Social media and anxiety in young adults: preparing primary care for the rising challenge

Background
Several researchers and policymakers have acknowledged the alarming association between social media usage and anxiety symptoms in young adults. While primary care holds a crucial role in the improvement of health outcomes for those presenting with anxiety, there has been no research on GPs’ perceptions of the impact of social media on anxiety. Furthermore, there has been little discussion of social media as a risk factor in anxiety-related consultations. This study is the first to use empirical research to inform how primary care can adapt to address social media’s impact on anxiety within young adults.

Aim
To identify GPs’ perceptions of the impact of social media on anxiety; and to identify the facilitators and barriers within primary care to addressing social media’s impact on anxiety among young adults.

Method
Following an exploratory pilot interview, semi-structured interviews with GPs (n = 7) were transcribed and thematically analysed following an inductive approach.

Results
Six facilitators were identified: a framework to facilitate discussion, open GP attitudes, GP training, alternative support, larger stakeholder influence, and young adult education of social media’s impact on anxiety. Three barriers were identified: a lack of GP awareness of social media’s impact on anxiety, cautious GP attitudes, and increased pressure on the health service.

Conclusion
This qualitative study revealed a diversity of perceptions, and these novel findings are instructive in the adaptation of primary care services to meet the current mental health needs of young adults, as well as better assisting GPs in engaging in these conversations, especially within university practices.

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