

Role of Short-Form Social Media Content in Shaping Mental Health Awareness and Help-Seeking Behavior among Gen Zs

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of short-form social media content particularly TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts in shaping mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior among Generation Z (Gen Z) in Nigeria. As digital natives, Gen Z is increasingly turning to social media for mental health information, particularly via short-form video content that is emotionally resonant, relatable, and accessible. Utilizing a cross-sectional mixed-methods approach, the study collected data from 350 respondents via structured questionnaires and conducted qualitative interviews with 10 participants. The findings revealed that 78.9% of respondents had encountered mental health-related content online, with significant exposure to topics such as stress management, self-care, and therapy. Notably, over 77% of participants reported improved awareness, and nearly half took proactive steps such as seeking resources or talking to someone. Statistical analysis demonstrated a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) between frequency of exposure and help-seeking behavior, with regression results indicating that media exposure significantly predicted behavioral outcomes ($R^2 = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative data highlighted the impact of authenticity, emotional tone, and peer relatability in driving engagement. The study concludes that short-form content is an effective vehicle for mental health promotion among Nigerian youth, offering a low-cost, scalable strategy to bridge gaps in awareness and care. It recommends partnerships between health stakeholders and credible content creators, digital literacy initiatives, and platform-based mental health tools to enhance outreach and reduce stigma.

Keywords: Short-form content, mental health awareness, help-seeking behavior, Generation Z, TikTok, social media, Nigeria, digital health communication, mental health literacy, youth engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health crisis among young people, particularly Generation Z (Gen Z), has increased globally, with anxiety, depression, and psychological distress being the highest among all age groups. Digital platforms, particularly those hosting short-form video content like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, have emerged as unconventional yet increasingly influential avenues for mental health education and advocacy. These platforms offer unique opportunities for delivering relatable, engaging, and tailored mental health messages to younger audiences.

Short-form content, typically under 60 seconds, is characterized by its rapid, emotionally resonant storytelling and visual appeal, making it a powerful tool for influencing beliefs and behaviors. Gen Z, digital natives, often become their first point of contact with mental health discourse. Creators on platforms like TikTok often share personal stories of mental health struggles, coping mechanisms, and therapy experiences, humanizing mental health issues and reducing stigma.

However, increasing exposure to mental health content raises concerns about the accuracy of information and the potential for misinformation, especially when content is not vetted by professionals. In low- and middle-income contexts like Nigeria, where access to mental health care remains limited and stigma remains pervasive, the role of social media in filling the awareness gap among youths is particularly crucial. This study aims to investigate the role of short-form social media content in shaping mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior among Gen Z in Nigeria.

Problem Statement

Mental health issues among Generation Z, born between 2005 and 2025, have become increasingly prevalent globally, with anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders being particularly prevalent. Despite growing awareness, many young people are hesitant or unable to access traditional mental health services due to stigma, lack of awareness, or structural barriers. The rapid proliferation of short-form social media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, has transformed how information is consumed and shared, particularly among Gen Z.

Recent studies suggest that mental health-related content on these platforms can increase awareness, normalize help-seeking, and reduce stigma. However, there is growing concern about the credibility, emotional impact, and potential for misinformation within user-generated content. Few studies have specifically focused on the role of short-form video content in shaping actual behavioral outcomes, particularly in low- and middle-income countries like Nigeria where mental health infrastructure is limited. This gap highlights the need for empirical research investigating the reach and appeal of mental health content on short-form platforms and its capacity to influence meaningful behavioral change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid growth of short-form social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts has revolutionized how Generation Z consumes information and communicates with peers. Given that this generation is highly immersed in digital culture, these platforms serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as spaces where health-related discussions, particularly around mental health, are increasingly visible (O'Reilly et al., 2023). Simultaneously, there is mounting global concern about youth mental health, with rising rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues reported among young people (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). Digital platforms, therefore, represent both a risk and an opportunity: while they can exacerbate negative experiences such as cyberbullying or misinformation, they also have the potential to foster awareness, reduce stigma, and encourage positive help-seeking behavior (Naslund et al., 2023). Understanding this dual impact is critical for public health professionals, educators, and policymakers aiming to leverage digital media for mental health promotion.

