Members face 'Catch-22' challenges joining online communities

February 16 2021

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People who seek support online from social media groups may end up not getting the help they need due to privacy concerns, according to a

new study by Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) and Gutenberg University in Sweden.

The new research, published in *Social Media & Society*, addresses the 'Catch-22' challenges that face secure digital communities and their potential members, who, when faced with verifying their identity, may not join these groups for fear of sensitive issues becoming public.

"Social networks, and the technologies that support them, provide valuable tools for forming and maintaining connections that build social capital," says Dr. Daphna Yeshua-Katz of the BGU Department of Communication Studies. "While we don't dispute the benefits of these far-reaching communities, our findings reveal the problematic paradox caused by security concerns."

The researchers examined communications shared within support groups on several platforms, including eating disorder blogs, a fertility support forum for women, a Facebook group for bereaved parents, as well as WhatsApp groups for Israeli military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. After conducting in-depth interviews with dozens of community members and site managers, it became apparent that lack of anonymity and public visibility in social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp can marginalize those who face social stigma.

For example, to gain access to their online social support groups, Facebook and WhatsApp algorithms force potential members to reveal aspects of their identity they may not wish to share, including real name, photo, profile, and phone number. Moreover, on Facebook, all users are required to disclose their list of friends and activities. These default settings may deter people who are not ready to reveal their identity.

"Online support communities must guard against imposters whose presence threatens a group's safe-haven," says Dr. Yeshua-Katz. "The

challenge is to find a way to maintain community boundaries without going underground in a way that removes these groups from the public sphere and blocks access to those who need support."

More information: Daphna Yeshua-Katz et al, Catch 22: The Paradox of Social Media Affordances and Stigmatized Online Support Groups, *Social Media + Society* (2020). DOI: 10.1177/2056305120984476

Provided by American Associates, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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