Meeting Students Where They Are: Centering University of Toronto Student Voices in Mental Health Conversations on Reddit

Lynie Awywen, Katherine Santangeli, Salina Faizani, Christina Vuong, Nadia Ben Hamoud, and Maria Romano

Abstract

As a result of the suicide that took place in March 2019 in the Bahen Centre at the University of Toronto, students and media have raised increasing concerns about the lack of mental health services available on campus. This article discusses how Reddit was used after the subsequent event to discuss mental health. The authors analyzed the subreddit, r/UofT, and found five common uses of Reddit for mental health, which include: searching for info on how to get help, sharing mental health resources, hearing other users experiences with mental health, and expressing concerns about mental health to raise awareness or advocate for better sources. Reddit is explored as an information source from a library context, and recommendations are provided for how LIS professionals can create and better support mental health initiatives within the University of Toronto.

Keywords: Mental Health, Advocacy, Health and Wellness, University of Toronto, Community Librarianship, Reddit, Online Student Communities

© 2019 Lynie, Awywen, Katherine, Santangeli, Salina, Faizani, Christina, Vuong, Nadia Ben Hamoud, Maria Romano. This is an Open Access article distributed under CC-BY.
Update since this article was written and presented in April, 2019: This discussion remains pressing, as another death by suicide occurred on Sept 27th, 2019 at the University of Toronto. Although our analysis was based on the March 17th, 2019 suicide, we want to acknowledge this recent tragedy and send our love to fellow community members who are hurting.

When examining the student body at the University of Toronto, it is becoming increasingly apparent that access to mental health resources are a growing concern, specifically, mental health resources available to students. Throughout the last few years, the issue of mental health has been brought to the forefront of universities as a significant factor in student health and success. As the concept becomes more and more destigmatized, universities are seeing an increasing demand for access to resources for students. The College Student Alliance, the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, Colleges Ontario, and the Council of Ontario Universities collaborated to produce a study entitled In It Together in November 2017 which highlighted the growing need for these resources. This study indicates that 46% of postsecondary students reported feeling too depressed to fully function in 2016, which was an increase from 40% in 2013 (In It Together, 2017). Furthermore, 65% of postsecondary students reported overwhelming anxiety in 2016, an increase from 58% in 2013, and a 2017 survey of on-campus student health service usage determined the second most used billing code by on-campus physicians was directly related to mental health (In It Together, 2017). At the St. George Campus, Accessibility Services reports that of the 4219 students registered in 2017-2018, Mental Health accounted for 49% of the students registered (University of Toronto, 2018).

In mainstream media outlets, the University of Toronto has garnered much attention over the past few years regarding its relationship to mental health services as perceived by the public. Concerns covered in news sources include the wait times students face to access resources, controversial policies and recent events related to the mental health of students (See Figure 1). These statistics and headlines show that not only is there a demand for resources, but there is growing need for accessibility to resources.

As recently as March 2019, the University of Toronto endured further tragedy resulting when a student committed suicide on campus, sparking outrage over the lack of mental health resources available. Conversation regarding mental health resources, access to these resources for students and the barriers currently faced by students from academic pressures all arose (See Figure 2). Some of the issues cited in these discussions have been:
• Difficulty accessing resources available  
• Lack of resources available  
• Lack of funding  
• Increasing need for mental health resources  
• Unhealthy educational culture  
• High stress environments

It is imperative that the issues surrounding mental health are addressed at the post-secondary level, at University of Toronto and beyond.

**Figure 1:** A screen capture of related news article titles advocating for better mental health services for university students.

---

**Students are not fragile flowers – we must care about their mental health**


**Students protest for better mental health services at University of Toronto following suicide on campus**

D'Sa, P. (2019, March 18). Students protest for better mental health services at University of Toronto following suicide on campus. The Toronto Star.

**U of T's new policy puts students with mental health issues on mandatory leave**


**As more students seek mental-health care, they face long waits – or pay out of pocket – as universities struggle with demand**


**What Toronto Colleges and Universities Are Doing to Help Students’ Mental Health**

Reddit and the UofT Mental Health Community

Reddit is a massive online forum that launched in 2005, with over 300 million users per month (Molina, 2017). The site categorizes forums by topic, which are known as “subreddits” and are preceded by “r/,” for example, “r/WorldNews” or “r/Funny.” The site allows users to start their own discussions, which are called “threads” and contribute or respond to others through comments and replies. Additionally, users can upvote and downvote threads and comments, which impacts their visibility online. Users generally remain anonymous under self-made non-identifiable usernames which can help make it easier for individuals to freely share their thoughts.
This anonymity can be especially important to some when it comes to sharing experiences about mental health and seeking help. As such, we have made an effort to study Reddit as an online community for mental health dialogue. With increasing attention towards mental health amongst UofT students, we decided to look specifically at the University of Toronto subreddit. The r/UofT subreddit is subscribed to by over 30,000 users (“r/UofT,” 2019). The subreddit features a pinned thread at the top which offers a list of health and wellness resources. While the UofT subreddit covers a diverse range of subject areas, from discussions about courses, to discussions about politics, in March of 2019 there was a surge in posts relating to mental health after news about the suicide in the University of Toronto’s Bahen Centre for Information Technology. Many students took the time to voice their opinions about how mental health was being addressed (or was not) at the university.

