



Online mental health information-seeking behaviour among undergraduate students in Nigerian private universities

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords

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Mental health disorders among youth have emerged as a significant global health burden, affecting approximately one out of seven individuals worldwide aged between 10 and 19 years. This study seeks to shed light on the online mental health information-seeking behavior among undergraduate students in Nigerian private universities. The study addresses the online information-seeking behaviors of undergraduates related to mental health. Data was collected through a questionnaire from a sample of 400 randomly selected undergraduate students from Covenant and Babcock Universities using a descriptive research design. The findings reveal that students predominantly seek mental health information online with search engines and social media being the primary sources accessed. The study also revealed that 65% of undergraduates never sought professional assistance after their exposure to mental health information online. Depression, anxiety, and eating disorders emerged as the most frequently sought-after types of mental health information. Students used online mental health information for self-education, self-diagnosis and to gain a better understanding of mental health. This study concludes that the understanding of undergraduate students' information-seeking behavior has implications for mental health education and support within university settings. The study recommends that online mental health communicators should develop messages that would motivate audiences to seek professional assistance for their respective mental health conditions.

Contribution/Originality: This study is original in its emphasis on the online mental health information-seeking behaviors of undergraduate students in Nigerian private universities, specifically examining the gap between online information exposure and professional help-seeking. It highlights a unique intersection of self-education, self-diagnosis, and mental health communication strategies in this context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the communication industry has experienced immense growth with the advent and constant revolutionizing of technology and the internet (Christine, 2017). The internet plays a salient role in people's lifestyles worldwide. The internet has changed and is still influencing the manner in which individuals relate to each other and run their daily affairs as well as exchange knowledge with those around them. The internet's growing impact on startups as well as established businesses has made it an integral part of modern life. The ITU (2024) states that in 2021, the global population of people using the internet was recorded around 4.9 billion signifying that more than two-thirds of the entire globe's populace is presently using the internet. Additionally, according to Statista (2024), 18% of internet users worldwide were between the ages of 18 and 24. The internet serves as one of the many resources for information available to young adults. Theoretically, the internet gives

young people private and fast access to information from different fields of knowledge in ways that were not possible in the past which could potentially lead to an uproar of issues.

The internet is a resource for information in several fields, including health. People probably turn to the mass media for information on their health since they have used several communication channels to learn about a wide range of subjects. In contemporary times, obtaining information about one's health through the internet has emerged as a prominent practice because of its widespread accessibility with comprehensive exposure of information, its ease of conducting searches, the cost effectiveness of access and its interactive features as well as ability (Javaid, Haleem, & Singh, 2024). According to research of young adults (Beck et al., 2014; Lim, Molenaar, Brennan, Reid, & McCaffrey, 2022; Nelson & Salawu, 2016) the Internet is a very enticing source for them when they need information about delicate or stigmatized health issues.

The provision of fundamental healthcare services in Nigeria continues to pose a significant challenge. The growing demand for healthcare is overwhelming health professionals and healthcare services. Average life expectancy in Nigeria is roughly 17 years less than the global average life expectancy for the world which is 72 years. The Nigerian doctor-to-patient ratio is one doctor to 6000 patients and falls short of the World Health Organizing (WHO) benchmark. Finding alternate means of receiving healthcare that satisfy the minimal needs becomes important because the depicted image of a population of 218.5 million shows an inadequate number of medical experts. Consequently, scholars, experts and development agencies are advocating for improved health behavior among the population from diverse demographic characteristics, especially young adults (Iversen, 2018; Jones, 2018).

Young people's search for health information is essential because many of them are dealing with several health problems, including mental health disorders. Nowadays, one of the most widely discussed subjects in the world is mental illness. They are mostly common among children, teenagers and young adults between the ages of 7 and 24 according to the Cambridge University Press in 2018. According to the report published by the World Health Organization (2021) it can be inferred that approximately 14% of the global health burden in the average age span between 10 and 19 years is attributed to mental illnesses affecting approximately one out of seven individuals globally. Additionally, suicide ranks as the fourth most prevalent reason for demise among individuals aged 15 to 29 also behavioral issues, anxiety disorders, and depressive illnesses have been identified as some of the primary triggers of illness and disability among adolescents, yet these remain largely unrecognized and untreated. The need for more trustworthy information and information sources cannot continue to go unnoticed.

1.1. Statement of the Research Problem

The prevalence of mental disorders is increasing which has significant negative effects on health as well as significant social, economic, and human rights implications worldwide. According to the World Health Organization, one out of every eight people, nearly 970 million individuals suffered from a mental disorder in 2019 (Kumar et al., 2024). Among the various mental disorders, depression and anxiety disorders were observed to be the most prevalent. The prevalence of anxiety and depressive disorders experienced a significant surge in 2020 which has been attributed to the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 (Kupcova, Danisovic, Klein, & Harsanyi, 2023). The World Health Organization's preliminary predictions for 2022 indicate an anticipated surge of 26% and 28% in the prevalence of anxiety and severe depressive disorders within one year. A significant proportion of individuals afflicted by such conditions experience barriers to accessing these interventions despite the existence of proficient strategies for the prevention and management of mental illnesses.

