

# A STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION AS A HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS OF STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN



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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This abstract provides an overview of a phenomenological descriptive research study that aimed to investigate the prevalence and effectiveness of using social media communication as a help-seeking behavior among university students for addressing psychological and emotional problems. **Objective:** The objective of the study was to understand the extent to which university students utilize social media as a means of seeking help for their psychological and emotional concerns and to assess the effectiveness of this behavior in addressing their problems. **Methods:** The study adopted a mixed-method research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. A survey was conducted online using Google Forms as the data collection tool. The survey consisted of 28 questions categorized into four sections: Background and Demographics, Use of Social Media Communication, Psychological and Emotional Experiences, and Effects of Social Media. The survey was distributed through various channels, including email, social media class chats, and the assistance of a lecturer. Data collection took place from March 7 to March 28, 2023. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data and present the findings. **Results:** The study findings addressed five research questions. It was revealed that a moderate proportion (49.6%) of University College Cork (UCC) students utilized social media to share their psychological and emotional concerns and seek advice or relief. The majority of respondents (67.2%) reported frequent use of social media for help-seeking purposes. Various social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok were employed for seeking help. The main psychological and emotional issues for which students sought help were stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear. The majority of respondents (69.8%) indicated that they received help through social media that addressed their problems. **Conclusion:** The study concluded that many UCC students experience psychological and emotional problems and turn to social media as a means of seeking help. The main motivating factors for using social media were ease of access, commonality, and the availability of information. While confidentiality and privacy were not prominent reasons, social media was generally perceived as a positive and fruitful option. However, most students did not believe that their social media experience significantly impacted their psychological or emotional problems. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for mental healthcare practitioners and university administrators in addressing student concerns. It is important to note that the study's limitation was the relatively small sample size of 119 students, representing just over 2% of the university's population of approximately 5000 students.

**Keywords:** social media communication, help-seeking behavior, university students, psychological problems, emotional problems.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone is made up of a physical and a mental component and neither is more important than the other. They both need to be in good operating condition for the individual to be considered whole and healthy. However, whether because of genetics, environmental factors, or simply from poor choices made by the individual, etc., sometimes the body and/or the mind does become ill and require the intervention of a professional to attend to the issue. While seeking help to address a physical illness is common as it bears little to no stigma depending on the kind of physical illness being experienced, seeking help to address a mental illness is usually not pursued because of the associating stigmas. In Jamaica, psychological and emotional mental health problems were not accorded to be illnesses to be attended to by professionals but were instead widely seen as a form of weakness that the individual needed to just shake off; a spiritual imbalance or attack that needed to be prayed away; or an incurable condition that renders the individual mad. The refusal to seek help for mental illnesses, however, can cause the illness to prolong and/or advance into a chronic problem that may in turn affect the physical health. It is therefore important for individuals to seek help for psychological and emotional problems and stresses. One way of relieving stress is by being socially connected to others, whether physically or by way of social media communication. Social media usage is one of the most popular online activities, and following the entrance of the worldwide pandemic, Covid-19 in 2020, almost everyone and everything went virtual. In 2021, over 4.26 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost six billion in 2027 (Dixon, 2023). While some research studies have found that excessive use of social media (that is Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, Snap Chat, etc.) is associated with increased levels of stress, others have found positive associations such as increased feelings of social connection. Reports have also documented that social media users also tend to report higher levels of perceived social support (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Shin & Purcell, 2015).

## Research Aim

The findings of this study are intended to contribute to the existing body of knowledge as it relates to the help-seeking behavior of university students, particularly as it relates to the use of social media communication, and for psychological and emotional problems. With persons becoming more aware of mental health concerns, it is imperative to identify and understand the prevalence of psychological and emotional problems being experienced by students and the impact of their preferred methods of addressing these problems.

The insight garnered from the study will assist:

1. University students in being sensitized to the effectiveness of social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour in addressing psychological and emotional problems and the preferred platforms used.
2. University administrators to gain insight in how to best assist students to address their psychological and emotional problems and improve their university experience.
3. Healthcare personnel in understanding university student's viewpoint as it relates to the barriers to and preferences for their help-seeking behaviour for the psychological and emotional problems experienced; and
4. Parents, guardians, and the general population in understanding the psychological and emotional issues being experienced by students and their preferred methods of addressing these issues.

## Research Objectives

- 1) Understand if students at UCC use social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour for psychological and emotional problems.
- 2) Determine the extent to which social media is used as a help-seeking behaviour to address their psychological issues.
- 3) Identify the types of psychological and emotional problems that UCC students are most likely to seek help for via social media communications.
- 4) Determine the effectiveness of social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour in addressing their psychological and emotional problems.
- 5) Ascertain the students' opinions on social media being a viable tool in addressing psychological and emotional problems.

