A Comparative Study of Digital Peer-Support Networks: Mitigating Social Isolation and Mental Health Outcomes for Young Women with HIV in Nairobi and Libya

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Abstract

Young women living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa often experience profound social isolation and mental health challenges, intensified by stigma. Digital interventions present a potential avenue for accessible support, but their comparative effectiveness across differing socio-cultural contexts remains poorly understood. This study compared the effect of a structured digital peer-support network, delivered via WhatsApp, on perceived social isolation and self-reported mental health outcomes among young women living with HIV in Nairobi, Kenya and Libya. A comparative, mixed-methods study was undertaken. Participants were enrolled into moderated, private WhatsApp groups. Quantitative surveys using validated scales measured social isolation and psychological distress at baseline and after six months. Qualitative focus group discussions explored participant experiences. Data were analysed comparatively between the two cohorts. Quantitative data showed a greater reduction in reported social isolation in the Nairobi cohort compared to the Libyan cohort. Qualitative analysis revealed a theme of 'camaraderie in confidentiality' among Nairobi participants. Libyan participants more frequently discussed a persistent fear of digital surveillance, which limited open disclosure. The digital peer-support network had a positive effect in both settings, but the extent of its impact varied. Contextual factors, notably perceived digital privacy and the local intensity of HIV-related stigma, appear to critically moderate the intervention's effectiveness in reducing isolation and improving mental wellbeing. Future digital peer-support programmes should be co-designed with end-users to address local contextual barriers, with specific attention to digital privacy and safety concerns. Implementation requires robust safeguarding protocols and facilitator training tailored to the specific socio-cultural environment. HIV, mental health, social isolation, digital health, peer support, women's health, sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa This study provides comparative evidence on the contextual moderators of digital peer-support for young women with HIV, highlighting the critical influence of socio-cultural and digital security environments on intervention outcomes.

ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

This is an abstract-only publication. The complete research paper with full methodology, results, discussion, and references is available upon request.

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