The continent's population is expected to double in the next three decades which will put greater pressure on young adults who presently make a living in highly competitive job markets across the region or who are struggling academically or with family issues (Lutz, Sanderson, & Scherbov, 1997). Many individuals who fail to

reach their objectives are likely to struggle psychologically (mentally) while some frustrated individuals may turn to substance misuse as a coping mechanism.

Scholars and experts are advocating deliberate mental health seeking behavior as a means to enhance their knowledge and behavioral habits in light of the rising prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescents (Aref-Adib et al., 2016; Sankoh, Sevalie, & Weston, 2018; Ustün, 1999). Given that searching for information has become one of the most prominent online activities among young people, ranking closely alongside playing video games and downloading music (Obasola & Agunbiade, 2016) seeking health-related information on the internet is crucial for enhancing mental wellness. It provides an abundance of information on various common and specialized mental disorders.

The users' comprehension of mental health issues is widened and made more germane to increase their participation in therapeutic interactions (Sillence, Briggs, Harris, & Fishwick, 2007). Additionally, it may promote improved decision-making and drug adherence. However, the availability of health information online frequently sparks debates among various segments of society regarding the value, veracity and utility of the vast quantity of health information (Cline & Haynes, 2001).

According to a recent European study, more than 75% of participants viewed the Internet as a valuable resource for learning a great deal about health, and 60% admitted to using it for this purpose as cited in Aref-Adib et al. (2016). According to research conducted by Escoffery et al. (2005) on U.S. college students, several students are using the Internet. More than 70% of the participants used the Internet as a source to obtain health-related data and more than 40% reported doing so frequently. Scholarly research indicates that internet access among undergraduate students in Nigeria (Obasola & Agunbiade, 2016), South Africa (Oyedemi, 2012) and Ghana (Owusu-Acheaw, 2015) is expanding. However, few studies have examined how this age group searches online for mental health information. This deficiency is due to the paucity of studies on mental health issues in the region. There are a few anomalous studies on mental health in Nigeria (Aluh, Okonta, & Odili, 2019; Kukoyi et al., 2022). However, these studies did not explore how adolescents use digital health information sources for mental health decision-making. Additionally, the diverse age groups in Nigerian public universities may confound understanding of the specific needs and preferences of undergraduate students. This study aims to investigate the online mental health information-seeking behaviors of undergraduate students in Nigerian private universities. The study seeks to understand how students use the Internet to obtain mental health information, the types of information they seek and their perceptions of its quality by focusing on private universities, which generally have a more homogenous age group than public universities.

1.2. Research Objectives

1. What are the online information-seeking behaviors of undergraduates regarding mental health?
2. What online sources do undergraduate students use to seek mental health information?
3. What types of mental health information do undergraduate students commonly seek?
4. To what extent do undergraduates use online mental health information?
5. How do undergraduates perceive the quality of online mental health information?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a descriptive research design. The utilization of this particular research design was motivated by its ability to effectively demonstrate the characteristics of individuals, circumstances, or groups as well as the frequency at which specific phenomena manifest. These studies primarily focus on observing, describing, and documenting various components of a given scenario or situation in its natural state (Dulock, 1993). Determining the kinds of mental health information undergraduate students are looking for was done by using the descriptive technique. The same descriptive technique was used to examine the online information sources used by

undergraduates to access mental health information, analyze how undergraduate students use online mental health resources, and find out how they handle incorrect information about mental health online.

2.1. Population

The boundaries of a research project are determined by the population. It is the perimeter within which research is conducted. The population of this study consists of students at Covenant University and Babcock University, (8,601 and 10,000, respectively, according to the universities websites) currently undergoing an undergraduate program. The choice of picking 2 private universities from Ogun State out of the 36 states in Nigeria is premised on the fact that Ogun State houses the highest number of Universities in Nigeria and the highest number of private universities. Ogun State has 13 universities, i.e., a federal university, 2 state universities and 10 private universities. Covenant University and Babcock University were randomly selected from the 10 private universities situated in Ogun State.

2.2. Sample

Although there is disagreement among academics over the ideal sample size (Keyton & Beck, 2008), 384 participants were chosen for this study from samples taken from Covenant University and Babcock University, respectively. According to the Fisher (1983) calculation which was mentioned by Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), this sample size was justified.

$$n = (z^2 p q) / d^2$$

Where

n= Minimum sample size required.

p= The proportion of the subjects in the target population estimated to have the characteristics being investigated.

z = Z- score from the standard nominal tables. $Z\alpha$ (α is the significance level and is always put at 0.05 in social science) $\Rightarrow Z_{0.05} \Rightarrow$ usually a standard of 1.96.

q= 1-p.

d= Maximum tolerable error in the study and in social science is 0.05.