## Research Questions

- 1) Do UCC students seek help from social media communication to treat psychological and emotional problems?
- 2) To what extent do UCC students use social media communication to seek help for their psychological and emotional problems?
- 3) For what psychological and emotional problems do UCC students use social media as a help-seeking behaviour?
- 4) How effective is social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour for UCC students with their psychological problems?
- 5) Do UCC students consider social media as a viable outlet to share their personal problems and to receive help for their psychological and emotional problems?

## Problem Statement

Since the Covid-19 pandemic people have been more open about psychological and emotional problems. However, based on the air of stigma that is still attached, there remains a level of reluctance from people, such as the youth, to physically seek help to address their psychological and emotional problems. While social media communication appears to be a useful alternative, not enough literature is available to inform on its effectiveness in helping university students to address psychological and emotional problems. This study therefore sought to assess the prevalence of the use of social media communication as a help-seeking behavior, and the viability of its use among university students in addressing their psychological and emotional problems.

## 2. Literature Review

### Social Media Use and Mental Health

Many people who struggle with mental illness now live prominent lives dominated by social media. Web and mobile platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or LinkedIn that enable people to connect with one another and share, collaborate on, or exchange various types of digital content are referred to as social media. Naslund, Bondre, Torous & Aschbrenner (2020), discussed that the broad appeal, accessibility, and popularity of social media platforms could be utilized as the subject of digital mental health develops, to make it possible for those who are struggling with mental illness or who need mental health services to get evidence-based care and support. They note that it is crucial for researchers to collaborate closely with clinicians and those affected by mental illness to ensure that potential benefits of using social media are carefully weighed against anticipated risks to achieve the intended goal, and to explore whether social media platforms can advance efforts to close the gap that exist in available mental health services. Naslund et al. (2020) reviewed recent studies on social media use among people with mental illness, considering how it affects mental health and wellbeing. They

also discussed early attempts to implement evidence-based programs for treating mental health issues via social media. It was noted that the risks, potential harms, and necessary safety precautions associated with utilizing social media for mental health were reviewed, and references to recent peer-reviewed papers in Medline and Google Scholar were made. The overall objective was to weigh the potential for social media to be a useful intervention platform for supporting those with mental illnesses, encouraging engagement and retention in treatment, and enhancing currently available mental health services, while balancing the need for safety and, in my opinion the objectives were met. It was noted that the variables were not clearly outlined. This may have been since the article was not only focused on one research but making comparisons and contrasts among another similar research. This method alludes to the innovative research method utilized by the researchers. Findings may be helpful and applicable to future research and initiatives.

Further studies have found that individuals with serious mental disorders (Spinzy et al., 2012) as well as young adults with mental illness (Gowen et al., 2012) appear to form online relationships and connect with others on social media as often as social media users from the general population. This is an important observation because individuals living with serious mental disorders typically have few social contacts in the offline world and experience high rates of loneliness (Badcock et al. 2015). Among individuals receiving publicly funded mental health services who use social media, nearly half (47%) reported using these platforms at least weekly to feel less alone (Brusilovskiy et al. 2016). In another study of young adults with serious mental illness, most indicated that they used social media to help feel less isolated (Gowen et al. 2012). Interestingly, more frequent use of social media among a sample of individuals with serious mental illness was associated with greater community participation measured as participation in shopping, work, religious activities, or visiting friends and family, as well as greater civic engagement, (Brusilovskiy et al., 2016).

Many studies have suggested that online technologies such as social media offer benefits to support mental health. Online technologies have been shown to be fast, accessible, low cost, and confidential. Despite this, relatively little is known of the mental well-being outcomes of online help-seeking. (Best et al., 2013, p. 2) note that online "support services may serve to reduce the potential emasculating consequences of stigmatizing face to face help seeking. As such the online method is more appealing and to males. This suggests that young males may favor this form of services; yet, in the same study the authors produced evidence suggesting a scarcity of high-quality online support. Nevertheless, the apparent lack of quality information and support has created 'trust' issues online (Best et al., 2016). It is postulated therefore that accessing mental health support online may result in inaccurate advice or diagnosis, perhaps increasing the potential for harm.