During the week of the suicide, the top thread in the subreddit addressed concerns about mental health services at UofT. Although the majority of subscribers seemed supportive of improving access to mental health services, there were a number of negative posts such as one which stated, “instead of blaming the university, blame yourself” in the r/UofT subreddit thread posted by alialiali_throwaway (2019). These comments seem to have a patronizing tone, with the sentiment that original posters merely cannot handle the pressure of being a student at University of Toronto. Some users believe that students should take the blame because they chose to enrol in the program, therefore they should be well aware of what they are getting themselves into. As of November 2019, the mental health and mental illness related conversations persist with many of the same topics and concerns discussed throughout this paper. One new observation is the proposed creation of a student support group. The user states that they are just a concerned student wanting to form an online group to support other students at UofT. The post became so popular that they had to create a new thread to disseminate information about the preliminary organization of the group (Reddit, 2019).

To analyze a higher volume of mental health posts, we filtered the r/UofT subreddit by searching for results with the words ‘mental health.’ It is highly unlikely that this captured all posts related to mental health as not all posts related to the issue are explicitly labelled, however we found this to be the most effective method to sift through related threads and their comments. From this, we identified five common uses of Reddit for mental health: (1) searching for information on the logistics of getting help, (2) sharing mental health resources, (3) hearing other users’ experiences with mental health, (4) sharing personal experiences with mental health to ask for recommendations/help or to provide encouragement, and (5) expressing concerns about mental health to raise awareness or advocate for better services. Overall, main activities
of the UofT Reddit mental health community included sharing/retrieving resources, personal experiences and awareness about the issue.

We were initially interested in the motivation behind seeking information on Reddit rather than accessing the UofT website or speaking to staff. However, we soon realized that we should highlight differences between these resources, rather than alienate them from each other. Thus for our analysis, we broadly explored Reddit as an information source. According to Veinot & Williams (2012) “community-level information production, circulation, and technology projects should be understood in an institutional, as well as interpersonal, context” (p.23).

Veinot & Williams (2012) also outline several paradigms, however, the interactionist paradigm was most relevant to our research and scope. The interactionist paradigm focuses on the relationship amongst individuals and/or objects in a community. A major theme of this paradigm is communication, which is a dimensional aspect that Reddit enables. In contrast, the UofT Health and Wellness website is strictly an informational source, which may lead to a sense of information overload. According to The Dark Side of Information, the solution to information overload or information anxiety is to take control of one’s information environment (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). Filtering and posting through Reddit may give users a sense of control, and this may be deemed a solution to the information overload encountered on the university’s website. The UofT website used to have an “ASKme Anything” button (University of Toronto, 2019). Please note, that this option has now been retired.

**Figure 3:** A screen capture of a database that assists students in finding resources.
Figure 3 contains a lot of information and provides multiple access points. However, we must question whether providing as much information as possible equates helpfulness or effective communication. In an interview with the Globe & Mail, director of the Wellness Centre at the University of Newfoundland explains the dangers of simply providing students with information. The goal is to have an open and continuous dialogue (Dixon, 2018). The University of Toronto does, however, affiliate with the Good2Talk phone services, which is a 24/7 phone line that anyone can call and engage in meaningful communication. Reddit provides an online option where this can happen as well.

When doing research about collaborative information seeking, current literature states there are two dimensions. For one, **explicit information** refers to two or more people seeking information on a declared concrete information need (Barney et al., 2011). Alternatively, **implicit information** is when an information seeker infers additional information (Barney et al., 2011). For example, Figure 4 shows implicit information, which is generated from utilizing the “Ask Me Anything” function. 15 possible resources came up when “how can I sign up for counselling?” was asked.

**Figure 4:** A screen capture of additional information provided by the “Ask Me Anything” function.

When browsing Reddit posts, we found lots of informationally explicit and implicit posts. Many posts also conveyed anecdotal information and comments that had a sense of warmth and encouraging words. Bowden states that a sense of community implicates warmth and belonging.
This influenced us to ponder the importance of peer to peer online communities. As Kate & Williams state, “studies suggest that community-level information production, circulation, and technology projects should be understood in an institutional, as well as interpersonal context” (2012).