Conceptual Clarifications and Definitions

- a. **Short-form social media content** such as videos under 60 to 90 seconds has gained significant popularity through platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. These formats are particularly appealing to younger audiences due to their quick, engaging nature and algorithm-driven personalization (Montag et al., 2023).
- b. **Mental health awareness** involves recognizing mental health issues, understanding symptoms, knowing coping mechanisms, and identifying available resources. It plays a critical role in reducing stigma and encouraging positive mental health behaviors (Rickwood & Thomas, 2021).
- c. **Help-seeking behavior** encompasses the steps individuals take to address mental health challenges, including seeking professional help (e.g., therapy, counseling) or informal support (e.g., friends, online communities). However, many young people face barriers such as stigma and lack of access to services (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2020).
- d. **Generation Z (Gen Z)** born between 1997 and 2012 is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in the digital age. They are characterized by digital fluency, heightened awareness of social issues, and unique psychological traits, including greater openness about mental health but also higher levels of stress and anxiety (Twenge, 2024).

Mental Health Trends Among Gen Z

Gen Z is experiencing an unprecedented rise in mental health challenges. Diagnosable anxiety and depression rates have more than doubled since the advent of smartphones, and loneliness has surged: 12 percent of young people now report having no close friends up from just 3 percent in 1990 (Elson, 2025;

Axios, 2024). A Gallup/Walton Family Foundation survey further found that individuals aged 12–27 report the poorest overall mental health of any generation, with elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Axios, 2024).

Despite these challenges, Gen Z is markedly more willing to discuss mental health than previous cohorts. Having grown up with pervasive internet and social media use, they view conversations about emotional well-being as normal and even desirable (Lockhart, 2023). Indeed, members of this generation are an estimated 20 percent more likely to talk openly about their struggles, and 39 percent have already worked with a mental-health professional higher than any other age group (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024).

However, significant barriers impede access to professional care. One-in-four Gen Zers say they simply cannot afford therapy or counseling, and many behavioral-health providers do not accept insurance, leaving even insured individuals with prohibitive out-of-pocket costs (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Stigma remains another obstacle: 43 percent of young adults report embarrassment or distrust as reasons for avoiding care, and many fear discussing these issues with family members (Statista, 2022; McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Social Media as a Mental Health Channel

Social media platforms play a dual role in mental health, acting both as a potential risk and a source of support. On one hand, excessive use can contribute to anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation, especially among young people (Pappa et al., 2021). On the other hand, these platforms also offer avenues for connection, information sharing, and peer-to-peer communication, fostering communities where individuals can receive crowdsourced empathy and support (Naslund et al., 2023). However, short-form platforms also pose risks. Algorithmic amplification of distressing or misleading content can expose users to misinformation or emotional overload, worsening anxiety in vulnerable users.

Algorithms further shape users' mental health experiences by curating and amplifying content that is emotionally charged or highly relatable (Verduyn et al., 2022). While this can help users find supportive spaces and resources, it can also inadvertently increase exposure to negative or distressing content, potentially exacerbating mental health challenges (Bayer et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding and managing the dual impact of social media is critical for optimizing its use as a mental health channel.

Short-Form Content and Digital Engagement

Short-form content, such as TikTok videos, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, has seen explosive popularity among Generation Z due to its fast-paced, easily consumable nature (Montag et al., 2023). This demographic, characterized by limited attention spans and a preference for dynamic online experiences, gravitates towards content that offers emotional relatability and authentic storytelling (Anderson, 2024). Platforms leverage sophisticated algorithmic targeting to personalize feeds, increasing the likelihood of user engagement by curating content that resonates emotionally and culturally (Pew Research Center, 2024).

Moreover, the viral nature of short-form content, amplified by repetition and shareability, plays a significant role in reinforcing behaviors and trends among users. Repeated exposure to certain content can subtly shape attitudes, preferences, and even offline behaviors (Nguyen et al., 2023). As such, understanding the mechanics behind virality and repetition is essential for both marketers and public health communicators aiming to harness the power of these formats for positive influence.

