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Social Media Platforms and their Relevance in Providing Psychological Support among Infertility Patients

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ABSTRACT
Infertility is a life-altering condition that often leads to psychological distress, including feelings of isolation, grief, and anxiety. Infertility is defined as the 'failure to establish a clinical pregnancy after 12 months of regular and unprotected sexual intercourse', affecting about 12–18% of women aged 18–44 years.(Lotti and Maggi, 2015; Vander Borght and Wyns, 2018).With the rise of social media, online platforms have become essential in providing emotional and psychological support to individuals coping with infertility. This paper explores the role of social media platforms in offering psychological support to infertility patients, focusing on the apps that are most commonly used and valued by individuals going through infertility treatments. The paper examines the features of these platforms, how they contribute to reducing emotional distress, and their potential benefits and limitations.

Keywords: *Social media platforms, Psychological support, infertility.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Infertility, the inability to conceive after one year of regular, unprotected sex, is a condition that affects millions of individuals worldwide. The emotional and psychological toll of infertility is often overlooked, but studies have shown that infertility patients are at an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges.Studies have reported that individuals living with a range of mental disorders, including depression, psychotic disorders, or other severe mental illnesses, use social media platforms at comparable rates as the general population, with use ranging from about 70% among middle-age and older individuals, to upwards of 97% among younger individuals.(Naslund et al.,2020) With limited emotional support available from healthcare providers, social media has become an essential resource for infertility patients seeking mental health providers, peers, family and community.

Social media platforms offer patients a way to connect with others who understand their struggles, share experiences, and access resources that may not be available through traditional medical channels. These platforms not only provide a sense of community but also facilitate mental health support through shared stories, expert advice, and emotional encouragement. The emergence of electronic health interventions has genuinely transformed how we provide health services. With the advent of telemedicine, mobile applications, Internet-based systems, and computerized medical information, patients can easily access quality care from the comfort of their homesThe large influence they have on the dissemination of health information is highly valuable,both because of the amount of time users spend on them and because of their nature, as sources of accessible and understandable knowledge. Research studies have shown that the format of Internet interventions makes it possible for prospective patients to reflect on the treatment before they make an informed decision to commit to it.(Andersson & Titov, 2014).This paper investigates the most commonly preferred social media platforms among infertility patients across various age groups and examines their role in psychological support. It will also highlight the advantages and disadvantages of relying on these platforms for mental health support. Members of online groups can gain social capital by reading the content.

1.1 Social Media Apps Used for Psychological Support

There are several social media apps that infertility patients use to seek psychological support, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, and specialized infertility apps like FertilityFriend and Glow. Each platform has unique features that cater to different aspects of infertility support. (Lin & Shorey, 2023)

The effectiveness of multimedia mental health self-care program based on cyber space on the mental health of infertile women: a randomized controlled trial concluded that social media apps could significantly reduce depression, anxiety, perceived stress and infertility stress and desirable satisfaction with the program was observed among users.

1. Facebook

Facebook remains one of the most widely used social media platforms for infertility support. The platform offers numerous private groups dedicated to infertility, where members can engage in open discussions, share personal stories, and ask for advice. These groups provide a sense of community, allowing individuals to express their feelings and find others who can relate to their experiences. Facebook's group structure also enables users to maintain a level of anonymity, which can be crucial for sensitive topics such as infertility.

2. Instagram

Instagram is particularly popular for its visual nature, offering infertility patients the opportunity to share their journeys through images, hashtags, and captions. Many individuals use Instagram as a way to track their infertility journey publicly, creating posts about IVF cycles, emotional highs and lows, and self-care strategies. The use of hashtags like #infertility, #IVFjourney, and #TTC (trying to conceive) allows users to connect with others going through similar experiences, fostering a sense of solidarity and emotional support.

3. Twitter

Twitter's brief post structure makes it an ideal platform for quick, real-time interactions. Infertility patients often use Twitter to share immediate updates, seek advice, or simply vent their frustrations. Hashtags such as #InfertilityAwareness, #IVF, and #PCOS (polycystic ovary syndrome) allow users to easily find and interact with others within the infertility community. The platform's fast-paced nature encourages frequent engagement and the sharing of tips, resources, and emotional support.

4. Snapchat

Snapchat has released a beta version of a search tool called "Here For You" that will connect users to mental health resources.And millennials and Gen Z users, the primary demographic for Snapchat, are more likely to share on the platform about mental health issues than older generations. (Basu, 2020)

5. Specialized Infertility Apps (e.g., FertilityFriend, Glow)

In addition to general social media apps, there are also specialized apps designed to assist infertility patients. Apps like FertilityFriend and Glow offer tracking tools for ovulation, menstrual cycles, and fertility treatments, alongside supportive features such as discussion forums and peer support groups. These platforms allow patients to connect with others who are on similar fertility journeys, creating communities where emotional support is as integral as the fertility tracking features.

