Psy-Connection Award Project Proposal 2015-2016

Project title: *CU Mind U*-Utilization of internet social media in mental health promotion: Incorporation of the use of Facebook to peer counsellors program (uBuddies)

Lau Yin Yim (1155033996) Undergraduate/4

**Background**

Every year, a group of peer counsellors are trained to provide guidance and emotional support for the fellow students in the campus through the uBuddies program. Nevertheless, the alarming mental health issues among college students has raised the call for enhanced awareness on mental health promotion that aims at de-stigmatization of mental illnesses and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. In addition, a lack of transparent and effective referral channel and comprehensive information of clinical psychology services or counselling services available may appear to be one of the factors that hinder timely intervention for the needed fellows. Besides, there are several constraints in the current uBuddies program in terms of geographical barriers in reaching the targeted students that may be at risk of mental disturbances, passive participation of fellow students and delayed response of the mailbox service.

Currently, mental health topics have been actively discussed on the popular facebook community pages among college students (e.g. CUHK Secrets). However, these pages are administered by students without adequate training on mental health knowledge or related background in regards to clinical psychology services. Besides, delivery of mental health knowledge is insufficient and dispersed on these pages. There is a need to have a specific facebook community page - *CU Mind U* administered by trained peer counselors for providing mental health information in a responsible manner.

The proposed utilization of university-based facebook community page serves as a medium to deliver valid mental health knowledge. In addition, it is a platform for exchanging viewpoints on mental health topics among students and for sharing personal experiences in overcoming psychological difficulties as a way to reduce stigmas associated with mental health illnesses. Hopefully, this enhances the intention of help-seeking of distressed fellow students.

**Objectives**

1. To equip fellow students with enhanced mental health literacy to establish positive attitude towards mental health issues in Hong Kong
2. To create a platform for exchange of personal experiences in overcoming mental-health related hardships
3. To reduce stigma attached to mental illnesses or people who are mentally distressed and promote help-seeking
4. To serve as a medium to provide referral services to clinical psychology services in a timely manner
Design & Implementation

Firstly, *CU Mind U* facebook page is a channel for students to share their stories of overcoming mental disturbances or their thoughts on mental health topics in an anonymous way or with identification as students wish through the use of google form record conveniently (Figure 1 & 2). uBuddies will serve as the administrator of this university-based facebook community page and can then post the relevant sharing or questions students publicly without recognizing the writer. As Asian adolescents have a tendency to withhold emotional expressions in face-to-face format, this way of anonymous sharing or inquiry potentially would minimize the reluctance of initiating dialogues on mental health issues and would reduce the shame associated with mental health problems and help-seeking behavior in Asian culture (Goldston et al., 2008).

The sharing of personal experiences or experiences of peers in overcoming emotional disturbances help to reduce negative effect of social stigma that having emotional or psychological upheavals is a sign of weakness and to further raise help-seeking intention and raise the intention to seek help(Hui, Wong, & Fu, 2014). Administrator can also provide referral information or clarification on the concerns of fellow students regarding the use of counseling services as well to address the anxiety of possible negative consequences on clinical psychological treatments and encourage early help-seeking (figure 3).

Alternatively, students can share their tips on maintaining mental well-being through the posts, such as gratitude records or music for relaxation (figure 4). This enhances the interaction and creates bonding among fellow students to sustain social support in promoting a caring atmosphere within campus. Having direct (Comments from respondents) and indirect (sharing experiences anonymously) interaction with peers who share their personal experiences on mental health issues, *CU Mind U* facebook community page is characterized with “empowerment, peer support and experiential knowledge” (Kummervold et al., 2002).

Secondly, the interactive nature of social media platform promotes conversations and engages students to discuss with other students in the same community or with the administrator on mental health topics (figure 5). uBuddies can clarify misunderstanding or criticisms on mental health related concepts in the dialogues through posting relevant academic findings or correct information regarding psychological or emotional disturbances, for example the identification of mental disorder symptoms and knowledge about mental health service within the community (Hui et al., 2014).

The use of multi-media in facebook is an advantage for providing accessible materials despite of geographical limitations, for example videos or graphic information help to better deliver professional psychological knowledge in a comprehensible way. Precise educational data or self-help manuals can be posted online for effective psycho-education to reach a wider scope of targeted audience, i.e. the college students who are active facebook users, within a short period of time. The access of information through transcendence of time and space maximizes the efficiency in mental health promotion with limited human resources with the combination into uBuddies program. Acquisition of informative and user-friendly psycho-educational materials
helps students to enhance mental health literacy which is associated with higher help-seeking intention (Hui et al., 2014).

It is believed that through this online social network platform among peers would equip students with targeted information of mental healthcare responsibly and highlight the importance of a supporting network among peers for individuals confronting mental disturbances (Hui et al., 2014) (figure 6). Strategic stigma change can be achieved through the online social media through targeted (i.e. college students), local (i.e. university-based), credible (i.e. uBuddies and students with previous psychological disturbances) and continuous contact (i.e. throughout academic year) as Corrigan (2011) proposed. De-stigmatization of mental illnesses through clarification of misconception of mental health knowledge would then eventually change individual's attitude and belief toward help-seeking positively.

Thirdly, the private message in Facebook facilitates efficient referral to relevant parties, e.g. Student Counselling and Development Service, in addition to current methods of making appointment in person or by telephoning or by internal mailing. Some student may hesitate to seek help by calling or by walk-in for arranging counseling appointment due to embarrassment while emailing takes days to be processed. The use of Facebook message function will serve as a preliminary channel for students to approach uBuddies who are on duty for instant emotional support and for referral of counseling services if needed after evaluation (figure 7).

This two-way online communication with timely reply, compared with traditional email service, will potentially help students to overcome some of the barriers to help-seeking, for instance physical access and disappointment from delayed response. It is found that people are more readily to discuss mental-health-related problems online than face-to-face or even disclose personal problems that they would not discuss face-to-face (Kummervold et al., 2002). The use of emoticons to convey moods is believed to maximize effective communication and there were findings suggested that computer technology may provide some promise in the prevention of mental illnesses, especially in the areas of screening and help-seeking (Tilford, 2006).

Through this additional online channel, uBuddies can further direct the student’s information for referral and arrangement of mental-health related service with the consent from the student after primary assessment on the levels of risk and emergency. The use of private message would help to facilitate early decision for seeking professional help with the provision of better understanding of mental health service and possible treatment options.

**Practical Issues**

Student Counselling and Development Service is suggested to recruit more peer counselors with advanced training in response to the introduction of this Facebook page. With a view to maximize the effectiveness of *CU Mind U* Facebook page, there is a need to keep the page updated and this requires uBuddies to be on duty as the administrators of the page by adopting a regular shift timetable for uBuddies to taking up this duty. In addition, enhanced public recognition of *CU Mind U* Facebook page is needed through setting up in-campus promotional booths and by sending email reminders at the initial stage of launching this Facebook page.
Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2
CU Mind U

#CU9023
"醫科小著想問問實際去輔導組探訪個案去跟醫精神科會唔會留紀錄架
major department同college會唔會記
有野想當人傾下但又唔知傾唔傾好
近年醫科仲要搞個個唔fitness to practice
話你啲就唔俾佢出ward繼續學系
好似系唔整死人會安樂啲”

Figure 3 (Source: facebook page of CUHK Secrets)

Figure 4 (Source: facebook page of CUHK Secrets)
CU Mind U

Figure 5 (Source: facebook page of CUHK Secrets)

Figure 6 (Source: facebook page of CUHK Secrets)
Figure 7 (Source: facebook page of CUHK Secrets)
References