### **Social Media as a Help-Seeking Behaviour**

More and more people with severe mental illnesses are using major social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube to discuss their sickness experiences or get assistance from people with related medical issues. Peer-to-peer assistance is a new phenomenon that involves uninvited communication between self-organizing online groups of patients and people with various health difficulties. A viewpoint on how online peer-to-peer relationships among those who have severe mental illnesses could help initiatives to advance the mental and physical welfare of this population was presented. A conceptual framework was put forth to show how peer-to-peer relationships online might give people with significant mental illnesses the chance to battle stigma, boost consumer engagement, and access online interventions for their mental and physical well-being (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch & Bartels, 2016). There appears to be a positive association between social media use and social support for persons with mental illness. Previous research has shown that people who experienced mental distress frequently use social media, which can enable them to receive support from the shared network (Moreno et al., 2012). There are different forms of peer support that people can receive from their social network, including informational support, emotional support, and companionship (Naslund et al., 2016). Frison & Eggermont, (2015) concurred that perceived emotional support can reduce perceived life stress depression scores. Although it was not examined how such perceived peer support for mental health issues may predict information-seeking behavior on social media.

### **Help-Seeking Behavior on social media Among Youths**

Despite the significant frequency of mental health issues among college students, the stigma associated with seeking help or support still stands in the way of those who need it (Gere, Salimi & Amina-Korang, 2020). Recently, social networking sites have grown in popularity as venues for exchanging many types of personal data. This includes details on one's health and wellbeing by way of comments on their postings, and the creation of conversation groups, through which users start and maintain friendships and interactions with one another. According to the findings from a study (Gere, et al. 2020), a fair number of college students utilize social media to express their private issues and seek advice or guidance. Sharing on social media might be favoured, because it gives university students the chance to engage without being judged and watched over by adults. The findings also point to inequalities between gender and academic levels in the expression of private issues on social media to get assistance. It further highlighted that college students are less likely to seek mental health care because of how frequently they disclose their emotional or personal issues or how frequently they seek help

from online sources. However, due to their accessibility and capability, social media sites were noted to be the preferred sources of information.

In this modern world, social networks play an important role in the help-seeking process. Several research findings have suggested that the patterns of help-seeking behavior are influenced by whom the sufferer consults with at first and when deciding whether to seek mental or medical care (Birnbaum, Candan, Libby, Pascucci & Kane, 2016). Help-seeking literature has emphasized the important role that family and friends play in persons seeking help for mental health issues. When young people identify a mental health issue, they usually prefer informal support rather than professional. It was further noted that college students might find social media such as Facebook or Instagram a safe place that allows them to freely disclose their needs and feelings without being worried about being recognized or stigmatized by others. This is because they might perceive this type of informal way of seeking help a means to safeguard themselves against the potential public stigma or negative attitudes in the world. Although research has yet to investigate the influences and effectiveness of online mental health seeking, this method of help seeking is growing rapidly particularly among young/college students (Edwards-Hart, & Chester, 2010; Naslund et al., 2016).

According to O'Reilly, Dogra, Hughes, Reilly, George & Whiteman (2018), the growing prevalence of adolescent mental disorders poses significant challenges for education and healthcare systems globally. Providers are therefore keen to identify effective ways of promoting positive mental health. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore perceptions that social media might be leveraged for the purposes of mental health promotion amongst adolescents aged between 11 and 18 years, utilizing focus groups conducted with adolescents, educational professionals, and mental health practitioners. Three themes were identified: first, social media appears to have the potential to promote positive mental health. Second, adolescents frequently utilize social media and the internet to seek information about mental health. Finally, there are benefits and challenges to using social media in this way. It is concluded that despite the challenges of using social media and the risks, social media does offer a useful way of educating and reaching adolescents to promote mental wellbeing. This research is presented in a sequential manner and all the relevant sections are present and easy to comprehend. Objectives are clear, findings are explained, and the connection is made to the initial objectives. Variables are appropriately selected and manipulated to carry out ethical research. However, innovations appear to be minimal, as the findings from the research are quite like that of another research, very informative research, nonetheless.

