the levels of skills regarding technology usage, confidentiality and privacy online, the lack of non-verbal cues when using text messages, as well as the possible feelings of boredom that clients might experience in online sessions. The potential effectiveness of online counseling, the establishment of a therapeutic relationship in cyberspace, as well as the potential benefits and challenges of working online with clients are still the topics of major debates [20].

IV. CONCLUSION

Given the pervasiveness of Social Media, striking a balance between effectively connecting with clients and maintaining an adviser’s personal life is challenging [17]. Mental health practitioners are becoming aware of the fact that the use of Social Media within the context of their work is not a part of their training and that could potentially have important implications in adapting their practices to this new digital reality [21]. The fact that psychologists are working with clients that face an increasing variety of technology-related problems (e.g. trolling, cyberbullying, Internet and Social Media addiction, the barriers between kids/teens and parents, and online interactions between teachers and their students) increase the importance of creating specific Social Media policies, training courses as well as supervision for mental health practitioners that are embracing Social Media in their practice [22], [23].

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REFERENCES


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