Exploring Self-Diagnosis Tendencies and Implications for Professional Help-Seeking Among Youth on Instagram

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Abstract

Social media has evolved beyond entertainment, and serves as a platform for education and fosters discussions on mental health. It has facilitated the formation of supportive communities where individuals share personal experiences and enabled mental health professionals to disseminate accurate information and address audience concerns. However, the lack of regulation regarding content creators raises concerns about the spread of misinformation and exaggerated portrayals of mental illnesses. This can lead to incorrect self-diagnoses and perpetuate existing stigma in both online and offline spaces. The impact of social media on mental health perception and self-diagnosis remains ambiguous, warranting further exploration and research.

This study aims to understand the perceptions of young adults regarding the information on Instagram, about mental disorders and their tendency to engage in self-diagnosis. The study also aims to understand the impact it has on seeking professional help upon self-diagnosis. Employing a quantitative approach, a self-constructed questionnaire consisting of 21 questions was administered offline to young adults aged between 18-25 who actively engage with mental health content on Instagram. The implications of the study are to promote awareness on the phenomenon of self diagnosis in Instagram and provide evidence that would help shape policies pertaining to the regulation of misinformation in the platform.

Keywords: Instagram, Self-diagnosis, Young adults

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become integral to daily life, serving as conduits for information exchange and community building. With billions of active users globally, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter are no longer confined to social networking alone; they serve as hubs for sharing and consuming information. Notably, discussions surrounding mental health have proliferated online, providing users with both awareness and support. Social media has democratized access to mental health knowledge, providing users with insights into mental health conditions, symptoms, and coping mechanisms. According to Homan et al. (2021), "the growing presence of mental health discussions on social media has helped normalize conversations about mental well-being and reduce stigma in significant ways." However, this accessibility has also led to unintended consequences, notably the increasing tendency for individuals to self-diagnose based on the content they encounter online. (John Hopkins Medicine, 2023) Self-diagnosis refers to the act of identifying a medical or psychological condition in oneself without

professional consultation (APA Dictionary of Psychology). It often involves interpreting symptoms using available information, such as that found on social media or other online platforms. This behavior is particularly prevalent in the context of mental health, where symptoms can be ambiguous and overlap with a range of disorders. The surge of mental health content on social media, often shared through personal narratives or self-help advice, has created a space where individuals feel empowered to diagnose themselves. Hasan et al. (2023) observed that "the normalization of anxiety and other mental health conditions on social media platforms led to increased self-diagnosis tendencies among viewers." The convenience and relatability of such content may appeal to individuals hesitant to seek professional care, but it also raises concerns about the accuracy and consequences of self-diagnosis. On one hand, social media provides an abundance of relatable content, such as influencers sharing personal struggles with mental health conditions, which can foster awareness and understanding. On the other hand, the lack of professional oversight on such platforms increases the risk of misinformation.

According to a study by O'Reilly et al. (2018), "adolescents who relied on social media for mental health information were more likely to identify with symptoms and attempt to self-diagnose, often inaccurately." These findings suggest that while social media can act as a catalyst for awareness, it can also inadvertently encourage self-misdiagnosis by oversimplifying complex conditions. Moreover, the tendency to self-diagnose can influence individuals' decisions to seek professional help. While some may use self-diagnosis as an initial step toward consulting a healthcare provider, others may view it as a substitute for professional evaluation, relying solely on their self-assessment. Sanghvi et al. (2022) highlighted that "many young adults who engage in self-diagnosis prefer self-help methods over seeking professional intervention, largely due to stigma, fear of judgment, or misconceptions about mental health services." This hesitancy is particularly troubling because accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment for mental health conditions often require professional expertise.

The nature of the content shared on social media complicates professional help-seeking. For instance, posts that normalize and validate mental health struggles can reduce stigma, but they may also lead individuals to incorrectly label their experiences. A systematic review by Cooper and Kar (2020) revealed that "patients who self-diagnose based on online content often arrive at medical consultations with preconceived notions about their condition, which can create tension in the healthcare provider-patient relationship." This indicates a dual-edged nature of self-diagnosis. While it can prompt some individuals to seek help, it can also lead to delays or complications in obtaining accurate care.