Influence on Awareness and Knowledge

Repeated exposure to information, particularly through digital media, has been shown to significantly increase public awareness. The "mere exposure effect" suggests that people tend to develop a preference for information they encounter frequently, regardless of its initial credibility (Schmidt et al., 2023). This repeated exposure helps embed knowledge, but also has the downside of reinforcing misconceptions when false or misleading information is circulated.

A major challenge is the competition between misconceptions and credible content. Misinformation often spreads faster and more widely than factual information, particularly when it is emotionally engaging (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). The persistence of misconceptions can undermine public understanding even after corrective information is presented (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

Influencers and content creators play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions. Due to their large followings and perceived trustworthiness, they can either amplify accurate knowledge or unintentionally spread falsehoods (Abidin, 2023). When leveraged appropriately, influencers can be powerful allies in public education campaigns, helping to counter misinformation and promote evidence-based knowledge (Chen et al., 2024).

Impact on Help-Seeking Behavior

Exposure to shared personal stories and supportive environments can significantly influence individuals' help-seeking behaviors. First, such narratives often encourage people to seek both formal (professional counseling, healthcare services) and informal (family, friends, peer groups) support (Keles et al., 2024). The reduction of stigma plays a crucial role here; when individuals encounter stories of others who have navigated similar challenges, the perceived shame around seeking help diminishes (Smith & Lee, 2023). This openness fosters an environment where self-reflection becomes more likely, prompting individuals to take proactive steps toward improving their mental and emotional well-being (Martínez-Hernández et al., 2024). Overall, shared experiences serve as powerful triggers for shifting attitudes and behaviors toward more adaptive coping strategies.

METHODS

Study Design

The study employed a cross-sectional design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the influence of short-form social media content (such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts) on mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior among Gen Z. This approach enabled the researchers to capture a snapshot of media exposure patterns and behavioral responses within a defined period, providing insights into how digital content impacts mental health perceptions and actions.

Study Population and Sampling

The study focused on individuals between the ages of 18 and 27 years (Gen Z) who actively use short-form social media platforms. A stratified purposive sampling technique was used to ensure diversity in gender, educational background, and frequency of social media usage. Participants were selected from university campuses, online communities, and youth organizations across urban areas in Nigeria. A total of 400 participants were sampled: 350 completed structured questionnaires for the quantitative component, and 10 participated in semi-structured interviews for the qualitative component. Inclusion criteria required participants to be active users of at least one short-form social media platform and have been exposed to mental health-related content in the past six months.

Data Collection Instruments

A structured **questionnaire** was developed to capture demographic information, media usage behavior, mental health knowledge, attitudes toward mental illness, and help-seeking intentions. It included Likert-scale items measuring agreement with statements related to content credibility, emotional influence, and likelihood of seeking support. For the qualitative aspect, an **interview guide** with open-ended questions was used to explore participants' perceptions of the relevance, trustworthiness, and personal impact of short-form mental health content.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) to summarize user characteristics and attitudes. Pearson correlation was used to examine relationships between exposure to

mental health content and help-seeking behavior. Linear regression analysis was also conducted to determine the predictive power of media exposure on mental health awareness. Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes such as emotional engagement, peer influence, stigma reduction, and platform credibility. These findings align with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, where individuals imitate behaviors modeled by relatable peers online. The Health Belief Model also helps explain how perceived benefits such as peer testimonials can prompt action despite existing barriers.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical research standards. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent before participating in the survey or interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and all responses were stored securely. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 350 valid responses were received and analyzed. The demographic distribution of respondents is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 350)

