

Communication Media and Mental Health Literacy among Indonesian University Students: Awareness, Information Exposure, and Peer Support Readiness

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ABSTRACT

This study explores university students' awareness, experiences, and perceptions of mental health issues and examines the role of communication media in promoting mental well-being. A quantitative survey complemented by qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended responses was conducted among 263 students at Universitas Brawijaya, Indonesia. Data were collected through an online questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach. The findings indicate that students demonstrate high awareness of mental health issues and frequently rely on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube for mental health information. Respondents perceived social media as a valuable channel for mental health education, awareness building, stigma reduction, and peer support. However, social media was also viewed as a source of stress, social comparison, and misinformation, highlighting its dual influence on student well-being. Although students expressed a strong willingness to support peers experiencing mental health difficulties, many lacked confidence regarding appropriate intervention strategies. Furthermore, interpersonal communication remained the preferred channel for validating mental health information and seeking support. The study contributes to health communication literature by demonstrating how social media and interpersonal communication operate as complementary mechanisms in mental health communication. The findings suggest that mental health initiatives should combine digital communication strategies with practical mental health literacy programmes to strengthen awareness, trust, and peer support among young adults.

Keywords: *Communication media, health communication, mental health literacy, new media, social media.*

INTRODUCTION

Mental health well-being is a critical aspect of overall health that significantly influences the lives of adolescents and young adults, particularly students. This developmental stage is marked by profound physical, emotional, and social changes, making young individuals, particularly those navigating academic pressure, vulnerable to mental health challenges. Globally, mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and stress-related conditions

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are increasingly dominant among youth, with studies indicating that approximately 1 in 5 adolescents experience mental health issues at some point in their lives (World Health Organization, 2021).

In many cultures, including those in Asia, mental health remains a taboo subject, often masked in misunderstanding and stigma. This lack of awareness can prevent young people from accessing the support they need, leading to detrimental effects on their academic performance, social relationships, and overall quality of life. As the youth population continues to grow, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia, there is an urgent need to prioritise mental health education and resources tailored to this demographic. By fostering an environment that encourages open discussions about mental health, adolescents and young adults will be empowered to take charge of their mental well-being, ultimately contributing to healthier, more resilient communities.

Mental health issues among adolescents and young adults have become a pressing concern globally, with significant implications for academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being. In Indonesia, the prevalence of mental health disorders among youth is alarming, with studies indicating that nearly 10% of adolescents aged 15-24 experience mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression (Ministry of Health of Republic Indonesia, 2019). Focusing specifically on Indonesia provides a fascinating case study of mental health challenges in a rapidly developing Southeast Asian nation with unique demographic and cultural characteristics. Indonesia's youthful population structure, where approximately 40% of the population is under 24 years old, creates both an urgent need and a significant opportunity for mental health intervention (World Health Organization, 2021; Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024).

This situation is worsened by Indonesia's cultural landscape, where mental health remains heavily stigmatised and often misunderstood. Traditional beliefs frequently attribute mental health conditions to supernatural causes or personal weakness, creating barriers to professional help-seeking and encouraging reliance on informal or traditional healing methods that may not address underlying psychological needs. This cultural stigma surrounding mental health often discourages open discussions and help-seeking behaviours (Sitohang, 2023). The stigma also hinders young individuals from seeking help, worsening their struggles and leading to a cycle of distress (Corrigan, 2004; Subu et al., 2022). Understanding mental health is crucial for adolescents and young adults, as this developmental stage is characterised by significant physical, emotional, and social changes.

Mental health challenges during these developmental years can lead to long-term consequences, affecting educational accomplishment, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life (Patel et al., 2018). The Indonesian context is further complicated by geographical disparities in mental health service availability. While major cities like Jakarta and Surabaya offer relatively better access to mental health professionals, rural and remote areas across the archipelago suffer from severe shortages of trained psychiatrists and psychologists. This service gap means that many young Indonesians, particularly those outside urban centres, have limited access to evidence-based mental health care. Additionally, socioeconomic factors play a crucial role, as mental health services are often perceived as luxury commodities rather than essential healthcare components, placing them out of reach for many families.

In Indonesia, new media have become an integral part of daily life, especially for young adults, serving as a primary space for social interaction alongside real-world engagements (Rahmat et al., 2023). As the most accessible and frequently used channel for health information, new media offers vast opportunities for individuals to learn about mental health. However, this digital environment also presents significant challenges. The rapid spread of false information, misunderstandings, and misperceptions about mental health issues is common, particularly within cross-generational communities where differing levels of media literacy exist (Kriyantono et al., 2023). These challenges can lead to inappropriate or harmful responses to mental health concerns.