Koşar (2024), conducted a study on "Exploring the Perceptions of the Relationship Between Social Media Mental Health Content and Self-Diagnosis and Help-Seeking Behaviour among Young Adults". The study investigated how exposure to mental health content on social media influences self-diagnosis and help-seeking behavior in young adults. The study concludes that while social media increases awareness and can encourage help-seeking behaviors, it also promotes self-diagnosis, with mixed outcomes. Some individuals seek professional help, while others hesitate due to concerns about the credibility of online information and stigma. Social media's role is complex, offering both positive support and potential risks.

Omega, C. R. (2023), conducted a study on "Investigating Mental Illness Perception on Social Media and the Propensity to Self-Diagnose" The study explored how mental illness is perceived on social media and its influence on individuals' propensity to self-diagnose. It was concluded that social media significantly shapes perceptions of mental illness, often leading to increased self-diagnosis among users. Participants were influenced by the prevalence of mental health content online, with many reporting a tendency to identify with symptoms shared on social platforms. This self-diagnosis, however, sometimes bypasses

professional consultation, raising concerns about the accuracy and risks of relying on online information for mental health assessments.

NEED FOR STUDY

The rise of mental health information on social media has driven a concerning trend of self-diagnosis, which often leads to misinterpretation of conditions. The connection between self-diagnosis and professional help-seeking remains inconsistent, with some transitioning to professional care while others are hindered by stigma, self-reliance, or misinformation. These challenges highlight the need to understand the impact of social media-driven self-diagnosis on mental health outcomes and factors influencing help-seeking behavior.

Existing research lacks focus on young adults' self-diagnosis and help-seeking tendencies, particularly on platforms like Instagram. This study aims to explore the relationship between exposure to mental health content on Instagram and self-diagnosis and help-seeking behaviors among youth. Employing a quantitative approach, it seeks to provide insights into how social media content shapes mental health perceptions and actions. Findings will offer recommendations for social media platforms and mental health professionals to promote informed engagement with mental health content, refine algorithms for reliable information, and encourage professional consultation.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To explore how young adults perceive the accuracy, reliability, and impact of mental health-related content shared on Instagram.
- To examine how exposure to mental health content on Instagram influences young adults' tendency to self-diagnose mental disorders.
- To investigate whether self-diagnosis affects young adults' willingness or hesitancy to seek professional mental health support.

Research Design

The survey research design was used for this study.

Sampling Procedure

The population for this study consisted of 122 young adults between the ages of 18-25 who are users of Instagram who are exposed to mental health content on the platform, residing across Chennai.The sampling procedure used was convenience sampling method, a type of non-random sampling technique.

Data Collection Tool and Method

The data collection tool employed was a self-constructed questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 18 items apart from demographic details that included close-ended questions about the respondent's exposure to mental health content on instagram, self-diagnosis tendencies and its impact on seeking professional help. The Likert rating scale was used to measure the dimensions. The questionnaire was administered in-person after receiving informed consent, through pen and paper.

Statistical Analysis

Percentage analysis was used for statistical interpretation. Microsoft Excel was used to analyse the data and the results have been presented in the form of tables and graphs.
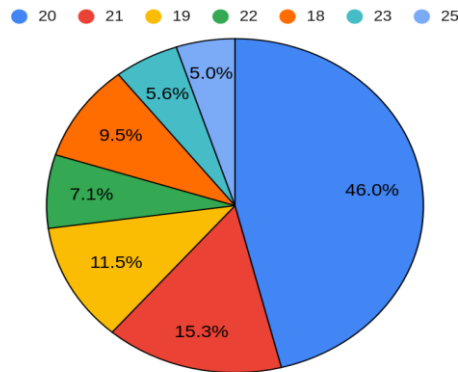
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Details

Table 1: Shows the distribution of respondents according to their age

Age	No of Respondents	%
18	13	9.50%
19	15	11.50%
20	57	46%
21	18	15.30%
22	8	7.10%
23	6	5.60%
25	5	5%

