

Online Mental Health Help Seeking Behaviors Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Even before the pandemic, utilization of online mental health resources continues to grow among young adults. There is limited research on online help seeking behaviors, let alone specific research on college students' online mental health help seeking behaviors. This study aims to identify which terminology college students utilize on online search engines to seek assistance related to mental health. A cross-sectional survey design was used during the 2019-2020 academic year. The respondents consisted of 259 college students at one of the 50 largest public institutions of higher education in the Southeastern United States. Overall, the sample data suggests that college students utilize general words such as mental health help, as well as specific symptoms and diagnoses, and words related to cost and insurance when searching online for mental health assistance. This data suggest online search word utilization for mental health has gender, racial, and age differences, which could further inform the way online search engines operate to provide adequate services for specific populations seeking help.

Introduction

Since being exposed to the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), the United States has seen an increasing concern for mental wellness. During late June 2020, 40 % of adults reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse with 31% experiencing anxiety and depression symptoms, 26% with trauma or stressor-related disorder symptoms, 13% with increased substance use, and 11% with suicidal ideations (Czeisler et al., 2020). From August 2020 to February 2021, people experiencing symptoms of anxiety, or a depressive disorder increased from 36.4% to 41.5% (Vahratian et al., 2021). Specifically, 80% of students reported some level of depression during the pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). Research indicates that Covid-19 mental health challenges have been associated with the morbidity of the disease, as well as the, strict, but necessary, health guidelines in place, such as physical distancing and stay-at home orders (Czeisler et al., 2020). As health guidelines were ordered throughout the nation, Americans were forced to revert to an online lifestyle. In April 2020, 51% of U.S workers reported working remotely due to Covid-19, and two-thirds of remote workers reported they wish to continue to do so, whether the pandemic continues or not (Brenan, 2021). Other aspects of life have also turned to online platforms, such as education, healthcare, and social events. With the nation adapting to current times, many people are left with utilizing their technology to accommodate their needs.

Research related to online help seeking behaviors appears very limited. When analyzing the generated websites that first appear when searching for mental health assistance, only a few of the websites that are available to young adults encourage them to seek professional evaluation (Birnbaum et al., 2016). Most of the search results are unmonitored chat forums. Other mental health search results attempt to reduce stigma, normalize psychotic symptoms, or are unrelated to mental health (Birnbaum et al., 2016). Individuals with mental health conditions also use search engines to learn about their symptoms. In one study conducted on search behaviors among individuals with psychosis, participants utilized only the top results from online searches which mentioned previously, do not provide adequate assistance (Aref-Adib et al., 2016). Although many participants valued the accessibility to online mental health information, many stated that they did not discuss their online mental health discoveries with their clinicians (Aref-Adib et al. 2016).

Even before the pandemic, utilization of online mental health resources continues to grow among young adults. The need for online services is essential to support the large number of young adults experiencing mental health challenges. Even more so, young adults turn to online services due to face-to face services posing barriers to access, availability, and high cost, all of which are important factors on whether young adults seek assistance (Kauer et al., 2014). In addition, online services offer young adults a sense of security, providing them with autonomy, anonymity, and privacy (Kauer et al., 2014). Although few studies examine the effectiveness of online mental health services, understanding college students' help seeking behaviors is an important first step in enhancing mental health and expanding access to appropriate care. The current study aims to identify online mental health seeking behaviors among college students. Although this study was conducted just months before the Covid-19 pandemic, results offer significant insight for colleges and mental health services as America continues to grow toward an online lifestyle.

Methodology

There is limited research on online help seeking behaviors, let alone specific research on college students' online mental health help seeking behaviors. This study aims to identify which terminology college students utilize on online search engines to seek assistance related to mental health.

Sample and Design

A cross-sectional survey design methodology was used during the 2019-2020 academic year. The sample consisted of college students and 259 responded at one of the 50 largest public institutions of higher education in the Southeastern United States. A questionnaire and an informed consent form (KSU IRB #19-521) were distributed at various campus events and to students in health and human services courses.

Description of the sample is in Table 1. Majority of participants were White (47%), female (50%), and between the ages of 18-25 (82%).

Table 1. Demographics

	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18-25	213	82
26-40	20	8
41-65	7	3
No Answer	19	17
Gender		
Male	105	41
Female	130	50
Gender Variant/Non-Conforming	2	1
Transgender Female	1	0.4
No Answer	21	8
Race		
White	121	47

Black	68	26
Multi-Racial	19	7
Hispanic/Latino	15	6
Asian	8	3
Pacific Islander	1	0.4
Other	1	0.4
No Answer	26	10

Measures and Analyses

The survey instrument was a 10-item questionnaire comprised of both open and closed-ended questions. The questionnaire evaluated help seeking behaviors, however, this article focuses specifically on online mental health seeking behaviors among college students. Participants were invited to share terms they would use for conducting online searches to identify resources to help themselves, or someone they know with emotional or mental health issues. These open-ended responses were labeled using open coding and grouped into eight themes which are depicted in Table 2.