Students, as a vital segment of the young adult population, are uniquely positioned to act as change agents in their communities. They can play a crucial role in recognising mental health issues among their peers and promoting awareness and understanding of mental well-being. However, many students lack the necessary training and resources to identify these issues effectively. Research shows that educational institutions often do not provide adequate mental health education, leaving students ill-equipped to support themselves and their peers (World Health Organization, 2021).

To effectively address these challenges, this study aims to investigate the role of students as change agents in recognising and addressing mental health issues among their peers in Indonesia, and to assess the effectiveness of exposure to mental health information in empowering students to promote mental well-being within their communities. Following that, the study has addressed an important question on how exposure to mental health information empowers students in Indonesia to effectively recognise and address mental health issues among their peers? Also, what impact does this have on the overall mental well-being of the student population?

This research is significant as it addresses the critical need for mental health awareness and education among adolescents and young adults in Indonesia. These are the demographics facing increasing mental health challenges. The demographic structure of Indonesia in 2025 reflects a youthful population with a significant working-age segment, presenting both opportunities and challenges for economic development and social services (United Nations, 2022; Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Hence, the high frequency of mental health issues among adolescents in Indonesia, coupled with a youthful demographic structure, emphasises the urgent need for increased awareness and targeted support to promote mental well-being and harness the potential of this significant group.

By focusing on students as change agents, the study wishes to empower them to recognise and address mental health issues within their communities, fostering a culture of support and understanding. The findings contributed to the development of effective mental health awareness programs tailored to the unique cultural and social context of Indonesia, ultimately enhancing the well-being of students. Additionally, this research provides valuable insights into the barriers that hinder help-seeking behaviours and the stigma surrounding mental health, informing policymakers and educational institutions about the necessary interventions. By promoting mental health awareness and equipping students with the tools to support themselves and their peers, this research has the potential to create healthier, more resilient communities and improve the overall quality of life for young Indonesians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have identified adolescents and other vulnerable groups, such as individuals with low educational attainment, the homeless, unemployed, and impoverished populations, as being particularly susceptible to mental health disorders. Liljeholm and Bejerholm (2020) emphasise that these groups face heightened risks due to various socio-economic and environmental factors. In the Indonesian context, national data indicate that 6.1% of people aged 15 and older, including adolescents, suffer from mental health problems, which are associated with a 200% increase in mortality due to difficulties in managing behaviour and emotions. The National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS) further quantifies this burden, reporting that 34.9% of Indonesian adolescents approximately 15.5 million individuals experience mental health issues (Center for Reproductive Health et al., 2022). These findings are supported by the 2018 Basic Health Research Study (Riset Kesehatan Dasar), which revealed that over 19 million Indonesians aged 15 and above suffer from emotional mental disorders, with more than 12 million experiencing depression, a condition linked to suicidal behaviour (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2018). Notably, the prevalence of depression among individuals aged 10 to 39 years, encompassing adolescents and the productive age group, reaches 47.7%.

In addition, the developmental transitions experienced by adolescents have been widely recognised as critical periods during which mental health problems frequently emerge. Liljeholm and Bejerholm (2020) highlight that phases such as career development and the transition from education to the workforce are particularly challenging. University students aged 15 to 20 are identified as a high-risk subgroup, with a 12.9% higher likelihood of depression compared to the general population (Sheldon et al., 2021). This vulnerability is echoed in a global survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018, which assessed the mental health of 14,000 first-year college students and found that over one-third experienced disorders such as depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness (Auerbach et al., 2018; Bennett et al., 2024; Drevland et al., 2024; Weiler et al., 2024). Previous research also indicates that 14% of college students report suicidal ideation, while 25% suffer from depression (Sheldon et al., 2021).

Studies conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic reported increased levels of depression, anxiety and psychological distress among university students. Recent investigations recorded a marked increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders since the pandemic began (Jia et al., 2024; Juozelskyte & Catling, 2024; Kivelä et al., 2024). A growing body of research has identified various factors that contribute to mental health disorders among university students, including both early life experiences and contemporary stressors. Hanson et al. (2024) emphasise that negative childhood experiences, alongside current pressures, play a significant role in triggering mental health issues in this population. In the context of modern stressors, the pervasive influence of new media, particularly social media, has become a central aspect of students' lives. In Indonesia, young people, particularly secondary school and university students, are among the most active users of digital media and internet-based platforms, making them a key demographic in studies of new media use and its psychosocial impacts (Gandana & Oktaviandy, 2021).

