

Depressed Pinterest users suffer from lack of positive messages, study finds

December 9 2015, by Sydney Devine



This pin, used in a University of Georgia study on depression and social media, portrays dysfunctional coping. Credit: University of Georgia

Despite the large number of posts on visual social media platforms that suggest—and fuel—depressing or suicidal thoughts, there aren't many for users to read and share that would help them cope with their mental state more proactively, a University of Georgia study finds.

Co-author Yan Jin, an associate professor of [public relations](#) in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication and associate director of the Center for Health and Risk Communication, is hoping health professionals can fill the gap with positive messages and images related to [depression](#) coping strategies.

The recent study was completed as a joint project between UGA and Virginia Commonwealth University—researchers from both schools helped complete the research.

Published in *Public Relations Review*, the research focused on Pinterest posts—a popular [social media](#) site with more than 100 million monthly active users where participants are able to "pin," "like" or "repin" photos and text that relate to them.

The study found that many on Pinterest are using the site to display their depressed thoughts and feelings.

"We found that when depression is being communicated or portrayed on Pinterest via images or text, there is a lack of more proactive coping approaches also being portrayed on Pinterest," Jin said.

Jin and her research team analyzed 783 Pinterest posts, categorizing them on their level of depression. They found that "more than half of the pins referred to the seriousness and severity of depression," according to the study results.

Researchers found that some posts were subtler and would include dark

poetry or depressing messages that would suggest a very depressive mood.

Other posts would be more straightforward—openly talking about [suicidal thoughts](#) or posting images of someone harming him or herself, according to Jin.

When analyzing these posts, Jin said there was a lack of specific coping strategies to balance out pins that suggest depressing thoughts. The study also found few health professionals and health public relations practitioners addressing the issue of depression on Pinterest.

"Conversations on social media platforms, especially ones like Pinterest, can provide insight in how both depression sufferers and others engage in conversation about this disorder outside of a formal health care setting," said study co-author Jeanine Guidry, a doctoral student in the department of social behavioral sciences at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Jin and her research team have been studying social media research for a number of years—looking for ways public relations practitioners can better reach different types of audiences in different situations. Her past research has mainly focused on text-based social media.

"We are shifting focus to more visual social media, like Pinterest and Instagram, which are different from Facebook or Twitter because they are less text driven," Jin said.

Visual social media is becoming more widely used, and many users "pin" or "share" pictures that display their feelings.



Yan Jin is an associate professor of public relations in the University of Georgia Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication and associate director of the Center for Health and Risk Communication. Credit: Dorothy Kozlowski/University of Georgia

Pinterest can be a good way to express one's thoughts and feelings, and users are, in a sense, venting or sharing their emotions with other users who may feel the same, according to Jin. This venting could be considered a form of coping with stress or depression.

A longer-term healing process is still necessary, and individuals also need to hear from a medical professional's perspective. Based on the study's results, professional solutions or advice is what's missing on Pinterest.

"Depression is a serious illness, as well as a public health issue," Guidry said. "This can help us understand both depression and the way we cope with it in a more comprehensive manner.

"There is a lack of representation from other health or medical organizations, and few have been engaged in this kind of dialogue or conversation on Pinterest with individuals who are suffering from or talking about depression. What kind of healing processes, support or lifestyle activities do health professionals recommend to these people that they can seek out?"

The study also found that pictures could be a more effective way to reach depressed users.

"This is a great opportunity for [health professionals](#) and health public relations professionals to engage in and put in more effective messages out there on this platform," Jin said, "involving such things as health tips on how to deal with depression or providing the right coping mechanism to facilitate more positive discussions in this community."

More information: The study, "Portrayals of Depression on Pinterest and Why Public Relations Practitioners Should Care," is available at www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S0363811115001113.

Provided by University of Georgia

Citation: Depressed Pinterest users suffer from lack of positive messages, study finds (2015, December 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-12-depressed-pinterest-users-lack-positive.html>

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