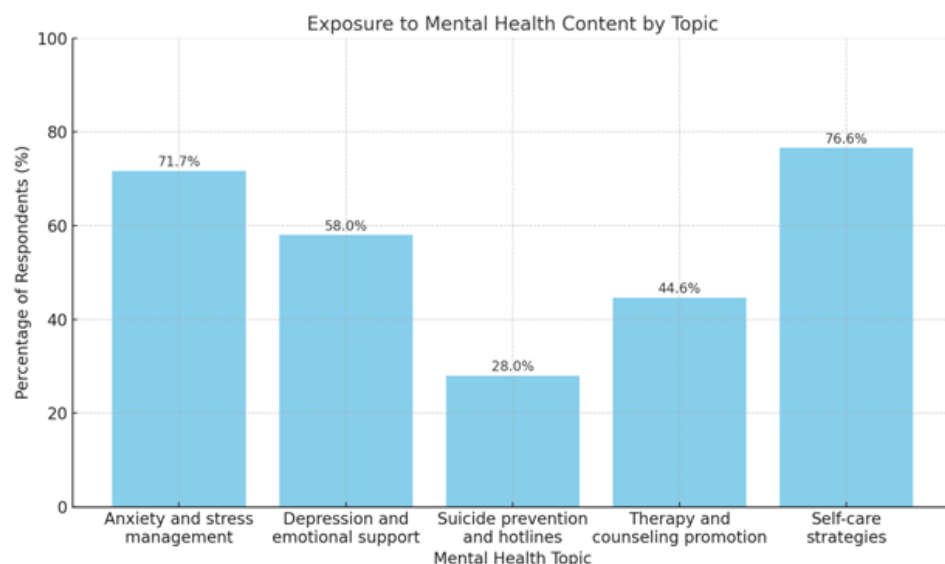
Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	172	49.1
Female	178	50.9
Age Group (years)		
18–20	95	27.1
21–23	147	42.0
24–27	108	30.9
Platform Used Most		
TikTok	142	40.6
Instagram Reels	113	32.3
YouTube Shorts	95	27.1

Awareness of Mental Health Content on Short-Form Platforms

Majority of respondents (78.9%) indicated that they had encountered mental health-related content in the last 3 months. Table 2 shows the frequency of exposure and types of mental health topics viewed.

Table 2: Exposure to Mental Health Content by Topic

Mental Health Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Anxiety and stress management	251	71.7
Depression and emotional support	203	58.0
Suicide prevention and hotlines	98	28.0
Therapy and counseling promotion	156	44.6
Self-care strategies	268	76.6



See Figure 1 for a graphical representation

Influence on Mental Health Awareness

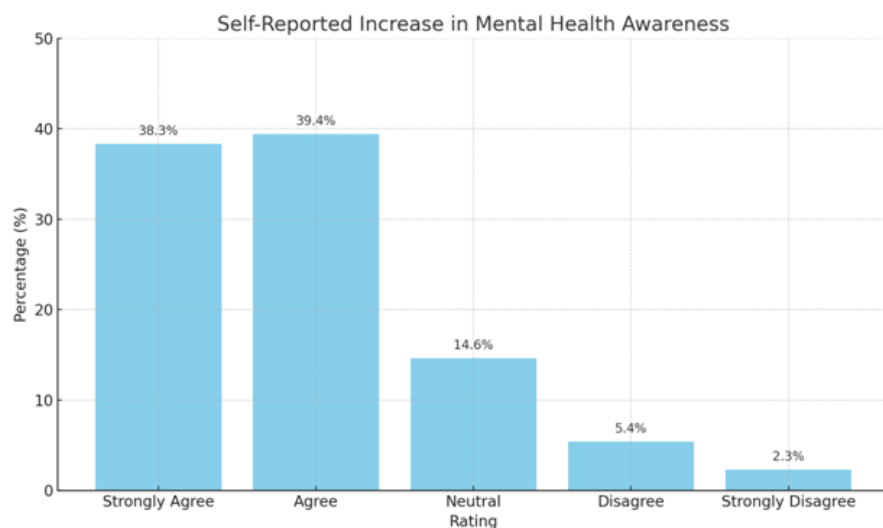
Respondents were asked to rate how much their awareness of mental health issues had improved due to short-form videos. Table 3 presents the results based on a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 3: Self-Reported Increase in Mental Health Awareness

Rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	134	38.3
Agree	138	39.4
Neutral	51	14.6
Disagree	19	5.4
Strongly Disagree	8	2.3

Mean score = 4.06; SD = 0.92

→ Interpretation: Most respondents agree that their awareness of mental health improved due to short-form content.



