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IMPACTS OF A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS ON HEALTH-CENTERED ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the use of health-centered Online Social Networks (OSNs), specifically analyzing user activity trends on Camoni, Israel's leading health-centered OSN. The research addresses the growing role of OSNs in providing medical information and emotional support during public health crises.
Background	The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered healthcare access, encouraging individuals to seek medical information and support online. OSNs have emerged as critical platforms for facilitating peer support, knowledge exchange, and community engagement in health-related discussions.
Methodology	A comprehensive 12-year dataset of Camoni's user activity was constructed to assess changes in participation over time. A large-scale (more than 400k posts) quantitative analysis was performed to identify trends and measure the impact of the pandemic on different user demographics (age, gender) and community activity levels (medical staff, patients, and their families).

The full paper has been published as the following and is being presented at this conference:

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Contribution	This study enhances understanding of how health-centered OSNs evolve during crises, highlighting demographic shifts in engagement and the increased reliance on online mental health resources. It provides empirical evidence of the pandemic's role in accelerating digital health adoption.
Findings	User engagement in Camoni increased significantly during the pandemic, particularly in mental health-related communities (more than 30% increase). The depression and anxiety community exhibited the highest activity levels. Men and younger individuals showed a notable rise in participation (nearly matching the levels of women and older adults). Users personally dealing with mental health challenges were the most active contributors (in several posts and comments).
Recommendations For Practitioners	Healthcare providers and policymakers should recognize OSNs as essential tools for patient education, mental health support, and crisis intervention. Integrating OSNs into public health strategies can enhance accessibility to mental health resources.
Recommendations For Researchers	Future studies should explore the long-term impact of the pandemic on OSN engagement, the effectiveness of online peer support in improving mental health outcomes, and cross-platform comparisons to identify universal trends in digital health communities.
Impact on Society	The study underscores the increasing responsibility individuals take for their health, particularly in mental health management. It also emphasizes the role of OSNs in mitigating social isolation and enhancing digital health literacy during global crises.
Future Research	Further research should investigate post-pandemic trends in OSN engagement, the role of artificial intelligence in moderating online health discussions, and the potential for OSNs to complement traditional healthcare services.
Keywords	data mining, online social networks, mental health, digital health communities, COVID-19, public health crisis

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