PROJECT TITLE: Impact of Self-injury-related Images on Urge to Self-Injure, Psychological Distress, and Physiological Arousal

FIELD OF RESEARCH CODE: 1701

PROJECT SYNOPSIS:

The work of our Research Group broadly focuses on individual differences in cognitive and self-regulatory processes (such as appraisal, coping, and emotion regulation) and their potential links with emotional vulnerability. We are particularly interested in behaviours used to regulate emotion, such as non-suicidal self-injury and risky alcohol use. Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) poses significant health risks to young people, placing them at higher risk of suicide than those who do not self-injure. As NSSI is a complex behaviour that often remains concealed, ongoing research is vital for understanding NSSI and assisting people who self-injure, as well as those who care for them. Our work in this area is recognised as one of the two core streams of the strategic Mental Health Research Group in the School of Psychology.

This proposed research program aims to explore the impact of self-injury related images, particularly in online contexts (e.g. social media), on physical and psychological indicators of
This is currently a topical question, as recently there has been much attention drawn to the potential for such images to be triggering and increase risk of self-injury. This is reflected in Instagram’s new policy to no longer allow such images to be posted on its platform. However, empirical research indicates that these images may actually reduce distress and facilitate recovery. This program of research will be instrumental in providing an evidence-based foundation for future policy decisions.

This proposed PhD will comprise three studies:

Study 1: How are self-injury related images processed by individuals with and without a history of self-injury?

The candidate will compare people with and without a history of self-injury on eye gaze, pupil dilation, and skin conductance while viewing self-injury related visual stimuli on a computer screen. This will determine where people routinely focus their attention while viewing self-injury images. We will also assess urges to self-injure to see if self-injury related images increase or decrease urges.

Study 2: What is the impact of trigger warnings?

In Study 2, the candidate will randomly allocate participants to either receive or not receive a trigger warning prior to viewing self-injury images. Trigger warnings are routinely used to alert viewers to the potential for distressing information or images. However, while the intent is to prepare people in an effort to reduce distress, there is no work assessing whether trigger warnings do impact where people look, or their physiological arousal level. Tracking of eye gaze, pupil dilation, and skin conductance will allow us to determine whether attentional allocation, and physiological arousal, are impacted by the trigger warning. We will again assess urges to self-injure to see the impact of trigger warnings on urges.

Study 3: What is the effect of acute stress?

People who self-injure typically do so during heightened periods of distress. There is also evidence to suggest people may seek out self-injury related content online when distressed, seeking validation and support. In this case, they are likely to encounter self-injury images online. In this last study, the candidate will repeat Study 2, but additionally randomly allocate participants to complete the Trier Social Stress Test – a reliable stress induction task. This will allow us to assess the effects of acute stress on attentional allocation and physiological arousal when viewing self-injury images.

Together, these three studies will provide empirical data regarding emotional processing of self-injury images, as well as data to inform policy decisions regarding the use of trigger warnings on emotional content. Data may also be as used as the basic of future applications for funding to explore cognitive processing of emotional images associated with self-injury.

FEASIBILITY AND RESOURCING – DESCRIPTION OF THE SUPPORT THIS PROJECT WILL RECEIVE:

Our team includes international experts in self-injury, experimental methodologies, eye tracking, and psychophysiology. This proposed research is directly aligned with the expertise of the supervisors and the goals of our research group, and is not contingent on research funding. We have access to a fully equipped psychophysiological laboratory, as well as state-of-the-art eye tracking equipment. Additionally, the candidate will be integrated into a high-
performing and vibrant research group (3x academic staff, 1 x postdoc, 9x PhD students, ~7x honours students per year), offering additional support.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT/ PROGRAM FOR THE ENROLLING SCHOOL OR INSTITUTION:

Given increasing concern over images that may increase risk of self-injury, this research has the potential to directly inform policies and procedures of global social media platforms. This real-world impact is aligned with School of Psychology's mission to produce world-class research with clear translational implications and maximum impact. Mental health is a recognised research priority in the Faculty of Health Sciences. With over 35 peer-reviewed publications and more than $2mil in research funding in the past 2 years, our research group, and the work of our students, is spearheading self-injury research within the University.

Students must express interest in this scholarship opportunity by emailing the Project Lead listed below. Please provide a copy of your current curriculum vitae and detail your suitability to be involved in this strategic project.

PROJECT LEAD CONTACT:

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