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Social Media as Occupation: Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

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Comments

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Technological advances and the emergence of social media have transformed how individuals participate in roles, habits, and routines. In his Eleanor Clarke Slagle lecture, Roger Smith (2017) wrote that “not long ago, using electronic technology was optional. Today, we depend on it” (p. 2). He continued by saying, “communicating with others would be so hampered without technology. We could no longer perform our major life functions” (p. 2). While the increased interconnectedness that technology and social media provide has had many positive impacts on society, there is also growing evidence of the negative effects of social media use on our physical and mental health (Ho et al., 2016; LeBourgeois et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017; Shensa et al., 2018; Uhls et al., 2017).

While much has been discussed about the use of social media in the popular press, clients’ use of social media has rarely been addressed in the occupational therapy literature. The available occupational therapy literature provides us with strategies for using social media to promote the occupational therapy profession or relates specifically to the ethical behavior of occupational therapists’ use of social media (AOTA, 2016). There is a paucity of literature related to the importance of understanding how clients’ use of social media intersects with their valued and necessary occupations, roles, and routines. Given the ubiquity of social media use and the potential benefits and costs to the daily lives of our clients, we write this Opinions in the Profession piece as a call to action for occupational therapists to recognize social media use as an occupation, to suggest evaluation and intervention strategies, and to discuss future implications for practice with clients across the life span.

Social Media Background

Social media is defined by Merriam-Webster as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). According to Aichner and Jacob (2015), social media is not limited to social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn. In fact, the authors describe 13 different types of social media, including social networking sites, blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, product and service reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, video sharing, and virtual works.

According to the Pew Research Center (2018a), Facebook and YouTube are the most popular social media sites in the United States, with 73% of adults currently using YouTube and 68% of adults currently using Facebook. Seventy-four percent of Facebook users access the site daily, while 51% report using the site several times a day (Pew Research Center, 2018a). Race and ethnicity do not appear to have a large impact on usage of the most popular social media sites. For example, 73% of adults who identify as Hispanic, 70% of adults who identify as Black, and 67% of adults who identify as White report using Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2018a). One exception is WhatsApp where 49% of Hispanics say they use the App while only 14% of those who identify as White and 21% of those who identify as Black use the app. In contrast, a person’s age does seem to impact their social media use. For instance, 88% of adults 18 to 24 years of age use some form of social media, while fewer adults 65 years of age and older report using social media (37%) (Pew Research Center, 2018b). Usage is highest for teens, with 97% of youth 13 to 17 years of age reporting use of social media and 45% reporting they are online almost constantly (Pew Research Center, 2018b). Moreover, a person’s age impacts their choice of platform, with young adults (18 to 24 years of age) primarily using Snapchat (78%) and Instagram (71%) over Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2018b). With nearly 100% of youth 13 to 17 years of age

and nearly 40% of adults 65 years of age and older using social media, it is imperative that occupational therapists consider its importance as an occupation across the life span.

Benefits and Potential Harms Related to Social Media Use

There are many benefits of social media use for individuals across the life span (Antheunis et al., 2016; Chopik, 2016; Heo et al., 2015; Steinfield et al., 2008; Uhls et al., 2017). For young people, the benefits include a variety of factors that are critical to healthy development, such as identity development and exploration, aspirational development, peer engagement, friendship development and maintenance, increased social capital, and access to social support (Uhls et al., 2017). One study of over 3,000 early adolescents showed a positive relationship between the use of social networking sites and quality of friendships (Antheunis et al., 2016). Steinfield et al. (2008) found that the use of social media (Facebook) helped to bridge social capital and address the relationship development and maintenance needs of college students. It is interesting that in this study the students with lower self-esteem appeared to gain more from their Facebook use than those with higher self-esteem (Steinfield et al., 2008). In fact, a majority of teens (81%) report that using social media makes them feel more connected to their friends, while 69% say it helps them interact with a more diverse group of people, and 68% say they feel that they have people who will support them through tough times (Pew Research Center, 2018c).