### **Perceived Benefits of social media as a Help-Seeking Behavior**

Perceived health benefits refer to people's evaluation of benefits associated with social media use for communicating about their health (Li, Wang, Lin, & Hajji, 2018). Perceived benefits can help the decision-making process of whether to adopt certain technologies or services (Lee, 2009). When people believe that the perceived benefits of social media in mental health services are significant, they can overcome the detriments associated with service adoption and be more likely to seek and share information concerning their mental health (Li et al., 2018). Previous research has explored the benefits of information seeking about mental health on the internet (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010). These benefits include access to a large amount of health information that is often more than other information sources; convenient place to learn experiences of people with similar health conditions; reduced embarrassment compared to seeking information in person from friends or talking to a professional; and empowerment through making sense of illness and learning about medication and treatment for mental illnesses. There are likely multiple factors at play when it comes to how social media use affects teenagers' rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Instead of adopting socially presumptive truths, objective researchers investigate correlations. Four categories of social media exposure were used to group the key findings from the included studies: time spent, activity, investment, and addiction. All these categories were discovered to be associated with psychological distress, anxiety, and depression, with recognition of how intricately these interactions are intertwined. Many under-researched mediators and moderators may explain the direction of this association, despite studies that have investigated the mediating and moderating elements that may contribute to or worsen the proposed link. There are also gaps found in the literature regarding methodologies and research design (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020). This research article, although like others, provided new and relevant data relating to the findings and will undoubtedly add value to the field and aid in other similar studies. It was easy to read and understand as all relevant sections were highlighted using appropriate subtitles and data was provided in a sequential manner. The objectives were clearly communicated. In relation to the variables, they were also explained in detail, helping to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the direction of the research and the methodologies to be utilized.

### **Social Media and Mental Health, the Caribbean Context**

Mental illness is a significant contributor to global disease burden, and this is expected to increase over the coming decades. Traditionally mental illness has not been well understood by the public, resulting in poor attitudes towards persons with mental illness and stigmatization, (Youssef, Bachew, Bodie, Leach, Morris & Sherma, 2012). Such conditions are common in the Caribbean where less than 5% of the health budget is allocated to mental illness. The aim of the study is to assess knowledge and attitudes towards mental illness among college students within the English-speaking Caribbean. A self-report questionnaire was adapted from previous studies designed to measure knowledge and attitudes of mental illness.

Students were sampled from the University of the West Indies campuses in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad & Tobago. Responses were collected from 673 people with a response rate of 84%. These results suggest that widespread educational campaigns need to be implemented across the region, designed to both increase knowledge about mental illness and reduce discrimination towards persons suffering with mental illness (Youssef et al, 2012). The format of the article was one that allowed for easy reading and interpretation. Key aspects of the research were highlighted, and data flowed in a sequential manner. The objective of the research was quite evident, and the suggestions from the findings were quite fitting and if implemented to very likely bring about positive changes in the right direction.

Underutilization of mental health resources is a well-documented problem. Little is known about the help-seeking attitudes of Jamaican adolescents. The aim of this study (Jackson Williams, 2014) was to examine predictors of psychological help-seeking attitudes among Jamaican adolescents. The individual determinants of health service utilization model suggest that several factors contribute to health care attitudes and utilization, including illness factors, predisposing factors enabling factors. Data were analyzed using hierarchical multiple regression. Results indicated that for this population, predisposing factors predict attitudes toward seeking professional mental health care. Specifically, increased age, decreased authoritarian beliefs, and increased benevolence predicted more positive attitudes toward seeking psychological help (Jackson Williams, 2014). The variables were not popular ones used in frequent research, as a result the research and findings undoubtedly contribute to the field and will provide a building block for another research to come. The demographic was clearly outlined as, and the objectives clearly indicated at the beginning of the research.

### Theoretical Framework

The humanistic theory is one of those theories that speaks to the psychological aspect of an individual's life. It focuses on everyone's potential and stresses the importance of growth and self-actualization. Humanistic theory premises that mental health develops along an expected path while the individual may try to adjust to his or her environment to survive within it. The fundamental belief of this theory is that people are innately good and that mental and social problems result from deviations from this natural tendency.

It further suggests that individuals possess personal resources and once motivated they can use their free will to pursue things (such as social media communication) that will help them achieve their full potential as human beings. Problems arise, however, when a person learns maladaptive strategies as a response to new situations.

## 3. MATERIELS AND METHDS

### 3.1 Sample

The participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling and consisted of those UCC students that were also social media users. The sample population was from the general undergraduate school population of the UCC which has an overall population of approximately 5000 undergraduate students. The students that participated in this survey were both males and females, from various years and areas of study, and who use social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The survey was open to participants from various age groups, demographic location, and religion.

### 3.2 Research Design

The study was phenomenological descriptive research which sought to understand the prevalence in the use of social media communication as a help-seeking behavior among university students, and the effectiveness of such a behavior in addressing psychological and emotional problems. This was a mixed method research as it utilized both the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. For the quantitative aspect of the research, participants were asked for objective knowledge about their background, demographics, the overall frequency of use of social media, and the frequency and rating of use as it relates to seeking help for psychological and emotional problems. The qualitative aspect of the study saw students responding to some of the questions in detail giving an overview of their own social media experience.