Table 2: Shows the distribution of respondents according to their gender

Gender	No of Respondents	%
Male	63	51.60%
Female	57	46.70%
Prefer Not to Say	2	1.70%
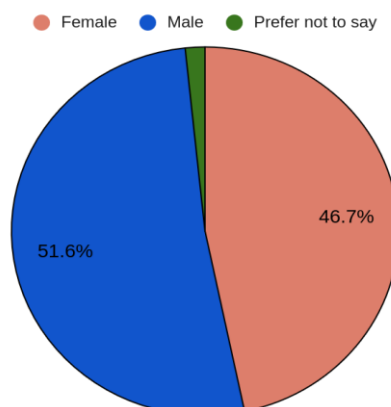
Table 3: Shows the distribution of respondents according to Engagement with Mental Health Content on Instagram

Options	Engagement with Accounts	Perceived Influence
Strongly Agree	7.40%	6.60%
Agree	18.90%	26.20%
Neutral	42.60%	45.90%
Disagree	19.70%	12.30%
Strongly Disagree	11.50%	9%
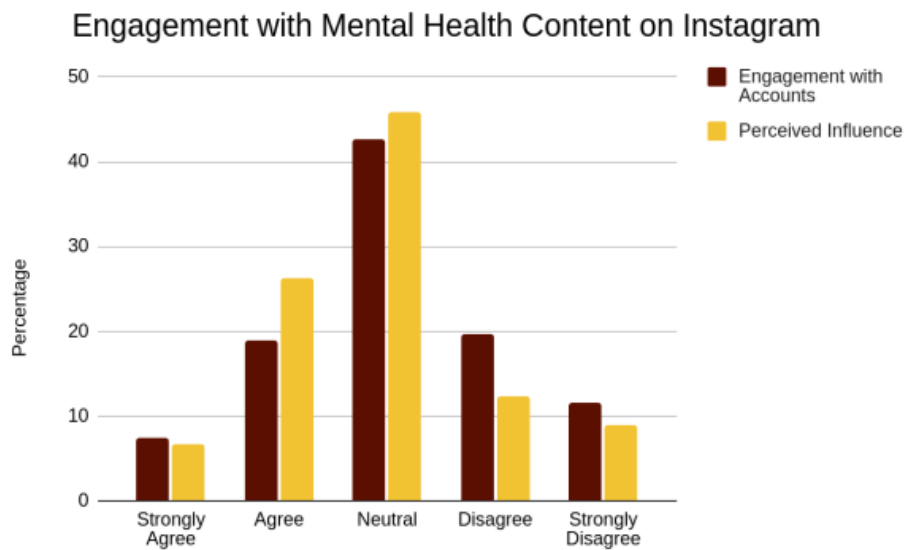
The graph indicates that a significant portion of respondents remain neutral regarding both engagement with accounts and perceived influence, with approximately 45% and 48%, respectively. Among those who actively engage with mental health content, around 20% agree that they interact with such accounts, while a slightly higher percentage perceives an influence from this content.

Conversely, engagement decreases among those who disagree or strongly disagree, with lower percentages for both engagement and perceived influence. This suggests a moderate correlation between engagement and perceived impact, where higher interaction with mental health content is associated with a greater acknowledgment of its influence. However, the strong neutral response highlights the potential for passive exposure without active engagement or strong perceptions of impact.

Table 4: Show the distribution of respondents according to Awareness and Self Reflection of Mental Health Content on Instagram

Options	Role of Instagram in Differentiating Myths and Facts	Effectiveness of Instagram in Raising Mental Health Awareness	Self Reflection on Mental Health After Viewing Instagram Content
Strongly Agree	3.30%	14.80%	8.20%
Agree	33.60%	44.30%	31.10%
Neutral	38.50%	29.50%	36.90%

