

Instagram Therapists vs. Qualified Mental Health Professionals: How Young Adults Perceive and Navigate Mental Health Advice Online

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Abstract

The growing presence of “Instagram Therapists” - individuals who share mental health advice on Instagram without formal qualifications - has raised important questions about the credibility of online mental health information. In contrast, are qualified mental health professionals and licensed practitioners. Existing literature shows a surge in young adults turning to social media for mental health guidance. However, limited research delves into how they perceive and differentiate between advice from Instagram Therapists and qualified professionals. This qualitative exploratory study aims to investigate how young adults perceive and navigate mental health advice provided by Instagram Therapists in comparison to Qualified mental health professionals. It explores the factors that contribute to building trust in Instagram Therapists, the motivations behind seeking help from qualified professionals instead, and the influence of Instagram-based mental health content on young adults' mental health beliefs, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviors. 15 young adults aged 18 to 30 years, with no formal background in psychology, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings suggest that while Instagram increases access to mental health information, the lack of Context and depth often leads to emotional consequences. Young adults eventually seek solutions beyond online content, transitioning to therapy for more clarity. Perceptions and misconceptions about therapy also emerged. This study highlights the importance of mental health literacy and verification of professional qualifications before relying on online advice. The results have implications suggesting policies and the need for accurate and responsible Mental Health information on online platforms.

Keywords: Content moderation, help-seeking behaviour, instagram therapists, mental health literacy, mental health professionals, misinformation

INTRODUCTION

The increasing awareness around mental health, there has been a rise in online mental health content on social media, especially on Instagram. This platform provides mental health information from both professional therapists and self-proclaimed 'Instagram Therapists' - individuals who may not have

formal training but share advice based on personal experiences or trends. The freedom for anyone to post content has led to a significant increase in misinformation, which can influence people's understanding of mental health. This misinformation may lead to self-diagnosis, reliance on unverified advice, or delays in seeking professional help.

Instagram's algorithm plays a key role in determining which content reaches a wider audience. Since the algorithm prioritizes engagement, it often amplifies content that is

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popular rather than accurate. This has blurred the boundaries between expert advice and general opinions, making it difficult for users to distinguish between reliable and misleading information. As a result, ethical concerns have emerged regarding the spread of unverified mental health content, which can have serious consequences for those who rely on it.

The influence of online mental health content extends beyond information consumption, it affects decision-making regarding whether to seek help from qualified professionals or rely on Instagram therapists. As the distinction between trained professionals and social media influencers becomes less clear, there is a growing need for better regulation of online mental health content, as well as greater awareness and education on how to identify credible sources.

This study explores the experiences of individuals who consume mental health content online, focusing on how it shapes their understanding of mental health, influences their decisions about seeking support, and affects their perception of professional versus social media-based mental health guidance.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The article "Self-diagnosis in a digital world," by Lindsey Phillips explored the emerging trend of self-diagnosis by individuals based on online resources and social media content, based on her conversations with clients seeking therapy. The article emphasized the importance of professional evaluation, noting that different mental health disorders may manifest in different ways for individuals depending on race, gender, life experiences, etc. The article highlights the dual-edged nature of digital self-diagnosis, acknowledging both the potential for increased self-awareness and the risk of misdiagnosis as well. It highlights the need for a balanced approach to encourage individuals to seek professional support when exploring mental health concerns with the assistance of online information (*Self-Diagnosis in a Digital World*, n.d.) The study titled "The Virtual Clinic: Social Media's Influence on Self-Diagnosing and Mental Health Awareness among Filipinos" by Kristine Joy Alegria Capuyan and Emmanuel Paciano M. Mabulay examines how individuals in Filipinos use social media platforms to self-diagnose mental health conditions. It highlights the significant trend of individuals using social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and TikTok to access mental health information, often leading to self-diagnosis and the spread of misinformation. Results highlight the key drivers such as easy access to online content of this help-seeking behavior, online. The study emphasizes the need to promote mental health literacy and responsible consumption of social media and advocates a balanced approach to seeking diagnosis and treatment (Joy & Mabulay, 2024)[12].