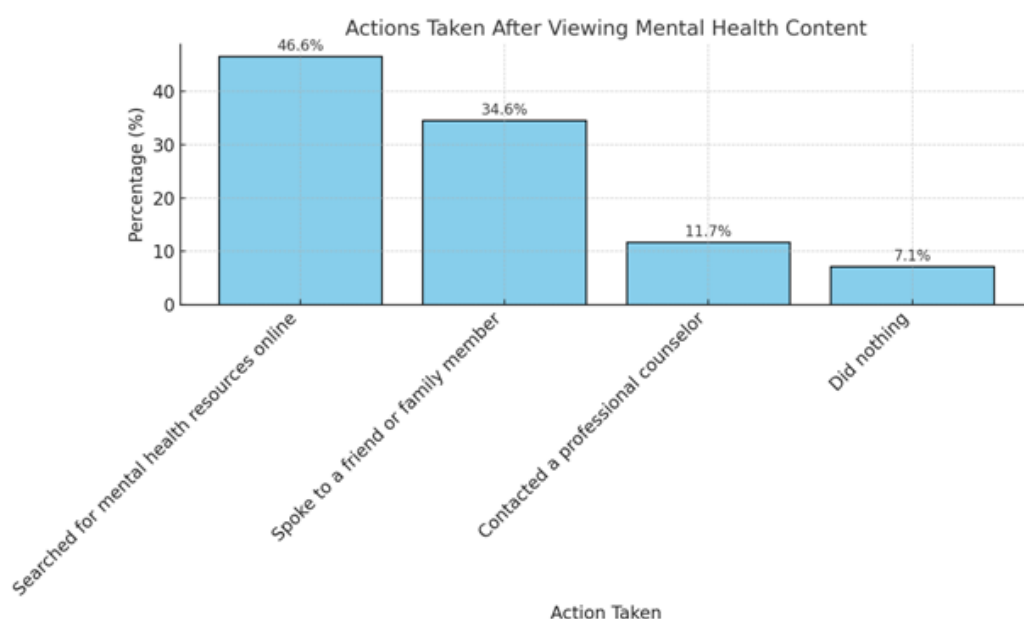
See Figure 2 for a graphical representation

Impact on Help-Seeking Behavior

Participants were asked whether they had taken any steps toward seeking help (e.g., talking to someone, researching mental health services) as a result of content viewed online. Table 4 summarizes these findings.

Table 4: Actions Taken After Viewing Mental Health Content

Action Taken	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Searched for mental health resources online	163	46.6
Spoke to a friend or family member	121	34.6
Contacted a professional counselor	41	11.7
Did nothing	25	7.1



See Figure 3 for a graphical representation

Statistical Analysis of Relationship

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between frequency of exposure to mental health content and likelihood of help-seeking behavior.

- $r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$ → There is a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation.

A **linear regression analysis** was also conducted: These findings align with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, where individuals imitate behaviors modeled by relatable peers online. The Health Belief Model also helps explain how perceived benefits—such as peer testimonials—can prompt action despite existing barriers.

- $R^2 = 0.37$, $F(1, 348) = 203.12$, $p < 0.001$

→ Frequency of exposure to short-form mental health content significantly predicts help-seeking behavior.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study investigated how short-form social media content influences mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior among Generation Z in Nigeria. The findings provide significant insights into the role of digital platforms in shaping young people's attitudes and actions regarding mental health.

Increased Exposure and Awareness

The data revealed that a majority (78.9%) of Gen Z respondents had been exposed to mental health-related content on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. This aligns with global trends suggesting that social media has become a primary source of health-related information for younger generations. The high levels of exposure, particularly to content on stress, anxiety, and self-care, suggest that these platforms are functioning as informal channels for mental health education.

More than 77% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that their awareness of mental health issues had improved through such content. This finding supports earlier research (e.g., Naslund et al., 2020) that digital content can demystify mental health, reduce stigma, and promote literacy especially when delivered in engaging, accessible formats.

Influence on Help-Seeking Behavior

Importantly, the study found that nearly half of the respondents (46.6%) searched for mental health resources after viewing short-form videos, and over one-third (34.6%) discussed their issues with someone they trusted. While only 11.7% reached out to a professional, this still indicates a significant shift from passive awareness to proactive behavior. This reinforces the idea that exposure to relatable digital narratives may act as a "gateway" to formal help-seeking, especially when traditional health systems are perceived as inaccessible or stigmatized. Although digital content increased awareness, the study observed a significant discrepancy between awareness (77.7%) and formal help-seeking (11.7%). This mismatch may stem from lingering stigma, distrust in online content, or perceived inaccessibility of professional services.