Disagree	19.70%	5.70%	14.80%
Strongly Disagree	4.90%	5.70%	9%
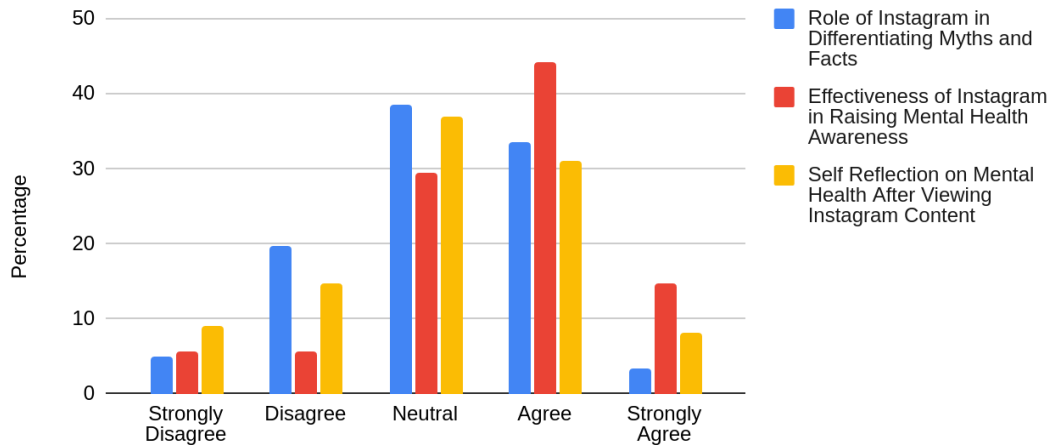
The graph highlights varying perceptions of Instagram's role in mental health awareness and personal reflection. A significant proportion of respondents agree or strongly agree that Instagram is effective in raising mental health awareness, with the combined percentage for these categories being the highest among the three measured aspects. This suggests that Instagram's ability to spread information and engage users on mental health topics is widely acknowledged. However, its role in helping users differentiate between myths and facts shows more neutral responses, indicating a less pronounced impact in combating misinformation or providing clear, factual content on mental health issues.

For self-reflection on mental health after viewing Instagram content, responses are more evenly distributed, with a considerable number of participants agreeing, but an equally notable proportion remaining neutral or disagreeing. This suggests that while Instagram may prompt some users to reflect on their mental health, its influence in fostering deep personal insights or actionable changes is less consistent. Interestingly, the levels of disagreement and strong disagreement are consistently low across all categories, which indicates that Instagram is not widely viewed as harmful or ineffective in these roles. Instead, the data points to Instagram being moderately effective, with its strength lying in raising awareness rather than driving personal reflection or tackling misinformation. This highlights an opportunity for Instagram to enhance its content to better support users in critical thinking and self-improvement regarding mental health.

Table 5: Shows the distribution of respondents according to Self Diagnosis Behaviour

Options	Attempting Self Diagnosis Based on Instagram Content	Online Mental Health Assessments Prompted by Instagram
Strongly Agree	5.7%	5.7%
Agree	31.1%	27%
Neutral	30.3%	20.5%
Disagree	24.6%	32.8%

Strongly Disagree	8.2%	13.9%

Self Diagnosis Behaviour
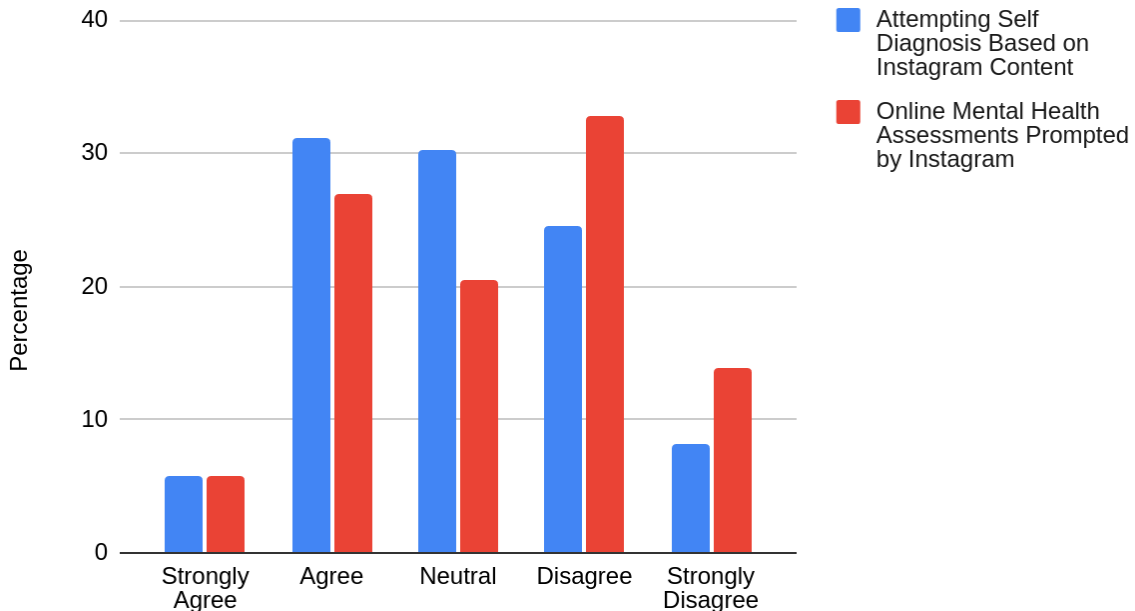
The graph illustrates the impact of Instagram on self-diagnosis behavior and online mental health assessments. A notable portion of respondents agree that Instagram influences self-diagnosis, as shown by the higher percentage in the "Agree" category for attempting self-diagnosis based on Instagram content. However, fewer participants agree that Instagram prompts them to take formal online mental health assessments, suggesting that its influence in this area is more limited. Neutral responses dominate both categories, indicating mixed opinions about Instagram's role in shaping these behaviors.