Pretorius et al. conducted a study titled 'Young People Seeking Help Online for Mental Health: Cross-Sectional Survey Study' on young people aged 18-25 living in Ireland. This study aimed to investigate the online help-seeking behaviours and preferences among young individuals. The findings indicate that young individuals are seeking assistance online for personal and emotional issues that are causing them distress. Anonymity and confidentiality provided by the online assistance are the key motivators to seek online help. Furthermore, it was also found that though young people are involved in strategies that attribute credibility to web-based information, concern about their reliability is still a substantial barrier. Additionally, some of the barriers, like the cost of certain online services, lack of reliability, inability to locate tailored information, and a lack of mental health literacy, were stated by the respondents (Pretorius et al., 2019)[18].

The study titled 'Young People Talk About Digital Support for Mental Health: An Online Survey of 15-30-Year-Olds in New Zealand' by Garrett et al. is a cross-sectional online survey which included respondents aged 15-30 years living in Aotearoa New Zealand. It aimed to discover what young people believed about different sorts of online assistance and their perceived benefits and cons. They appreciated digital mental health support but preferred in-person care, emphasizing trust, quality, and targeted services in both formats. Some found digital help useful, while for many, the benefit was more restricted. The findings indicate that digital mental health interventions are not suitable for all kids (Garrett et al., 2014)[11].

The study examined the factors influencing help-seeking behavior in mental health, with the objective of understanding barriers and facilitators in the process. The study focused on young people and explored challenges such as stigma, accessibility, and awareness. The findings indicated that positive help-seeking experiences increase the likelihood of seeking support in the future. Additionally, the study highlighted the role of digital mental health resources in improving access to support. The authors emphasized the need for well-designed, accessible, and personalized interventions to enhance engagement and effectiveness in mental health services.

Social media has become a key platform for young adults seeking mental health information and is a key source of mental health information for young adults, with Instagram and TikTok being prominent sources. While influencers and mental health professionals both contribute to improving mental health awareness, their approaches differ. Instagram therapists engage audiences but may lack scientific accuracy, whereas qualified professionals provide evidence-based but sometimes less engaging content. Research shows that content on mental health symptoms, self-care, and treatment options can enhance mental health literacy, but unregulated posts by influencers raise concerns about misinformation. Disclaimers and crisis support improve credibility but are inconsistently used. As online mental health discussions grow, balancing accessibility with credible information is essential (Pretorius et al., 2022)[16].

Digital influencers shape youth mental health perceptions and behaviors through their relatable social media presence, often surpassing the influence of qualified mental health professionals. While casual and humorous content from influencers makes mental health discussions more accessible, it may trivialize serious issues, whereas qualified professionals' clinical tone, though informative, risks being perceived as unrelatable. Influencers who share personal mental health experiences are often seen as authentic and relatable, though their advice may lack accuracy. Combining personal narratives with expertise improves content credibility. While sponsored content can effectively promote mental health products and services, concerns remain about potential exploitation.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive bias theory

Cognitive bias is a systematic (i.e., non-random and thus predictable) deviation from rationality in judgement or decision-making.

Cognitive schemas or shortcuts enable people to make rapid and efficient decisions without conscious effort. Shortcuts enable individuals to make "good enough" and often accurate judgments. However, they also make people susceptible to predictable cognitive biases (Ehrlinger et al., 2016)[9]. Cognitive biases include the hindsight bias, anchoring bias, halo effect etc.

Dual-process theory

Dual Process Theory explains why people demonstrate restricted rationality in thinking and decision-making activities. It claims that there are two separate cognitive processes: Type 1 (T1) and Type 2 (T2). This hypothesis claims that an obvious distinction in thinking is required to explain two clusters of correlational facts. One cluster reflects a quick and intuitive process, whereas the other describes a slow and deliberate one (Evans, 2008; Kahneman, 2011; Evans and Stanovich, 2013[10], as cited in Bellini-Leite, 2022). T2 core features include heavy working memory load, explicitness, low capacity, high effort, and slowness, whereas T1 central qualities include weak working memory loading, implicitness, high capacity, low effort, and speed (Bellini-Leite, 2022).[3]

Cognitive dissonance theory

Social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957. Festinger (1957) defined cognitive dissonance as "An antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction."

Cognitive dissonance theory is based on three basic principles. Humans are conscious of discrepancies between their actions and ideas. When individuals recognise this contradiction, they

experience dissonance, which encourages them to overcome it. Individuals experience tension and seek to reduce it. This dissonance or tension can be handled in one of three ways: by modifying beliefs, actions, or perceptions of actions (Borah et al., 2020).[5]

Conceptual Framework

Qualified mental health professionals

Qualified Mental health professionals include psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors, who have undergone formal education and training and certification to diagnose, treat and support individuals with mental health concerns. They use evidence based practices and adhere to ethical guidelines to ensure accurate and responsible care.