1.2 Psychological Benefits of Social Media Support

1. Emotional Support and Validation

Infertility often leads individuals to feel isolated, particularly when friends or family members may not fully understand the emotional challenges involved. Social media platforms provide a space where users can connect with others who share similar experiences. This sense of shared understanding offers validation and helps alleviate feelings of loneliness. Knowing that others are going through similar struggles can make patients feel less isolated and more supported in their emotional journeys.

2. Reduction of Stigma and Shame

Infertility is frequently surrounded by societal stigma, which can lead to feelings of embarrassment or shame for those struggling to conceive. Social media platforms provide a space for users to discuss infertility openly and without judgment. This transparency reduces the stigma associated with infertility, making it easier for patients to talk about their experiences and seek help. Furthermore, discussing infertility in an open and supportive environment can empower individuals to advocate for themselves and make informed decisions about their treatments.

3. Psychological Empowerment

Access to information and personal stories on social media can be empowering for infertility patients. Patients can learn about treatment options, self-care strategies, and coping mechanisms that they might not have encountered in medical

settings. Hearing about others' success stories or how others have managed the psychological impact of infertility can inspire hope and provide the strength needed to continue their journey.

4. Increased Access to Resources

Social media platforms provide a wealth of resources, including mental health professionals, fertility clinics, financial assistance programs, and coping strategies. Users can share information about what has worked for them, creating a collective knowledge base that others can tap into. These resources can be vital for patients who may not have access to local support services or those who prefer to seek help outside traditional healthcare settings.

1.3 Limitations of Social Media Support

While social media offers many benefits for infertility patients, it is not without its limitations.

1. Misinformation

One of the major drawbacks of social media is the prevalence of misinformation. Infertility patients may encounter unverified medical advice, unsupported treatment claims, or misleading success stories. Without the guidance of healthcare professionals, individuals may be vulnerable to making decisions based on incorrect or unscientific information.

2. Emotional Overload

While social media provides emotional support, it can also contribute to emotional overload. Constant exposure to others' struggles and negative outcomes may exacerbate feelings of despair or anxiety. Additionally, comparisons to others' fertility journeys can lead to unrealistic expectations or feelings of inadequacy.

3. Lack of Professional Support

Despite the psychological benefits social media offers, it cannot replace professional counseling or medical advice. Infertility patients may require professional help to manage the emotional distress associated with their condition. Social media support, while beneficial, is most effective when used in conjunction with professional care.

This study was conducted to examine the most relevant social media platform used by infertility patients for psychological support.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Grey Relational Analysis (GRA) is a statistical method used to assess the degree of relationship between multiple factors within a system, particularly when information is partially unknown or "grey," by analyzing the similarity in their trend of change over time, essentially measuring how closely their patterns follow each other; the more similar the trends, the higher the "grey relational degree" between them, indicating a stronger relationship.

This was a cross- sectional single centric study conducted in the OPD of a tertiary care hospital wherein females between age of 19 to 45 years and above and undergoing infertility treatments were included in the study. Written informed consent was taken from all participants.Grey Relational analysis was used to analyse the social media platforms.GRA solves problems by combining the entire range of performance attribute values being considered for every alternative into one, single value. The assessment criteria used to analyse patient preference while selecting a social media app is Efficiency of communication(CI) Quality of Entertainment (C2), Privacy and security (C3) and transparency of Information (C4), Personal branding and marketing. Data analysis was done using computerised software. Data was first preprocessed using the formula and beneficial attributes and non beneficial attributes and values were calculated for the three age groups respectively. For beneficial values higher the better and non beneficial values , lower the better. The maximum and minimum values are determined followed by calculation of the grey relational coefficient.Further Grey relational grade is determined through the application of the formula.Finally from the grades the ranks are determined indicating the most relevant social media platform ranked 1 and least preferred platform ranked 5.

3. RESULTS

Our study included 155 females of age groups 19 -24, 25 to 45, and 46 and above un. From the comparison of the three tables we can observe from the ranks that whatsapp is found to be the most relevant app across all the three age groups for psychological support to infertility patients.It can be observed that the whatsapp app platform is ranked 1 across all the three age groups and hence is the most relevant app for psychological support as well as the most preferred platform used by Infertility patients for psychological support.