Interestingly, disagreement levels are higher for online assessments, with many respondents rejecting Instagram's influence on prompting formal evaluations. In contrast, fewer respondents strongly disagree with Instagram's impact on self-diagnosis, highlighting its stronger informal influence on individual perceptions of mental health. Overall, the data suggests that Instagram plays a more significant role in encouraging self-diagnosis than in motivating structured mental health actions.
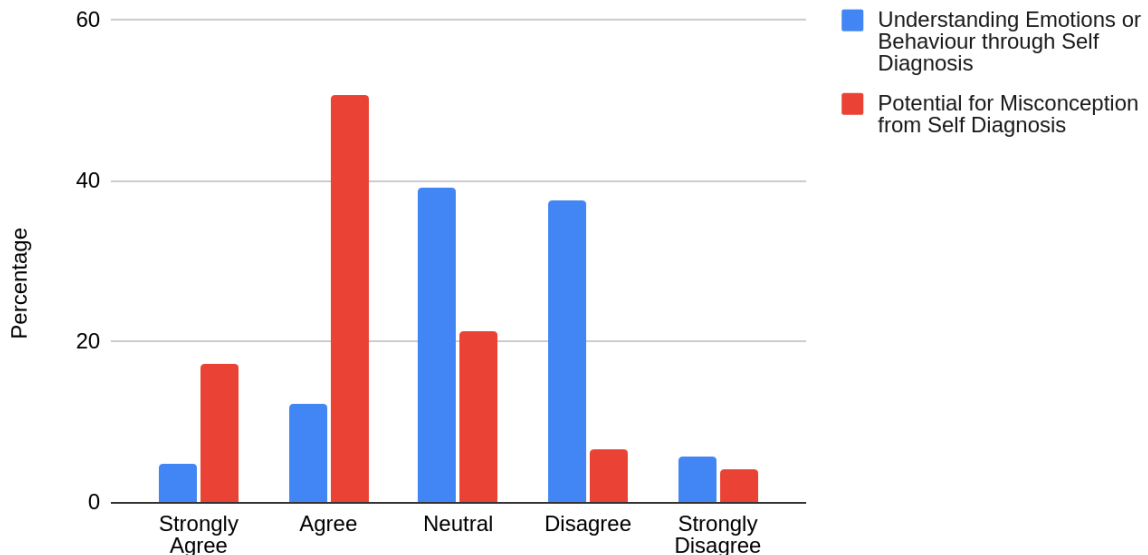
Table 6: Shows the distribution of respondents according to the Impact of Self Diagnosis

Options	Understanding Emotions or Behaviour through Self Diagnosis	Potential for Misconception from Self Diagnosis
Strongly Agree	4.9%	17.2%
Agree	12.3%	50.8%
Neutral	39.3%	21.3%
Disagree	37.7%	6.6%

Strongly Disagree	5.7%	4.1%

The graph examines the impact of self-diagnosis by comparing two factors: understanding emotions or behavior through self-diagnosis (blue bars) and the potential for misconceptions resulting from self-diagnosis (red bars). A large percentage of respondents agree that self-diagnosis leads to misconceptions, as indicated by the prominent red bar in the "Agree" category. Meanwhile, fewer respondents strongly agree with this sentiment, showing that misconceptions are widely acknowledged but not strongly emphasized.

