Chapter 2
Social Support and Stress

ABSTRACT

In today’s hyperconnected world, social media provides more than social support. In fact, social scientists have linked it to the wellbeing of individuals. Social media sites provide open and accessible communication platforms for families, caregivers, and individuals with autism. They are able to share, connect, and exchange information. Furthermore, social media is an efficient means of connecting due to communication challenges of autistic individuals. However, there is a need to scientifically measure social support and stress dissipated through online interaction. Using the proposed assessment methodology of social support and stress in online interaction, it is observed that the autism community provides significant social support to its members through Twitter and blogs. Social support facilitated by interactions with autism community members reduces psychological stress and improves the quality of life for the families dealing with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

INTRODUCTION

There is an increase in the number of children diagnosed with ASD. In turn, countries face a shortage of resources for effective delivery of autism support. There is no medication to treat the core cause or symptoms of autism. However, there is an ongoing in-depth research to better understand ASD. Families coping with the daily challenges of autism can be helped through increased autism awareness and societal acceptance. For families coping with
autism-related challenges, online and support communities provide a sense of belonging and general know-how to help them understand their situation.

Behavioral differences exist in types of online interaction, especially social media platforms. A simplified online platform-independent mechanism is the forefront criteria in designing a methodology to access social support and stress. Social support through interaction with fellow autism community members helps reduce psychological stress and improve the quality of life for families dealing with ASD.

This chapter will discuss the value and impact of social support in minimizing stress within online communities. A literature review of social support and stress in social and information sciences will be presented. The final section of the chapter will discuss the importance of building a methodology to quantify social support and stress. This overview will introduce the process of evaluating social support and stress in online interaction.

**SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Sociologists published many research works on the social support concept. White and Dorman (2001) found the usefulness of social support as compared to traditional methods for many users who do not have the desire or ability to attend the face-to-face session. Arora et al. (2007) found that women who were newly diagnosed with breast cancer found positive social support through family, friends, and healthcare providers. Coulson (2005) found evidence of online social support in the form of emotional and informational support received by an individual with irritable bowel syndrome. In their study on Norwegian mental health-related online discussion forums, Kummervold et al. (2002) found that online interactions benefitted people suffering from mental disorder.

Recent research by Gallant, et Irizarry, Boone, and Kreps (2011) indicated that social media platforms like blogs and Twitter were convenient platforms to communicate in healthcare communities. Weiss (2002) found that social support played an active role in reducing depression and anxiety in mothers of children with autism. A study by Jordan (2010), which focused on the evolution of online autism support, found benefits of the Internet in spreading education and autism awareness. Shaw and Gant (2002) found that the Internet reduced loneliness and depression while increasing self-esteem among users with psychological health issues. A study on an online smoking community established that online support from community members provided confidence
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