

Expanding the Reach of Recreation Therapy:
Leveraging Social Media for Advocacy, Education, and Inclusion

Emily Cassady, M.S.
Michael J. Bradley, Ph.D.
Jamie Woolery, Ed.D.

Abstract

The therapeutic recreation profession and the utilization of social media for educational, advocacy, and service expansion purposes require further research, representing a potential area of significant benefit for all recreation professions. Adherence to professional guidelines in the realm of social media empowers recreation agencies to reach a vast audience daily, fostering education on recreation and its multifaceted impact on the mind, body, and spirit. Therapeutic recreation professionals play a pivotal role in facilitating access to recreational activities for individuals who might otherwise encounter barriers. As described by Stanborough (2020), "Recreational therapy employs leisure activities to enhance the skills, abilities, overall health, and emotional well-being of individuals with specific health conditions." Collaborating with individuals and their healthcare teams, recreational therapists formulate health goals and personalized plans rooted in the individual's interests and community resources. Notably, recreational therapy serves as a conduit for positive social engagement, countering feelings of isolation. By adhering to ethical standards in social media use, employing professional language, and selectively sharing content that aligns with the profession's values and enhances the agency's image, recreation therapy professionals can deliver high-quality online programming to clients worldwide. This approach not only extends the reach of therapeutic recreation services but also contributes to the broader understanding of the profession's impact on individuals' well-being globally.

Keywords: Recreation therapy, therapeutic recreation, social media, education, advocacy, online programming

Introduction

The existing body of research on the intersection of social media and therapeutic recreation is notably scarce, with available studies primarily addressing broader themes such as social media's role in healthcare communication, marketing applications, and contemporary therapeutic recreation services. Noteworthy among these is the article “A New Dimension of Health Care: Systematic Review of the Uses, Benefits, and Limitations of Social Media for Health Communication” authored by Moorhead, et al. (2013). In this review, the authors emphasize the transformative potential of social media within the healthcare landscape, positing it as a dynamic medium that facilitates communication among the public, patients, and healthcare professionals. The authors underscore the capacity of social media to engender collaborative exchanges and serve as a mechanism for social interaction across a diverse spectrum of individuals. Recognizing the power of social media as a tool, the authors tout its ability to enhance health outcomes through the facilitation of communication on health-related issues. It is evident that social media, functioning as a robust platform for communication, holds significant promise within the context of therapeutic recreation. Despite the limited extant research, the broader insights gleaned from studies in related domains, such as healthcare communication, provide a foundational understanding of the potential benefits and challenges associated with leveraging social media for therapeutic and recreational purposes. Further exploration and focused research within the realm of therapeutic recreation are imperative to fully comprehend and harness the possibilities presented by social media in this specific context.

Literature Review

According to Roberts and Passmore (2018), the strategic use of social media in therapeutic recreation education involves sharing perspectives and trends that impact the field. This can be achieved through the establishment of organizational social media accounts where updates about services, events, and programs can be regularly posted (Roberts & Passmore, 2018). Additionally, these platforms can serve as channels for sharing educational content, such as articles, videos, and infographics, aimed at elucidating the benefits of therapeutic recreation and its efficacy in addressing the needs of individuals coping with illnesses and disabling conditions. As highlighted by the American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA), Therapeutic recreation is a systematic process utilizing recreation and activity-based interventions to address the assessed needs and goals of individuals dealing with illnesses and one or more disabling conditions (Roberts & Passmore, 2018). Furthermore, social media emerges as a potent tool for advocacy and awareness-building for the therapeutic recreation profession. Roberts and Passmore (2018) suggest that practitioners can utilize various social media platforms to not only advocate for themselves but also to raise awareness about the profession. A course available on SMART CEUs Hub explores the integral role of social media in therapeutic recreation, providing insights into effective utilization of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram by Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS). The course offers practical tips on maximizing the impact of these platforms and delves into diverse strategies for advocating on behalf of therapeutic recreation. In essence, the strategic deployment of social media in therapeutic recreation education encompasses disseminating information, sharing educational resources, and advocating for the profession. This multi-faceted approach leverages the reach and influence of social media platforms to advance understanding,

appreciation, and recognition of the crucial role played by therapeutic recreation in enhancing the well-being of individuals facing health challenges.