Where

$$n = \frac{z^2 p q}{d^2}$$

$$d^2$$

$$z=1.96.$$

$$q= (1-0.5).$$

$$d= 0.05.$$

$$\text{Therefore, the sample size was } = (1.96)^2 * 0.5 * (1-0.5) / (0.05)^2 = 3.8416 * 0.5 * 0.5 / 0.0025 = 384 \text{ undergraduates}$$

2.3. Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling strategy was used for the survey to choose respondents for the distribution of questionnaires. There are 36 states in Nigeria. Ogun State was chosen purposely because it has the most private universities in Nigeria. In the first stage, 2 universities, Babcock University and Covenant University were selected from Ogun State using a simple random process. In the second stage, the university students were further divided into their various colleges. 1 college each was randomly selected from both universities, the College of Science and Technology and the School of Management Sciences. In the third stage, 2 departments were randomly selected from each college. The department of Management Information System and Biochemistry was selected from Covenant University and the departments of Business Administration and Marketing and Accounting were selected

from Babcock University. At the last stage, the departments were stratified into levels using a simple random technique. 200 and 400 level students were selected from the 2 colleges in Covenant University and the 300 and 400 level students were selected from the 2 colleges in Babcock University.

2.4. Data

Descriptive statistics data expressed in frequency, percentage, and cross tabulation was used to describe the demographic traits of respondents as well as the sources of information they use. As a result, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to organize the quantitative data that this investigation produced.

Table 1. Demographic profiles

Variables	Babcock University	Covenant University	Total
Gender			
Male	25 (6.2)	137 (34.2)	163 (40.5)
Female	128 (32.0)	110 (27.5)	238 (59.5)
Total	153 (38.2)	247 (61.8)	400 (100)
Age			
16-18	137 (34.2)	36 (9.0)	173 (43.2)
19-21	16 (4.0)	117 (29.2)	133 (33.2)
22-24	0 (0.0)	94 (23.5)	94 (23.5)
Total	153 (38.2)	247 (61.8)	400 (100)

3. RESULT

3.1. Demographic Profiles of Respondents

Table 1 presents the cross tabulation of participants from the two selected universities in Ogun State, Southwest, and Nigeria. The gender distribution of respondents reveals that among the 400 participants, 163(40.5%) were male while 238(59.5%) were female students. This suggests that most of the participants in the study were female. The age distribution also depicts that 43.2% of the students population fell within the age range of 16-18 years, 33.2% were within the age group of 19-21 and 23.5% were within the age group of 22-24. The majority of the participants involved in the study fell within the age range of 16 to 18 years.

Research Question 1: What are the information-seeking behaviours of undergraduate students towards mental health?

The information-seeking behaviours of undergraduates were measured with five items that will help in providing answers to the first research question. The analyses of the items are presented in tables and figures with appropriate captions and interpretations.

Table 2. Information- seeking behaviours of undergraduate

Items	Yes	No
Do you seek information on mental health from any online platform?	210 (52.5)	190 (47.5)
Do you enjoy seeking mental health information from online platforms?	204 (51.0)	196 (49.0)

Table 2 presents a selection of measurements pertaining to the information-seeking behaviour of undergraduates that participated in the survey. 52.5% of the participants opined that they seek information on

mental health from any online platform while 47.5% of respondents had an opposing opinion. This could be due to the internet's role as a convenient and easily accessible source of knowledge.

In addition, most of the respondents, which accounted for 51% noted that they enjoy seeking mental health information from online platforms. This result could be attributed to the anonymity enjoyed when searching for mental health information online.

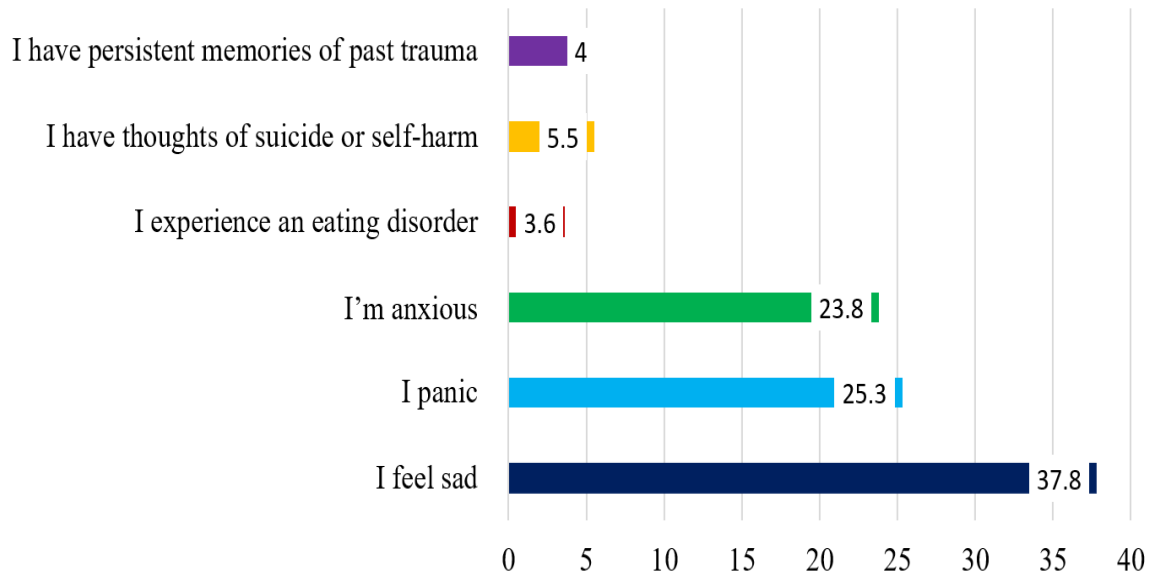


Figure 1. Conditions that make people seek information online.