Conversely, understanding emotions or behavior through self-diagnosis receives relatively fewer agreements, with the blue bars being notably lower across most categories. Neutral responses are significant for both aspects, particularly for misconceptions, reflecting ambivalence or uncertainty about the effects of self-diagnosis. Disagreement levels are minimal for both factors, with a slightly higher percentage of respondents rejecting the notion of misconceptions compared to understanding emotions. Overall, the graph suggests that while self-diagnosis may help some individuals understand their emotions, it also carries a substantial risk of fostering misconceptions, which is more prominently perceived.

Table 7: Shows the distribution of respondents according to Help Seeking Tendencies

Options	Role of Instagram in Seeking Professional Help	Motivation to Consult a Mental Health Professional Due to Self Diagnosis	Sense of Preparedness to Talk to Professional after Engaging with Instagram Content
Strongly Agree	7.4%	3.3%	6.6%
Agree	28.7%	19.7%	22.1%

Neutral	33.6%	33.6%	38.5%
Disagree	19.7%	29.5%	23%
Strongly Disagree	10.7%	13.9%	9.8%
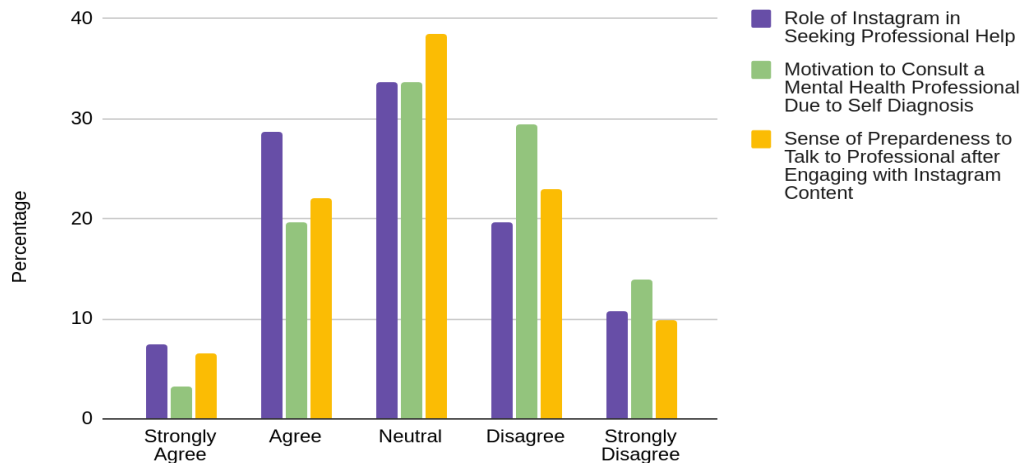
The graph explores help-seeking tendencies influenced by Instagram, focusing on three aspects: Instagram's role in encouraging professional help-seeking (purple), motivation to consult a mental health professional due to self-diagnosis (yellow), and a sense of preparedness to talk to a professional after engaging with Instagram content (green). Neutral responses dominate across all categories, particularly for preparedness and motivation, indicating that many individuals have mixed feelings or uncertainty regarding Instagram's influence on these behaviors.

A significant portion agrees that Instagram plays a role in seeking professional help and motivates consultations due to self-diagnosis, as seen in the notable purple and yellow bars in the "Agree" category. However, fewer respondents strongly agree with these impacts. Disagreement levels are also prominent, especially in preparedness and motivation, suggesting that Instagram's influence in fostering confidence or action varies among individuals. Overall, the data reflects that while Instagram may contribute to help-seeking behaviors for some users, its impact remains inconsistent, with a large portion of respondents remaining neutral or disagreeing.

Table 8: Shows the distribution of respondents according to Perceived Influence and Credibility of Social Media of Mental Health Content on Social Media

Options	Collaboration between Professionals and Influences to Spread Awareness	Verifying Information from Social Media with Reliable Sources	Impact of Social Media on Young Adults' Understanding of Mental Health
Strongly Agree	18.9%	15.6%	31.1%
Agree	45.9%	38.5%	46.7%

|			
Neutral	23%	30.3%	17.2%
Disagree	6.6%	10.7%	2.5%
Strongly Disagree	5.7%	4.9%	2.5%