### 3.3 Data Collection Tool and Procedure

The data collection tool selected to carry out this research was a survey. This survey was administered online via Google Forms to the target audience of the study, students of UCC who have social media accounts. The survey consisted of 28 questions separated under four subheadings as follows: **Background and Demographics** which consisted of six questions; **Use of Social Media Communication** which consisted of five questions; **Psychological and Emotional Experiences** which consisted of nine questions; and **Effects of Social Media** which consisted of eight questions. Google Form was selected over other survey platforms such as Survey Monkey as Google Form provided the opportunity to ask more than 10 questions without being charged for the service.

The approval and support for the study was obtained from the Lecturer, Professor Kotra Mohan, and the Students Affair Department of the UCC. An informed consent was developed and attached to the survey. There was mass distribution of

the survey by way of emails from the Student Affairs Department to the general school population. The school’s various social media class chats on Telegram and What’s App were also used to invite participants, as well as via our Lecturer, who disseminated the survey to his various classes for his students' completion. Responses were received during the period March 7 - 28, 2023. The survey started with an introduction to, and the purpose for the study. There were also instructions for completing, an informed consent, and the survey questions. The survey did not collect any personal or identifying information. No financial incentive was provided to students for their participation in the study.

### 3.4 Statistics

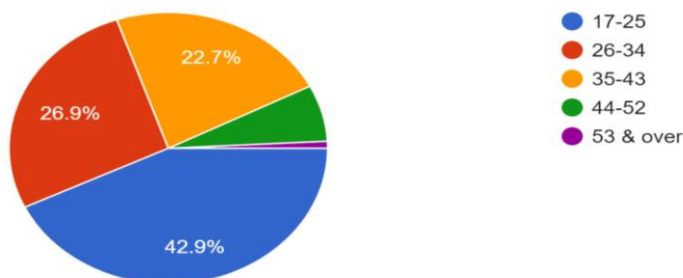
The data from the survey was reviewed using the summary generated by the Google Form website and from an extracted Google Spreadsheet. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze and display the data garnered. This includes the use of simple percentages, Figures, and tables to reflect the information.

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Background and Demographics

#### Age Range of Respondents

A total of 119 respondents participated in the survey. Of that number, 51 (or 42.9%) of the respondents’ age ranged from 17-25 years. This age range accounted for most respondents. Respondents aged 26-34 years counted 32, the second highest percentage, at 26.9%. Age range of 35-43 registered 27 or 22.7% of respondents. Eight or 6.7% of respondents indicated that they belonged to the 44-52 age category. The age range 53 and over accounted for the smallest percentage of respondents, having recorded only 1 or 0.8%.



**Figure 1:** Age range of respondents.

#### Gender of Respondents

Of the 119 respondents, 99 or 83.2% were females. The remaining 20 or 16.8% of the respondents accounted for the males that participated in the survey.

**Table 1:** Gender of respondents.

Gender of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Male	20	16.8
Female	99	83.2

#### Marital status and religion of respondents

In answer to the question of marital status, 70 respondents (or 58%) indicated they were single, 30 or 25.2% indicated they were in a committed relationship and 19 (16 %) indicated they were married. One hundred and eight (or 90.8%) of the respondents identified as Christians. Four or 3.4% identified as Atheists. Four respondents indicated that they were not religious or a part of a religion. Three respondents each identified as Rastafarian, Holiness and Agnostic.

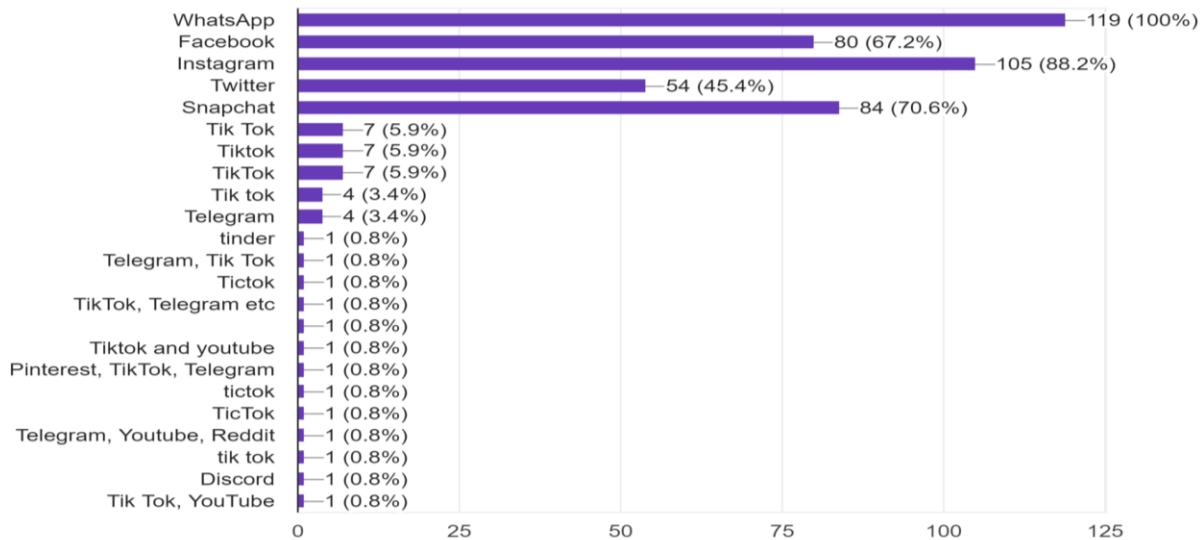
#### Respondents program and year of study

