

Socialisation or Social isolation? Virtual Ethnography and mental ill health.

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Virtual Ethnography: A method of research that involves observation of participants in their online environments, for example, an internet chat room (Heyes, 2018)



Why use social media?

- Richardson (2015) online and offline should not be considered as completely different entities, both are communities built through complex multi-dimensional relationships.
- Markham (2004) Lack of visual cues could add to the quality of the research.
- Pavalanthan and De Choudhury (2015) prominent resource for individuals who are distressed by affective and behavioural changes.
- Naslund et al (2014) growing importance as a means to connect and interact.



Key stats

- 60% of adult internet users read about other people's health issues online (Fox, 2011).
- 15% of all adult Americans used a health related community support forum in 2012 (National Cancer Institute, 2013).
- 1 in 5 internet users used online groups or communities for support in 2011 (Fox, 2012).

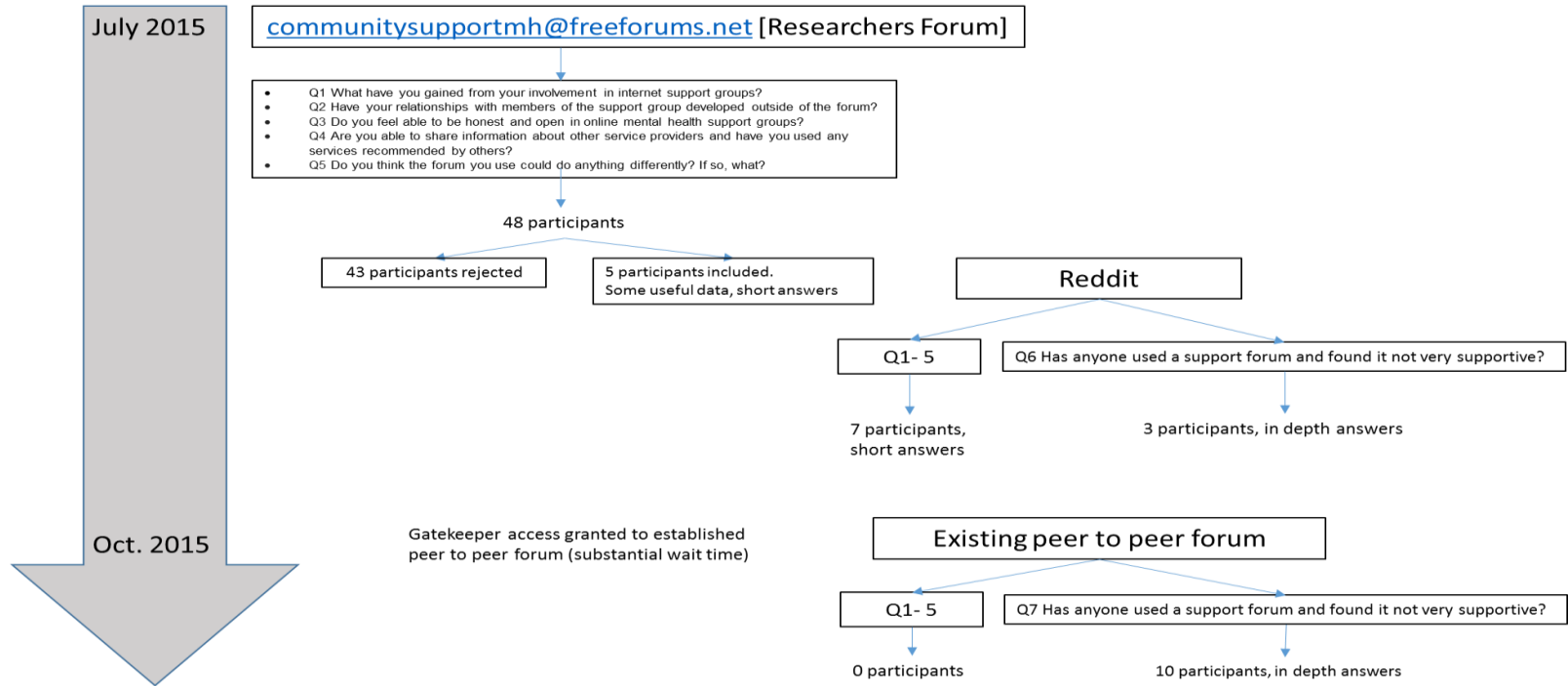


Key points

- Anonymity can lead to disinhibition (Pavalanthan and De Choudhury, 2015).
- Self-disclosure synonymous with reduced medical interventions (Beuhler, 2017, Ellison, 2007).
- Reliance on search engines is decreasing (Dutton et al, 2013).
- Users of social media are consumers (Broom, 2005; Dutton et al, 2013; Fergie et al, 2015; Giles, 2013)



Phase 1 – Researching Online Support Forums
(Virtual Ethnography)





Ethics

- ‘Tolerated observer’ - a presence that is apparent to the participant, but does not hinder the information given (Hine, 2010: 10).
- Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson(2012) used archival data from an online forum
 - research was not considered to be on human subjects
 - is in the public domain
 - so does not need consent
- Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014: 25): observation of public behaviour only in situations where those observed ‘would expect to be observed by strangers’.



Ethics

- Disclosure statement in the original post
- Contact details for withdrawal
- EU General Data Protection Regulation (2018) All participant data must be sufficiently changed to protect their identity.



How effective is virtual ethnography?

- It is not clear how research is utilised to effect policy or improve user outcomes
- Theoretical frameworks were invented before the internet – are they still relevant?
- People that respond to online questions are not representative of the whole population.



However.....

- It offers many new opportunities for insight into
 - Online consumerism
 - Online support networks
 - Health seeking behaviour
 - The effects of social media on health

Social media is bad for your mental health, Facebook admits



The company admitted that passive users might suffer from low moods.
REX FEATURES

Facebook has finally conceded that social media can harm mental health but it proposed that users improve their wellbeing by posting more updates and comments.



Mental health: the dangers of the social media diagnosis

February 28, 2018 1.31pm GMT

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Even Facebook agrees that social media can be [bad for your mental health](#). And research by the Department of Education has found that the mental well-being of teenage girls in the UK [is worsening](#), with the impact of social media cited as the cause.

Yet [my research](#) reveals that more people are turning to these platforms for help with their mental health issues. This has been exacerbated as the crisis in the NHS sees [waiting times for appointments](#) grow. While most of the people I spoke to believed social media helped them, [there is a concern that it could be adding to ongoing mental health problems](#).

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Disclosure statement

Kim Heyes does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation



Thank you for listening

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Recent publications:

28th Feb - Heyes, K. (2018) Mental Health: the dangers of the social media diagnosis <https://theconversation.com/mental-health-the-dangers-of-the-social-media-diagnosis-90717>

Heyes, K. (2018). *Researching online community support forums using virtual ethnography*, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, doi: 10.4135/9781526442345. <http://methods.sagepub.com/video/srmpromo/p9T0BF/researching-online-community-support-forums-using-virtual-ethnography>

Heyes, K (2017) Socialisation or Social Isolation? Mental Health Community Support in the digital age. In El Morr, C (ed) (2017) *Novel Applications of Virtual Communities in Healthcare Settings* PA, USA: IGI Global DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2958-3.ch002

Heyes, K (2017) *Using virtual ethnography to research vulnerable participants online: A case study of mental health online community support forums*. SAGE Research Methods Online DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526403605>