



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON INTERNET USE FOR MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT - A PROSPECTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT—

In both developed and developing countries, concerns about young people's mental health are growing. According to studies, resource-poor nations like India have additional difficulties due to stigma, a lack of mental health specialists, and a lack of knowledge regarding psychiatric diseases. Due to recent studies showing that UG and PG students suffer much greater levels of psychological discomfort than the general population, mental health issues may be even more common in these students. Adolescents, particularly college-bound adolescents, have reported having trouble getting access to traditional mental health care, in part because of the stigma still attached to psychiatric disorders. Disgrace over psychological health problems is widespread, especially in developing countries like India. According to studies, stigma prevents many people with mental health problems from getting help. Because of its wider reach and the anonymity it offers, the internet appears to be a viable alternative assistance for young people who don't favor traditional help-seeking agencies in the case of mental issues. Regarding India or other developing nations, there are no available data. There is a pressing need to understand more about how young people use the Internet for mental health difficulties and how much trust they put in it, as well as how this influences their use of medical consultations. Despite being one of the most widely utilized sources of knowledge globally, using internet tools to learn more about mental health is a relatively untapped subject in this emerging globe.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mental, neurological, and substance use disorders (MNS) are the major cause of years lived with disability (YLD) globally and provide a severe and expanding challenge to health systems globally. In India, a recent national mental health study found that among those ages 18 to 29 there was a 10.6%

present prevalence of mental illness and a 13.7% lifetime prevalence. The number of websites on the internet which provide guidance and help for issues related to mental health problems is substantially growing. However, there is a paucity of research on how user access the internet to access these services. This was the reason we decided to take up



the study. There is no published data for the developing world on how they use the internet to access health information online. Although there are many studies on internet use and internet addiction among young adults which are largely available in indexed journals. This study is conducted at SRM Medical College Hospital & Research Centre.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES:

Aims: The goal is to research and analyse how Indian university students utilize the internet to get information about mental health.

Objectives:

To describe the general use of the internet.

To describe the use of internet for mental health information.

To study the value students, as sign to the mental health information on the internet and their expectations from it.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Survey design and questionnaire

“Across-sectional survey of internet usage for mental health information and support seeking in university students. We used a quantitative descriptive approach for the study and all data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire on email from May to June 2018. The questionnaire was created using data from earlier worldwide research projects and studies on the usage of the internet for mental health information. The 25 items in the questionnaire were divided into three groups. (1) General information, i.e. demographic details such as age, gender, subject of academic study, type of accommodation, place of living, employment and both physical and mental health condition over a period of 1 year; (2) General usage of the internet, i.e. internet usage for social networking, for seeing videos, emails to send etc.; and (3) internet usage for health and mental health

issues, e.g. the frequency of use of the internet for obtaining information on general health, specific mental health problems (sexuality, eating disorders, depressive disorders, addictive disorders, anxiety disorders) and wellbeing, the use of mental health online support, trust in online information, and the advantages and the disadvantages of using the online resources for mental health information and support. The 25 items comprise of Yes/No questions, multiple choice questions, and Likert scales.”

Setting and sample

Students enrolled in universities were sent both the questionnaire and an email outlining the study. Prior permission was obtained from the head of the institute and an online informed consent was taken from the respondents of the questionnaire. Students were not compensated for compiling the questionnaire, and they were able to choose not to participate in the study by not answering it. Refusal rates were quite high since there was no incentive involved to fill the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to around 500 students and only 265 gave consent to participate in the study, out of which only 193 had completed the questionnaire.

Inclusion criteria:

Consenting adults above the age of 18 years studying in a university who are able to understand and read English language

Statistical Analysis

The data was entered and coded for analysis on SPSS version 24.0. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize samples and describe the variables in this study.

Ethical Considerations

The study was initiated after clearance by the Sub-Ethics Committee. All participants provided online-based informed consent. In the online questionnaire, the researcher provided a description of the study's purpose. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that there would be no direct monetary or other benefits for participating



in the study and they could withdraw from the study at any point. All participants were given the option of calling or emailing the researcher in case of any doubts or further clarifications

RESULTS:

The sample: participant profile

The questionnaire was distributed to around 500 students and only 265 gave consent to participate

in the study, out of which only 193 had completed the questionnaire. Participants mean age was 22.8 years; the majority of participants were females 68.9%. Most of the participants lived in an urban household 85%, while majority 41.5% lived with parents, 38.3% lived in a college accommodation and only 20.2% lived in a rented accommodation or alone. This is represented in the in the Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the samples.