Statistical analyses were performed using Microsoft Excel. The pivot table application in Excel was used to conduct cross tabulations. Demographic variables were rescaled into polytomous variables. Two sample equal variance t-tests were conducted using alpha level of 0.05 to identify statistically significant differences in responses across different demographic groups.

Findings

A quarter of the respondents would use the words “mental health help” or similar words to identify mental health resources, as well as words related to specific services. Other frequently used terms pertained to symptoms and diagnoses (19%) or cost and insurance (13%). Females were more likely to search for specific services (45%) and symptoms (25%), compared to males (30% and 23%, respectively). There was a significant association between males and females for the category specific services ($p < .05$). Males were more likely to use the words “mental health help” (46%), compared to females (34%). Specific locations (18%) and self-help (24%) were most likely to be searched by females.

Hispanic (53%) and White (47%) participants were more likely to use the words “mental health help” or similar words in their online search, whereas multiracial participants (53%) were more likely to seek specific services, and Asian Americans were more likely to use location specific searches (25%) and self-help word choices (38%) compared to other races. There was a significant association between White (47%) and Black (28%) respondents for category mental health help ($p < .01$) and cost/insurance (2% and 9%, respectively) ($p < 0.05$). Black (43%), Asian (50%), and multiracial (53%) participants appeared to utilize words related to specific services more than any other word choice category.

Younger respondents (18-25 years) were cost sensitive and used words related to cost and insurance more than other age groups. For the category location, the ages 18-25 (14%) and 41-65 (57%) were significantly associated ($p < .01$), as well as the ages 26 to 40 (10%) and 41 to 65 (57%) ($p < 0.01$). Respondents between the ages of 41-65 were the most likely to seek location specific services or use general terms related to mental health help (57%). The age group 26-40 was most likely to use specific services (55%), symptoms or diagnoses (35%) and self-help (30%) in their searches compared to the other age groups. For the category mental health help, the ages 18-25 (38%) and 26-40 (35%) were significantly associated ($p < .05$), as well as the ages 26-40 (35%) and 41-65 (57%) ($p < .05$).

Table 2. Online Help Seeking Word Search

Word Search	<i>n</i>	%
Specific Services	128	25
Mental Health Help	126	25
Symptoms/Diagnosis	97	19
Cost/Insurance	66	13
Location	43	8
Other	28	5
Specific Website	15	3
Self-help	11	2
Total	514	100

Note. The frequency count may be more than sample size due to multiple open-ended responses. The total possible range for answers is 259 x 5 blanks, meaning there is a chance for 1295 answers for each category.

Discussion

Although research on college students' online help seeking behaviors is limited, results from this study provide some interesting insights. Overall, the data suggests that college students utilize general words such as mental health help, as well as, specific symptoms and diagnoses, and words related to cost and insurance when searching online for mental health assistance. When looking at gender differences, females are more likely to use specific word choices pertaining to symptoms and diagnoses, while males used more general terminology. This finding could be useful when targeting gender specific audiences for mental health resources on the internet. Additionally, females were more likely than males to search for self-help remedies than males, and there is little research to compare these findings to. However, these findings could be related to perceived stigma around mental health help-seeking behavior and men's lack of knowledge surrounding self-care practices (Wendt & Shafer, 2016). When looking at racial differences, Black, Asian, and multiracial participants utilized words related to specific services more than any other word choice category, which is interesting as research indicates racial and ethnic minority groups generally have low mental health literacy (Crisanti, 2016). Furthermore, younger respondents were more likely to use words related to cost and insurance, while middle aged respondents leaned towards self-help word choices. Concerns regarding cost and insurance among younger respondents is like discourses by Yelpaze and Ceyhan (2019); however, much research describes older adults having positive attitudes towards help-seeking behavior (Currin et al., 1998; Robb et al., 2003). Therefore, in this study, middle aged responses towards utilizing self-help may be based on expanding their mental health care while also utilizing professional help.

Limitations

Although this exploratory study aimed to contribute to the literature on college students and their online mental health seeking behaviors, this study had several limitations including small sample size, unrepresentative demographics for the population, and respondent bias. Lastly, human error is possible, as the data were typed into excel.

Implications of Study

More research needs to be done on college students' help seeking behavior on online platforms. This is especially important as Covid-19 has caused many Americans to revert to a virtual lifestyle. Even more so, 75% of all mental illness onsets by age 24, and 47% of young adults (aged 20 to 39 years) utilize the internet for health information (Reavley & Jorm, 2010; Ybarra & Suman, 2008). This data suggest online search word utilization for mental health has gender, racial, and age differences, which could further inform the way online search engines operate to provide adequate services for specific populations seeking help, as well as informing how social workers and human service organizations tailor their online platforms to reach these populations. A collaboration among social workers and web designers would enhance this process to expand outreach of online mental health services.

Conclusion

Since entering unprecedented times due to Covid-19, living in a virtual world has become normalized, and the need for online mental health services has become essential. This study provides insight on gender, racial, and age differences on college students online mental health help seeking behaviors, however, this is just the starting point in providing adequate online mental health services.

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Declaration of Conflicting interests

Neither I nor any person associated with this paper have a significant financial arrangement or affiliation with any product, service, facility, or person used or discussed in this paper, nor any potential bias against another product, service, facility, or person.

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