Most respondents indicated that they were completing either an associate or bachelor’s degree in Business Administration (46), Social Work (16), Applied psychology (13), IT 8, Human Resource Management (9), Information Technology (8), Tourism (6), Criminology and Criminal Justice (5), and Media and Communication (2). Forty-four (44) of the respondents were in their first year of study, 26 were in their second year, while 16 and 32 were in their third and final year of study respectively.

#### Use of Social Media Communication

*Social media platform used by respondents and frequency of use.*

One hundred percent of the respondents shared that they had social media accounts. All respondents indicated that they had accounts on WhatsApp, which was also the most frequently used social media platform as indicated by 79 or 66.4% of respondents. Instagram was the next most used platform as indicated by 21 or 17.6% respondents; this is of the 105 (or 88.2%) respondents who indicated having an Instagram account. Also, Snapchat (84 or 70.6%), Facebook (80 or 67.2%) and Twitter (54 or 45.4%). Other unlisted social media sites on which respondents indicated that they have accounts were Tik Tok, Telegram, Tinder, YouTube, Pinterest, Reddit, and Discord, all being used by less than 5% of the total respondents; except for Tik Tok which was associated with 34 respondents.

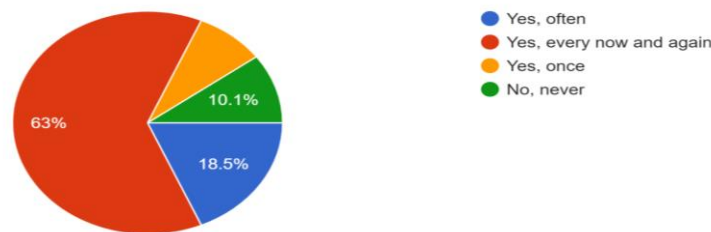


**Figure 2:** Social media platforms used by respondents.

All of 82.4% or 98 respondents indicated that they use social media multiple times daily. Nine (or 7.6%) of respondents said they use social media multiple times weekly, while 5.9% (or 7) of the respondents indicated that they use social media every now and then. Just 5 or 4.2% of respondents indicated that they only use social media a few times per week. Almost all respondents (97.3% or 116) indicated that they mostly used their phone to access social media communication platforms.

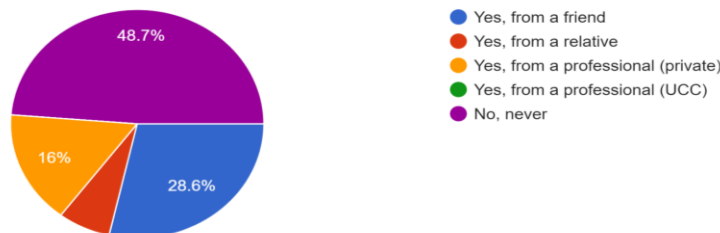
**Psychological and Emotional Experience**

A total of 107 respondents indicated to have experienced psychological and/or emotional problems with 63% indicating it was every now and again, 18.5% indicating it was experienced often and once for 8.4% of respondents.



**Figure 3:** experience of psychological/emotional problems

Despite the large number of respondents who indicated to have experienced psychological and/or emotional problems, almost half the respondents (48.7%) have never sought any physical intervention to address the problem, and only 16% ever sought professional help, with the main reason (38.7%) being due to a lack of privacy.