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	113	68.90%
	Male	60	31.10%
Living Situation	College Accommodation	74	38.30%
	Rented Accommodation / Alone	39	20.20%
	Parents	80	41.50%
Setting	Urban	164	85%
	Rural	29	15%

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Table 2. Frequency and use of internet by the sample population

Variable	Percentage			
	Several times a day	Once a day	Few times a week	Never
Sending emails	18.7%	14.50%	57%	9.80%
College Work	37.80%	20.70%	33.20%	8.30%
News updates	35.80%	31.60%	26.90%	5.70%
Looking for Health information	27.50%	21.80%	49.20%	1.60%
Music	26.90%	19.20%	26.90%	2.10%
Playing Games	16.10%	9%	50.80%	23.8%
Shopping	7%	13.50%	69.90%	9.80%
Chatrooms	34.20%	12.40%	29.50%	23.8%
Social Networking	62.70%	18.10%	16.10%	3.10%
Watching videos	56%	24%	19.70%	0.3%
Movies or Netflix	19.20%	22.80%	47.70%	10.4%

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Table 3. Conditions for which sample sought information online in the last 12 months

Variable	Frequency(n=163)	Percentage
Severe Mental Illness	79	40.9%
General health	153	79.3%
Eating Disorders	71	36.8%
Stress	87	45.1%
Anxiety	72	37.3%
Sleep disturbances	39	20.2%
Behavioral Problems	57	29.5%
Mood Disturbances	71	36.8%
Addictions	39	20.2%
Menstruation	77	39.9%
Sexual health	68	35.2%
Depression	84	43.5%

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When asked whether they had looked for online support for a mental health issue in the previous 12 months, it was found that 97.8% of the entire sample had never used online therapy, 95.6% had never entered a specific chat room, and 91.8% had never gone to a forum for discussion board for questions and issues relating to mental health.

Table 4. Various methods of help sought for health problems on the internet by the samples

Variable	Frequency(n=163)	Percentage
Online Therapy	17	8.80%
Chatrooms	26	13.50%
Forums	20	10.40%
Online Doctor's Appointment	16	8.30%
Self-help Videos	72	37.30%

How college students use search engines to find information on mental health

According to data in Table 5. 66.3% have often

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used Google to look up their symptoms in contrast only 17.10% have directly visited a health website. 43.5% reported to having never checked the date

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of information, whereas 45.1% often look up the institution for the credibility of information as opposed to 47.7% who often look at the reviews

and comments of people on websites, in contrast to 30.6% who go to a website on their friend's recommendation.

Table 5. Reasons for seeking mental health information on the internet

Variable	Percentage			
	Often	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Instead of going to a doctor	17.10%	30.10%	49.20%	3.60%
Before going to a doctor	28.50%	34.70%	32.10%	4.70%
After a medical consultation	28%	28%	38.30%	5.70%
Independently from any medical consultation	20.70%	33.70%	39.90%	5.70%
Whenever you want to seek relevant information for someone	47.10%	24.40%	24.90%	3.60%

Faith in the Internet as a source of advice and assistance for mental health

“When asked about advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet for mental health information and support, as seen in Table 6. The total sample thought the three main advantages of the Internet were: being easily accessible 24 hours a day (62.20%); being anonymous, private and confidential (39.40%); and containing a vast amount of valuable information (38.90%). The disadvantages were that Internet contains unreliable information (61.70%); is untrustworthy in comparison to medical advice (26.40%) and it is unclear who produced the information (50.30%).”



Table 6. Advantages and Disadvantages of seeking mental health information online.

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Advantages	Anonymous, private and confidential	76	39.40%
	Vast amount of valuable information available	75	38.90%
	Easily accessible 24 hours a day	120	62.20%
	Easy to find and ask for information	69	35.80%
	Fast and time saving	73	37.80%
	Cheap	13	6.70%
	Convenient	46	23.80%
	Easy to communicate with other people in the same situation	17	8.80%
	A good place to start and to find out where to go for further assistance	40	20.70%
	Less embarrassing than talking to a friend or family member	15	7.80%
	Knowing who produced the information	4	2.10%
	Opportunity to find real experiences of people	32	16.60%
Disadvantages	Too anonymous	40	20.70%
	Unreliable information	119	61.70%
	Not easy to find information	36	18.70%
	Inconvenient and complicated information	38	19.70%
	Not knowing who produced the information	97	50.30%
	Impersonal information not fitting your own experience	48	24.90%
	Alarming information	28	14.50%
	Distrust the information	50	25.90%
	Difficulty to access internet connection	12	6.20%
	It complicates the relationship with one's doctor	27	14%
	No filters on forums and chat rooms	18	9.30%
	It is less trustworthy than talking with family and friends	51	26.40%
Risk of being traceable	18	9.30%	