Hurley et al. (2024) highlight increasing concerns regarding the detrimental effects of social media on mental health and well-being, noting that students are exposed to numerous negative influences such as unrealistic expectations, social comparison, excessive usage without meaningful engagement, attention-seeking behaviors, peer pressure, exposure to

harmful content, and social media addiction, all of which can elevate stress levels. These findings are further supported by Drevland et al. (2024), who point out that social media-induced stress is particularly pronounced among female students, driven by pressures related to body image and the need to maintain a flawless online persona. Despite these challenges, social media remains a primary source of health-related information for students, including updates on the COVID-19 pandemic, although interpersonal communication remains necessary to verify information due to the prevalence of misinformation on these platforms (Kriyantono et al., 2023).

In addition to social media influences, several studies have explored other environmental and social factors contributing to mental health problems among university students. These factors include accommodation and housing quality, institutional environment, and students' sense of belonging within the university, all of which may influence psychological well-being and mental health outcomes (Worsley et al., 2022). Similarly, Lister et al. (2023) report that heightened anxiety among students impairs social skills, communication, and fosters social withdrawal, further exacerbating mental health challenges.

Academic pressures and the challenges of adapting to new social environments have also been identified as significant contributors to the mental health crisis among students. Wolstenholme (2025) highlights that male students are more prone to suicidal behaviours than females, a disparity attributed to environmental factors, cultural constructs of masculinity, and barriers to accessing mental health support. This is consistent with findings by Batchelor et al. (2020), who emphasise that difficulties in accessing psychological services due to long waiting times, limited alternative treatments, and inadequate communication infrastructure compound mental health problems among students. Bennett et al. (2024) further observe that the development of effective mental health services remains constrained by operational shortcomings, with most evaluations focusing on counselling services and insufficient attention given to lower-intensity supports such as mental health teams, non-clinical welfare support, and student accommodation welfare.

The consequences of unmanaged mental health issues extend beyond personal well-being, significantly impacting academic performance and broader socio-economic outcomes. Hinkson et al. (2022), Lister et al. (2023), with Juozelskyte and Catling (2024) demonstrate that students with mental health problems face increased risks of failing or dropping out of courses, which can hinder educational attainment. Moreover, Qin et al. (2024) argue that mental health disorders contribute to economic instability at both national and global levels, driven by deteriorating health and elevated premature mortality rates.

Conversely, maintaining good mental health is associated with enhanced sustainable development, as it promotes personal productivity and national economic growth. Shisana et al. (2024) note that good mental health reduces the risk of chronic diseases and other health complications, thereby lowering healthcare costs for individuals and governments. Given these consequences, access to quality mental health services becomes increasingly important for young adults and university students. Consequently, Kusumaningsih (2023) emphasized the government's responsibility to ensure the provision of accessible, equitable, and high-quality mental health services for the community. Supporting adolescents in seeking professional mental health care is also critical, as highlighted by Weiler et al. (2024), to ensure effective management and mitigation of mental health issues.

In a nutshell, adolescents and university students face a high frequency of mental health disorders, worsened by socio-economic factors, developmental transitions, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Contributing factors include negative early experiences, social media pressures, poor living conditions, academic stress, and limited access to mental health services, which significantly impact academic performance and create an urgent need for improved mental health support.

Based on the literature reviewed, this study seeks to understand university students' awareness, experiences, and perceptions regarding mental health and the role of communication media in promoting mental well-being. Therefore, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the level of awareness and knowledge of mental health issues among university students?

RQ2: What factors do university students perceive as contributing to mental health problems?

RQ3: How do students respond to and manage mental health challenges experienced by themselves or their peers?

RQ4: What role does communication media, particularly social media, play in shaping mental health awareness and support among university students?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design supplemented by qualitative data obtained through open-ended questionnaire items. The qualitative responses were analysed thematically to provide contextual explanations for the quantitative findings. This combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions enabled the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data related to student mental health. The study was conducted by distributing an online questionnaire via Google Forms to explore the characteristics of student mental health across several areas adopted from previous research (Batchelor et al., 2020; Setyanto, 2023; Bennett et al., 2024; Drevland et al., 2024; Hurley et al., 2024; Kivelä et al., 2024; Weiler et al., 2024; Wolstenholme, 2025). Items were adapted to suit the Indonesian university context and reviewed by the research team to ensure clarity and relevance to the study objectives.