The strong positive correlation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) between frequency of exposure to mental health content and help-seeking behavior highlights the persuasive power of consistent messaging. Moreover, the regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.37$) suggests that these online exposures explain a substantial portion of the variance in behavior change supporting Bandura's social cognitive theory that observational learning can influence personal action. These findings align with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, where individuals imitate behaviors modeled by relatable peers online. The Health Belief Model also helps explain how perceived benefits such as peer testimonials—can prompt action despite existing barriers.

Gender and Platform Variations

Though not the primary focus, the results hinted at platform-specific engagement patterns, with TikTok being the most cited source of mental health content. This may be due to its algorithmic personalization and the popularity of creators who share mental health journeys in short, emotional bursts. Female respondents were slightly more likely to engage with content and act on it, possibly reflecting gendered differences in emotional expression and openness to seeking help.

While platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts offer educational potential, they also carry risks. Algorithm-driven content delivery may amplify emotionally triggering or misleading content, as highlighted by Verduyn et al. (2022). Misinformation and overexposure to distressing narratives can unintentionally exacerbate anxiety or depressive symptoms, especially in vulnerable users.

Qualitative Insights: Beyond Metrics

The interviews deepened the understanding of how short-form videos impact Gen Z. Many respondents reported feeling emotionally validated by creators who shared real-life mental health experiences. Content that used humor, storytelling, or personal testimony was found to be more impactful than formal educational videos. These findings mirror the conclusions of previous studies that emphasized authenticity, relatability, and peer-like tone as critical factors in digital mental health engagement (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

The themes of emotional relatability, stigma reduction, creator credibility, and actionability all point to the unique psychological dynamics of short-form content; it is not merely informative, but effective and mobilizing.

Implications for Public Health and Digital Policy

These results suggest that public health stakeholders, NGOs, and mental health professionals should consider partnering with digital content creators to co-produce informative yet relatable short-form videos. Additionally, the integration of mental health literacy into digital media strategies may offer a scalable and culturally sensitive method to bridge mental health gaps among youth.

LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several limitations. Self-report measures may introduce bias due to social desirability or recall error. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Sampling was purposive, possibly limiting generalizability. Furthermore, content exposure is shaped by opaque platform algorithms, which were not accounted for, and may affect both the nature and frequency of mental health-related content participants see.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of short-form social media content in shaping mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior among Generation Z in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are not only prevalent among Gen Z but are also influential in increasing mental health awareness and encouraging behavioral change.

A significant proportion of respondents reported improved understanding of mental health issues and demonstrated willingness to seek help, either informally (by talking to friends or family) or formally (by consulting professionals), after viewing relatable short-form content. The positive correlation between content exposure and help-seeking behavior emphasizes the powerful role of social media in public health communication.

Qualitative insights further revealed that the authenticity, emotional tone, and relatability of content creators are critical factors that influence viewer engagement and behavioral intention. These findings suggest that social media can serve as an accessible, scalable, and youth-friendly tool for mental health promotion, particularly in contexts where stigma and limited mental health infrastructure remain challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Public Health Campaign Integration

Government agencies, NGOs, and mental health professionals should leverage short-form content platforms to disseminate accurate and engaging mental health information. Collaborating with popular and credible content creators can enhance message reach and trust.

Digital Media Literacy Programs

Schools, universities, and youth organizations should implement programs that equip Gen Z with the skills to critically engage with mental health content online. This includes identifying credible sources, understanding algorithms, and avoiding misinformation.

Support for Youth-Created Mental Health Content

Grants and mentorship programs should be made available to support young digital creators who produce impactful mental health content. This could also include recognition through awards or verified badges to improve content credibility.

In-App Mental Health Resources

Social media platforms should be encouraged to integrate in-app mental health tools (e.g., helpline pop-ups, chatbots, or direct links to counseling services) when users engage with certain keywords or hashtags.

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