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to examine the relevance of social media platforms is facilitating psychological support to infertility patients.To our knowledge the present study is one of the few studies which has considered social media platforms to collect data.In our study infertility was being described as a feeling of being fragmented as a person and being alienated from social

life.In other words social media may be used to process the emotional side of infertility.Online communities were also found to be convenient and "safe haven" with diverse options for struggling couples.(Lin & Shorey, 2023)

5. CONCLUSION

Social media apps play a crucial role in providing psychological support for infertility patients, offering a sense of community validation, and empowerment. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and specialized infertility apps each provide unique opportunities for individuals to connect, share experiences, and access resources. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations of social media, including the potential for misinformation and emotional overload. For optimal psychological support, social media should be seen as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for professional mental health care. As technology continues to evolve, the role of social media in infertility support will likely expand, offering new ways for individuals to find the emotional support they need during their journey.According to participants in this study one of the main functions of psychological support platforms was to facilitate receiving and providing assistance. Additionally some participants reported that some information provided through the platforms was untrue and cannot be generalised. Additionally because all participants were female, the results cannot be applied to men who might have different experiences and support needs.The findings are based on participants views at one point in time and the study was conducted in and Indian context and therefore may not be generalisable to different cultures.

6. LIMITATIONS

Our study has quite a few shortcomings. Firstly it was a hospital based study,consequently the findings cannot be generalised to the whole population.Secondly the sample size was limited to 155 , hence findings cannot be generalised to the whole population.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil

Conflicts of Interests

There are no conflicts of interest.

TABLES

Calculation of beneficial attributes for age group 19 - 24

	B	**Beneficial attribute**	**(Higher the better)**			
	NB	**Non beneficial Attribute**	**(Lower the better)**			
Age 19 -24						
	B	B	B	B	B	B
Sr no.	**Social Media Platform**	**Efficiency of communication**	**Quality of entertainment**	**Personal Branding and Marketing**	**Privacy and security**	**Transparency of information**
1	Instagram	3.78	3.96	3.8	2.8	2.68
2	Whatsapp	4.44	2.41	2.61	3.55	3.26
3	Facebook	2.77	2.73	3.05	2.46	2.48
4	Snapchat	3.23	2.95	2.54	3.17	2.9
5	Twitter	3.41	3.75	3.28	3.14	3.15
	Max	4.44	3.96	3.8	3.55	3.26
	Min	2.77	2.41	2.54	2.46	2.48
	Weights	0.23	0.21	0.2	0.19	0.17

Sr no.	Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
1	Instagram	0.61	1	1	0.31	0.26
2	Whatsapp	1	0	0.06	1	1
3	Facebook	0	0.21	0.41	0	0
4	Snapchat	0.27	0.35	0	0.65	0.54
5	Twitter	0.38	0.87	0.59	0.62	0.85
	Max	1	1	1	1	1
	Min	0	0	0	0	0
Deviation Sequence						
	Instagram	0.39	0	0	0.69	0.74
	Whatsapp	0	1	0.94	0	0
	Facebook	1	0.79	0.59	1	1
	Snapchat	0.73	0.65	1	0.35	0.46
	Twitter	0.62	0.13	0.41	0.38	0.15

Max	1
Min	0

Calculation of Grey Relational coefficient

Calculating Grey relational Coefficient			**Distinguished coefficient**	**0.5**	
Social Media Platform	**Efficiency of communication**	**Quality of entertainment**	**Personal Branding and Marketing**	**Privacy and security**	**Transparency of information**
Instagram	0.56	1	1	0.42	0.4
Whatsapp	1	0.33	0.35	1	1
Facebook	0.33	0.39	0.46	0.33	0.33
Snapchat	0.41	0.43	0.33	0.59	0.52
Twitter	0.45	0.79	0.55	0.57	0.77

Calculating Grey Relational Grade					
Weights	0.23	0.21	0.2	0.19	0.17
Social Media Platform	**Efficiency of communication**	**Quality of entertainment**	**Personal Branding and Marketing**	**Privacy and security**	**Transparency of information**
Instagram	0.13	0.21	0.2	0.08	0.07
Whatsapp	0.23	0.07	0.07	0.19	0.17
Facebook	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.06	0.06
Snapchat	0.09	0.09	0.07	0.11	0.09
Twitter	0.1	0.16	0.11	0.11	0.13

Social media platform	Total	**Grade**	Rank
Instagram	0.69	**0.14**	2
Whatsapp	0.73	**0.15**	1
Facebook	0.37	**0.07**	5
Snapchat	0.45	**0.09**	4
Twitter	0.62	**0.12**	3