The questionnaire included demographic information, including age and gender, and assessed respondents' social media usage patterns and preferred platforms; respondents' knowledge of mental health disorders and their perceived causes; their personal experiences with mental health issues and help-seeking behaviours; and perceptions of communication media in promoting mental health awareness. In addition, several open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to elaborate on their views regarding the causes of mental health issues and the role of communication media in mental health promotion.

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and readability and subjected to a pilot review among a small group of students. Minor wording revisions were made based on feedback received.

Invitations to participate in this anonymous survey were sent through various social media platforms to 263 students at Brawijaya University, Malang, during March to December 2024. The selection of respondents was based on convenience sampling, as adolescent students can be easily accessed at the university level (Creswell, 2021; Kriyantono, 2024).

Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, while open-ended responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure. The qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative results to provide deeper insight into students' perceptions and experiences regarding mental health and communication media.

Demographic information was gathered from participants, including their age and gender (male/female). Participants were asked to respond to various criteria, such as agree-disagree; ever-uncertain-never; ever-never-not noticed; willing-not willing-uncertain; know-don't know-uncertain-not willing to answer. Additionally, they provided responses on identifying types of mental health disorders, causes of mental health issues, preventive measures, strategies for managing mental health disorders, their knowledge of mental health information dissemination, and their opinions on mental health.

Open-ended responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis involving coding, theme development and theme refinement. The process involved meticulously examining the entire dataset to grasp its context and content; initial codes were generated after a detailed review of the data; these codes were then grouped into significant themes and subthemes. The codes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency with both the coded extracts and the overall dataset. Finally, participants' responses to open-ended questions were assigned to the most relevant themes or subthemes, with some responses potentially fitting into multiple primary themes.

The research has been conducted with due regard to the ethical aspects of research so that the rights of participants or respondents are protected. The participants were asked to fill out the G-Form. There is not expected to be any harm, discomfort or inconvenience for participants. The participants will benefit by being able to express their opinions about mental health issues to educate other people. They were also informed that the results of the research project will be published in a journal with the anonymity of participants. Only the authors have access to the data collected for this project. As an assurance of confidentiality, data and information that identifies participants will be de-identified or coded as soon as possible. Data and information will be kept on the first author's laptop which is password protected.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings according to the research questions guiding the study. Descriptive survey results are complemented by thematic insights derived from open-ended responses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' awareness, experiences, and perceptions regarding mental health and communication media. Below, the researcher presents an analysis of participant characteristics along with their social media adoption behaviors.

Table 1: Participants' characteristic

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
15-20	146	55.51
21-25	117	44.49
Gender		
Women	181	68.82
Man	82	31.18

Social Media Types (multiple selection possible)		
Instagram	258	98.1
X (Twitter)	191	72.6
TikTok	230	87.45
LinkedIn	148	56.27
YouTube	227	86.31
Others	52	19.77
Frequency of Social Media Use		
>5 hours	147	55.89
2-4 hours	93	35.36
1-2 hours	15	5.7
2-4 hours & >5 hours	7	2.66
1-2 hours & 2-4 hours	1	0.38

Source: G-Form Questionnaires (2024)

This study was predominantly participated in by female respondents, which occurred coincidentally as more female students were willing to complete the Google Form questionnaire. Among the 263 participants, 64% were aged between 15 and 20 years, while 36% were aged between 21 and 25 years. In terms of gender, there were 181 females (63.50%) and 82 males (36.50%). All participants reported using social media, with Instagram being the most frequently used platform (98.09%), followed by YouTube (86.31%), TikTok (87.45%), X/Twitter (72.62%), LinkedIn (56.27%), and other unspecified platforms (19.77%). Participants could select more than one platform. Regarding social media usage duration, 55.89% of participants spent more than 5 hours per day, 35.36% spent 2–4 hours, and 5.703% spent 1–2 hours daily, and 3.041% spent less than an hour a day on social media. This indicates a high level of daily engagement with social media among respondents, which is relevant for understanding the reach and potential impact of mental health messaging on these platforms.

Awareness of Mental Health Disorders

To address RQ1, this section examines respondents' awareness and knowledge of various mental health disorders. Understanding students' familiarity with different mental health conditions provides an indication of their overall level of mental health literacy and awareness. Table 2 presents respondents' recognition of different mental health disorders.