The benefits of using social media for adults include the potential for decreased loneliness and increased social participation (Chopik, 2016), especially when travel may be difficult. Further research suggests that increased social media use for adults is associated with better life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Heo et al., 2015). Finally, a recent study in older adults found that online social participation can limit the effects of pain on depression (Ang & Chen, 2019).

Without minimizing the powerful positive impact that technology, and specifically social media, has had on our society, it is imperative to simultaneously recognize the potential negative outcomes of social media use. Limited use, overuse, or inappropriate use of social media may result in the disruption of roles, habits, routines, and balance in a person's life.

The literature presents an increasing number of documented negative consequences related to social media use (Ho et al., 2016; LeBourgeois et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2018; Primack et al., 2017; Uhls et al., 2017). Evidence suggests links between social media use and depression, anxiety, and social isolation (Lin et al., 2016; Primack et al., 2017). A recent study in *JAMA Pediatrics* involving a sample of 3,826 adolescents found that the use of social media and television may enhance symptoms of depression in adolescents (Boers et al., 2019). In addition, a review of the literature by LeBourgeois and colleagues (2017) found “an adverse association between screen-based media consumption and sleep health” (p. S92). Further evidence supports an association between the use of social networking sites and body image dissatisfaction (Ho et al., 2016). Pew Research examining teens' social media experiences found that 45% of teens feel overwhelmed by the drama on social media, 43% feel pressure to post only content that makes them look good to others, and 26% say that using social media makes them feel worse about their own lives (Pew Research Center, 2018b). Overall, there is considerable evidence suggesting that social media use can result in potential harms to users' physical and mental health.

Balancing the Benefits and Consequences

There are a variety of positive and negative effects of social media use. While some people benefit from its use, others experience negative effects. The Pew Research Center (2018c) noted that while 71% of teens stated that using social media makes them feel more included, 25% said it makes

them feel more excluded. While 69% stated that using social media made them feel more confident 26% stated that it made them feel more insecure (Pew Research Center, 2018c).

It is interesting that authors recently suggested that it may be how a person engages with social media that impacts their experiences (Verduyn et al., 2017). These authors recently reviewed the current research examining the relationship between social media use and well-being and found a negative relationship between passive use of social media and subjective well-being and a positive relationship between active use of social media and well-being. They suggest that passively using social network sites results in social comparisons and envy, while active use creates social capital and stimulates feelings of social connectedness (Verduyn et al., 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that occupational therapists do not make assumptions about groups of people and social media use, but instead, examine individual social media use and the impact that engagement in this occupation has on their participation in other daily activities, roles, and routines and their physical and mental health.

Social Media as Occupation

Smith (2017) discussed the relationship of technology to occupation, stating “technology has a role in occupation so fundamental, it must be considered an essential building block of occupation” (p. 1). We agree with this call to bring technology to the forefront of theory and practice and are further proposing that social media use be considered an occupation in and of itself. *The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process* (OTPF-3) describes occupation as “the daily life activities in which people engage” and notes that “occupations occur over time; have purpose, meaning and perceived utility to the client” (AOTA, 2014, p. S6). Wilcock and Townsend (2014) state that “occupation is used to mean all the things people want, need or have to do It refers to all aspects of actual human doing, being, becoming, and belonging” (p. 542). The OTPF-3 categorizes daily occupations into the larger groups of ADLs, IADLs, rest and sleep, education, work, play, leisure, and social participation. The use of social media clearly fits into the broader categories of leisure and social participation but may also have a significant, and potentially negative, impact on occupations, such as rest and sleep, education, work, and play. Social media use also often intersects with other common daily occupations, such as care of others, health maintenance, spirituality, and social participation. It is clear that the OTPF-3 language supports the construct of social media use as an occupation.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

Given the high incidence of social media use and the current evidence demonstrating both the benefits and consequences of using social media, we believe that occupational therapy should be consistently addressing social media use among clients across the life span. Occupational therapy can be involved in supporting social media use throughout the occupational therapy process, beginning with the evaluation process, continuing during the intervention phase, and concluding with recommendations to support participation after the discontinuation of services. As a profession, we can play a variety of important roles in addressing social media use with clients including, but not limited to, supporting clients of varying abilities in accessing social media, helping clients and families set appropriate limits surrounding screen time, helping clients gain self-advocacy skills for handling and responding to messages on social media, increasing clients’ self-worth and self-confidence, and promoting positive social participation and general health and wellness.