Previous research on forums and mental health highlight benefits of online communities. For example, a key benefit is providing empowerment to users seeking mental health advice (Kummervold et al., 2002). Individuals can post directive and non-directive information. This variety allows Reddit to act as an information ground where the exchange of information assists with navigating mental health needs and concerns.

As future librarians/information professionals, advocacy issues will arise in our careers in various capacities. One study analyzed the use of Reddit for health-related information and stated that there is a sense of trust amongst users who engage with the website (Record et al., 2018). An article titled “I Sought It, I Reddit” underlines the trustworthiness of Reddit over Twitter and Facebook (Record, Silberman, Santiago & Ham, 2018). More specifically, it states that users who seek information on Reddit, are more likely to utilize that information. The article states that the current political climate has undermined the trustworthiness of Facebook and Twitter (Record et al., 2018). Furthermore, “unlike Facebook’s strict user identification policy, users who want to participate on Reddit can create anonymous and unique profiles without any form of required identification or verification (Record et al., 2018). Evidently, there is a great desire to remain anonymous, which positions Reddit as more favourable. That being said, as Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals we need to consider our role in advocacy for this particular issue. We will explore this in the last section of our discussion. The next sections will discuss specific findings from the UofT subreddit.

Findings: Reddit, Online Peer Support and Assessing Gaps in Mental Health Resource

Through an observation of the UofT subreddit, we were able to identify multiple trends in regard to the UofT online mental health community. By searching “mental health” under the UofT subreddit we were able to find similarities between posts that allowed us to understand why students turn to Reddit as their source of information. The first trend we noticed was a focus on students looking for logistical information in terms of UofT’s resources. The types of information students are looking for on this forum include questions such as: what type of help
they offer, how to make appointments, curiosity surrounding wait times, cost and more. This information is all readily available to students through the UofT website pertaining to mental health resources, however, students seem to rely more on retrieving this information through Reddit.

Furthermore, another reoccurring post we noticed amongst students using UofT’s subreddit were those seeking personal experiences and advice from other students. Many Reddit users were looking for insight from students who have had previous experience with UofT’s resources. For example, in Figure 5, a student asking logistical questions and seeking personal experience from other Reddit users is evident. In addition, this student is asking for advice on the right time to seek help. Evidently, Reddit seems to be a place where students ask others personal questions, which they may be afraid to ask in-person because it may be too intrusive. Moreover, since the online community on UofT’s subreddit is a large community with over 30,000 members, it is very easy for users to find others to share particular experiences and to reach out to. To some students, Reddit may be the first step in receiving any kind of help with their mental health struggles. By sharing and hearing other peoples’ experiences with mental health struggles, users can feel less isolated and alone in their problems.

In addition, we found that many mental health related posts on Reddit included students voluntarily sharing resources, phone numbers, websites and official UofT documents with their peers. Not only is Reddit a place where students ask questions and receive answers, it is also a forum where students post important information so that it is easily accessible to their colleagues. Beyond the sharing of resources, users actively express their feelings and personal reflections on student life. Based on various comments, it is evident that the anonymity of the platform makes it a safe place for students to share without feeling judged.

Another trend we noticed among Reddit posts relating to mental health is the urge to raise awareness. Students use Reddit as a space to express their concerns with the ongoing mental health issues at UofT. Raising awareness about suicides, mental health issues and current UofT news occurs regularly in discussions. Students on Reddit are also advocating for better services through the creation of petitions. Figure 6 illustrates a petition that was created on March 18th, 2019 in light of the Bahen Centre suicide. Within four days of posting the petition, there were 6,000 of signatures hoping for better services to students at the University.
Seeking Personal Experiences:

Some students use Reddit to ask for other people’s experiences and advice with mental health. This post here asks, “how do you decide when something is serious enough to ‘get help’? I’ve always sucked it up and kept everything to myself because I don’t have anyone trusted in my life to reach out to” (r/UofT, 2019).

Figures 5: A screen capture of a Reddit post asking for suggestions on UofT mental health services

![Reddit Post](image1)

Can anyone speak to their experience with the mental health services at UTSG? and/or explain how it works? Are all appointments made through the health and wellness centre? how long are waitlists?

and how do you decide when something is serious enough to “get help”? I’ve always sucked it up and kept everything to myself because I don’t have anyone trusted in my life to reach out to. Though I think I would feel even worse if I try to talk to a professional and have a bad experience with them.

