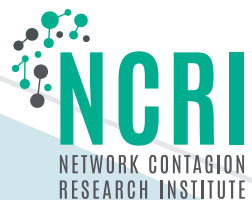


Online Communities of Adolescents and Young Adults Celebrating, Glorifying, and Encouraging Self-Harm and Suicide are Growing Rapidly on Twitter

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NCRI Insights Report

Online communities of adolescents and young adults celebrating, glorifying, and encouraging self-harm and suicide are growing rapidly on Twitter.

Key Takeaways

- A community promoting self-harm (specifically, “cutting”) is circulating graphic and bloody depictions of self-injury on Twitter.
- In October, 5Rights, a UK-based children’s digital rights charity, alerted Twitter that their algorithms were pushing those searching the terms “self-harm” to profiles promoting self-harm rather than profiles connected to finding help.
- Since October, the use of hashtags related to self-harm (e.g. like “#shtwt” for **Self-Harm TWiTter**) has increased roughly 500%, averaging tens of thousands of mentions per month. Many community members appear to be adolescents and young adults.
- *Hashtags associated with “shtwt” are peaking as well. These terms are usually associated with and accompanied by photos of severe and even potentially life-threatening self-inflicted wounds. These images and the cutting behavior are praised, celebrated, and encouraged.*
- *The vast majority of this content is in direct violation of Twitter’s Suicide and Self-harm policy, which states “users may not promote or encourage suicide or self-harm,” and its Sensitive Media policy which prohibits depictions of “gratuitous gore, bodily fluids such as blood, and serious physical harm, including physical wounds.”*
- Evidence suggests adult online predators are likely engaging with these communities.
- These data appear to be the tip of the iceberg. The NCRI has identified a number of rapidly growing, and in some cases overlapping, Twitter communities dedicated to the glorification of eating disorders, mass shootings, and more.

Executive Summary

Twitter hosts a massive community that glorifies and encourages self-harm — specifically “cutting.” Graphic photographs of what appear to be bloody self-injury by people who have sliced into their skin continues to proliferate, many such tweets garnering unusually high engagement given the small number of followers of the posting account. Photographs and other images are accompanied by slang terms for blood as well as for the depth, pattern, and complexity of cuts. Photographs depicting wounds that are bloodier and more severe, more dangerously deep, and more complex in number and/or design of cuts are more widely circulated than those that depict less serious wounds.

In October 2021, Twitter was alerted to the presence of the hashtag “#shtwt” (short for **Self-Harm TWiTter**), and that their algorithms were pushing those searching the terms “self-harm” to profiles in this community promoting self-harm rather than profiles connected to finding help. Since then, despite Twitter having [claimed](#) it would take action against tweets that violate their rules on suicide and self-harm, the use of related hashtags has seen exponential growth, and mentions of shtwt are up 500%.

The vast majority of the content circulating within the shtwt community is in direct violation of several Twitter policies. The NCRI has also identified a number of dangerous, and in some cases, overlapping communities that encourage and glorify eating disorders (in particular, a fixation on shedding weight until the skeleton is visible), mass shootings, and more.

Background

Prior to the birth of online internet forums in the 1990’s an individual engaging in non-suicidal self-harm (NSSI) had few opportunities to discuss her or his habits other than with friends, family, and medical or mental health professionals. Today, platforms such as Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter are home to hundreds of communities of adolescents and young adults engaging in NSSI who “turn to the internet to find information and receive validation and social support” according to a qualitative analysis of social media and self-harm photographs in *Frontiers Psychiatry*.¹

Some of these communities are tightly moderated and operate primarily as vehicles for people engaging in self-harm to get help. For example, some serve as a resource to communicate and relieve distress, acting as a support network that encourages people engaging in harmful behaviors to get help.² Online communities serving such functions are not the focus of this report. Our focus is Twitter communities that celebrate, glorify, validate, and encourage those who engage in self-harm to continue and escalate self-injurious behavior.

¹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00274/full>

² <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0181722>