Figure 1 shows the conditions under which people seek mental health information online. 37.8% noted that they used to seek mental health information online when they felt sad, 25.3% noted that when they are panicking, they usually seek mental health information online, and 23.8% noted that they did that when they were anxious. Similarly, only 3.6% believed that when they experience an eating disorder, they seek mental health information online. Meanwhile, 5.5% and 4.0% noted that when they have thoughts of suicide or self-harm as well as when they have persistent memories of past trauma, respectively. According to the results, undergraduates majorly seek online mental health information when they feel sad, when they are panicking and when they are anxious. This might be due to their emotional competence to express their feelings enough to seek out resources about mental health online.

Table 3. How frequently do you seek mental health information online?

Items	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than thrice
Daily	10.8	2.3	2.7	2.0
Weekly	11.4	3.9	3.3	4.0
Monthly	19.3	26.1	7.0	6.3
Total	41.5	33.3	13.0	12.3

Table 3 displays the percentage of respondents who look for information about mental health online once, twice, or more often than once each day, week or month. Most participants seek mental health information online twice monthly.

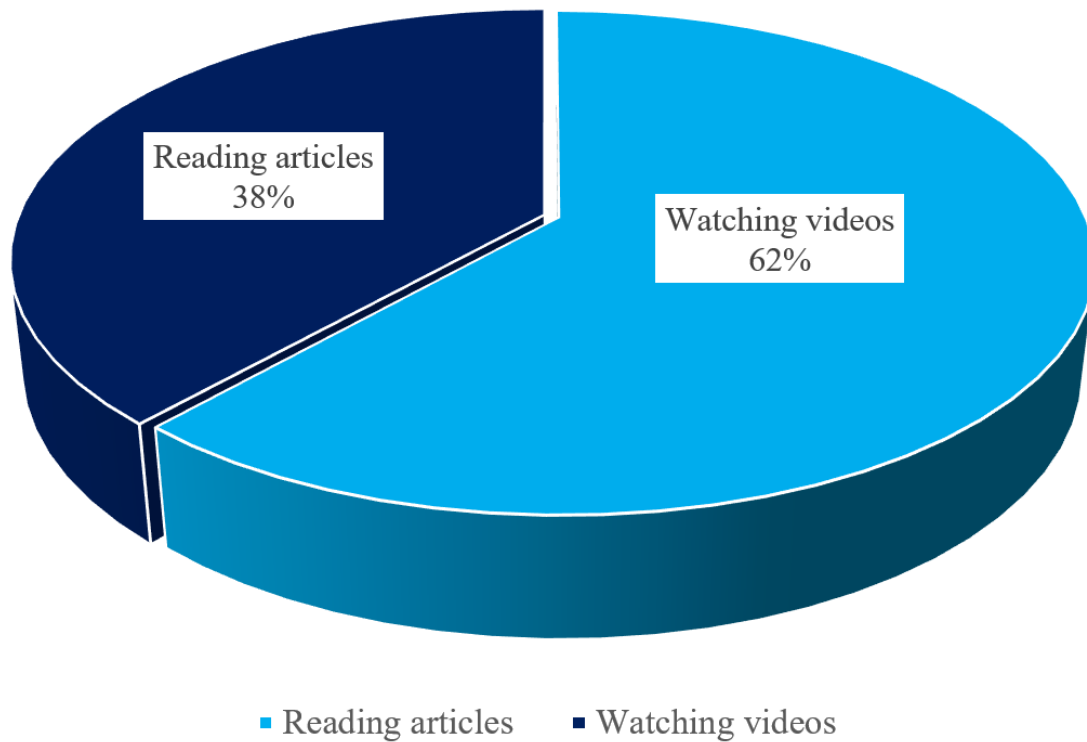


Figure 2. Content preference for getting online mental health information.

Figure 2 shows the content preference for getting online mental health information as noted by the respondents. The results showed that most (62%) participants preferred watching videos on online mental health information while 38% preferred reading articles. This could be as a result of the appealing nature of videos and their audio-visual characteristics which facilitate a heightened level of engagement and immersion.

Research Question Two: What are the predominant online mental health information sources undergraduate students are exposed to?

Research question two was measured with two items in the research instrument. The first question that was asked in attempting to find out predominant online mental health information was centered around the online platforms predominantly utilized to get information on mental health. The finding is presented in Figures 3 and 4.

