

AYA cancer survivors found strength in a private social networking community, fostering a sense of belonging and encouragement that they linked to improved health behaviors, and physical and mental health.

“Thank Goodness for Cancer Friends!”

Experiences of Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Cancer Survivors in a Virtual Discussion Group

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Background

- AYA cancer survivors (ages 15-39) are often underrepresented in research,¹ which reinforces the “AYA gap” in knowledge and care and widens health disparities.²
- AYAs experience unique challenges that often go unmet, particularly loneliness and a lack of peer social support.³⁻⁵
- The difficulty of these challenges (e.g., infertility, threats to autonomy, financial burdens, feeling overwhelmed, etc.) are compounded by other challenges experienced during this pivotal time of development in early adulthood.⁴⁻⁶
- Researchers need to find ways to fill this AYA gap, and develop evidence-based approaches to address the challenges and inequities experienced by AYA cancer survivors.

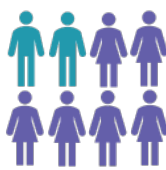
Purpose

- Explore participant perspectives regarding the value of a private social network platform embedded within a virtual health platform (Burnalong) for improving social connection among AYA cancer survivors.

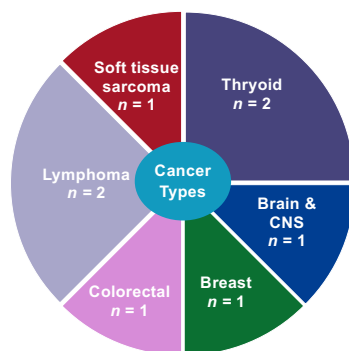
Methods



- Intervention participants were asked to complete 3 physical activity sessions on the Burnalong platform 3 times a week with a friend or family member and to engage in the private social network twice a week (guided questions were provided as prompts).
- Eight AYA cancer survivors (M_{age} = 33 years; range = 23 - 38 years) participated in the pilot study.
- A thematic analysis was conducted of the social network discussion board content⁷⁻⁸



6 women and 2 men



Results

Changes in Health Behaviors

Participants experienced immediate connection with other AYA cancer survivors based on their shared unique experiences that influenced health behaviors, as well as physical and mental health.



“ I love reading the responses & feeling like I get to chit chat with you all! [...] I've surprised myself by logging in and trying tai chi, doing a cardio class yesterday with a friend, [and] doing the aggressive ab work out [other participant] posted about a few weeks ago. I'm doing more with burnalong than I thought and I'm proud of myself for continuing. [...] Very therapeutic and loving environment. ”

Shared Vulnerability Resulted in Support in other Domains

Authentic and vulnerable discussions and support extended to encouragement for milestones and other activities.



“ Message to moderator and other participant:
I'm thinking of you both this week & sending extra joy & love your way. Scanxiety is so hard. I hope you're both taking self-care very seriously this week! ”

Discussion and Implications



Demonstrates Promise of Virtual Networks to Support a Sense of Belonging Among AYA Cancer Survivors.

- Through sharing of advice, encouragement, and coping strategies.



Emphasizes the Value of Tailored Behavioral Programming.

- Impacts the social and community context of the Social Determinants of Health, supporting improve health outcomes and quality of life for AYA cancer survivors.

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