Social Media and Perceptions of Mental Health and Their Implications for Students' Psychological Health

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how social media shapes students' perceptions of mental health and its implications for their psychological health. The study used a qualitative approach with data collection through in-depth interviews and participant observation to explore students' experiences, views, and interactions with social media content related to mental health. The results showed that social media plays a central role in building students' understanding of mental health issues. Educational content, personal stories, and online communities are the main sources of information that influence students' perceptions. However, the findings also revealed that uncontrolled exposure to mental health content on social media can encourage students to self-diagnose. This phenomenon often leads to misunderstandings, excessive anxiety, and inappropriate decision-making regarding their mental health conditions, without professional consultation. This study emphasizes the importance of managing the use of social media wisely to support students' mental health. Higher education institutions and online communities can utilize social media as a more positive platform to improve digital literacy and support mental health, improve digital literacy, and reduce the risk of misdiagnosis. Based on these findings, further research is recommended to explore effective digital literacy strategies and the implementation of social media-based mentoring to mitigate the risk of misdiagnosis.

Keywords: Social Media, Perception, Mental Health, Students, Self-Diagnosis

Introduction

Social media has evolved from a simple communication tool into a dominant platform for disseminating information, including mental health-related content. Among university students, social media now plays a central role in shaping perceptions of psychological issues. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter provide instant access to diverse content—ranging from educational materials and personal experiences to awareness campaigns initiated by individuals

and professional organizations. These narratives not only enhance awareness but also influence how students interpret and respond to mental health conditions in themselves and others.

However, this ease of access also presents significant challenges. Much of the information circulating online lacks scientific grounding or is presented by non-experts. Viral content often emphasizes subjective or dramatized experiences, which can encourage students to self-diagnose without clinical consultation. This trend has led to confusion, unnecessary worry, and in some cases, delays in seeking appropriate mental health care.

Perception, as explained by psychological scholars such as Sarwono, Robbins, and Gibson, is a cognitive process influenced by individual experiences, beliefs, and environmental cues. In the context of social media, students' perceptions are shaped by frequent exposure to repetitive, persuasive, and emotionally charged content. When consumed uncritically, this content can distort their understanding of complex mental health conditions and lead to misinformed conclusions.

Furthermore, data from the Indonesia-National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (2022) indicates that approximately 34.9% of Indonesian adolescents experience mental health problems, yet only a small percentage seek professional counseling. This gap highlights the disparity between awareness and action, potentially influenced by social media-driven narratives. While social media may broaden public discourse on mental health, access to effective treatment remains limited.

Maintaining good mental health is essential for student well-being, academic performance, and social functioning. Mentally healthy individuals are better equipped to manage emotions, cope with academic pressure, and build positive interpersonal relationships. Conversely, poor mental health can disrupt learning, damage relationships, and hinder future success.

This study seeks to explore how social media influences students' perceptions of mental health and how these perceptions affect their psychological well-being. Using a communication

psychology approach, the research aims to examine the interaction between message content, individual interpretation, and behavioral or emotional outcomes. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically to the fields of communication and psychology, and practically through recommendations for fostering a healthier and more responsible digital environment for young people..

Literature Review

Theory of Perception

Perception refers to the process by which individuals interpret and make sense of information. Sarwono (2002), Robbins (2003), and Gibson (2000) emphasized that perception is influenced by personal experiences, beliefs, and the medium through which information is delivered. In the context of social media, these variables are amplified, as users often consume content tailored to their interests, which reinforces existing biases or concerns.

Definition of Mental Health

According to the World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH, 1948) and Indonesia's Law No. 3 of 1966, mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness but encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and act, and also determines how they handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions.

Psychological Well-being Framework

Ryff (1989) identified six dimensions of psychological well-being: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others. These dimensions are particularly vulnerable to the effects of social media, which can both support and disrupt mental health.

Related Studies

Research by Astuti et al. (2022) found that increased use of social media after the COVID-19 pandemic correlated with heightened anxiety and depression among students. Yana et al.

(2024) observed that students often relate to mental health content without verifying its accuracy, which contributes to the spread of self-diagnosis culture.

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Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method with a phenomenological approach, aiming to understand how students interpret and respond to mental health content on social media. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation involving 10 students from the Communication Studies Program at Universitas Pasundan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their active engagement with mental health-related content on social media platforms.

The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and variations in perception. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded and organized into themes such as: sources of information, emotional responses, trust in content, and tendencies toward self-diagnosis.