Figure 6: A screen capture of a petition to provide students with better mental health services at UofT

![Petition](image2)

In light of the recent loss of our fellow University of Toronto student, who took their own life in the Bahen Centre, we have realized that something must be done. With the near-constant pressure to strive for academic perfection, the added stresses of recent changes to OSAP funding, and the many other issues...
Librarianship Role in Centering Mental Health Conversations

The American Library Association (ALA) relies on the foundation of essential core values that help guide, define and inform professional practice. These core values consist of access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education and lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, preservation, the public good, professionalism, service, and social responsibility (ALA, 2017). With relation to mental health resources, and access for students, many of these core values are in alignment with this topic. The ALA believes that “all information resources that are provided directly or indirectly by the library, regardless of technology, format, or methods of delivery, should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users”, relating directly to post-secondary institutions (including UofT) ability to provide access to students for all necessary mental health resources and services (American Library Association, 2004). Health and wellness centres at UofT are bound by different ethics and laws, which enables student privacy and confidentiality to be a main priority, complementing the ALA's core value of protecting user privacy for intellectual freedom. Another core value that ALA shares with mental health initiatives within post-secondary institutions, and UofT in particular, is the ability to recognize broad social responsibilities. These social responsibilities are defined with regard to the contribution that librarianship can make in helping to solve problems within society, or support efforts to educate individuals based on relevant problems. This value is favourably aligned with mental health initiatives within different online communities, and more so within UofT’s services and resources provided to students.

Moving Forward: Recommendations for LIS Informational Professionals

There are various ways that librarians and library staff can serve the University of Toronto student body. A successful example of librarians pioneering mental health initiative exists at our very own iSchool. Librarian Kathleen Scheaffers’ piloting iRelax and Mindful Moments at the Inforum are available to all students. iRelax is U of T’s first secular, ethically and sustainably-sourced mindfulness resource area. Mindfulness practices have been empirically shown to be an effective way to reduce stress, regulate emotions, and increase focus (Moniz, Henry, Eshleman,
Moniz, & Slutzky (2016). The sessions are facilitated by Kathleen herself, who holds a certificate in Foundations of Applied Mindfulness Meditation. Kathleen, who is passionate about this work, serves as an important reminder that as information professionals we have other skills that we can contribute to the field in addition to information services. A few of us participated in Dr. Jenna Hartel’s (Dr. Hartel is a proponent of mindfulness practices as well and often uses her class time to integrate introductory practices to students) information workshop last year where Kathleen was invited to speak, and utilized this space to disseminate information to students about mindfulness initiatives. This is an example of how faculty and librarians can collaborate to maximize awareness of resources offered. Additionally, LIS students have assisted with facilitating workshops on yoga and mindfulness practices throughout the semester. Lynie, a second year LIS student, is currently doing an intensive training session with the Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre to prepare for peer advising. This training prepares for co-coaching other graduate students and empowering them with integral information to accessing, navigating and utilizing services on campus, including mental health services. This is especially important at this time on campus when students are grieving and feel lost.

Throughout this paper we have discussed the importance of peer advocacy in delivery of mental health resources. Hence, our other diverse backgrounds (personally and professionally) can contribute to the servicing our student communities. Additionally, there are training opportunities available. For example, iStudents for Mental Health (a student group on campus that I found out about through working on this presentation and have since joined) offers full scholarships for future information professionals to receive mental health first aid training through the Mental Health Commission of Canada, which any of us can apply for.

Furthermore, in correlation to the Reddit community specifically, we envision a LIS professional with mental health training background or a member of students for Mental Health to participate in the Reddit forum. We can provide reference services and additional mental health resources as requested. This link could then be posted on UofT libraries webpage with a disclaimer that although it is an unmoderated forum, there are valuable information exchanges that can happen. For one, the anonymity of being online and not having to formally identify yourself is helpful for students who are not ready for formal therapy options (i.e. the difference in power dynamics between patient and therapist, fear of institutional disregard, lack of relatability to students etc.).

Finally, in order to integrate the concept of integral diversity into programming, library space can be used for community discussions that target specific diversified groups. This is
a direct response to UofT’s Report of the Provostial Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health that seeks to embed diversity and diverse student needs (persons with disabilities, racialized and underrepresented populations, diverse sexualities etc.) into mental health programs, an area that is lacking. For example, the Race and Ethnicity Caucus, another on campus student group has facilitated discussion on mental health for Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) community members. Similar events, along with de-stressing initiatives, can occur in library spaces which would aid in mental health outreach.

Below is a list of resources that can be accessed by all University of Toronto Students

References

alialiali_throwaway (2019, March 20). “To the people complaining on this sub about students protesting for better mental health at UofT”: Comments. Message posted to https://www.reddit.com/r/UofT/comments/b3d6w6/to_the_people_complaining_on_this_sub_about/eiz0vpi?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x

Amanozaku (2018, April 06). “How are the counselling/ mental health services at York”?
Comments. Message posted to https://www.reddit.com/r/yorku/comments/au7/how_are_


Veinot, T. & Williams, K (2012). Following the “community” thread from sociology to information behaviour and informatics: Uncovering theoretical continuities and research opportunities. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, (5), 847-864