The literature on the relationship of social media and therapeutic recreation illuminates critical insights into the potential impact of digital platforms on consumer well-being, the imperative for public education regarding recreation therapy, and the transformative role of social media in contemporary therapeutic recreation services. In the work "The Future of Social Media in Marketing" by Appel et al. (2020), the discussion underscores the potential adverse effects of extensive social media use on consumer well-being. The study reveals a negative correlation between heavy social media usage and perceived social isolation, loneliness, and depression. This insight necessitates a nuanced approach when utilizing social media for marketing purposes, particularly in the context of promoting therapeutic recreation services.

Addressing the need for advocacy and education in the field of therapeutic recreation, "Advocating for Therapeutic Recreation: Is it Just a Matter of Speaking Up?" by Park et al. (2022), delves into the misunderstandings surrounding therapeutic recreation and advocates for intensified efforts to clarify the profession's scope and impact. This underscores the importance of leveraging social media as a tool for disseminating accurate information about recreation therapy and fostering a broader understanding of its benefits. In "Exploring Contemporary Therapeutic Recreation Services" by Roberts and Passmore (2018), the authors highlight the diverse array of services facilitated by social media, services that would be otherwise challenging to offer without digital platforms. This underscores the transformative role of social media in expanding the reach and inclusivity of therapeutic recreation services.

Recent articles by Taylor (2021) and Raypole (2020), emphasize the pivotal role of social media in educating the public about recreation therapy. Taylor (2021) stresses the importance of

comprehensive knowledge among recreation therapists to effectively advocate for their profession while Raypole (2020) provides guidance on the ethical utilization of social media to expand services and educate the population about a given profession. There is recognition of social media as a powerful tool for marketing, advocacy, and education within the realm of therapeutic recreation, and leveraging digital platforms effectively can broaden the understanding of recreation therapy and mitigate potential negative impacts associated with social media use, ensuring a balanced and informed engagement with the public.

Social media serves as a powerful platform for advocating and educating about therapeutic recreation. As Appel et al. (2020) point out, social media provides a space for free interaction, enabling marketers and professionals to connect with consumers and engage in open communication. This principle is particularly relevant to CTRS who can leverage social media for advocacy purposes. Park et al. (2022) emphasizes the persistent misunderstanding of therapeutic recreation as a healthcare profession, underscoring the importance of advocacy to dispel myths and increase awareness. Social media, with its wide-reaching and accessible nature, has become an invaluable tool in this advocacy process. By utilizing various social media channels, CTRS can actively promote the profession, address misconceptions, and educate the public about the significant role of therapeutic recreation/recreation therapy (hereafter referred to only as therapeutic recreation) within the healthcare system.

The utilization of social media for health promotion and education, as noted by Moorhead et al. (2013), further underscores its potential in the context of therapeutic recreation. By harnessing the capabilities of social media platforms, CTRS can disseminate information about the benefits of Recreation Therapy, share success stories, and provide valuable insights into the various services offered. To emphasize, yet again, the use of social media in advocating for

therapeutic recreation enables professionals to freely communicate, dispel misconceptions, and educate the public about the profession. The versatile and expansive nature of social media platforms provides a unique opportunity for CTRS to actively engage with a broad audience, ultimately contributing to the growth, awareness, and understanding of the field.

The integration of social media in the realm of therapeutic recreation fosters digital professionalism and serves as a dynamic tool for community engagement and education. As highlighted by Moorhead et al. (2013), social media introduces a new dimension to healthcare by facilitating communication among the public, patients, and health professionals. It serves as a powerful mechanism for collaboration and social interaction, offering a medium for individuals to discuss health issues and potentially improve health outcomes. This underscores the significance of social media as a transformative tool that can be harnessed by CTRS to enhance their digital professionalism and promote the profession effectively. Moreover, research supports the idea that social media can be instrumental in bringing the therapeutic recreation community together and educating its members. The insights provided by Roberts et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of engaging with community members and establishing a community outreach plan. By actively participating in online communities, CTRS can showcase an awareness of community needs and gather valuable feedback on the type of programming desired by community members. This engagement not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the community's needs but also enables professionals to tailor their services and programs to better meet those needs.