**Figure 4:** General help-seeking behaviour of respondents.

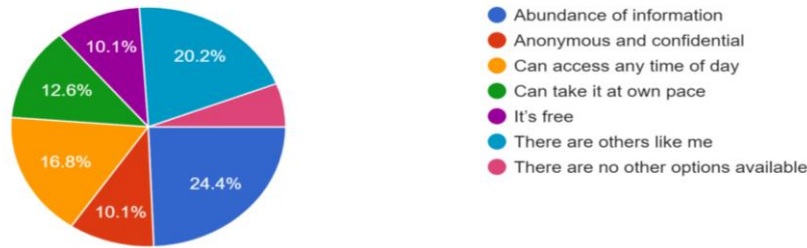
Fifty-nine (or 49.6%) respondents answered in the affirmative to seeking help for their emotional and/ psychological problems on social media with WhatsApp being the most used site (32.8%), followed by Instagram with 16%. Stress

(30.3%), anxiety (26.9%) and depression (21%) were the top three psychological and emotional problems that respondents experienced and sought help for via social media.

**Table 2:** frequency of help-seeking behaviour on social media.

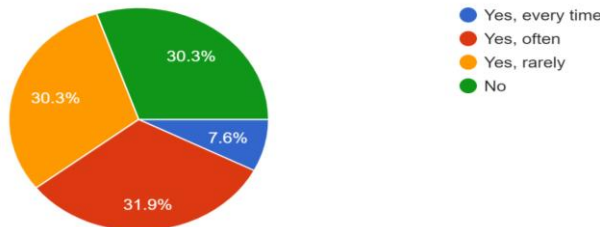
	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Everyday</b>	24	20.2
<b>Once a week</b>	25	21
<b>Once a month</b>	11	9.2
<b>Couple times per month</b>	20	16.8
<b>Couple times per year</b>	39	32.8

The main motivations for using social media to help in addressing psychological and/or emotional problems were noted by respondents to be the availability of an abundance of information (24.4%), a community of persons with similar issues (20.2%); unlimited and ease of access (16.6%), and ability to proceed at own pace (12.6%). The fact that access is free of cost and that access is anonymous and confidential both counted 12 respondents each or 10.1%. Seven (or 5.9%) respondents felt there were no other options available to them.



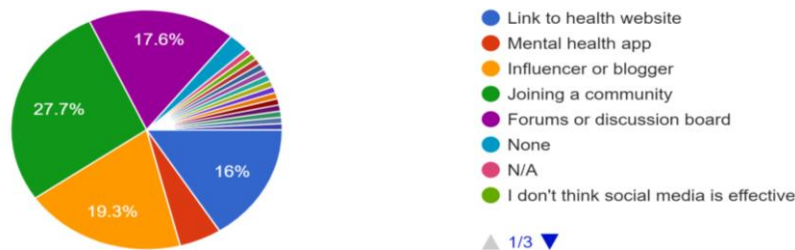
**Figure 5:** reason given for social media use as help-seeking behaviour.

While 30.3% (or 36) of respondents indicated that they don't usually get help from social media to address their psychological and/or emotional problems, 83 respondents (or 69.8%) indicated that social media have helped them to address their issues.



**Figure 6:** frequency help is received from social media for psychological/emotional problems.

The psychological and/or emotional problems for which they have received are stress (54.6%), anxiety (42.9%), depression (37.8%), loneliness (31.9%) and fear (11.8%). Respondents further indicated that help is mostly received from influencers and bloggers (44.5%), forums or discussion boards (31.9%), accessing links to health websites (25.2%), joining a community (20.2%), using a mental health app (10.9%). Additionally, 9 respondents stated that they would talk to a friend or family member. Joining a community (27.7%), influencer or blogger (19.3%), forums or discussions (17.6%), and accessing a link to a health website (16%) were considered the most effective ways of getting help via social media.



**Figure 7:** Source of help for psychological/emotional problems.

**Effects of Social Media on Psychological/Emotional Problems**

Most of the respondents (78 or 65.5%) indicated that they felt somewhat better after seeking help for a psychological and/or emotional problem on social media. Twenty respondents (or 16.8%) said they felt much better, while 18 respondents (or 15.1%) said they felt no different. Of the 119 respondents only 30 or 25.2% said they would recommend social media to others as an effective tool to help with psychological and emotional problems. As it relates to the effectiveness of social media as a help-seeking behaviour, 23.5% of respondents thought it highly effective while 32.7% didn't think it is effective. The majority of respondents (43.7%) were in the middle on the matter.