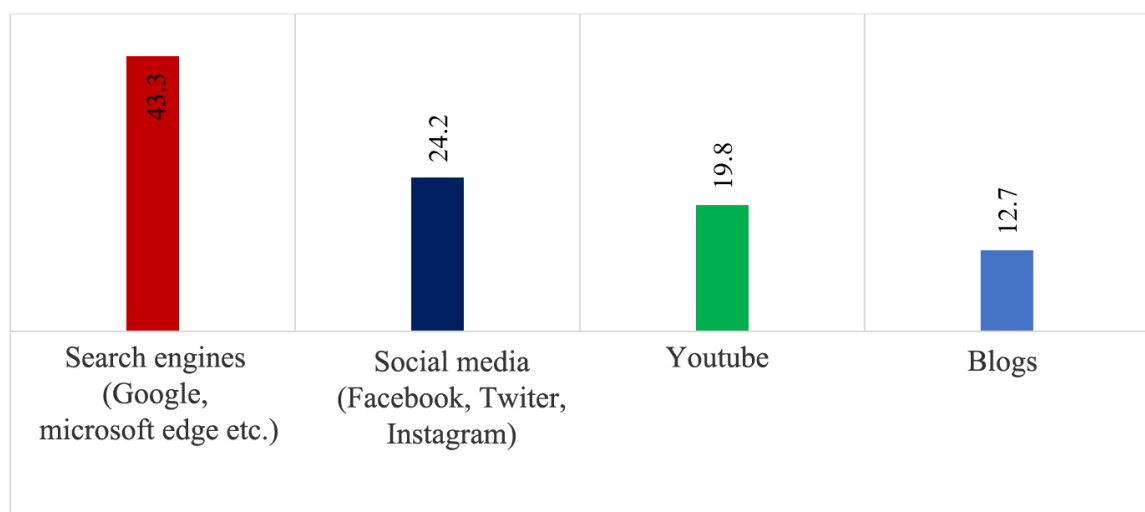


Figure 3. Online platform predominantly utilized to get information on mental health.

According to Figure 3, most respondents which accounted for 43.3% predominantly use search engines, such as Google, Microsoft Edge and other search engines to get information on mental health online. This is followed by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram which accounted for 24.2%. Meanwhile, 19.8% used YouTube while 12.7% used blogs to get information on mental health online. This trend may be caused by the many benefits it gives people who are looking for information, such as faster access to information and a more user-friendly interface made possible by keyword searches. Undergraduates can find more updated health-related information by searching across various files at the same time.

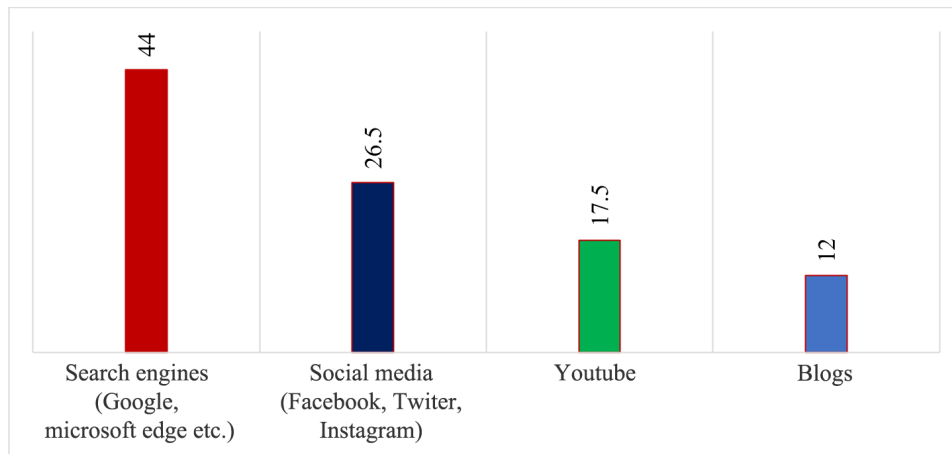


Figure 4. Most preferred source to seek mental health information.

Based on the responses, Figure 4 shows the most preferred sources to look for information about mental health. The result showed that the majority of the respondents which accounted for 44% mostly prefer search engines, such as Google, Microsoft Edge and other search engines to get information on mental health online. This is followed by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram which accounted for 26.5%. Meanwhile, 17.5% preferred YouTube while 12.0% preferred blogs to get information on mental health online. This result can be attributed to the versatility of search engines to provide information in both audio and visual form and the ease of access.

Research Question Three: What types of mental health information do undergraduate students search for?

Question three focused on types of mental health information undergraduate students search for online. This was measured with nine items.

