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INSTAGRAM CLOSE FRIEND STORIES FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AMONG LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE

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Background

Social media use among LGBTQ+ young people is reported to be higher than for their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Jenzen, 2022; Robards et al., 2021). For LGBTQ+ young people facing mental health challenges, everyday support from friends is important, and often occurs through social media (Berger et al., 2022; Milton et al., 2023). Among Australian young people, Instagram is the most widely used social media platform. It is also a platform that affords many communicative options, ranging from public posting to private chat, and the increasingly common use of ephemeral Instagram Story posts, including Close Friend Stories. This project responds to a need to better understand of how popular social media platforms, such as Instagram, afford peer-based mental health support for LGBTQ+ young people, as a population that faces high rates of poor mental health.

Researchers have found that Instagram offers an important source of mental health information and support for its users. Much of this research has focused on scraping and coding platform content, typically sourced through hashtags (Gupta & Ariefdjohan, 2021; Lee et al., 2020; McCosker & Gerrard, 2021), and most of this research has not focused on LGBTQ+ young people. This paper responds to this by engaging with Australian LGBTQ+ young people via a qualitative survey and interviews, to discuss how peer support for mental health plays out through their use of social media platforms. Many participants highlighted how Instagram's Close Friend Stories plays a key role in sourcing and offering support to friends and peers.

Methods & Approach

Interviews about digital peer support for mental health were conducted with 36 LGBTQ+ young people, aged 16-25, living in Australia. Interview questions were informed by data from a national survey conducted prior (N=660). Most interview participants (N=24) had

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completed the survey and were recruited at that point, with the remainder recruited through additional promotion and advertising on social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) and through LGBTQ+ community networks. Interview participants cover all ages from 16-25 years, lived in all major states and territories of Australia, lived in a range of settings (urban, regional, and rural), and had a range of sexual orientations (most commonly bisexual and queer) and ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. Participants were 50% cisgender and 50% trans and gender diverse.

Data from interviews that focus on participants' uses and experiences of social media in relation to social and mental health support, are the focus of this paper – specifically discussion of Instagram's Close Friend Stories feature. Following the work of Baym (2015), this research takes a relational approach to social media and its everyday use, asking 'What do friends do with the Close Friend Stories, and how might this foster mental health support?' Madianou's (2016) concept of 'ambient co-presence' is used to consider participants' everyday Instagram use, and a range of Close Friend Story practices related to mental health support – whether this is sought or offered.

Findings

Participants offered a rich account of digital peer support that was suggested to permeate Instagram use for many. Most highlighted that friendships were a central anchor point to their Instagram use. Use of Instagram also extended beyond friendship communication, with the platform offering access to information, learning, entertainment, and a culture of browsing and connecting to others. However, the many modes and directions of Instagram use were experienced alongside friends, punctuated by seeing and chatting with friends.

Twelve participants explicitly discussed their use and familiarity with Close Friend Stories for mental health posting. Among these participants, Close Friend Stories were commonly described as a space to vent, share, and seek support. For example:

Greta: A lot of my friends are quite willing to post stuff if they're not feeling super great... They'll post things and then you know to reach out to them.

Amal: There's some [friends] particularly that have a Close Friends list purely to talk about their mental health. And I respond... "oh that's cool of you, I'm here for you."

Close Friend Stories were valued for the ability to reach a selected group of friends, with whom one could be more vulnerable or honest. These Stories were therefore suited to mental health disclosures (as well as other disclosures, with one participant 'coming out' on Close Friends the day before our interview).

A key finding was that mental health posting on Close Friend Stories precluded the need to directly ask a friend for support, which was seen as unfair and burdensome. As many participants noted, friends may not always have the capacity to offer support and may be facing challenges of their own. A Close Friend Story that would reach a small

group of friends (usually close friends, but not always), allowed viewers to choose to respond or not, and responses would be direct and private, initiating conversation.

This arms-length signaling for support was seen as the appeal of Close Friend Stories, making it safer, more careful, and less likely to disrupt or challenge friendships. Close Friend Stories were also ambiguous, with this ambiguity often being the starting point to a conversation. As Avery describes: “people will be, ‘I’m depressed haha’ [and] I’ll be, ‘hey is this a joke or is this serious I can’t tell. But either way I’m here to talk to you about it if it is.”

Participants illustrated a specific literacy of mental health posting on Close Friend Stories, in which the practice was familiar, recognisable, and part of friendship cultures on Instagram. For some, such as Koda, there was a sense that posting about your feelings to Close Friends was ubiquitous: “I think we all have a tendency to post things about how we are feeling to private stories.” Many others, such as Odette, gave examples of their own postings: “I mean the other day I quite literally posted on my Instagram story a photo of me crying.”

For Riley, who also spoke of being disabled and often unable to spend time with friends outside of social media, Instagram Stories were a key space to vent, rant, and share their feelings to friends: “I call them either my angry trans rants or my crip rants which is where I just kind of go on about something that bothers me.” Riley did not expect nor need responses to their rants, and also saw them as educational to friends who were not queer, trans, or disabled.

Conclusion

For LGBTQ+ young people, Close Friend Stories offer a particular form of co-presence, through an intimate structure that can hold mental health disclosures more carefully and safely. This connects to Madianou’s concept of ‘ambient co-presence’ (2016) which is fostered through participants’ everyday use of Instagram – a platform they experience in the company of friends. As such, the use of Instagram Close Friend Stories can foster more intense experiences of connection, intimacy, and a culture of vulnerable sharing that is felt to be reciprocal. Although Madianou focuses on transnational family communication, the ambient co-presence she discusses reflects that of LGBTQ+ young people – many of whom predominantly engage with friends through social media, and for whom friendships contour their Instagram use. This offers a sense that friends are always in reach, and that Instagram can be a caring and careful space.

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