How a Breast Cancer Hashtag Changed Medicine

#BCSM helps people affected by breast cancer find one another and connect with advocates and health care professionals in a safe space.

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Since its creation in 2011, the hashtag #BCSM—which stands for "breast cancer social media"—has steadily increased in popularity, enabling many thousands of people who have survived or are in treatment for breast cancer to commune with one another in the digital sphere.

Now, a study published in the Journal of Patient-Centered Research and Reviews has revealed that this pioneering digital community plays a unique role in bringing together a multiplicity of individuals with a stake in advancing breast cancer research and treatment, including advocates, caregivers, people with breast cancer, doctors and other medical workers.

Online support groups such as the #BCSM Twitter chat improve on the traditional in-person model by allowing individual members to remain anonymous while cutting transportation and childcare costs, the researchers concluded. (A Twitter chat is a moderated, regularly scheduled conversation that occurs on the social media platform).

Led by Matthew S. Katz, MD, a radiation oncologist at Lowell General Hospital in Massachusetts, the authors of the study collected and analyzed data on Twitter trends in #BCSM use from January 1, 2011 to January 1, 2020. They found that #BCSM use had increased by 424% between those dates. In total, 75,685 Twitter accounts had shared 830,925 tweets containing the hashtag, putting the number of impressions—or potential views—at 4.22 billion.

"Some of the success of #BCSM, as the first online community of its kind on Twitter, is likely related to its filling a need for patients seeking information and support on this platform," the authors wrote.

By categorizing #BCSM use by user profession, the authors found that the number of patient advocates using the hashtag had increased by 226% and that the number of physicians and "nonphysician health care professionals" using the hashtag had increased by 693%. The hashtag has appeared in discussions of topics including advocacy, metastasis, survivorship, death and dying, and scientific research, often in conjunction with words such as treatment, study and risk.

“The robust use of the #BCSM hashtag during and outside scheduled chat hours speaks to the value for patients, physicians and other interested stakeholders in having breast cancer–related content organized around a designated cancer-specific tag,” the authors wrote. Participation actually peaked in 2013 and has declined in recent years as online resources—and distractions—multiply. If the #BCSM community is to survive, the authors wrote, it will need to anticipate and rapidly adapt to changes in the digital environment.

The weekly #BCSM Twitter chat takes place on Mondays at 9 p.m. ET. Anyone can join by going to @BCSMchat.

To read more about how people with breast cancer are cultivating community on Twitter, click here. To see a list of breast cancer support groups, click here.

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