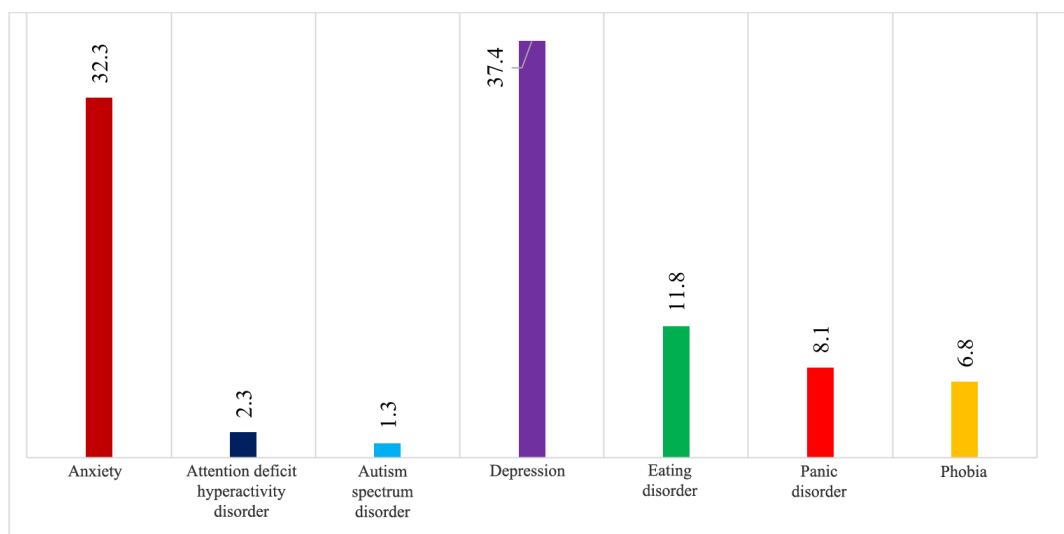


Figure 5. Type of mental health information students seek.

Figure 5 depicts multiple resources students look for when researching mental health. The findings revealed that depression and anxiety were the most often mental health information undergraduate students search for online. This result could be attributed to a number of factors like academic stress, financial stress, and social pressure.

Table 4. Types of mental health information being sought

Items	Very often 5	Often 4	Rarely 3	Sometimes 2	Never 1
I seek information about depression online.	40.5	13.8	16.2	19.5	10.0
I seek information about anxiety online.	17.8	26.5	13.2	25.5	17.0
I seek information about eating disorders online.	40.3	13.5	20.8	14.3	11.1
I seek information about phobia online.	37.0	17.5	19.8	16.2	9.5
I seek information about panic disorder online.	41.8	20.8	18.2	8.2	11.0
I seek information about autism spectrum disorder online.	7.8	4.0	55.2	15.8	17.2
I seek information about Schizophrenia online.	7.0	8.0	60.5	12.5	12.0
I seek information about bipolar illness online.	9.2	10.0	54.0	14.8	12.0

Table 4 depicts the opinion of students on mental health information being sought. Mental health information that students used to seek covers depression, anxiety, eating disorders, phobia, panic, autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, and bipolar illness. The findings revealed that most of the respondents very often seek information about depression. In addition, they also often seek information about anxiety and seek information online about eating disorders. The findings also revealed that most of the participants seek mental health information online about phobia and panic very often while most of them also seek information online about autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, and bipolar illness rarely. The findings imply that depression, anxiety, eating disorder, phobia, and panic were the types of mental health information being sought by the students very often and often.

Research Question Four: What do undergraduate students use online mental health information for?

Table 5a. What do undergraduate students use online mental health information for?

Items	Yes	Sometimes	No
I make use of the information I get on mental health online.	195 (48.7)	96 (24.0)	109 (27.3)
Due to your exposure to online mental health information, have you ever sought professional assistance?	140 (35.0)	-	260 (65.0)

Table 5a shows the information on whether the respondents used online mental health information. 48.7% used the information, 24% sometimes use the information and 27.3% don't use the information for anything. Similarly, the researcher wanted to find out if, due to the exposure of the respondents to online mental health information, they have ever sought professional assistance. Most of the respondents which accounted for 65% never sought professional assistance.

Table 5b. What do undergraduate students use online mental health information for?

Items	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Neutral	Not confident
How confident were you in the online mental health information received?	13.8	41.5	33.7	11.0

How confident respondents were in the online mental health information gotten was depicted in Table 5b. The result showed that most of the participants which represent 41.5% were somewhat confident.

Table 5c. Mental health information usage

Items	Understanding of mental health	Self-education	Self-diagnosis	Decision on treatment
I use the mental health information.	13.8	51.1	23.3	11.8

Table 5c shows respondents use the mental health information. Some of the things they use it for cover the understanding of mental health, self-education, self-diagnosis, and treatment decisions. The findings showed that most participants used the information for self-education followed by self-diagnosis, knowledge and treatment, respectively.

Research Question Five: What are the perceptions of undergraduate students on the quality of online mental health information?

Table 6. Undergraduates perceptions of the quality of online mental health information

S/N	Items	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	SD
FBC1	Online mental health information is trustworthy.	81 (20.2)	158 (39.0)	100 (25.0)	39 (9.8)	24 (6.0)	4.620	0.6534
FBC2	Online mental health information is reliable.	71 (17.7)	171 (42.8)	98 (24.5)	34 (8.5)	26 (6.5)	4.582	0.5313
FBC3	Online mental health information is dependable.	50 (12.5)	147 (36.8)	123 (30.8)	54 (13.5)	26 (6.5)	4.151	0.5982
FBC4	Online mental health information is misleading.	38 (9.5)	39 (9.8)	130 (32.4)	106 (26.5)	87 (21.8)	4.270	0.5589
FBC5	Online mental health information is exaggerated.	37 (9.3)	90 (22.5)	123 (30.7)	114 (28.5)	36 (9.0)	4.227	0.6213