Instagram therapists

Instagram therapists are individuals who share mental health advice on Instagram without formal qualifications in psychology or mental health. Their content is often based on personal experiences or popular psychology rather than scientific evidence, which raises concerns about misinformation and self-diagnosis.

Objectives of the Research

1. To explore how young adults perceive the credibility and reliability of mental health advice from Instagram therapists compared to qualified mental health professionals.
2. To understand the impact of online mental health content from Instagram therapists on young adults' beliefs and help-seeking behaviours.
3. To explore factors influencing young adults' trust and engagement with mental health information online

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study has utilized a qualitative approach, the collection of data through dialogue and open-ended communication. This exploratory research method aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how young adults perceive and navigate mental health advice online.

Inclusion Criteria

The participants included in this study met the following criteria:

- Individuals between the age of 18 years to 35 years
- Individuals who have sought therapy from a qualified mental health professional
- Active users of Instagram who engage with online mental health content shared by 'Instagram therapists.'

Exclusion Criteria

The participants excluded in this study met the following criteria:

- Individuals formally trained in Psychology
- Individuals who are not well-versed in English
- Individuals diagnosed with a mental health disorder
- Individuals who do not actively use Instagram
- Individuals receiving therapy exclusively through text-based platforms or mental health chatbots.

Research Questions

1. How do young adults perceive and navigate mental health advice provided by Instagram Therapists compared to Qualified Mental Health Professionals?
2. What factors contribute to building trust in Instagram therapists among young adults?
3. What factors are influencing young adults to seek help from Mental Health Professionals instead of Instagram therapists?
4. How does exposure to mental health advice on Instagram influence young adults' mental health beliefs, coping strategies and help-seeking behaviour?

Research Settings

The study was conducted in an online setting using Google Meet as the primary platform for data collection by ensuring accessibility, privacy and convenience for participants.

Research Tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences with mental health advice on Instagram. This approach allowed for open ended discussion. The participants were informed about the purpose and structure of the discussion.

The interview questions were as follows:

1. How often do you come across mental health advice on Instagram, and what kind of online mental health content do you engage with the most?
2. What kind of emotions have you experienced when you have been exposed to excessive online mental health content?
3. What role does a professional's qualifications play in whether you trust their advice online?
4. When you see mental health advice from an Instagram therapist, how do you determine if it's credible?
5. Have you ever encountered misinformation about mental health on Instagram? If so, how did you identify it?
6. Before consulting the professional therapist, did you explore the content of Instagram therapists and try implementing it? If yes, then why and how has it been for you? / If no, why?
7. What factors determined your decision to seek help from a qualified mental health professional instead of relying on Instagram advice? For eg. - factors like cost, convenience, stigma, etc.
8. How did the experience of consulting a professional therapist compare to following Instagram mental health advice?
9. Has the mental health content shared by Instagram therapists changed your perception of mental health?
10. What measures can be implemented to make Instagram a safer platform for discussing mental health, ensuring that the content shared is provided by qualified mental health professionals?

Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 15 individuals aged 18 to 26 years who actively use Instagram and engage with mental health content. Participants were required to have prior experience seeking therapy from a qualified mental health professional. This purposive sampling ensured that the participants had relevant experiences to contribute meaningful and relevant insights to the study. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method used for identifying and interpreting patterns with qualitative data. The analysis was done manually using Braun and Clarke's six-step process. This approach helped ensure that the themes identified were closely aligned with the participants' experience and perceptions.

The analysis started with familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. Initial codes were generated to understand significant features of the data relevant to the research questions. These codes were analyzed to identify recurring patterns, which were organized into potential themes. Themes were reviewed to ensure they correctly represent the data. Finally, the themes were clearly defined and named to ensure that themes were distinct and effectively answered the research question. The final themes were integrated, supported by direct quotes from participants. The findings were also interpreted in relation to the already existing literature.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained to minimize bias and ensure that the interpretation accurately reflects the participants experiences and perspective.

