The Avenue Towards More Attention: Social Media Usage with Mental Health Organizations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Vinh Le
Center for Nonprofit & NGO Studies, Northern Illinois University

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Dr. Alicia Schatteman

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Abstract

This capstone looks into the ways that mental health organizations had shifted their social media engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, I wanted to see the extent that mental health nonprofit organizations have changed their outreach on social media during the pandemic. The shifts towards a more online approach would presumably impact nonprofit organizations in general, as they normally do not have a firm plan to manage their social media platforms. The importance of online engagement has also increased since society will rely on it during a long amount of quarantine without physical contact with other people, and they will obtain their news from their frequented websites. This study examined ten mental health organizations and their three potential social media websites to count the amount of posts and the types of content they are publishing before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. After gathering the data on their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages, it was found that a majority of the organizations and their social media platforms had changed their outreach in different ways. While most of it can be seen as an overall improvement, mental health organizations should look into the amount and types of content they are posting, along with providing more engagement with their followers.
Introduction

The focus in mental health has been increasingly important for one to look out for, especially with a quarantine that has lasted for over a year. A lot of people have changed their social interactions to become virtual, outside interactions are shunned, and with a lot of job environments being at home, the time to relax and work has become blurred. The sudden transition towards an online environment can be a lot to take in, and can shift one’s mood to be more negative than usual. With a lot of people having poor mental health in this new environment, it is important for nonprofit organizations to assist them with their programs and services, especially those who have a focus in mental health. After all, the long-lasting quarantine has developed or increased the number of people who are experiencing bad mental health from the lack of social interaction.

In terms of reaching out to the general public, one of the best methods in the modern world has been to utilize social media. The use of social media allows mental health organizations to interact with the community to gain feedback and notify them of their resources or upcoming events. It also lets them publicly show support for other organizations by linking to their articles or talking about their collaborations together. It can be utilized as a very active and versatile resource for themselves and the community, especially with a quarantine that pushed society to make a push towards the online environment. However, it can be difficult for mental health organizations to figure out the best approach to using social media, particularly if they have ideas to maintain multiple platforms. According to the study done by Dunham and Company, they found that their social media management and interactions did not change in the span of four years (2019). With the COVID-19 pandemic causing interactions to be in a more
online environment however, to what extent have mental health nonprofit organizations changed their outreach on social media during the pandemic?

**Literature Review**

While the focus of this study was to find any notable changes to mental health organizations and their social media before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to look back at other sources to see some of their general goals, mindsets and actions. Campbell, Lambright and Wells’ research began looking at how much social media was being used in nonprofit organizations and county departments (2014). They see its role as being very effective for these groups, but there are still areas that have not been looked upon when it comes to nonprofits and human services. They wanted to look at the extent that these organizations were using social media, how they use it to engage stakeholders, their visions on social media usage and the potential barriers it can bring. Their data was collected from the social media accounts of nonprofit organizations and county departments that delivered human service in New York, along with getting some interviews with 40 organizations chosen at random. While their range let them have an overall picture on what they all used and are able to research whether their information during interviews held up, it was confined to a few areas that are considered smaller than other organizations.

Upon looking at their findings from their data collection to see their social media usage and their visions with using it more, they found that Facebook was the most widely used with the organizations and departments, and that nonprofits were using social media more in general. Some reasons that they looked toward using them were for marketing any activities, keeping relevant to key constituencies, and increasing community awareness about themselves and their issues that they are solving. They found that nonprofit organizations that were using social media
had a limited view on the potential it brings, and their interviews found that institutional policies were a large barrier from them using it to express themselves. Another potential barrier was the lack of vision to use social media, since it is a fairly new resource that was not implemented when these organizations were being created. The researchers believe that scholars should share their findings towards these leaders in order to physically show its potential and they way that it can be used while keeping clients hidden from the public.

Though their team had found some good results from the amount of output that nonprofits were doing, Campbell and Lambright’s research looked more into how they are using the Internet and social media to show their services to the community (2019). Internet presence is important as it shows the willingness that organizations will do to spread their message and have online engagement with potential donors. Their research question involved seeing how these organizations have evolved to use the Internet in terms of their activities and visibility. They looked at some nonprofits in South Central New York and found their usage in two points in time to see their evolution and characteristics that they obtained through the use of social media.