The last research question focused on the perceptions of undergraduate students on the quality of mental health resources available online. Five items were used to gauge this with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on a 5-point scale. One of the question that was asked was to know if online mental health information is trustworthy. Most respondents which accounted for 61.1% strongly agreed and agreed that online mental health information is trustworthy. 25% were indifferent about the statement while 15.8% had an opposing opinion with a mean score of 4.620 and a standard deviation of 0.653. Similarly, most participants which accounted for 60.5% strongly agreed and agreed that online mental health information is reliable. 24.5% were indifferent about the statement while 15.0% had conflicting views with a mean score of 4.582 and a standard deviation of 0.5313. Similarly, most respondents which accounted for 49.3% strongly agreed and agreed that online mental health information is dependable, 30.8% were indifferent about the statement while 20.0% had conflicting views with a mean score of 4.151 and a standard deviation of 0.5982. Furthermore, most respondents representing 48.3% strongly disagreed and disagreed that online mental health information is misleading, 32.4% were indifferent about the statement while 19.3% had conflicting views with a mean score of 4.270 and a standard deviation of 0.558. The coding was done in reverse order. Moreover, these findings also revealed that most respondents which accounted for 37.5% disagreed and strongly disagreed that online mental health information is exaggerated. 30.7% were

indifferent while 31.7% believed that online mental health information is exaggerated with a mean score of 4.227 and a standard deviation of 0.6213.

4. DISCUSSION

The evolution of modern technologies has led to a widespread practice of seeking health information online worldwide. The impact of this phenomenon is significant in terms of the quality of life and health outcomes of a given nation. This study sought to investigate the online information-seeking behavior of undergraduate students towards mental health. According to the results, majority of the participants sought information on mental health from any online platform. This result is similar to [Montagni et al. \(2020\)](#) findings, a significant proportion of students (91.4%) have utilised the internet as a source of general health information with almost half of them (49.4%) having searched for mental health information at least once on any online platform. This also confirms the findings of [Baidoo, Gyamerah, Yeboah, Koomson, and Owusu-Fordjour \(2022\)](#); [Esmailzadeh, Ashrafi-Rizi, Shahrzadi, and Mostafavi \(2018\)](#) and [Mathew and Osaze \(2014\)](#) that indicated that their respondents used the internet as their main health information source. The findings further showed that a majority respondents enjoy seeking mental health information online similar to [Pretorius, Chambers, Cowan, and Coyle \(2019\)](#) findings. The result of the study also showed that most of the respondents sought mental health information online when they feel sad, when they are panicking or when they are anxious. On the other hand, few of the respondents sought online mental health information when they had thoughts of suicidal or self-harm. Similarly, [Rickwood, Deane, and Wilson \(2007\)](#) found that when young people are struggling with suicidal thoughts, they are less likely to look for support or resources online.

The researcher similarly wanted to find out how often the participants sought mental health information online. The findings showed that the frequency of online searches for mental health information among survey respondents was relatively low when compared to other activities. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the sample reported conducting such searches at least twice per month. This is similar to [Montagni et al. \(2020\)](#) study where results showed that participants exhibited infrequent online mental health information-seeking behaviour, with a majority of the sample (53.8%) reporting accessing health information at least once a month.

To ascertain the content preference of the respondents for getting information online, the results showed that most participants would rather watch a video about mental health online than read articles on mental health.

The findings of this study reinforce the uses and gratification theory in the following ways:

Information-seeking: The information-seeking variable is in line with why the respondents went online to look for mental health information. It suggests that people actively look for information to meet their needs, like learning about mental health issues or how to help themselves etc. This need for information can be met through online platforms, which are easy to use and reach.

Need satisfaction: The study shows that people look for mental health information online to satisfy their specific needs, such as seeking information when they feel sad or are panicking or anxious. This aligns with the needs gratification principle of the uses and gratifications theory, which says that people use media to meet their psychological, emotional, and social needs.

To ascertain the principal online platforms that undergraduate students utilize as sources of mental health-related information, the findings revealed the primary sources of mental health information that cater to the health information requirements of students. Among various mental health information sources, search engines (Google, Microsoft Edge etc.) topped the list of online platforms predominantly used by undergraduates to get information on mental health, this is followed by social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), while YouTube and blogs were the least used. These findings correlate with the result of [Mathew and Osaze \(2014\)](#) which revealed that a significant proportion, 78%, of the participants in the study reported utilising Google as their primary source for obtaining information online. It is the most commonly utilised means of information dissemination followed by

social media. [Urquhart et al. \(2005\)](#) assert that online health information resources provide numerous benefits to information seekers, such as quickened access to information and ease of use through the utilization of keyword searches. Moreover, it is possible to conduct a search across multiple files simultaneously, thereby facilitating undergraduates in locating more updated health-related data. This can also be attributed to the convenience of accessibility facilitated by Android, IOS and Microsoft-operated mobile phones and other portable gadgets that are extensively accessible.