Perceived Infleunce and Credibility of Mental Health Content on Social Media
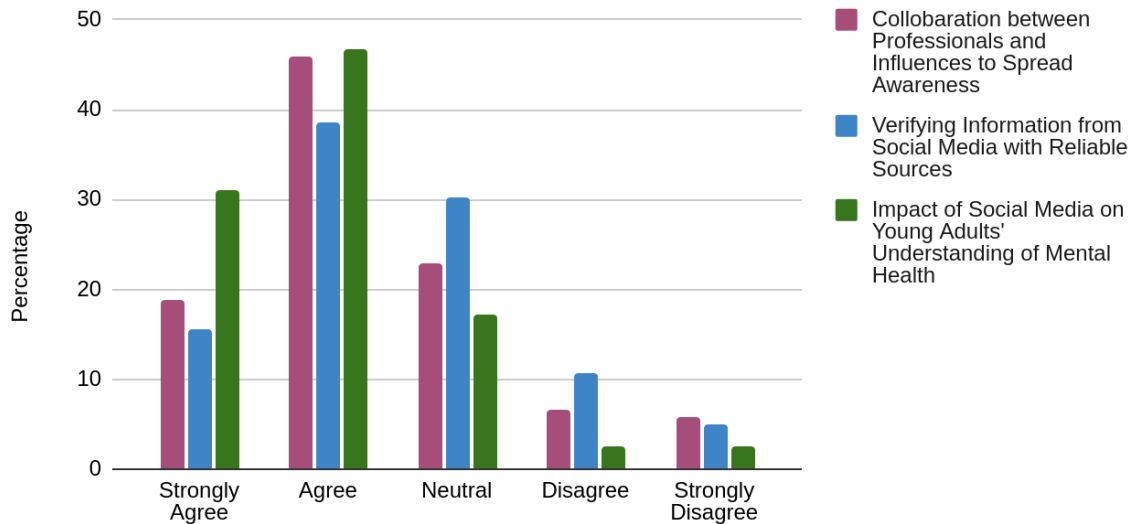
The graph examines the perceived influence and credibility of mental health content on social media across three aspects: collaboration between professionals and influencers to spread awareness (purple), verifying information from social media with reliable sources (blue), and the impact of social media on young adults' understanding of mental health (green). A significant portion of respondents agree that social media impacts young adults' mental health understanding, as shown by the tall green bar in the "Agree" category. Similarly, collaboration between professionals and influencers is also widely agreed upon, reflected by the strong purple bar.

However, verifying information with reliable sources receives a more varied response, with fewer participants strongly agreeing or agreeing, and many remaining neutral. Neutral responses are particularly high across all three categories, indicating a level of ambivalence or uncertainty about these factors. Disagreement and strong disagreement levels are minimal for all aspects, suggesting that while there may not be strong endorsement of credibility and influence, these elements are not widely dismissed either. Overall, the data highlights that while social media is acknowledged for its impact on mental health understanding and collaboration efforts, its credibility and reliability remain areas of mixed perceptions.

Table 9 shows the distribution of respondents based on the Suggestions for Social Media Platforms to Promote Accurate Mental Health Awareness and Mitigate Misinformation

Graph 9 shows the distribution of respondents based on the Suggestions for Social Media Platforms to Promote Accurate Mental Health Awareness and Mitigate Misinformation
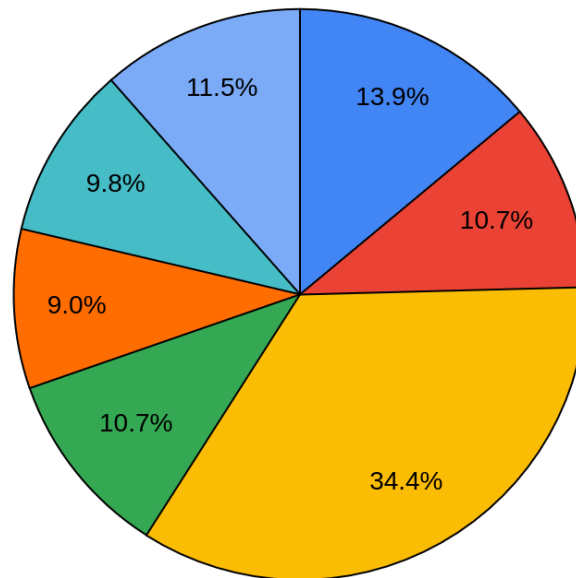
Graph 9 highlights key recommendations from respondents on improving mental health content on social media. The most popular suggestion (34.4%) was partnering with mental health experts and organizations to create verified content, emphasizing the need for credibility and accuracy in online mental health discussions. This response reflects concerns about misinformation and the potential harm of unverified advice.