In their findings, most organizations had a website with contact info, but only three quarters had social media, and only 13% had three accounts. Going into more specifics on them, Facebook pages had more followers, while organizations interacted with Twitter more frequently. Overall, their research found that nonprofits had various ways of using the Internet to show themselves after creating their own website, and that their presence would change depending on their organizational capacity, members, program service fees and level of government funding. It shows that most of them do not see social media as a large necessity to help their mission despite its potential to assist them overtime. The variation that they all had depended on how early they adopted the idea of using social media, how active they were in
posting content, and how visible they wanted to be in front of their stakeholders. The focus to maintain their social presence should become an additional task for an organization’s annual goals if they want to engage their audience with their mission and supportive services.

Many nonprofit organizations talk about how they utilize different social media platforms to have the community take notice of their actions. However, a lot of discussion can come from the amount of social media platforms that these organizations choose to maintain, along with the frequency and types of posts that they will create. With the data from Alice Creedon’s article, a study from the Case Foundation was able to have a survey with almost 500 participants to see their methodologies and practices with the use of social media (2018). From their survey, 88% of nonprofits found that their best communication tools were still with their emails and main websites. Since most websites of these organizations will include their contact information or an area to send direct messages, it is no surprise that donors and the community would think to go there instead of their social media platforms to message them. Another reason is from the 47% that believed donations are a large part of their engagement area, since it involves having a personal connection with their shared mission or core values.

The Case Foundation’s study also found that only around half of participants had some staff that primarily focus on their social media management. The others either had a team policy to take care of their social media presence or thought of content to post at random moments. The use of social media is still a fairly new area to the nonprofit society, so there have not been concrete plans that are taught or passed down for the effective way of managing them. These results show that on a large scale, either due to not having enough staff to handle it as their core objective or believing that linking articles that relate to their mission is a good way to spread awareness instead of making original content. The article finishes up the findings by providing
some tips to organizations that do not have a set plan to handle social media. Creedon (2018) goes over ideas like including photos and videos to make it visually engaging towards the audience so that it grabs their attention, or making their websites have a good format on mobile devices since many people tend to use them a lot. If nonprofits want to keep their audience engaged with their organization, they need to put emphasis on a trained management team that can handle their social media content by making it easily accessible and visually pleasing.

The guide created by Thackeray, Neiger and Keller (2012) saw the potential that social media brings into social marketing strategies, and how its uses could expand the potential reach that nonprofit organizations could once never achieve without it. Its value is more than a form of spreading news or entertainment content, as it can keep people engaged in a group’s communication and stay relevant to important contacts without designating a specific time. The opportunity to continue conversations with the group and its audience is very powerful if managed correctly, but the guiding point to maintain it can be difficult to figure out for those who have not experienced this sort of engagement. This article was created to be the guide that social marketing teams need to include social media in a meaningful way to their plans, and see how it can transform some of their audience into active participants instead.

The first step that they went over is describing the audience that the social media area should be focused towards, and moving to the specific outlet that the audience uses most frequently. It is also important to find out the ways that they are using their social media and adapt social marketing to that, so they can plan out a strategy to fit their actions. The second step is to write down the reasons for wanting to engage with the audience, whether it is to obtain feedback or recruit audience members to directly help the page. With the third step is using the second step and creating a strategy to accomplish the purposes that social marketing wrote about.
With the final step, they need to look at their plans and choose the right social media outlet to use for their audience for ease of access and willing participants. If social marketing teams are able to plan out their use of social media using these steps, then it helps the group and the audience stay active in improving services and creating new ideas. Social media can become a powerful communication area if both sides are willing to actively engage with each other, and the plan to make that route direct and easy is essential for it to continue.

In order to look at the directions that social media teams have already taken, Philanthropy News Digest summarized the *Nonprofits & Social Media: A Missed Connection* report by Dunham and Company, who analyzed over 150 nonprofits and their social media platforms to see the type and frequency of their activities (2019). By looking into their adoption for social media, response time, integration and content with the nonprofit organizations, they were able to find some interesting results with the way they managed social media to spread their image overall. The chief strategist for Dunham and Company, Jennifer Abohosh, stated that the shift towards social media is not the issue anymore, but instead the way to utilize it (2019). They saw that a lot of the nonprofits have not changed their frequency of responding to their community members since their previous study that was four years ago. They have not figured out an effective change that allows them to post more content and engage with their community between the years, despite the increase in social media adoption that was created since then. There is a lot of potential that can be used to engage with their audience, but looking for the best methods and maintaining it can be difficult for them.