In essence, the strategic use of social media contributes to the development of strong digital professionalism within the therapeutic recreation field. By actively engaging with the community, professionals can leverage social media platforms to promote awareness, share

valuable information, and ultimately enhance the quality of therapeutic recreation education to better serve clients.

Discussion

In total, the authors of the study identified three emerging themes in the use of social media within therapeutic recreation: advocacy for the profession, community engagement and education, and the strategic use of social media to expand services. Together, these themes illustrate how digital platforms have become essential tools for Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS) seeking to promote their work, connect with clients, and innovate in service delivery.

Social media serves as a powerful advocacy tool, as Taylor et al. (2021) note, platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow professionals to raise awareness about the field, highlight the benefits of services, and promote inclusion. Organizations such as the City of San Diego Park & Recreation Therapeutic Recreation Services program exemplify this, using social platforms to publicize events and showcase the value of therapeutic recreation in municipal settings. Ethical boundaries, however, are essential, as Raypole (2020) emphasized the need for professionals to maintain distinct personal and professional presences online, use appropriate privacy settings, and adhere to professional language when representing the field. Social media also provides an opportunity to educate the public and build community. Sharing relevant articles, quote cards, or infographics can demystify the role of recreation therapists and establish professionals as trusted sources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lexington Parks and Recreation pivoted to virtual programming via Zoom, offering storytime, art classes, and fitness sessions. This sustained community engagement and demonstrated adaptability in times of disruption. The potential to

reach isolated or homebound clients highlights social media's role in fostering inclusion and support beyond traditional in-person models.

Platforms like YouTube and TikTok present innovative ways for CTRS to expand service reach. By creating videos of therapeutic activities, such as guided relaxation or adaptive exercises, professionals can engage wider and more diverse audiences. This content can make Recreation Therapy more accessible, especially for those who may face physical or geographic barriers to in-person services. Moorhead et al. (2013) described social media as a multi-sensory communication tool, which adds richness to client interactions and supports diverse learning styles.

In summary, social media has become a multifaceted asset in therapeutic recreation, offering avenues for advocacy, public education, and service delivery. While ethical considerations must guide its use, a strategic and thoughtful approach can empower recreation therapists to elevate the profession and meet the evolving needs of their communities.

References

- Appel, G., Grewal, L., Hadi, R., & Stephen, S.T. (2020). The future of social media in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 48, 79–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1>
- Moorhead, S. A., Hazlett, D. E., Harrison, L., Carroll, J. K., Irwin, A., & Hoving, C. (2013). A new dimension of health care: Systematic review of the uses, benefits, and limitations of social media for health communication. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 15(4). doi: 10.2196/jmir.1933. PMID: 23615206; PMCID: PMC3636326.

Park, K., Genoe, M.R., Nelson, S., Boser, D., Ostryzniuk, L. & Cripps, D.G. (2022) Advocating for therapeutic recreation: is it just a matter of speaking up? *World Leisure Journal*, 64 (4), 508-529. DOI: 10.1080/16078055.2022.2099452

Raypole, C. (2020). *A Therapist's Guide to Ethical Social Media use*. GoodTherapy.

<https://www.goodtherapy.org/for-professionals/marketing/digital-marketing/article/therapists-guide-ethical-social-media-use>

Roberts, S., & Passmore, T. (2018, October). *Exploring contemporary therapeutic recreation*

services: Community center: Parks and Recreation Magazine: NRPA. National Recreation and Park Association. <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/october/exploring-contemporary-therapeutic-recreation-services/>

Stanborough, R. (2020). *The benefits of recreational therapy*. Healthline.

<https://www.healthline.com/health/recreational-therapy#benefits>

Taylor, M. (2021). *What is recreational therapy?* WebMD. [https://www.webmd.com/mental-](https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-is-recreational-therapy)

[health/what-is-recreational-therapy](https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/what-is-recreational-therapy).

Emily Cassady is a graduate student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, Exercise, & Sport Science at Eastern Kentucky University. Michael J. Bradley serves as Dean for the College of Research and Graduate Studies at Arkansas Tech University. Jamie Woolery serves as Student Engagement Coordinator for the College of Health Sciences at Eastern Kentucky University. Contact: Michael J. Bradley, Ph.D. at mbradley19@atu.edu