Table 2: Assessment of awareness regarding types of mental health disorders

Types of Mental Health Disorders	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Anxiety Disorder: Characterized by excessive anxiety where the sufferer feels constantly worried and fearful.	240	91.25
Mood Disorder: Related to mood where the patient may experience extreme mood changes.	214	81.37
Schizophrenia: A condition that causes the sufferer to experience hallucinations, difficulty thinking, and delusions.	210	79.85
Psychotic Disorder: Similar to schizophrenia, this disorder makes it difficult for the sufferer to distinguish between reality and hallucinations.	175	66.54
Impulse Control: A person has difficulty restraining themselves from acting aggressively.	173	65.78
Eating Disorder: Losing control over the quantity of food consumed.	166	63.12

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): Causes the sufferer to feel compelled to perform repetitive activities.	164	62.36
Personality Disorder: The sufferer has abnormal and difficult-to-change patterns of thinking and behaviour.	160	60.84
Tourette Syndrome: Repeated movements or speech outside the sufferer's control.	133	50.57
Psychosomatic: Physical problems that arise from the sufferer's own thoughts.	127	48.29
Factitious Disorder: The sufferer deliberately fakes symptoms of illness to receive attention.	73	27.76
Dissociative Disorder: Disrupts the continuity between thoughts, actions, memories, and identity.	69	26.24
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Triggered by traumatic events where the sufferer will respond hysterically if they see a similar event.	49	18.63
Depression: Feeling anxious, restless, hopeless, and worthless	47	17.87
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): The sufferer has difficulty focusing, is impulsive, and hyperactive.	43	16.35
I just learned about all the above options.	7	2.66

Source: G-Form Questionnaires (2024)

Table 2 presents respondents' awareness of various mental health disorders. Among the 263 respondents, Anxiety Disorder was the most recognised condition (91.25%), followed by Mood Disorders (81.37%) and Schizophrenia (79.85%). Awareness was moderate for Psychotic Disorders (66.54%), Impulse Control Disorders (65.78%), Eating Disorders (63.12%), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (62.36%), and Personality Disorders (60.84%). In contrast, awareness of Dissociative Disorder (26.24%), Factitious Disorder (27.76%), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (18.63%), Depression (17.87%), and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (16.35%) was considerably lower. Only seven respondents (2.66%) reported that they had only become familiar with these disorders through the survey.

The findings suggest that students possess relatively high levels of awareness regarding commonly discussed mental health conditions. The open-ended responses further reveal that respondents generally associate mental health disorders with emotional instability, stress, anxiety, and difficulties adapting to life transitions. One respondent explained:

I believe young people face mental health challenges due to significant hormonal and biological changes during their transition to adulthood. These changes can impact mood, sleep, and cognitive functions, which in turn affect mental health. (Female, 15–20 years old)

Another respondent highlighted the pressures experienced by young people:

The pressure to succeed in various aspects of life, like careers, relationships, and lifestyle, can also lead to stress and anxiety when expectations are unmet. (Female, 15–20 years old)

These responses indicate that respondents not only recognise mental health disorders but also understand the broader social and developmental challenges associated with them.

Mental Health Awareness

In addition to assessing knowledge of specific mental health disorders, RQ1 also seeks to understand students' general awareness of mental health issues. Therefore, respondents were asked about their perceptions of the importance of mental health and the prevalence of mental health concerns among young people. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Identification of mental health awareness knowledge

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
I recognise that mental health is as crucial as physical health	97.72	2.281
I believe there has been a rise in mental health disorders recently	75.28	31.94
I think mental health issues have increased among young people aged 15–25 years	93.54	6.463

Source: G-Form Questionnaires (2024)

As shown in Table 3, the findings suggest that students are highly aware of the growing prevalence of mental health issues and indicate a strong recognition of mental health as a significant public health concern among university students. The qualitative responses support this observation by revealing a common belief that contemporary young adults face increasing emotional and psychological pressures. One respondent stated:

Increasing work-related pressures whether in academics, internships, or full-time jobs contribute significantly. The transition from ample free time to a demanding workload can be overwhelming. (Female, 15–20 years old)

The findings suggest that students are highly aware of the growing prevalence of mental health issues among their peers and recognise the importance of addressing these challenges through education and support initiatives. The overwhelming agreement that mental health is as important as physical health, together with respondents' recognition of the growing prevalence of mental health issues among young adults, suggests that mental health awareness is relatively high among the students surveyed. This suggests that mental health education programs may be effective in raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues within the student community.