Another notable recommendation (13.9%) was using algorithms to prioritize verified, evidence-based posts. Respondents acknowledged the overwhelming volume of mental health content and suggested that platforms should leverage technology to highlight trustworthy information. This indicates a growing awareness of the role algorithms play in shaping public understanding of mental health.

Additionally, 11.5% of respondents supported educational campaigns to improve mental health literacy, aiming to reduce stigma and promote early intervention. Similarly, 10.7% recommended collaborations with influencers and public figures to raise awareness, recognizing their significant reach and ability to engage diverse audiences.

An equal percentage (10.7%) suggested encouraging users to report misleading or harmful mental health content, highlighting a sense of shared responsibility in combating misinformation. Meanwhile, 9.8% advocated for in-app resources and helpline links to provide immediate support to users in need. Another 9% recommended stricter moderation policies to flag and remove false or harmful content, though this received relatively lower support, possibly due to concerns about free speech restrictions.

Overall, respondents prioritized credibility, algorithmic control, and education in addressing mental health misinformation. Their recommendations reflect an awareness of the challenges posed by unverified content and a call for platforms to take greater responsibility in curating reliable information. The emphasis on expert collaboration, algorithmic adjustments, and user engagement suggests a balanced approach that values both institutional oversight and community participation in improving the quality of mental health content on social media.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to self-diagnosis tendency among young adults engaging with mental health, the impact of social media, specifically instagram, reveals a complex landscape that has significant implications. It is observed that Social media has a decisive impact on the youth's understanding and perception of Mental Health.

The findings of this study highlights that while a large proportion of people actively engage with mental health content on Instagram, only a small number of people find the information shared on the platform regarding mental health to be useful. The study revealed that many people engage in self-reflection after viewing mental health content on instagram and majority of the sample population also display self-diagnosis behaviour. However, it wasn't common belief that self diagnosis helped in better understanding of one's own emotions and behaviours. This was followed up by a significant number of respondents claiming that self-diagnosis through Instagram or any social media platform often leads to misconceptions about mental health.

Another important finding was that most of the respondents were not motivated to seek professional help after self-diagnosis. It also revealed that self-diagnosis doesn't contribute to the consultation of mental health professionals. When the respondents were urged to give suggestions, it was observed that collaboration between Instagram influencers and mental health professionals would reduce misinformation. It was noted that social media platforms must strike a balance between moderation and openness, particularly when dealing with complex, subjective topics like mental health, which can vary across individuals and cultures.

In conclusion, the findings suggest a strong demand for improved mental health awareness on social media, with an emphasis on accuracy, education, and accessibility. These responses highlight a growing awareness of the impact social media has on mental health and the need for collaborative efforts between professionals, influencers, platforms, and users to ensure that information is accurate, responsible, and supportive.

IMPLICATIONS

- The study highlights the need to educate young adults about the risks associated with self-diagnosis based on unverified mental health content on Instagram.
- It emphasizes the importance of fostering critical evaluation skills to identify credible mental health information on social media platforms.
- Provides insights into the need for strategies to encourage professional help-seeking behavior among individuals engaging in self-diagnosis.
- It offers evidence to guide policymakers in creating regulations to combat misinformation and promote the sharing of expert-verified content on Instagram.
- Suggests the value of partnerships between social media platforms and mental health organizations to disseminate accurate information and reduce stigma.

LIMITATIONS

- The study was conducted on a sample of 122 young adults in Chennai, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population.
- The use of convenience sampling, a non-random sampling technique, may introduce bias into the study results.

- The reliance on an 18-item self-constructed checklist for data collection may limit the depth and breadth of the study's findings.
- The study focused on participants from Chennai, which may not fully capture the behaviors of young adults across different regions.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- Investigating the prevalence and impact of self-diagnosis tendencies on other social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Twitter, or YouTube) to assess platform-specific influences.
- Investigate how Instagram's visual appeal, algorithms, and recommendation systems contribute to the spread of mental health-related misinformation or reinforce self-diagnosis behaviors.
- Examine the effectiveness of existing platform policies and potential regulatory frameworks in curbing misinformation about mental health on Instagram.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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