Findings show that Google was the most favored search engine for accessing mental health-related information, this result corresponds with [Seçkin \(2014\)](#) study. Followed by social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, this corresponds with [Schønning, Hjetland, Aarø, and Skogen \(2020\)](#) findings.

The results of this study reinforce the uses and gratification theory in the following ways:

Meeting specific needs: The results back up the idea that people actively use search engines and social media to find the mental health information they need. According to the uses and gratification theory, this aligns with the idea that people use media to meet certain needs and wants.

Active media use: The study's results, which show that undergraduate students take an active role in choosing and using online platforms, reinforce the idea that people who use media are proactive agents. Students choose the tools (like search engines and social media) that help them reach their goals and meet their needs the best. This shows both their freedom of choice and their need to be in control of how they use media.

The result of the study reveals that depression, anxiety, and eating disorders are the most frequent types of mental health information among undergraduate students. This result can be juxtaposed with WHO's report in 2022 that among the various mental disorders, depression and anxiety disorders were observed to be the most prevalent. The prevalence of anxiety and depressive disorders experienced a significant surge in 2020, which has been attributed to the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 ([World Health Organization \(WHO\), 2022](#)).

The findings sought information about these mental disorders online and showed that most of the respondents very often sought information about depression, eating disorder and anxiety. This study suggests that most of the respondents very often seek information about depression, eating disorders and anxiety online because online platforms provide anonymity and privacy which enables individuals to access information on sensitive topics such as mental health without fear or judgement or stigma. Youths may experience a greater sense of ease in accessing information through online platforms as they provide a secure environment for them to investigate their inquiries and acquire knowledge without divulging their personal identity. The internet also offers immediate access to a vast amount of information. Youth are digitally connected and possess a high degree of familiarity with them, thereby facilitating their ability to access information pertaining to mental health topics with ease and convenience. The accessibility and availability of online resources make it an attractive option for seeking information.

The result also showed that some respondents sought information online about phobia and panic often, while they sought information about autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia and bipolar illness rarely. The findings imply that depression, anxiety, eating disorder, phobia, and panic disorders were the types of mental health information being sought by the students very often and often. This can be attributed to the fact that depression, anxiety and panic disorders are some of the primary causes of diseases and disabilities among adolescents.

A noteworthy aspect of the results obtained in this investigation pertains to the utilization of sought-after information in the process of arriving at a decision. According to the findings, the majority of respondents made use of the mental health information they got online. This study is similar to [Fox \(2011\)](#) findings that majority study's respondents made use of the information gotten and 44% reported that the information they got had been helpful. Most respondents never sought professional assistance after their exposure to mental health information online. The findings show that a few of the respondents were very confident while the majority was somewhat confident and some were neutral about their confidence level in information obtained. Respondents use the information gotten majorly for self-education. Some of the respondents also used the information gotten for self-

diagnosis or treatment and a few respondents used the information gotten for a better understanding of mental health after a visit to the hospital or health center.

The results of the study revealed that a significant proportion of participants expressed strong agreement or agreement that online mental health information is trustworthy. This result suggests a positive perception among undergraduate students regarding the credibility of such information. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that a considerable percentage (15.8%) expressed a different perspective, denoting a certain degree of doubt. This is similar to Eysenbach and Köhler (2002) findings.

The second research question focused on the reliability of mental health information available on the internet. According to the results, the majority of participants strongly agreed or agreed that such information is reliable. Whilst a significant proportion maintained a neutral or undecided stance, signifying a lack of consensus, and a lesser fraction expressed conflicting views. The third research question investigated the reliability of mental health information available on the internet. The statement regarding the reliability of online mental health information was found to be agreeable by a majority of the participants. Nevertheless, a noteworthy percentage of individuals maintained a neutral or indecisive stance, while 20.0% articulated contradictory perspectives. This result corresponds with Diaz et al. (2002) findings. The fourth research question aimed to evaluate the degree to which internet-based mental health information is perceived as being misleading. A substantial proportion of undergraduates strongly disagreed or disagreed with the proposition that online mental health information is deceptive. This implies a prevailing notion of dependability and precision.

The fifth research question pertained to the perception of online mental health information as being exaggerated. According to the results, a significant proportion of participants (37.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, suggesting a perception of limited exaggeration. However, a significant proportion of respondents, specifically 30.7% maintained a neutral stance on the matter, while 31.7% expressed the belief that the information pertaining to mental health available online is exaggerated.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents have a positive perception towards online mental health; they are open to seeking information and resources related to mental health online. However, this information is not effective enough for necessitating active decision-making, such as sourcing treatment amongst respondents because respondents have low confidence in information retrieved. The study also observed high-level of hesitancy to seek professional assistance among respondents. It was also observed in the course of the investigation that the majority of respondents prefer watching videos online about mental health to reading articles online for seeking mental health information. The study also discovered that depression, anxiety and eating disorders are the most frequently sought after types of mental illness online. The study corroborates the assertions of the use and gratification theory, media sources on mental health cater to the needs of respondents hence, respondents interact with these sources for meeting their information needs. The study also reveals the need for more strategic communication that evokes action in the audience, i.e., seeking professional assistance.

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