With some of the larger organizations, they found that health organizations were generally some of the best groups to utilize social media. They found these results using data such as their audience size, their engagement with them, and the frequency of posts that they
decide to show. However, they are not the best in some of these categories, as they saw that environmental and animal welfare organizations had larger audiences across their social media pages. There were also religious groups having the most audience interaction, and found that health organizations had only half the amount that religious groups had on their social media. It helps show that while nonprofit organizations that focus on health are using their online platforms well, there are definitely improvements that they could make to match what other nonprofits are doing with their social media.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the entire world to become more online, but it can be difficult to imagine the scale of effects that it caused to the average citizen. However, Junling Gao’s study was used to rapidly assess the mental health problems and social media presence in China while the virus had begun to spread (2020). Although the study had only lasted three days, it is able to provide a quick response from the average person about the increasing danger of the incident without any secondary thoughts in their mind. With the results from 4,872 participants around China, Gao and their team were able to find that over 80% of them were exposed to social media frequently. They had measured the signs of depression, anxiety, or a combination of both, and then calculated whether that would change if they were more or less exposed to social media. Their results showed that signs of anxiety or a combination of depression and anxiety had increased when they were frequently exposed to social media in the country. Their study helps show the prevalence of social media in someone’s daily life, and the potential dangers it can cause along with its usefulness at the same time.

A lot of nonprofit organizations will look into giving their audience tips and information about mental health, but is there a good way to approach it with their social media? S. Anne Moorhead and her team wanted to look for the general uses, benefits and limitations of social
media for health communication because there was not much information about it (2013). In order to find and gather up the potential data, Moorhead and her team looked through 98 different research studies, and they were able to find seven main uses for social media as a way of health communication. The biggest one that they wanted to highlight was to increase interaction with others, which makes sense since it allows them to spread information about their health, or can lead them into finding the health support that they may need. Some other important benefits included ways to provide different types of support, rallying the audience to influence health policy and spreading out good information about different health topics. While a majority of the limitations were about the potential privacy issues and quality concerns regarding the information that is shared, they see social media as a powerful tool that can be approached in many ways to spread health communication.

While Moorhead’s study (2013) saw the potential use social media can bring to communicate health, C. Lee Ventola’s study looked into the way that healthcare professionals have generally used social media, along with the potential benefits and risks it can bring (2014). She goes into how many adults have been steadily using social media to network with others, share media and obtain knowledge from various platforms. She noted that there were a billion Facebook users in 2012, and how 100 million Twitter users would post over 65 million tweets on a daily basis to show how widely used it has become. Based on her research, she found that healthcare professionals will utilize it as a way to expand their network to talk to other physicians about their findings and as another way to educate and interact with their patients. However, she also found that it can create a bad image for the healthcare professional that will stick with the patient for long periods of time, and there can be punishments if their responses and assistance are not what their board members expect as the best way to help patients. They
need to make sure that they use social media as professionally as if they were in their offices, or else they may stray from their usefulness or be penalized for not acting as such. Ventola finishes off her study by bringing up general guidelines that can help healthcare professionals stay helpful for their patients without going over any risky boundaries (2014). It is important to have a set of rules to follow so that a professional or an organization can be effective resources while maintaining their good image to those they are supporting and to their social media audience.

A few articles may find that there should be more engagement with a nonprofit’s audience in order to keep them interested, but what would be a good method to do that? In *Effective Social Media Engagement for Nonprofits: What Matters?* by Julia L. Carboni and Sarah P. Maxwell, they studied the best ways to effectively do this with a two-way communication (2015). By gathering the attention of their audience and stakeholders instead of using their social media platforms to simply post information, both sides will become interested and eventually support each other by having more engagement. It can eventually lead to new ideas for events or networking that allows two organizations to collaborate, which makes the potential for better engagement more interesting. Using Facebook posts as a way to measure stakeholder attention, they were able to find that the type of post affects their potential engagement. Some examples were that posts that were strictly photos were given more support, longer posts bringing in more engagement and how frequently posting content will lead to less engagement due to the overwhelming amount of content given. There are many ways that nonprofits can strategize ways to increase more audience engagement, but they should figure out the type of engagement to look for and the best platform to grab their attention.