			Age 25- 45			
	B	B	B	B	B	B
Sr no.	Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
1	Instagram	3.69	4	3.85	2.69	2.62
2	Whatsapp	2.69	2.85	2.46	2.15	2.23
3	Facebook	2.77	3.08	3.23	2.46	2.46
4	Snapchat	3.69	4	3.85	2.69	2.62
5	Twitter	3.62	3.08	3.46	2.85	2.69
	Max	3.69	4	3.85	2.85	2.69
	Min	2.69	2.85	2.46	2.15	2.23
	Weights	0.22	0.29	0.4	0.32	0.46

Calculating Beneficial/ Non Beneficial Attribute values						
Sr no.	Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	CalcQuality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
1	Instagram	1	1	1	0.78	0.83
2	Whatsapp	0	0	0	0	0
3	Facebook	0.08	0.2	0.56	0.44	0.5
4	Snapchat	1	1	1	0.78	0.83
5	Twitter	0.92	0.2	0.72	1	1
	Max	1	1	1	1	1
	Min	0	0	0	0	0
Deviation Sequence						
	Instagram	0	0	0	0.22	0.17
	Whatsapp	1	1	1	1	1
	Facebook	0.92	0.8	0.44	0.56	0.5
	Snapchat	0	0	0	0.22	0.17
	Twitter	0.08	0.8	0.28	0	0

Max	1
Min	0

Calculating Grey relational coefficient

ent			Distinguished coefficient	0.5	
Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
Instagram	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.39	0.38
Whatsapp	1	1	1	1	1
Facebook	0.87	0.71	0.47	0.53	0.5

Snapchat	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.39	0.38
Twitter	0.35	0.71	0.41	0.33	0.33

Calculating Grey Relational Grade					
Weights	0.23	0.27	0.38	0.32	0.46
Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
Instagram	0.08	0.09	0.13	0.12	0.17
Whatsapp	0.23	0.27	0.38	0.32	0.46
Facebook	0.2	0.2	0.18	0.17	0.23
Snapchat	0.08	0.09	0.13	0.12	0.17
Twitter	0.08	0.2	0.16	0.11	0.15

Calculating the rank

Social media platform	Total	**Grade**	Ranks
Instagram	0.59	**0.12**	4
Whatsapp	1.66	**0.33**	1
Facebook	0.97	**0.19**	2
Snapchat	0.59	**0.12**	4
Twitter	0.69	**0.14**	3

			Age 46 and above			
		B	B	B	B	B
Sr no.	Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
1	Instagram	3.32	3.41	3.55	2.59	2.68
2	Whatsapp	3.27	3.05	2.91	2.82	2.59
3	Facebook	3.23	3.32	3.23	2.55	2.77

4	Snapchat	4.09	3.32	3.09	3	2.82
5	Twitter	3.18	3	3.14	2.77	2.64
	Max	4.09	3.41	3.55	3	2.82
	Min	3.18	3	2.91	2.55	2.59
	Weights	0.22	0.27	0.37	0.33	0.47

Calculating Beneficial/ Non Beneficial Attribute values						
Sr no.	Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
1	Instagram	0.15	1	1	0.1	0.4
2	Whatsapp	0.1	0.11	0	0.6	0
3	Facebook	0.05	0.78	0.5	0	0.8
4	Snapchat	1	0.78	0.29	1	1
5	Twitter	0	0	0.36	0.5	0.2
	Max	1	1	1	1	1
	Min	0	0	0	0	0
Deviation Sequence						
	Instagram	0.85	0	0	0.9	0.6
	Whatsapp	0.9	0.89	1	0.4	1
	Facebook	0.95	0.22	0.5	1	0.2

Max	1

Calculating Grey relational coefficient			Distinguished coefficient	0.5	
Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
Instagram	0.77	0.33	0.33	0.83	0.56
Whatsapp	0.83	0.82	1	0.45	1
Facebook	0.91	0.39	0.5	1	0.38
Snapchat	0.33	0.39	0.64	0.33	0.33
Twitter	1	1	0.58	0.5	0.71

Grey Relational Grade					
Weights	0.22	0.27	0.37	0.33	0.47
Social Media Platform	Efficiency of communication	Quality of entertainment	Personal Branding and Marketing	Privacy and security	Transparency of information
Instagram	0.17	0.09	0.12	0.27	0.26
Whatsapp	0.19	0.22	0.37	0.15	0.47
Facebook	0.2	0.11	0.18	0.33	0.18
Snapchat	0.07	0.11	0.23	0.11	0.16
Twitter	0.22	0.27	0.22	0.16	0.34

Social media platform	Total	**Grade**	Rank
Instagram	0.92	**0.18**	4
Whatsapp	1.4	**0.28**	1
Facebook	1	**0.2**	3
Snapchat	0.68	**0.14**	5
Twitter	1.21	**0.24**	2

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