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Social Support-Seeking among People with Mental Illness on Social Media: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of social media, understanding how people with mental health illnesses seek social support online is crucial for enhancing support mechanisms. This systematic review synthesises evidence on the information-seeking behaviours of individuals with mental illness on social media, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. A thorough search was done for studies published between 2014 and 2024 on *PubMed, ProQuest*, *Web of Science*, and *Google Scholar*. Studies that looked at how people with mental health illness use social media to seek social support were required to meet inclusion criteria. A standardised form was used to extract the data, which were then qualitatively synthesised. A total of 11 studies met the inclusion criteria. The findings indicate that people with mental illness use social media primarily to seek social support, share personal experiences, and gather information on symptoms, treatments and medications. Social media platforms like *Facebook*, *X*, and *Reddit* were commonly used. This review highlights that social media is a significant resource for people with mental illness' information and support seeking. While it offers benefits, concerns also exist regarding the reliability of information and privacy issues. Future research should focus on interventions to enhance the positive impacts of social media on social support-seeking behaviours.

Keywords: Social support, systematic review, mental health, mental illness, social media

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Social support is generally defined as the resources that are shared with others via social connections (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). According to Uchino (2004), four primary categories of social support include emotional support, informational support, companionship support, and tangible support. Studies have shown that social support positively affects a range of mental health outcomes (Varvel *et al*., 2007; Guilaran *et al*., 2018; Kshtriya, 2020). As mentioned by Wang *et al*. (2015), of these four categories of social support that people seek both offline and online, the most theoretical and empirical emphasis has been given to emotional and informational support. They distinguished between informational and emotional support, defining the former as the giving of knowledge or counsel and the latter as the

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expression of compassion, sympathy or encouragement. Due to the swift advancement of internet technology, online social support is now accessible on many popular social media platforms. Rideout and Fox (2018), as cited in Naslund *et al*. (2019), assert that people with mental health illness often use social media (e.g., *Facebook*, *X*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*) and tend to seek help or services through these platforms.

Understanding how individuals with mental illness seek support online is crucial for enhancing support mechanisms. Therefore, this systematic review aims to synthesise current evidence on social support-seeking behaviours of people with mental illness on social media platforms.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Mental Health Social Support-Seeking

Ever since the Internet's emergence, computer-mediated communication has demonstrated its ability to promote positive user connections (Coursaris & Liu, 2009; Oh & Lee, 2012; Xie, 2008). Computer-mediated social support enables people to search for the kind of assistance they require online in the event that it is not readily available in person (Turner *et al*., 2001). Individuals with symptoms of mental conditions or are diagnosed with mental health illness often turn to online platforms for various reasons. For instance, Akhther (2021) stated that those who have been diagnosed with mental health issues list four main goals for using social media: making connections with other people who share their experiences, learning about mental health from others, sharing firsthand accounts of dealing with mental illness, and discovering coping mechanisms.

In a different study, individuals with schizophrenia emphasised three reasons for using the Internet to search for mental health information: the ability to remain anonymous, the opportunity to discover that others share similar health conditions, and the reduced complexity of accessing information, which helps alleviate fears (Schrank *et al*. 2010). Meanwhile, young adults indicated that the inexpensive cost of accessing the Internet was a significant factor in their decision to use online resources, suggesting that it encouraged them to look for help online frequently (Pretorius *et al.,* 2019).

Besides, studies have shown that people experiencing mental health challenges engage with others on social media and form online relationships at rates comparable to the general population (Gowen *et al*., 2012; Birnbaum *et al*., 2015; Naslund *et al*., 2019). It is because online platforms have an advantage in offering users space to engage in sensitive discussions and be more vulnerable with minimal risk, which conventional face-to-face communication lacks (Coulson, 2005). As Crocker & Canevello (2008) mentioned, a person who gained support from other members of online support groups may feel motivated to return the favour when others need support. Therefore, this support exchange will increase the amount of useful online information.

Challenges in Online Mental Health Social Support Seeking

The internet and social media have been recognised as valuable tools for mental health service users, offering opportunities to reduce stigma and encourage mental health information seeking, as emphasised by Herrera-Peco *et al*. (2023). In a quantitative study, young adults expressed their concerns when searching

for online mental health resources and one of them is not knowing if the information was reliable (Naslund *et al.*, 2019). In a different study, more than half of the participants who used the Internet to search for mental health information believed that it contains unreliable information (Montagni *et al.*, 2016).

Additionally, people with mental illness have concerns about their privacy every time they expose themselves on social media (Torous & Keshavan, 2016; Naslund *et al.*, 2020). This is similar to a study by Milton *et al.* (2024) that found participants with mental illness worried about the safety of their privacy while seeking mental health information on online platforms. The reason for privacy is often associated with stigma. When mental illness is present, the concern about being identified is often justified, as stigma and the need for confidentiality are widely recognised issues. This is also confirmed by prior study. Naslund and Aschbrenner (2019) found that people with mental illness worried about people's stigma on their mental health and how it will affect their occupational and personal lives.

Apart from that, findings of other study suggest that people find it challenging to find the care they need on social media through mental health programs and services, highlighting the limited access to health care in online settings (Naslund *et al.*, 2019). Social media may be a valuable tool for improving mental health programs and services and widening people's exposure towards the accessible care, as highlighted by the study participants. Other studies also have indicated similar findings, showing the inadequacy of medical and mental health services offered to individuals with mental illness (Kazdin, 2017; Naslund *et al.*, 2019).