**Table 3:** Experience with help-seeking behaviour on social media.

Experience using social media as help seeking behaviour	Frequency	Percentage %
Negative Experience	10	13
Positive Experience	29	37
Both Negative and Positive Experiences	34	43

In response to the question "How would you describe the experience of using social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour to address psychological/emotional problems?", the responses varied significantly as this was an open-ended question. 79 respondents attempted the question. Of the said number, 6 respondents or 8% replied using 'N/A', the answers of the remaining 74 were analyzed as follows: 29 respondents or 37% responded favorably to the question. In summary, they believe that it is somewhat effective and convenient and is used to gain access to a lot of information and resources, and to interact with many different people. On the contrary, 10 or 13% had a negative perception and mentioned that social media does more harm than good when used as help-seeking behaviour for psychological and emotional problems and is therefore not very useful. The remaining 43% or 34 respondents, were undecided as they were of the opinion that there are both positive benefits to be had from utilizing social media as a help-seeking behaviour as well as negative effects may arise such as bullying and misinformation.

In our study we have examined the use of social media communication by students of UCC, as a help-seeking behaviour for psychological and emotional problems. Descriptive statistics were used in answering the research questions.

### **Findings**

#### ***RQ1: Do UCC students seek help from social media communication to treat psychological and emotional problems?***

The results of the study revealed that a moderate amount of the university's students (49.6%), use social media to share their psychological and/or emotional concerns to obtain advice and/or to relieve the tension. These results further confirm the findings of previous studies (Gere, Salimi & Amina-Korang, 2020) which suggested that the prevalence of online help-seeking behavior was increasing among young adults.

#### ***RQ 2: To what extent do UCC students use social media communication to seek help for their psychological and emotional problems?***

From the study it was gathered that the majority of respondents (67.2%) frequently use social media as a help-seeking behaviour for their psychological and/or emotional problems. Twenty-one percent (21%) sought help via social media at least once per week, 20.2% everyday, 16.8% at least twice per month and 9.2% at least once per month. It was further gathered from the study that help was sought from multiple social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Tik Tok.

#### ***RQ 3: For what psychological and emotional problems do UCC students use social media as a help-seeking behaviour?***

Stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear were the main psychological and emotional issues for which respondents indicated that they sought help from social media communication. They further indicated that they received help for these psychological and emotional problems experienced.

#### ***RQ 4: How effective is social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour for UCC students with their psychological problems?***

According to O'Reilly, Dogra, Hughes, Reilly, George & Whiteman (2018), the growing prevalence of adolescent mental disorders poses significant challenges for education and healthcare systems globally. Providers are therefore keen to identify effective ways of promoting positive mental health. The study showed that most of the respondents (69.8%) indicated that they received help which addressed the issue they were experiencing. This finding will be most useful to the healthcare system to inform their action planning.

#### ***RQ 5: Do UCC students consider social media as a viable outlet to share their personal problems and to receive help for their psychological and emotional problems?***

The feedback from the respondents on the viability of social media was a mixed response. While some attested to their experience being ineffective or worsening their concern, the majority attested that social media was a positive and fruitful option.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study has revealed that many UCC students do experience various psychological and emotional problems for which they are not seeking physical, professional help but have tried using social media to address the problems experienced. Confidentiality and privacy being reasons for using social media were the lowest responses and therefore did not support

previous studies that attributed the stigma attached to mental health as the reason for the help-seeking behaviour. It appears that ease of access, commonality and the readily available and wealth of information were the main motivating factors for seeking psychological and emotional help from social media. This further supports other studies that have suggested that online technologies such as social media offer benefits to support mental health such as being fast, accessible, and low cost (Best, Manktelow & Taylor, 2014). Most students indicated that they do experience psychological and emotional problems and they do use social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour to address their problem. However, the majority of the students indicated that they did not think their experience on social media significantly impacted their psychological or emotional problems either negatively or positively. This is very insightful and can chart the way mental healthcare practitioners and university administrators address students' concerns. While the perspective garnered from this study can be useful, a possible limitation is that 119 students responding to the survey reflect just over 2% of the school's population of approximately 5000 students. This may not be considered a large enough representative sample to provide sufficient data.

**Recommendation:** Most entities have improved on existing or have implemented new online services because of the transition of society. Since it has been noted that the main reasons for utilizing social media communication as a help-seeking behaviour by students surrounds the convenience of it, it is recommended that mental healthcare practitioners investigate the development of a website and/or social media application specifically to address mental health issues. With the accompanying and appropriate public awareness campaigns to get buy-in, such as by way of partnership with schools such as UCC, then the credibility of the information being shared can be managed and tailored to the various problems. This could also be integrated into the existing health systems online technologies that are currently being utilized.

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