Results

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Table 1. Quotes and code for themes

Themes	Description of Themes	Code	Quotes
Seeking Solutions Beyond Online Mental Health Content	Many individuals seek professional therapy for personalized support, as online content often lacks context-specific guidance	Preference for professional support over informal or online advice	"And instead of going to someone like friends and family or relatives or something like that, I thought that it would be better to consult someone who actually does this for a living, to consult an actual professional, qualified professional, because they would not only help me visualize the perspective, see things from a different perspective, but would also help me build the mindset of how do I pull myself out of these situations."
Emotional Toll from Unresolved Mental Health Issues	Quick-fix solutions can lead to frustration, emotional distress, and hesitation in seeking professional help	Frustration due to ineffective mental health advice	"I've followed some mental health tips that later turned out to be incorrect, which was frustrating."
Perceptions and Misconceptions About Therapy	Misconceptions about therapy reduce its perceived importance, but personal experiences highlight its long-term benefits	Fear of therapy workload	"I was hesitant about therapy after seeing posts that mentioned how demanding it can be."
Emotional Consequences of Excessive or Unverified Content	Consuming excessive or unverified mental health content can lead to emotional exhaustion, confusion, and misinformation.	Emotional distress from content, Impact of misinformation, Negative effects of unverified advice	"Sometimes, after consuming too much mental health content, I feel overwhelmed and emotionally drained." "I tried breathing exercises I saw online, but instead of helping, they made me more anxious." "Sometimes, after consuming too much mental health content, I feel overwhelmed and emotionally drained."
Momentary Validation & Information Processing	Instagram mental health content provides momentary validation but lacks long-term behavioral impact, highlighting the need for digital literacy.	Temporary validation without resolution	"Yeah, that's what, see, when I think that I don't see a solution there, I see multiple people talking about, okay, this is what childhood trauma looks like, or this is what anxiety looks like. And if I relate to it, to some extent, I feel like, oh my God, is this why I have been behaving in a certain way? Okay, cool, I understand it. But then how do I go about this? How do I even, you

			know, sort of address this in my life is something that I spoke to this about.”
Emotional Impact & Therapy Perception	Instagram fosters peer support, but its coping strategies lack structured implementation compared to professional therapy.	Emotional distress due to unstructured therapeutic solutions	“I sort of want to seek a solution there, which is not out there. And so instead of overwhelming, I think it becomes frustrating that, okay, the problem has been stated. I understand I'm going through anxiety, I understand I'm going through depression, but what do I do about this? So that frustration sort of keeps me awake after a while.”
Ethical Concerns & Misinformation Regulation	Unverified content blurs professional boundaries, necessitating fact-checking tools, credentialing, and platform accountability.	Need for verification of mental health content	“Fact checkers let you know, like fact checkers, according to like real psychology or like maybe there's some experts in there.” “Social media platforms should have better ways to filter and remove misleading mental health content.” “There could be a watermark or something of the sort telling people that the individual is qualified to share such kind of posts.”
Uncritical Consumption & Misinformation Risks	Risks passive acceptance of online content reinforces cognitive biases, emphasizing the need for critical evaluation of mental health advice.	Self-diagnosis, Taking advice at face value, Lack of attention to qualifications	“I often relate to mental health posts and assume they apply to me.” “I usually don't check if the person sharing advice is a professional or not.” “I take a lot of advice from Instagram without really fact-checking it.”
Perceptions and Misconceptions About Therapy	Misconceptions about therapy reduce its perceived importance, but personal experiences highlight its long-term benefits.	Instagram influencing negative perceptions of therapy	“I was hesitant about therapy after seeing posts that mentioned how demanding it can be.”
Emotional Consequences of Excessive or Unverified Content	Consuming excessive or unverified mental health content can lead to emotional exhaustion, confusion, and misinformation.	Emotional distress from content, Impact of misinformation, Negative effects of unverified advice	“I've followed some mental health tips that later turned out to be incorrect, which was frustrating.”
Preference for Professional Advice	Participants trusted professional therapists over Instagram therapists, valuing their accuracy, credibility, and	Personalised professional advice	“My therapist knew my situation and was able to give proper advice for that situation.”

	effectiveness.		
Transition to Therapy for More Clarity	Many sought professional therapy to validate or better understand mental health advice found on Instagram.	Seeking professional support for clarity	"I go to my therapist and talk to her about the advice seen on Instagram and ask if it's something I should go for."
Lack of Context or Depth in Online Mental Health Information	Instagram content was often seen as generic, lacking personalization, and scientific backing.	Preference for personalized support over generic online advice.	"Okay, the biggest difference is the, the, I would say, the privacy that you get. And also the tailor made, like, on Instagram, like I said, it was more of a blanket generalized symptom diagnosis." "If the person is trying to figure out why when it comes to Instagram, therapists, they're talking at a general level. They're not really figuring out why the issue is with you to just take as a mass figure"
Transition to Professional Support	Participants moved to professional therapy after recognizing its limitations and the need for expert guidance.	Realization of need for professional help, Personalized professional guidance	"After some time, I realized I needed more than just Instagram posts and sought professional help." "Speaking to a therapist was different because they gave me solutions tailored to my experiences."

