

Self-harm content on Instagram: 'Self-harm or self-help?'

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Instagram users who post self-harm content online are choosing ambiguous hashtags in an attempt to circumvent the social media platform's ban on harmful content, a researcher at the University of Otago, Wellington, has found.

Ph.D. student Jacobo Picardo reviewed research published during the

past 10 years about suicide and self-harm content posted on Instagram. Only 10 studies had been published up to the beginning of 2020. Seven of the studies described samples of publicly available Instagram content, while three surveyed or interviewed Instagram users.

Instagram, which has more than a billion active monthly users, is one of the most popular social media platforms among young people.

The studies showed the photo and video-sharing site was a popular platform for posting self-harm content, with depictions of cuts, usually on the arms or legs, the most common.

Users often choose ambiguous hashtags designed to avoid censorship by Instagram, which banned graphic self-harm images from its platform in February 2019, and extended the ban to fictional depictions of self-harm or suicide last October.

Mr Picardo says [online communities](#) have emerged around these hashtags, allowing users with self-harm or suicide interests to come together online.

"Instagram's ability to flag such content is limited because hashtags are evolving faster than they can be tracked and assessed by the platform's content moderators. Surveillance methods drawing on hashtag and captions to identify self-harming content do not appear to be very effective. Moreover, Instagram's tool for users to report negative content has not been widely adopted, with few Instagram users aware of it. Instagram is looking into new technologies, such as using AI automatic image recognition algorithms, which help identify such content. However, there is a lack of consensus about how to best tackle this content."

Mr Picardo says the actual prevalence of self-harm or suicide content on

Instagram is unknown, but researchers have found the nature of the content to be diverse, with posts ranging from pictures of wounds and selfies to memes and references to movies or lines from songs.

"In general, self-harm content on Instagram receives a high volume of audience engagement and attention, and visual and gorier posts are likely to receive a greater number of 'likes.'"

Users' comments are most likely to show empathic support and care for the content posters, but studies show concerns there may be negative impacts on viewers engaging with such content.

"Self-harm or suicide content online often does not follow media guidelines to prevent [negative effects](#), and some studies show concerns that such content could trigger others to self-harm, as well as perpetuating such behavior by normalizing and validating it and through the sharing of self-harm methods and tips for concealment. However, causal copycat effects have not been proven, and further studies are needed to look into this."

Recent research suggests such content reflects users' expressions of distress, and that there could be some benefits from others engaging with it online, such as by providing a supportive online community and offering alternative coping strategies and tips on reducing self-harming.

Mr Picardo says more accurate and reliable information about those who engage with self-harm content on Instagram is needed.

"We need researchers to speak directly to online users in order to obtain reliable information about them and their views of what constitutes [self-harm](#) content online, why they engage with it, how it affects them and how it relates to their lives offline," he says.

As part of his Ph.D. research, he has begun interviewing young adults in Wellington to gain a better understanding of their views of the issue.

More information: Jacobo Picardo et al. Suicide and self-harm content on Instagram: A systematic scoping review, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0238603](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0238603)

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