Knowledge of Mental Health Causes

To answer RQ2, respondents were asked to identify factors they believe contribute to mental health problems. This section explores students' perceptions of biological, environmental, psychological, and social influences that may affect mental well-being. Table 4 summarises the factors identified by respondents.

Table 4: Assessing knowledge of mental health causes

Factors Affecting Mental Health	Respondent	Percentage (%)
Genetics: Mental disorders are often hereditary, indicating a genetic component at play.	96	36.5
Environment: Stressful environmental factors, such as living in poverty or having an abusive family, can increase the risk of developing mental disorders.	247	93.92
Childhood Trauma: Traumatic experiences during childhood can impact a person's life later on, even if they are no longer in a stressful environment.	234	88.97
Stressful Life Events: Experiencing significant stressors like the death of a loved one or a serious accident can lead to mental health problems.	228	86.69
Negative Thought Patterns: Constant negative self-talk or pessimism can contribute to a cycle of depression or anxiety.	209	79.47
Unhealthy Lifestyle: Poor habits, such as inadequate sleep or an unhealthy diet, can negatively impact mental health.	176	66.92
Substance Abuse: The use of drugs and alcohol can trigger mental health issues and hinder recovery.	156	59.32
Excessive Social Media Use: Overuse of social media can result in feelings of dissatisfaction, loneliness, and addiction, which may increase depressive symptoms.	208	79.09

Source: G-Form Questionnaires (2024)

Table 4 shows that environmental factors were identified as the most significant contributor to mental health problems (93.92%), followed by childhood trauma (88.97%) and stressful life events (86.69%). Excessive social media use (79.09%) and negative thought patterns (79.47%) were also recognised as major contributors. By comparison, genetic factors were identified by only 36.50% of respondents.

The open-ended responses provide additional insight into how students interpret these factors. Three dominant themes emerged: environmental and family influences, academic and social pressure, and the influence of social media. Regarding family and environmental influences, one respondent stated:

There are numerous causes of mental health disorders, especially in young people, including weak connections between children and parents, and negative influences from their home environment and surroundings. (Male, 15–20 years old)

Academic and social pressure also emerged as a recurring concern:

Increasing work-related pressures—whether in academics, internships, or full-time jobs—contribute significantly to mental health problems. (Female, 15–20 years old)

Social media was frequently identified as both a source of stress and a contributing factor to poor mental health:

Social media also plays a major role, often showcasing content about happiness, friendships, and achievements. For those with depression, it can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and being unloved. (Male, 15–20 years old)

Another respondent added:

One potential cause is the increasing consumption of quick, dopamine-driven entertainment on social media. This can lead to addiction. (Male, 15–20 years old)

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that students perceive mental health as being influenced by a complex combination of social, environmental, psychological, and technological factors. These findings also suggest that respondents are more likely to associate mental health problems with environmental and psychosocial factors than with biological explanations.

Experiences Related to Mental Health Disorders

To address RQ3, respondents were asked about their personal experiences with mental health issues and the actions they took when encountering such challenges. These findings provide insight into students' coping strategies, help-seeking behaviours, and decision-making processes when dealing with mental health concerns. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Identification of experiences related to mental health disorders

Statement	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Have you ever experienced mental health issues?</i>		
Yes	145	55.13%
Unsure	76	28.90%
No	30	11.41%
No response	12	4.56%
<i>Based on your response, what actions did you take?</i>		
I was unsure, so I did nothing	48	18.25%
I didn't know what to do	13	4.94%
I talked to someone I trust	10	3.80%
I searched for information online	7	2.66%
I consulted a psychologist	11	4.18%
I increased my religious practices	14	5.32%
I exercised	2	0.76%

Source: G-Form Questionnaires (2024)

The findings in Table 5 indicate that more than half of respondents (55.13%) reported having experienced mental health issues, while 28.90% were unsure and 11.41% reported never experiencing such issues. Among those affected, many respondents reported taking no immediate action because they were uncertain about how to respond (18.25%). Others

sought support through interpersonal communication, professional consultation, religious practices, exercise, or online information seeking. The qualitative responses provide further context. Respondents frequently linked mental health difficulties with transitions to adulthood, academic demands, and social expectations. One participant explained:

The pressure to succeed in academics, careers, relationships, and lifestyle can lead to stress and anxiety when expectations are unmet. (Female, 15–20 years old)

These responses help explain why many students experience uncertainty regarding appropriate coping strategies. While awareness of mental health issues appears high, practical knowledge regarding how to respond to personal mental health difficulties remains limited. Many students hesitate to take immediate action when experiencing mental health problems, often due to uncertainty or lack of knowledge about appropriate responses. This indicates that while exposure to mental health information may increase confidence in recognising mental health factors, there remain gaps in translating this recognition into effective coping or help-seeking behaviours. Exposure to mental health information can improve students' confidence in recognising mental health factors, but also highlight the need for education to equip students with practical strategies for action.