DISCUSSION

In Table1, The findings suggest that individuals frequently encounter mental health content on Instagram, but their engagement with such content varies. Participants reported that their exposure is often incidental rather than intentional, with content emerging from professional pages or therapy-based accounts. This aligns with previous research indicating that social media serves as a passive source of mental health information, rather than an actively sought-out resource (Naslund et al., 2020)[15].

Participants reported experiencing momentary validation from engaging with mental health content online, often reacting impulsively by either completely relating to this content or questioning its relevance. However, Instagram's transient nature, people don't actively incorporate these coping skills into their daily routines. This aligns with the dual-process theory (Evans & Stanovich, 2013), which states that although people process information emotionally and instinctively at the time, lasting behavioural change requires more cognitive involvement. Many assessed this content by comparing it to personal experiences or discussions, highlighting digital literacy's role in preventing misinformation due to confirmation bias (Lewandowsky et al., 2012)[13].

Participants acknowledged Instagram's positive emotional impact, with relatable posts creating a sense of belonging and reducing isolation, supporting research demonstrating social media's role in providing peer support (Seabrook et al., 2016)[20]. Trust depended on the source, with professionally curated posts perceived as more trustworthy. Some also learned coping strategies like breathing techniques, but rarely implemented them. In contrast, therapy was perceived as more structured and effective. Exposure to online mental health discussions contributed to a greater appreciation for therapy, despite concerns about affordability. This is a crucial shift given the impact of stigma in deterring help-seeking (Clement et al., 2015)[8].

Concern over false information and the ethical implications of unverified mental health content on social media calls for safer online spaces. Participants expressed concern about the possible dangers of unverified mental health content. They highlighted the unclear boundaries between expert advice and informal discussions. It has been strongly suggested that in order to improve trust and accountability, verification measures like professional credentialing and content labelling are necessary. Some suggested AI-driven fact-checking and disinformation report mechanisms. Additionally, they suggested more stringent community norms and collaboration with mental health professionals. In order to ensure responsible content sharing and reduce potential psychological risks.

Uncritical consumption of online mental health content can lead to misinformation and poor self-diagnosis, impacting the well-being of individuals. One participant highlighted, stating, "I used to believe everything I saw on Instagram about mental health because it sounded so convincing. But later, I realized that not all of it was accurate or applicable to me." This reflects a deeper concern: social media prioritizes engagement over accuracy, leading to unintentional internalization of inaccurate or oversimplified psychological information (Chou et al., 2020)[7]. While some participants acknowledged passively taking advice without questioning its accuracy, others said that they checked information using academic sources. Such passive consumption reinforces cognitive biases, spreads misinformation and may influence self-diagnosis and treatment choices.

The sample exhibited a clear preference for professional advice over Instagram therapists. Participants reported that they found the professional therapist to be accurate and trustworthy than the Instagram therapists. They also reported that if they experience any mental health concern, they prefer consulting a professional. A study suggests that the majority of the people from the sample (73%) preferred in-person psychotherapy to digital consultation. Additionally, 62% of the sample expressed concerns about the effectiveness of digital psychotherapy (Renn et al., 2019)[19].

Individuals prefer engaging in therapy given by a professional for better clarity. One of the participants mentioned, "I go to my therapist and talk to her about the advice seen on Instagram and ask if it's something I should go for." Findings of the survey suggested how young people make use of the information presented with factual information of symptoms as its treatment. The findings indicate that young people value information that is backed by research and written by experts in the field (Pretorius et al., 2020)[17]. Several individuals prefer licensed therapists for more clarity and dependability because Instagram therapists' content frequently lacks a solid research foundation.