As opposed to looking at Facebook posts to look at engagement, Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory D. Saxton’s research examined the ways that nonprofits were using Twitter to support
their organizations (2012). Rather than having longer posts or ones that are mainly photos, they wanted to see the uses that smaller posts, called “microblogging” could bring for organizations in general. By looking at the 100 largest nonprofit organizations in the United States, they saw three parts of microblogging that were essential in maintaining their platform and retaining their audience: information, community and action. They believe that Twitter’s basic function is to spread information about the organization to their followers. With community, nonprofits will look to create relationships through interactivity and discussion between them and their audience or other organizations that may have an interest in their mission and activities. By creating this community, the audience will want to take action for the organization by donating to their cause or retweeting their events for their followers to look at. This streamlined process that Twitter created has allowed nonprofit organizations to potentially create more engagement opportunities with their audience than if it was attempted on a normal website. Their studies bring light to the potential usefulness that Twitter can bring should nonprofits want to shift their focus to create more engagement and form strong relationships.

**Methodology**

This study looked into how mental health organizations have changed their outreach with social media due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The drastic change that has taken place is a great opportunity to see how much change these organizations have done due to the shift towards an online environment. The data that was collected from this research was primary data from ten mental health organizations and their social media pages. These organizations were chosen from those who have a location in Illinois and have either their mission statement or provide services and information with a focus towards mental health. These organizations were only chosen state-wide to keep the variety of data more contained, as different states and their actions may change
how their nonprofits shift their social media management. The ten nonprofits shall remain anonymous, but will instead be classified as “Organization A-J” in order to keep track of each one throughout the study.

The researcher looked into the number and types of posts that these organizations created from January 1st, 2019 to December 31st, 2020, marking a large amount of time before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to keep data focused, this study only looked into their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages should they have these social media outlets. Three different types of social media platforms were chosen since large groups will shift their social media plans to have different types of posted and shared content depending on the platform used. Data was divided up between their posts and the types of content found with each year for each social media platform. Data for posts were numerically adding them manually for each of their social media platforms between the two years, while the types of content contain notes of what the researcher saw frequently with the posts that the organizations posted with each social media platform. The exception towards counting posts manually will be for Twitter, as NVivo will be used to count the number of tweets between both years. Mental health organizations that do not have one of the three platforms in either year will be noted as “none-applicable” during the data collection. Gathering their social media data from these ten organizations will decide the conclusion on whether or not the COVID-19 pandemic changed their outreach with their social media pages.

Findings, Discussion and Improvements

Findings

The data that was collected with the ten mental health organizations across three social media platforms yielded a lot of interesting results between 2019 and 2020. In terms of content,
most focused on linking sources to other articles and mental health organizations, creating posts and reminders for their events and including posts that are meant to self-promote themselves. The articles that they would link had nation-wide mental health and COVID-19 updates, along with providing some tips and awareness on mental health since it was becoming more of a known issue to viewers. In addition to the tips and awareness articles, mental health organizations would also insert hotlines and emails to other programs and organizations for viewers in case they or someone close needs to talk to a professional about their mental health. With their self-promotion quotes, they would usually include links to their other social media, introductions to new staff or showing ways that viewers can get involved with the organization. However, not many of them seemed to include replies to their posts whenever people comment on them. It was very rare to see them respond to anyone between all ten organizations and their social media platforms.

![Facebook Posts/Photo Updates/Event Inclusions](chart.png)
Facebook was the most prevalent website that mental health organizations used, as 100% of them utilized this platform between the two years. Out of the ten organizations, eight of them had increased the number of posts from 2019 while two had decreased their amount of posts. Looking at some of the organizations that increased their post amount, Organization A went from 43 posts to 88 posts, doubling their content that they chose to post. While they mainly posted content that gave links towards mental health and special events in 2019, they also included more personal self-care posts such as pet engagement and mental health hotlines in 2020. Some of the biggest increases in post amount were with Organizations B and F, which each one having less than 100 posts in 2019 to over 300 in 2020. Besides having more of their content from 2019 such as events and self-promotion posts, they also included COVID facts and mental health tips or quotes that might impact a viewer to reflect and something positive themselves. The content changes with Organizations C and I did not change much despite the
decrease in posts for the year, as it was mainly kept as links to other articles or organizations, self-promotion posts and some of their events on a smaller scale.