Concern for Mental Health Issues

Beyond personal experiences, RQ3 also examines how students respond to mental health issues affecting people around them. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they had observed mental health challenges among peers, their willingness to provide support, and their confidence in taking appropriate action. Table 6 presents the findings.

Table 6: Identifying concern for mental health issues

Question	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Have you ever noticed someone in your environment with mental health issues?	Yes	220	83.65
	Never	20	7.6
	Did not notice	21	7.98
	Never & Did not notice	1	0.38
	Yes & Never	1	0.38
If you see someone experiencing mental health issues, would you be willing to help?	Willing	210	79.85
	Hesitant	39	14.83
	Willing & Hesitant	9	3.42
	Willing & Unwilling	3	1.14
	Unwilling	2	0.76
If willing, do you know what to do?	I know	103	39.16
	Unsure	91	34.6
	I don't know	24	9.13
	I answered "unwilling/hesitant"	23	8.75
	I know & Unsure	11	4.18
	I don't know & Unsure	6	2.28
	Other combinations	5	1.9

If you know what to do, where did you gain this knowledge?	Social media or online media	234	88.97
	Personal experience	150	57.03
	Academic literature	91	34.6
	Seminar/workshop	81	30.8
	Formal education	46	17.49

Source: G-Form Questionnaires (2024)

Table 6 reveals that 83.65% of respondents had noticed individuals around them experiencing mental health issues. Furthermore, 79.85% indicated that they would be willing to assist someone facing mental health challenges. However, only 39.16% reported knowing what actions they should take, suggesting a substantial gap between willingness and preparedness.

Role of Communication Media

To answer RQ4, respondents were asked about the sources from which they obtained information about mental health and their perceptions of the role of communication media in promoting mental health awareness. Particular attention was given to social media because of its widespread use among university students. The following findings integrate survey responses with open-ended comments regarding the functions of communication media in mental health communication.

Social media and online platforms were identified as the primary sources of mental health knowledge (88.97%), followed by personal experience (57.03%), academic literature (34.60%), seminars or workshops (30.80%), and formal education (17.49%). The thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed several perceived functions of communication media, including information dissemination, mental health education, stigma reduction, peer support, and public awareness building. The open-ended responses further illuminate how students perceive the role of communication media in mental health awareness. One respondent noted:

Communication media is essential in raising public awareness about mental health first aid. Through education, reducing stigma, promoting first aid actions, and increasing public awareness, media can influence attitudes and behaviours related to mental health. (Female, 21–25 years old)

Another respondent remarked:

Communication media can function as an information provider, making mental health first aid knowledge more accessible to the public. (Male, 21–25 years old)

Similarly, another participant stated:

Media can spread awareness about the signs and symptoms of mental health disorders and teach the public appropriate first aid responses. (Female, 21–25 years old)

These responses demonstrate that students view communication media not merely as a source of information but as a mechanism for education, stigma reduction, awareness building, and peer support. Nevertheless, respondents also emphasised the continued importance of interpersonal communication and professional consultation when addressing personal mental health concerns.

DISCUSSION

While social media and online platforms are the primary sources of mental health information for most students, there remains a significant gap between their willingness to help peers and their actual knowledge of how to respond effectively. This suggests that although students are frequently exposed to mental health-related content, such exposure alone may not be sufficient to equip them with the practical skills needed to manage their own mental well-being or provide appropriate support to others. Previous studies similarly show that mental health literacy is related to help-seeking behaviour; however, this relationship is also shaped by perceived social support and help-seeking stigma (Yang et al., 2024).

