SMAD

Original Article

Suicide, depression and sexual and gender minorities: posts published on personal blogs*

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Objective: the aim of the study was to analyze posts on suicide, depression, and the LGBT population on Tumblr® platform blogs. Method: a study with a qualitative approach, which submitted to thematic analysis posts identified from the search for keywords related to suicidal behavior and LGBT population on the TUMBLR platform. Results: 14 blogs were identified, with 916 posts. The main topics addressed were related to intense suffering, self-destructive behaviors, emotional vulnerability, rejection and self-depreciation. Conclusion: these themes reveal important needs to be investigated and addressed in interventions to promote mental health in the LGBT community at the individual and collective levels.

Descriptors: Suicide; Depression; Sexual and Gender Minorities; Blog; Internet.

Suicídio e depressão na população LGBT: postagens publicadas em blogs pessoais

Objetivo: o objetivo do estudo foi analisar postagens sobre suicídio, depressão e população LGBT em blogs da plataforma Tumblr®. Método: estudo com abordagem qualitativa, que submeteu à análise temática postagens identificadas a partir da busca de palavras chave relacionadas ao comportamento suicida e população LGBT na plataforma TUMBLR. Resultados: foram identificados 14 blogs, com 916 postagens. Os principais temas abordados estiveram relacionados a sofrimento intenso, comportamentos autodestrutivos, vulnerabilidade emocional, rejeição e autodepreciação. Conclusão: esses temas relevam importantes necessidades a serem investigadas e abordadas em intervenções para a promoção da saúde mental da comunidade LGBT no âmbito individual e coletivo.

Descritores: Suicídio; Depressão; Minorias Sexuais e de Gênero; Blog; Internet.

Suicidio, depresión en la población LGBT: publicaciones en blogs personales

Objetivo: el objetivo del estudio fue analizar publicaciones sobre suicidio y depresión en la población LGBT en los blogs de la plataforma Tumblr®. Método: estudio con un enfoque cualitativo, que sometió a análisis temático publicaciones identificadas a partir de la búsqueda de palabras clave relacionadas con el comportamiento suicida y la población LGBT en la plataforma TUMBLR. Resultados: se identificaron 14 blogs, con 916 publicaciones. Los principales temas abordados se relacionaron con el sufrimiento intenso, los comportamientos autodestructivos, la vulnerabilidad emocional, el rechazo y la autoestima. Conclusión: estos temas revelan necesidades importantes que deben investigarse y abordarse en intervenciones para promover la salud mental en la comunidad LGBT a nivel individual y colectivo.

Descriptores: Suicidio; Depresión; Minorias Sexuales y de Género; Blog; Internet

Introduction

It is estimated that every 40 seconds, a suicide occurs somewhere in the world. There is a contingent of 800,000 people who end their own lives annually. Currently, this number exceeds, at the end of a year, the sum of all deaths caused by homicides, wars, and civil conflicts. Suicide represents 1.4% of all deaths on the planet and is the second cause among young individuals between 15 and 29 years old. Between 2010 and 2016, the global suicide rate dropped 9.8% in some regions of the world but increased in the Americas Region. Reducing suicide mortality is among the goals prioritized by the World Health Organization for 2030[1].

The LGBT population gathers individuals who feel sexual/romantic attraction for the same sex or for both sexes (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals), as well as individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth (Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite). A number of studies have shown a higher risk of suicide attempts for the LGBT population compared to the general population[2]. LGBT youth also have significantly higher rates of depression than non-LGBT[3]. A study conducted in the United States identified that 8% of the heterosexual men and 13% of the heterosexual women had suicidal ideation, while among men and women from the LGBT population, this rate was 36% and 42%, respectively[4]. Furthermore, it is estimated that 20% of the adult LGBT population has already attempted suicide throughout their lives[2]. The impact of being an LGBT person on mental health and suicidal behavior seems to range between environments with different levels of support and acceptance[5], prejudice, discrimination, and judgment[3,6-8]. The connection with the community can exercise important protection against negative outcomes linked to mental health[3].

Suicide prevention requires an attentive look at the early identification of individuals at risk and the search and use of new viable and satisfactory approaches for coping. Virtual social media, allied with in-person treatment modalities, have great potential to collaborate with the fulfillment of these objectives, as they are highly widespread networks, present in daily life, with easy access, and allow the evaluation of the suicide risk of these and of the life components of these individuals[9–12].

The LGBT community is more prone to receive a lower quality treatment due to the stigma, lack of knowledge by the health professionals, and low attention to the specific need of this group[13]. Research in the virtual media is promising for studies on minority groups less present in traditional health services[14]. The expression of feelings in the virtual environment can be more comfortable for LGBT individuals than searching for help among family members or professionals[11,15].

Therefore, virtual media make up important sources of data collection for understanding suicidal behavior[14]. Thus, this study had as objective to analyze the following topics: suicide, depression, and the LGBT population in blog posts.