Results and Discussion

This study focuses on two core objectives: (1) to explore how social media shapes university students' perceptions of mental health, and (2) to identify the implications of these perceptions on students' psychological well-being. The research involved in-depth interviews and observations with Communication Studies students from Universitas Pasundan.

Formation of Mental Health Perceptions through Social Media

Most participants acknowledged that platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube played a key role in shaping their understanding of mental health. They often accessed a variety of content, including infographics, motivational videos, and personal stories discussing anxiety,

depression, stress, and coping mechanisms. Many felt these platforms helped normalize discussions about mental well-being, offering comfort and emotional validation.

Some students reported that social media provided a safe space to express emotions and seek solidarity. They found relatable content that reduced feelings of isolation. However, the study also revealed that exposure to misleading or overly dramatic content led to increased anxiety. Participants shared concerns about self-diagnosing mental health issues after watching content lacking professional verification. Some admitted feeling worried or confused, believing they suffered from conditions depicted in videos despite having no formal diagnosis.

The emotional impact of personal stories was significant, often leading to empathy and introspection. However, participants also highlighted the risk of accepting social media content at face value. The abundance of unverified content sometimes led to misinformation, confusion, and over-identification with symptoms.The findings underscore the need for improved digital literacy among students. Educational interventions are necessary to equip students with the skills to evaluate content critically, distinguish credible sources, and make informed decisions about their mental health.

Implications for Students' Psychological Well-being

The second part of the research examined the psychological effects of these perceptions. Participants reported feeling more informed about mental health topics, with some adopting coping strategies they learned from social media—such as breathing techniques and journaling. These practices helped some students reduce anxiety and feel more in control of their emotions. However, many also expressed that the constant stream of content about mental illness heightened their concerns. Some developed a tendency to self-diagnose based on symptoms discussed in posts or videos, leading to unnecessary stress. Others mentioned the negative effects of encountering harmful content, including posts promoting unhealthy comparisons, fear of missing out (FOMO), and even content related to bullying or trauma.

Students recognized that not all mental health content was helpful or accurate. Several voiced the need for greater awareness of the limitations of online information. Some emphasized the importance of consulting professionals instead of relying solely on social media for psychological guidance.Overall, while social media has the potential to support mental health awareness and reduce stigma, it also poses psychological risks when content is misinterpreted or lacks context. The findings highlight the necessity of enhancing media literacy and providing accessible mental health support in educational institutions. Through better guidance and critical consumption, students can safely navigate mental health discourse online without compromising their psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This study confirms the significant role of social media in shaping university students' perceptions of mental health. Social media serves as a key source of information through educational content, personal stories, and online communities. It helps raise awareness about the importance of mental well-being, introduces stress management techniques, and offers a space for emotional expression and peer support.

However, uncontrolled exposure to mental health content can lead to risks such as inaccurate self-diagnosis, increased anxiety, and poor decision-making. Many students tend to associate their own experiences with symptoms they encounter online, often without consulting professionals. This highlights the need for more mindful and guided use of social media to prevent misunderstanding and misinformation.

The findings emphasize the importance of improving both digital and mental health literacy among students. They must be equipped to critically evaluate online information and be reminded to seek help from mental health professionals when needed. Social media, if used responsibly, can be a powerful tool to support mental health and student well-being.

Recommendations:

1. Enhance Digital and Mental Health Literacy

   Higher education institutions should incorporate digital and mental health literacy programs into their curriculum. These programs can include seminars, training sessions, or workshops aimed at helping students discern credible information and avoid misinformation.

2. Promote Positive and Evidence-Based Content

   Mental health organizations and online communities should produce informative and evidence-based content. These materials should encourage students to talk openly about their mental health and seek professional help when necessary.

3. Awareness Campaigns Against Self-Diagnosis

   Students should be educated about the risks of self-diagnosis based on social media. Campaigns can be carried out via social media itself to guide students toward appropriate professional services instead of relying solely on online content.

4. Collaboration Between Universities and Mental Health Professionals

   Universities should collaborate with certified mental health professionals to provide accessible counseling services, including online sessions, which can reduce barriers for students who hesitate to seek help in person.

5. Monitoring and Regulation of Online Mental Health Content

   Social media platforms should implement better moderation and verification processes for mental health-related content. Partnerships with medical professionals can improve the quality and accuracy of information distributed on these platforms, reducing potential harm

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