During the evaluation process, we suggest that questions specific to a client’s use of technology and social media become part of every occupational profile. This will begin to open dialogue with clients and will help to determine if a client requires supportive intervention surrounding the use of

social media. While the AOTA Occupational Profile Template (AOTA, 2017), which was designed to guide the occupational profile, does include a section on virtual environments, it does not provide suggested language to assist occupational therapists in exploring this topic with clients as an occupation. Suggested questions include: “Do you currently use technology and social media?” “Are you satisfied with the amount of time you spend using technology and social media?” and/or “Do you need supports to access technology and social media?” Answers to these questions will then help inform the intervention process. In addition, during the analysis of occupational performance; skilled observation of computer, tablet, or phone use; and collaborative goal setting around social media use may be indicated.

During the intervention phase, there are many ways that occupational therapists can support social media use as an occupation. Modifications and adaptations can be made to the environment, the tools, or the task of engagement in social media. This can include identifying and providing alternative access methods for people unable to access their computers, tablets, or phones. Other examples include enlarging fonts or adjusting contrast to the device screen, using talk-to-text or text-to-talk applications, or addressing positioning of the person and/or device to facilitate use and access. For the older adult, education in the use of social media to maximize social participation may be a goal, as may education or accessibility options. For children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism spectrum disorders, supporting executive functioning may impact their use of and response to social media. Determining which social media sites are overstimulating or otherwise inappropriate may also be a key goal. For persons across the life span, the occupational therapist may address anxiety and depression related to the amount or type of social media use the client is engaging in, encourage and support alternate occupations, or provide education on applications that can limit time or sites a person is visiting. Table 1 provides a variety of additional ways occupational therapy can use the OTPF-3 intervention approaches to address social media use in practice.

Table 1

Examples of Occupational Therapy Interventions for Adolescents and Adults Using Social Media

| Approach | Example |
|-----------------------|---|
| Create/ Promote | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote access to technology and social media • Promote digital literacy among older adults • Promote executive functioning skills to support social media use • Promote positive self-identity through appropriate use of social media • Promote self-advocacy via education • Promote self-esteem and mental health • Promote general health and wellness |
| Establish/ Restore | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish positive habits and routines surrounding the use of social media • Establish healthy sleep routines by eliminating social media from the bedroom • Establish safety routines for maintaining privacy • Restore mental health of individuals struggling with anxiety and depression resulting from or exacerbated by social media use |
| Maintain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain physical access to social media through ongoing interventions • Maintain social participation and friendships through positive, appropriate use of social media • Maintain health and wellness |
| Modify | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify the environment to increase access to technology and social media • Modify technology to improve access to social media |
| Prevent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent further disability by providing proper access • Prevent social isolation through improved access and education • Prevent the development of negative self-concepts related to bullying, body image, etc. |

Note. Based on *Approaches to Intervention* as outlined in the OTPF-3 (AOTA, 2014).

Conclusion

Social media has become a stand-alone occupation that contributes to the shaping of the roles, habits, and routines of clients across the life span; therefore, we firmly believe that it should consistently be a consideration during the occupational therapy process from evaluation through discharge. Furthermore, exploratory research to determine current occupational therapy practices, trends, and gaps is essential. Occupational therapists have the distinct skill set needed to promote healthy social media use to optimize the benefits while mitigating the negative consequences on physical and emotional health. We call on occupational therapists to embrace social media as an occupation across the life span.

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