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

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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

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

Wilson, M., & Ono, S. (2017, October 5). Students are not fragile flowers – we must care about their mental health. *The Globe and Mail*.

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

Rizza, A. (2018, June 27). U of T's new policy puts students with mental health issues on mandatory leave. *The National Post*.

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

High demand for counselling is changing how Canadian campuses get students the help they need – but many still feel they're falling through the cracks

Gibson, V. (2019, February 14). As more students seek mental-health care, they face long waits – or pay out of pocket – as universities struggle with demand. *The Globe and Mail*.

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

Chan, K. (2016, December 5). What Toronto Colleges and Universities Are Doing to Help Students' Mental Health. *The Torontoist*.

Figure 2: A screen capture of a news article emphasizing the lack of mental health resources at U of T

U of T lacks mental health resources amid spate of suicides: students

The University of Toronto St. George Campus is shown in this Google Street View image.

Michelle McQuigge, The Canadian Press
Published Wednesday, March 20, 2019 5:04PM EDT

McQuigge, M. (2019, March 20). U of T lacks mental health resources amid spate of suicides: Students. *CP24*.

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.

Ask a Question:

Quick Links:

Top Ten Answers:

You Asked

How can I sign myself up for counselling

Answer

Advisors

If you are an undergraduate student, your first point of contact for advising is your [registrar's office](#) through your college or faculty. Registrars can help you with academic advising, financial counselling and personal counselling.

If you are a graduate student, you may find your departmental graduate program administrator or faculty supervisor is your first contact for advising. However, depending on the issue, you may choose to contact the [School of Graduate Studies](#) directly.

There are other advising programs around the university as well, including [Academic Success](#), [Career Exploration & Education](#) and the [Transition Advising](#) program for international students. Mental health and assault counselling are also available through the [Health & Wellness Centre](#).

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.

The screenshot shows a webpage titled "Further Information" with the heading "Where can I go if I am having problems and would like to talk to someone?". It lists various resources for students, categorized into "On-campus resources" and "Off-campus resources".

On-campus resources:

- Health & Wellness Centre** offers a single point of access for all health and mental health services for University of Toronto students (undergraduate and graduate). Koffler Student Services Centre, 214 College St., 416-978-8030
- Multi-Faith Centre** Get in touch with a chaplain or spiritual advisor. Koffler House, 569 Spadina Ave., 416-946-3120
- Equity & Diversity Offices** assist students with concerns and challenges related to their experiences at the University.
- Ombudsperson** provides impartial and confidential assistance when you've been unable to resolve your concerns about your treatment by University authorities. 416-946-3485

Off-campus resources:

- Good2Talk Post-Secondary Student Helpline** offers 24-hour free, anonymous and confidential counselling, information and referrals for mental health, addictions and well-being for all post-secondary students Tel. 1-866-925-5454.
- Anishnawbe Health** Mental Health Crisis Line for Indigenous Students: Support from Traditional Healers, Counsellors and Elders and other health care providers. Tel. 416-360-0486 or 416-920-2605
- The Gerstein Crisis Centre** is a 24-hour community based mental health crisis service for adults in Toronto Tel. 416-929-5200
- Assaulted Women's Helpline** is a free, anonymous and confidential 24-hour telephone and TTY crisis telephone line to all women in the province of Ontario who have experienced any form of abuse. Tel. 416-863-0511
- Distress Centres of Toronto:** provides 24-hour telephone support, 365 days a year for those experiencing emotional distress or in need of crisis intervention and suicide prevention. They also provide face-to-face support and counseling to people dealing with the effects of suicide and homicide. Tel. 416-408-4357
- Drug and Alcohol Helpline:** is a live answer 24/7, confidential and free helpline that provides information about drug and alcohol addiction services in Ontario. Tel. 1-800-565-8603
- Mental Health Helpline:** will answer your call, email or web chat 24/7 to provide information about mental health services in Ontario. Tel. 1-866-531-2600
- ConnexOntario:** is a live answer 24/7, confidential and free helpline that provides information about addiction, mental health and problem gambling. Tel. 1-866-531-2600
- Centre for Addiction & Mental Health (CAMH):** In-patient and out-patient support for mental health needs and addictions. Intake line (Monday - Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m.) Tel. 416-535-8501 ext. 2
- LGBT Youthline:** Confidential, non-judgemental and informed LGBTQSI peer support. Open Sunday - Friday, 4 - 9:30 p.m. Call 1-800-268-9688 or Text 647-694-4275
- Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Care Centre:** 24-hour support for victims / survivors of sexual assault and domestic / intimate partner violence Tel. 416-323-6040

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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

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(2001). 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

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

Better Mental Health Services at the University of Toronto

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

LIS Recommendations:

- Embed an LIS student, professional, or member of iSchool for mental health into the Reddit community. They can offer reference services and additional mental health resources as needed
- Provide a link to Reddit on our library websites (bridging the gap between the university and online communities)
- Librarians have different interests/skill sets and diverse backgrounds that can be contributed in addition to information services
- Use library spaces for community discussions and target specific diverse groups
- Expand initiatives like the Inforum's iRelax and Mindful Moments programs spearheaded by iSchool Librarian Kathleen Scheaffer

Connection to Literature:

- Bamber, M. & Schneider J. (2016). Mindfulness-based meditation to decrease stress and anxiety in college students: A narrative synthesis of the research. *Educational Research Review*, 18, 1-32.
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UofT Resources:

Academic Success 416-978-7970
 Accessibility Services 416-978-8060
 Anti Racism & Cultural Diversity Office 416-978-1259
 Campus Police 416-978-2323
 Centre for International Experience 416-978-2564
 Community Safety Office 416-978-1485
 Health and Wellness Centre 416-978-8030
 Housing 416-978-8045
 Indigenous Student Services 416-978-8227
 Multi Faith Centre 416-946-5624
 Sexual and Gender Diversity Office 416-946-5624
 Sexual Violence Prevention and Support Centre 416-978-2266
 TravelSafer (available 24/7) 416-978-7233

External Resources:

Anishnawbe Health Mental Crisis Line for Indigenous Students 1-855-242-3310
 Assaulted Women Helpline 1-866-863-0511
 CAMH Intake 416-535-8501 ext 2
 ConnexOntario Addiction, Mental Health and Problem Gambling Services 1-866-531-2600
 Distress Centres of Toronto 416-408-4357
 Gerstein Centre Mental Health Crisis Line 416-929-5200
 Good2Talk Student Helpline 1-866-925-5454
 LGBT Youthline 1-800-268-9688
 Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Care Centre 416-323-6040
 Toronto Rape Crisis Centre 416-597-8808

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