Online mental health information often lacks personalization, context, and depth. Participants reported Instagram advice is often subjective, reflecting individual experiences rather than evidence-based insights. As a result, participants found it difficult to benefit from such content as their experiences differ and the advice lacks context and depth, thereby making it become difficult to be understood and implemented.

Individuals shifted from Instagram therapists to seeking professional support. Participants reported that they realised that they needed to seek professional help after realising the limitations of mental content online. The participant realized that Instagram advice was insufficient. One of the participants mentioned, "After some time, I realized I needed more than just Instagram posts and sought professional help." Professional therapy offered a personalized approach and ongoing support.

Participants reported feeling confused by the narratives around mental health online and turned to professional support for a more customized approach. One of the participants mentioned: "The biggest difference is the, the, I would say, the privacy that you get. And also the tailor-made, like, on Instagram, like I said, it was more of a blanket generalized symptom diagnosis. You are actually interacting with someone. In therapy, you explain your context, and you get a response that is tailored to your context, which is not there on Instagram." Seeking professional help allows individuals to establish goals that are relevant to their personal growth and needs.

Individuals often experience an emotional toll from unresolved mental health issues due to a lack of information. Participants reported feeling lost when online mental health advice lacks clear direction, focusing on the 'what' aspect of the mental health concerns, but not the 'how' of the issue. Some participants reported feeling frustrated, struggling without effective solutions to their concerns. One participant mentioned - "I've followed some mental health tips that later turned out to be incorrect, which was frustrating." Reliance on these 'quick-fixes' often discourages seeking help from qualified professionals. This may lead to ongoing emotional dysregulation and unresolved psychological distress.

Misconceptions about therapy have been a central theme. A lack of awareness about therapy can lead to misinformation and an increased reliance on mental health information online. A common misconception is therapy is ineffective or unnecessary when information is already available online. However, research shows that 50% of clients saw a significant improvement after 21 therapy sessions, with 75% of clients showing improvement after 40 sessions. Participants also reported a shift in their perception after attending therapy. One participant mentioned - "I have come to realize that I don't have to have issues to go to therapy, it just generally helps you lead on with life. You don't have to really think that, oh my God, I'm messed up."

Excessive and Unverified content leads to emotional consequences for individuals. Research shows individuals felt overwhelmed due to the vast amount of information online (Skinner, Biscope, Poland, & Goldberg, 2003)[22]. Studies also found out how only 8% of the posts online are supportive, while others focus on self-harm and loneliness (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017)[6]. Participants reported, "Sometimes, after consuming too much mental health content, I feel overwhelmed and emotionally drained." Misinformation online further makes it challenging to distinguish a false narrative from authentic information.

Implications

The study has significant implications for research, mental health awareness and policy for social media. With limited research on the impact of Instagram therapists, this study highlights the need to further explore how young adults engage with mental health advice online. As social media continues to shape public opinion, understanding their role in mental health communication is crucial. A key concern is the issue of misinformation and how it leads to self-diagnosis. Many young adults may rely on Instagram for psychological insights without verifying the credibility of the sources, highlighting the need for better mental health literacy. Encouraging critical evaluation of online content and seeking information from qualified professionals can help users make informed decisions.

The study emphasizes the need for platform specific policy regarding content moderation and accuracy. Social media platforms could implement stricter guidelines, ensuring mental health content is more evidence based. Requiring content creators to mention their qualifications that will help differentiate professionals from unverified sources.

The study highlights the growing intersection between social media and mental health and the need for ongoing research, awareness initiatives and policy related interventions to ensure that the online mental health content is reliable.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, it also presents a set of limitations. The generalizability of the findings is limited due to the small sample size, inherent subjectivity involved in the qualitative exploratory research, and the potential self-selection bias of participants interested in mental health and Instagram. The understanding gathered from this study may be improved by larger-scale quantitative research that uses validated questionnaires and provides a fuller understanding of these issues. The study may also reflect the researcher's bias with respect to the interview questions due to the professional knowledge about the field. The study lacks the definition of mental health as well as mental health content, leading to subjectivity, which leads to the participants considering mindfulness and meditation as mental health content.

CONCLUSION

In the algorithm world of Instagram, where professional boundaries are often blurred, the influence of mental health content goes beyond information consumption. It shapes the perception of individuals, affects their help-seeking behaviors also leading to self-diagnosis. The study highlights the growing need for content regulation, along with awareness and identifying credible sources, as misinformation about mental health is on a rise.

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