The present findings support emerging evidence that the effectiveness of social media in health promotion depends not only on the quantity of information available but also on how that information is framed and communicated. For example, Song et al. (2025) found that functionality-focused social media content enhanced body appreciation and functionality appreciation among young women by emphasising personal capabilities rather than appearance ideals. These findings suggest that strategically designed social media messages can positively influence psychological well-being and may be more effective in fostering meaningful understanding and behavioural change than simple information exposure alone. Therefore, mental health education initiatives should focus not only on increasing awareness through social media but also on promoting evidence-based, skills-oriented content that empowers students to translate awareness into effective action.

Therefore, exposure to mental health information must be compounded with mental health education programs that provide structured, evidence-based training, which are essential to help students critically navigate social media influences, reduce misinformation, and develop practical skills for mental health first aid. Such education can empower students to better manage social media's impact on their mental well-being and improve their preparedness to assist peers facing mental health challenges. Mental health education can therefore help students distinguish credible information from misleading content and improve their preparedness to provide appropriate initial support to peers experiencing mental health challenges. The findings of this study successfully investigated the role of students as change agents and assessed the effectiveness of exposure to mental health information, but also provided clear answers to the research questions.

While not directly measuring the overall mental well-being post-intervention, the findings strongly suggest that empowering students, through mental health education, would significantly enhance the mental well-being of the student population. By equipping students to effectively recognise and address mental health issues in their peers, these programs foster a more supportive and less stigmatised environment. Increased peer support can reduce feelings of isolation and encourage help-seeking behaviours, as students become more confident in guiding themselves and others towards appropriate resources. Furthermore, by enhancing critical awareness of social media's impact and providing strategies to manage digital stressors, mental health education can mitigate a significant modern challenge to

student well-being. Ultimately, the empowerment of students as mental health advocates is designed to create a more resilient, informed, and supportive community.

This study successfully demonstrates that exposure to mental health information plays an essential role in empowering Indonesian students to become effective change agents in recognising and addressing mental health issues among their peers. The findings reveal that students possess a high level of awareness of mental health challenges and a strong willingness to offer support.

However, a critical gap exists between this willingness and the practical knowledge required for effective intervention. Mental health education directly addresses this gap by enhancing students' understanding of various disorders and their causes, and by providing actionable strategies for peer support. By fostering a more knowledgeable and proactive peer support network, reducing stigma, and equipping students to navigate digital influences, these programs contribute to a more supportive, resilient, and mentally healthy academic community.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that social media remains the primary channel through which university students access information about mental health, with platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok dominating usage. The findings reinforce previous research indicating that while social media can effectively raise awareness, decisions regarding mental health issues are most effectively addressed through face-to-face interpersonal communication with trusted individuals or professionals.

The results further demonstrate that social media use does not necessarily foster isolation or loneliness; rather, it can enhance awareness when students critically compare online information with insights gained through direct interaction. The majority of respondents exhibited high social empathy and a willingness to assist peers experiencing mental health challenges. This reflects both their academic capacity to process complex issues and their personal exposure to mental health experiences, whether their own or those of people around them.

Respondents showed familiarity with a broad range of mental health disorders and their causes, contributing to a rejection of negative stigma toward affected individuals. Notably, students recognized the dual role of social media: it can exacerbate mental health problems through harmful comparisons and misinformation, yet it also serves as a valuable tool for prevention campaigns and awareness building, especially for those in stressful environments.

More importantly, the study highlights a critical gap between awareness and action. Although most students demonstrate a strong understanding of mental health issues and express willingness to support peers facing psychological difficulties, many remain uncertain about appropriate intervention strategies. This finding suggests that awareness alone is insufficient. Universities, health authorities, and communication practitioners should move beyond awareness campaigns towards practical mental health literacy programmes that equip students with the skills needed to provide peer support and access professional resources. By identifying students as potential change agents within their communities, this study contributes to the growing body of health communication research that seeks to transform mental health awareness into meaningful action and social support.

From a communication perspective, the findings demonstrate that social media and interpersonal communication should not be viewed as competing channels. Rather, they function as complementary mechanisms in mental health communication. While social media increases accessibility to information and public awareness, interpersonal communication remains essential for validation, trust building, emotional support, and help-seeking decisions. This study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of how communication media can be strategically integrated to strengthen mental health awareness and support among university students in Indonesia.

Future research should explore specific mental health disorders in greater depth, employ in-depth interviews to capture richer qualitative insights, and conduct comparative and correlational analyses, such as between socio-demographic variables and awareness levels, or between awareness and preferred coping strategies. Such approaches could produce a more comprehensive understanding of how communication channels influence mental health perceptions and behaviours among university students.

BIODATA

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