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Only 23.3% of the overall sample thought that mental health information on the Internet is credible and only a handful, i.e. 36.8% had knowledge about certified health websites as seen in Table 7. Table 7. Trust and credibility of mental health information on the internet

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Credibility of mental health information on the internet	21	23.3%
Knowledge about certified health websites	71	36.8%

DISCUSSION

By this study, we examined how Indian university students used the Internet to look for mental health resources and assistance. Our study is the only one conducted in a developing country in this regard. There have been similar studies done in Europe and in the west. Our study population was in line with those studies.^{8, 14, 16, 17}

Our findings suggest that 94.3% students use the internet several times a day which is in line with the study Beck F (2013).⁸ Almost all of them reported to have owned a smartphone and accessed internet on it, smartphone has become an indispensable part of life for the young generation.

The majority of the students 92.70% reported to have looked for general health information online and 70.50% for mental health information, which is much higher than what has been reported in all international studies.^{8,14,16,17} This may be because all these studies are at least 5-8 years old and since then there has been a change in the way people use technology specially the internet. This is also very strongly supported by the fact, that in our study most of the samples 99% owned a smartphone and accessed the internet through it, which wasn't the case in even the most developed countries a decade ago. Easy access to internet on the smartphone may be one of the most important factors promoting access of information on health and mental health among our sample population.

Majority of the samples 41.9% reported to have

seen mental health information online, just out of curiosity and for no particular reason, which is consistent with the study of (Montagni, Ilaria 2016).¹⁷ This is a positive sign that the new generation is curious about mental health and are wary of the fact that mental health issues are on the rise and that mental health is as important as physical health.

The most samples searched for mental health conditions are severe mental illnesses, stress, depressive disorder and anxiety disorder. This is in line with all the international studies we came across.^{8,14,16,17} This may be due to the fact that these conditions are on the rise in the young population as suggested by recently published National Mental Health Survey in this regard.²

The most interesting finding which has not been reported in any studies done in this regard is that 37.7% of the samples have used self-help videos available on the internet for their own mental health problems. This is a rising trend in the new generation and this also gives a good opportunity to mental health professionals working in this field to utilize this platform to launch content for this population.

At least half of the samples reported to have used the internet to seek relevant mental health information for someone. This may be a proxy to admitting to have sought information for themselves, but because



of the stigmas surrounding mental illness wouldn't turn up. On the contrary, they may be for their less technologically advanced parents or elders. Surprisingly, half of the samples admitted to have never sought information instead of going to a Doctor, which may be due to the fact that most of our samples are educated and belong to affluent families who can afford good healthcare.

The samples reported the 3 main advantages of seeking mental health information on the internet as it being Anonymous, private and confidential, readily available round the clock and that enormous amount of useful information available in one place. The disadvantages they reported were Unreliable information, not aware of who has given the information and it is less reliable than having conversations with family members and friends. This is consistent with the results of e-MentH project which was carried out in Europe.¹⁶

The majority of the samples distrust mental health information in the online resources and only a handful know about certified health websites. It is the duty of mental health professionals to post authentic, reliable and relevant content on emerging mental health problems in this age group to increase the credibility of mental health information online. It is advisable to even have some strict policy in banning or blocking out websites which don't abide with the norms and give appropriate or false information.

The study had a few limitations, since the study was conducted in a small time frame the sample size was limited. The samples were not properly distributed in terms of socio-demographic characters, as the study had most of the samples as females, similar age group and from the urban area. The study population doesn't represent the national sample. In spite of all these limitations the strength of the study lies in the fact that it is the only study in the developing world in this regard and will be of great help to mental health professionals in devising content to be up

loaded on the internet to promote mental health education.

6 CONCLUSION

Internet looks to be a helpful resource for university students to conduct informational searches, and it is the future of education. The mental health community must now work to guarantee that the caliber of online material is improved and that websites and initiatives specifically geared toward young people be developed. The findings of our study might then be considered in developing a credible online repository of mental health education material and promoting mental health on the internet for university students.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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