With the amount of Twitter accounts for the ten mental health organizations, only seven of them had posted content between the two years, as Organization D did not have a Twitter account and Organizations C and I had not posted since 2016 and 2015 respectively. The organization that had changed its output drastically between the two years was Organization F, as they went from a single tweet in 2019 to 184 tweets in 2020. Their tweet in 2019 was about the Giving Tuesday event that they were participating in, but they shifted their social media plans next year by including motivational quotes and self-promotion tweets such as donating to them with one’s Amazon account or with their upcoming events. On the other spectrum for drastic output though, Organization J went from 465 tweets in 2019 down to 200 tweets by the end of 2020. A lot of their content with both years stayed relatively the same, having tweets about mental health holidays, links to mental health resources and some of their collaborations.

![Twitter Tweets/Retweets/Tweet Replies](image-url)
However, in late 2019, Organization J were more focused on giving their own news source on their website, and a majority of their tweets would mostly link to it.

Out of the three social media platforms that were tracked, Instagram had the least amount of accounts associated with it, as half of the mental health organizations did not have an account for their organization. However, those that did utilize the platform had a big impact in their outreach, with the other five organizations obtaining an increase to their Instagram posts. Most notably, Organization F did not even post anything in 2019, but eventually created 182 posts whenever 2020 had finished. In order to keep their social media engagement running besides self-promotion content, they decided to post some self-reflection questions that viewers could comment on and provide inspirational quotes to give some thought for their followers. The general lack of participation with this social media outlet is very shocking to see though. This platform is a great way to isolate posts and view individual comments that are on each one, but perhaps the types of content seemed too similar to what Facebook and Twitter already do.
**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to see the extent that mental health nonprofit organizations have changed their outreach on social media during the pandemic. It would help provide a good image on the ways that these organizations would have shifted their social media management and the types of outreach that they would perform. Although not all of the mental health organizations have all three social media platforms, there is enough evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had changed their outreach compared to the time before the pandemic. Whether an increase or decrease, most either had a large shift in the amount they post, and many would improve the variety by including personal mental health tips or activities to do during the quarantine. Most of these mental health organizations would provide their services in-person or in public events, so they needed to find alternatives in order to help their community and engage their audience in new methods. As stated previously though, many of these organizations did not respond to the audience’s comments much, nor provide methods to initiate feedback. Their content was focused on self-promotion to their own and other nonprofit organizations, noting various events and collaborations they might have. However, it was rare to see posts that ask questions towards their viewers, which felt like some missed potential that could be fixed. They could bring more engagement by asking the audience about their mental health that week, any exciting moments before or after an event, or provide personal stories so that the viewers can put in their own input like some of them have already done. While it is important to show off the variety of services and actions that the organization is doing, their social media platforms could be used even further to socialize and engage with their followers and community.

**Improvements**
Although this data was able to show that the COVID-19 pandemic did affect the way mental health organizations had changed the outreach on social media, there were some errors along the way and possible improvements that could be done. As both Facebook and Instagram had their posts counted manually, there is the chance of human error that may create a possible miscount with these two social media platforms. Another error that happened unexpectedly involved some mental health organizations and their Facebook pages. Previously considered organizations had posted too frequently that the website crashed during the counting process, leading to different organizations replacing them for not being able to fully access their posts back to the beginning of 2019. It would have been great to see the differences in post amount for these frequent content-creating organizations, as their Facebook post number in 2020 reached over 500 at times, but unfortunately the website was not able to handle loading that much content at once for the researcher.

In terms of improvements, one area that could be refined is the way that these posts could have been counted. As stated previously, many of these posts were counted manually by a single person, and while NVivo was able to obtain tweets from 2020 and 2019, their functionality for Facebook posts did not allow the researcher to look back that far. Another possibility would be to track certain types of posts, or possibly remove some that do not seem as important. Facebook posts such as updated events and cover photos were included, so perhaps they could be shifted out of the count for a more narrow count on just outreach posts for their audience. On the other hand, including Facebook and Instagram comments as part of their outreach post count could also be useful to track, as those types of feedback and interaction were not included in the overall count for their posts.
There are many paths to take if one was interested in furthering this capstone study. Some parts could have even more detail, such as counting posts by month or noting the amount of different content that they posted monthly or annually. If it was tracked down to the amount of posts per month, there could be even larger changes that would be seen when the COVID-19 pandemic became global in the middle of March. Other changes that could be made are the different social media platforms that were tracked. Since Instagram was only a part of five organizations, it may not be seen as relevant as Facebook and Twitter, and could be removed since it was not popular enough. Some of the mental health organization’s websites did not include a link to their Instagram accounts despite having one and including the other two. A possible replacement could be to track some data in LinkedIn, since a majority of the organizations had an account and included it in their website more than Instagram.
References