Method

This is a study with a qualitative approach. The source for data collection was the Tumblr blog platform. Tumblr is an international platform composed of approximately 300 million blogs, with flexibility in building blogs and with the anonymity option in the user's account setting. The collection of blog posts took place from January to July 2017. The searches were carried out using words related to suicidal behavior ("suicide", "suicidal", "depressive", "depression") in combination with words or acronyms related to the LGBT population ("gay", "lesbian", "homosexual", "transsexual", "transvestite", "LGBT", "bisexual", and "transgender").

At the end of the searches, the identified blogs were systematically organized. The content that met the study's selection criteria was saved by screenshooting and identified by a number corresponding to the order in which they were found. Each post was typed into an editable document and the transcriptions went through a review process for correction of possible errors. All posts in the Portuguese language of the "text" or "quote" type were eligible for the study, which were available on blogs identified in the search strategies.

The analysis of the blogs and their posts was carried out by the first author and systematically checked and supervised by the second author. For data analysis, thematic analysis was used by following the six phases proposed: familiarization with the data (with transcription and proofreading of the data); code generation (coding of relevant characteristics of all data systematically); search for themes (code grouping in potential themes, gathering of relevant data for each potential theme); theme verification (in relation to coded extracts and the data set with the proposal of an analysis thematic map); theme definition (for enhancing each theme); and writing the report of the scientific investigation[16].

The project followed the recommendation of Resolution No. 510/2016 on research involving human beings and used only public domain information[17] (that is, posts totally available on the Internet without access restriction for being posted by adult users that chose to keep their profile accessible to the public). In order to ensure maintenance of the secrecy and privacy of the platform users, the posts selected for presenting the results were identified with Arabic numbers, according to the blog identification order and their respect

post (example: B1P259, where "B1" refers to blog 1 and "P259" to post number 259 of the respective blog).

Results

A total of 14 blogs were identified, with 1,293 posts in text or quote format. However, 42 duplicate posts were excluded, as well as 335 with obscure content, which made analysis impossible. Thus, 916 posts were included in the study. The number of eligible posts in each blog ranged from zero to 448.

Intense suffering and self-destructive behavior

Intense and unbearable suffering was the theme in 150 posts. The presence of a strong feeling of emptiness, hopelessness, and loss of the meaning of life associated with self-destructive behavior and numbness with substance abuse was striking. Hopelessness was linked to different spheres of the lives of the authors of the posts, and seemed to be fed by constant deception experiences, slowness, boredom, and discontent with life. *All night she cries and dies a little* (B1P259); *There are things inside me that need to be killed (B1P267); There are several things that can frustrate your plans, like life* (B1P197)

Suicidal behavior and self-harm were recurrent and cross-sectional themes, although not always explicit on the posts. Self-harm showed to be a mechanism for the materialization of intense suffering, a way of externalizing, dominating, and controlling anguish, seeking to relieve suffering through physical pain, mutilation, and bleeding. Suicidal behavior was represented by some bloggers as a soothing alternative and as the only effective way to end suffering. *Every time that I close my eyes, dying sounds like a so happy thought in my mind (B10P80); The pain of the soul printed on the wrist (B10P92); You know, when you feel so tired of life. Then you shut yourself in the bathroom, open the shower and start to cry, grab any object that can take it out on yourself this anger with life, this pain, then you bleed* (B10P147)

Emotional vulnerability

Emotional vulnerability was the theme of 200 posts, which mainly addressed the difficulty in externalizing feelings, the sensation of exhaustion and fragility. The authors of the posts felt anguished for repressing feelings, wearing social masks, neutrality, and for expressing non-genuine feelings. According to the posts, the unexpressed feelings became more vivid, recurring, intense, and, at the same time, difficult to be named and managed. *There are some things about which you can't speak, but at night you relive all of them* (B1P39); *Drowned in unsaid words* (B1P378)

Contents that refer to fatigue, physical and mental exhaustion attributed especially to daily pressures and fear of one's own feelings were also identified. The sensation of being in an unbearable or borderline situation also stands out. *How are you bearing it up?- I'm not* (B3P25); *And you know what? It won't take long, I'm reaching my limit* (B10P91)

Rejection and self-depreciation

Most of the posts (566) were related to this category, which was characterized essentially by rejection (experienced or feared), as well as by intolerance and self-deprecation. *I saw people leaving me when I most needed them (B10P165); What's the reason for people abandoning me?* (B1P193)

The fear of suffering rejection was most often described in situations involving feelings of affective dependence, emptiness, and fear of loneliness. In addition, it was more linked to love relationships. *I've been very hurt and was abandoned and forgotten; tell me if there is any reason to believe in people again?* (B11P143)

The experiences of rejection, in turn, were intensified by intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination. The individuals reported violence acts suffered and also the impacts of these manifestations on their lives. It should be noted that intolerance was not restricted to LGBTphobia, but was also linked to stigma related to mental disorders and overweight. *It sucks hearing jokes about mental problems (B11P353); (...) Don't eat, you fat girl, drink water and if you eat, vomit it!* (B10P40)

There were also feelings, attitudes, and reactions directly related to self-deprecation. Low self-esteem, personal failure, insecurity, insignificance, generalized incompetence, being diminished in the most diverse ways, repulsion, and self-hatred were highlighted. *I have a bad habit of minimizing myself, of finding myself insufficient (B1P79); How I hate myself. You don't know how much.* (B10P4)

Discussion

In this study, 14 blogs were analyzed, with 916 publications related to suicide, depression, and the LGBT population, three issues marked by taboos, stigma, and incomprehension. The main themes addressed in the blogs were related to intense suffering, self-destructive behaviors, emotional vulnerability, rejection, and self-depreciation.

The feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, emotional fragility, exhaustion, and loss of the meaning of life were associated with self-destructive behaviors. The adaptive ways of confronting are important protective factors against negative mental health results among minority populations[6]. Thus, it is important to increase investments in investigations and actions that consider the characteristics and demands in the mental health of sexual and gender minorities.

The unexpressed feelings became more vivid, recurrent, intense, and, at the same time, difficult to name and manage, generating the sensation of being in an unbearable situation. Although they report not expressing their own feelings, the bloggers did so in the virtual environment. The literature shows that, for LGBT people, the expression of feelings in a virtual environment can be more comfortable than in a face-to-face manner[11]. Although there are virtual groups of minorities that promote emotional support and belonging[18], the communication about suicidal behavior in an online environment can be harmful, both for the one who expresses it and for vulnerable individuals exposed to the content posted[19]. Also, a Brazilian study carried on *Twitter* identified that most of the posts on suicide and the LGBT population do not receive any kind of feedback from users, not characterizing an opportunity of welcoming or support[19].

Suicidal behavior and self-injury were recurrent and cross-sectional themes in the posts. Self-injury was mentioned, especially, as a strategy for temporary relief of suffering, while suicidal behavior represented a comforting and effective alternative to end suffering for some bloggers. Sexual and gender minorities are considered to be groups at risk of a variety of negative health conditions, including mental health problems[6]. A number of studies have shown a higher risk of suicidal behavior in the LBGT population compared to the general population[2]. Thus, it is necessary to invest in prevention actions that meet the specific needs of this group[8,13]. Studies on content linked to suicidal behavior in social media have been showing that posts on prevention are still minorities and there is poor disclosure of support resources and reliable and accessible guidelines[11,19]. It is important that there are virtual prevention resources that complement face-to-face approaches[20-21]. It is important to develop and evaluate safe interventions, at a large scale, accessible, scientifically supported, and capable of catalyzing support, promoting stigma reduction, reduction of risk factors, and promotion of protective factors[22–24].

Most of the posts were related to rejection (experienced or feared), intolerance, and self-deprecation. The fear of rejection seemed to be more intense when associated with love relationships. Love break-ups or low quality, conflicting, and violent relationships can be important stressors among LGBT individuals[25].

The experiences of rejection, in turn, were marked by intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination. In the hegemonic heterosexual model, LGBT individuals are exposed to specific stressors that impose an additional risk on mental health, such as the experience of prejudice, discrimination, victimization, rejection[6], social marginalization[7], greater bullying experience, lower community support, and lower social support[8].

In addition to these differences among heteronormative and LGBT youth, the health treatment received by the LGBT community tends to be of poorer quality due to the stigma, lack of knowledge of the health professionals, and low attention given to the specific needs[8,13]. Health professionals need to get prepared and supported to better meet the demands of the LGBT population, as there still are important weaknesses to be overcome[26].

Intolerance was not restricted to LGBTphobia but was also linked to stigma related to mental disorders and appearance (overweight). This disqualification of the individual seems to be linked to the phenomenon of inter-sectionality, which presupposes the interdependence between power relations, value, and characteristics of the individual. It is necessary to question social inequalities and "multiple and imbricated oppressions", as well as to invest in initiatives that promote mental health and social justice[27].

LGBT individuals are exposed to specific stressors that impose additional risks on mental health, such as LGBTphobia[6]. LGBTphobia is characterized as an experience of rejection, moral disqualification, and violence against genres and various sexualities that can favor the introjection of prejudices and stigmas. In this study, self-deprecation was manifested by feelings, attitudes, and reactions linked to low self-esteem, personal failure, insecurity, insignificance, general incompetence, several ways of diminishing oneself, and self-hatred. The reduction of LGBTphobia needs to be considered as one of the components of suicide prevention and requires involvement in inter-sectoral and innovative actions, and the elaboration of public policies and research studies with social impact.

This study has limitations related to the source of data collection (restricted to only one social medium); data collection strategy (delimited by key terms and search for posts with texts); lack of triangulation in the data analysis; as well as specific factors of secondary data collection in a virtual environment that do not integrally represent the perspective on the theme. It should be noted that the analysis did not consider user profiles in an individualized and longitudinal way. Thus, the considerations are based on the posts, not prioritizing the analysis of users or blogs.

Conclusion

The main themes addressed in the blogs were related to intense and unbearable suffering, self-destructive behavior, emotional vulnerability (difficulty in externalizing feelings, the sensation of exhaustion and fragility), rejection (experienced or feared), and self-deprecation. These themes revealed important needs to be investigated and addressed in interventions for the

promotion of the mental health of the LGBT community in the individual and collective scope.

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