Strategies on Mental Health Social Support Seeking

Support-seeking behaviours are categorised under the Social Support Activation Model based on Barbee *et al.* (1993) along two dimensions: (1) verbal versus nonverbal elicitation and (2) direct versus indirect elicitation (Wang *et al.*, 2015). An indirect elicitation technique might be expressing worry about a diagnosis, but a direct elicitation strategy might be asking a query regarding medications in online spaces where communication is verbal. Furthermore, there is evidence to show that these two types of strategies can be applied to elicit distinct types of support. Previous studies, for instance, indicate that members of online support groups ask questions in obtaining reliable information, and that focused questions yield more helpful responses than open-ended ones (Bambina, 2007; Burke *et al.*, 2007). While asking questions is effective in eliciting informational support, self-disclosure is effective in generating emotional support (Wang *et al.*, 2015).

People's support seeking behaviour may help them be aware of their mental health experiences and traits, research more on their diagnosis and make sense of the prescribed medications along with their side effects (Akhther, 2021). Wang *et al.* (2015) claimed that support seekers employ a range of strategies to communicate their need for assistance during support elicitation. For instance, young people between the ages of 11 and 25 look for peer support by asking questions, finding others who are similar to them, and sharing contextualised experiences (Prescott *et al.*, 2017; Naslund *et al.*, 2016; Akhther, 2021). Similarly, Naslund *et al.* (2019) found that sixty percent of diagnosed individuals favour interactions with medical professionals and navigating health care services, while ninety-three percent incline towards finding information on how to cope with mental health symptoms.

In a study by Choudhury and De (2014), they explored mental health discourse on *Reddit* and found that people who post to mental health subreddits frequently utilise it as a platform to self-disclose by freely communicating their experiences living with mental illnesses and the effects those experiences have on their relationships, careers, and daily lives. Apart from that, they found it is also typical for *Reddit* users to inquire about comprehensive information about symptoms and treatment through a direct speech act.

In a qualitative study, *Reddit* users who were looking for emotional and informational support during the COVID-19 outbreak were more likely to perform self-disclosure by revealing details about themselves such as their location, age, and education background (Lee *et al*., 2023). Other researchers have also discovered that self-disclosure appeared in postings shared on *Reddit's* mental health channels and they highlighted that the comments and prompt reactions to the postings demonstrate community's willingness to offer support and advice. Trepte *et al*. (2018) suggest that social support is effectively exchanged when the provider offers appropriate support, and the recipient is open to sharing personal information.

3.0   METHOD

This study adopts a systematic review approach, using the online articles retrieved from *ProQuest*, *Web of Science*, and *Google Scholar*. Keywords used to identify relevant literature include "mental illness", "social support", "support-seeking" and "social media". The researchers also utilised Boolean operator "AND" to refine the search process. For instance, "mental health AND online social support", "social support AND social media" and "support-seeking behaviours AND social media". Articles published within the last ten years (since 2014) were selected due to the rapid development of social media in recent years. A total of 11 articles met the review inclusion criteria and were included in the current systematic review. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA diagram displaying the total number of studies retrieved and the selection process for the papers that are included in the review. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) the research must be an original empirical study (2) the purpose of the study must be to address social support-seeking in social media, (3) the study must investigate social media usage among people with mental illness and (4) the study was published in a peer-reviewed journal. Figure 1 provides the process flow employed in this review.
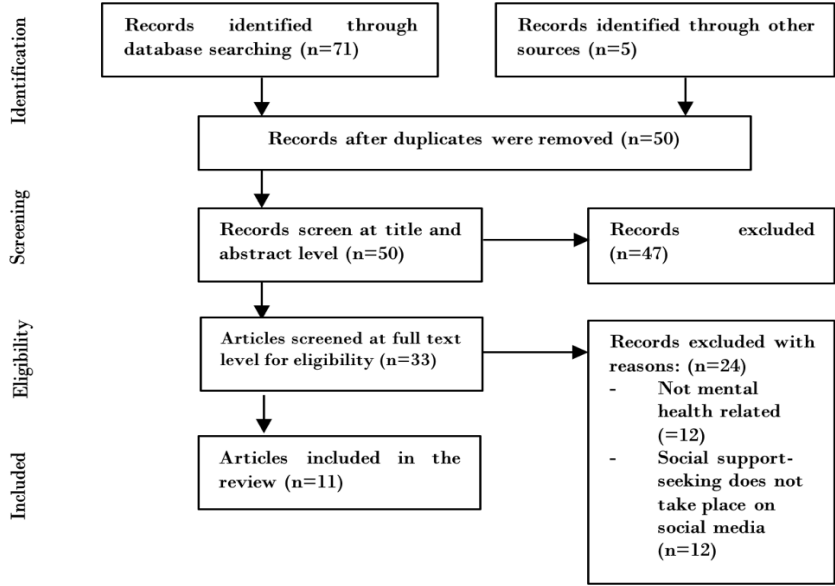

Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram

In the 'Identification' phase, a comprehensive literature search was conducted to retrieve articles published from 2014 to 2024. The initial keyword searches yielded a large number of articles, therefore, a more filtered search was done using predefined inclusion criteria to narrow down the selection. The articles were further reviewed in the 'Screening' phase, whereby the titles and the abstracts were carefully reviewed to ensure that all possibly qualifying articles were selected. In the 'Eligibility' phase, a full-text review of each article was performed to identify whether it met the specified inclusion criteria. This step helped exclude studies that were irrelevant or did not fulfil the necessary requirements. In the final 'Included' phase, all the remaining articles selected from the eligibility assessment were included to be critically evaluated for quality. Once the selection of the articles was finalised and confirmed, the chosen studies underwent analysis and synthesis to draw crucial conclusions.

4.0   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the use of an online keyword search, a total of 71 articles were successfully found. However, after screening the abstracts of the articles obtained, only 50 articles met the qualifying criteria as they focused on online social support-seeking by people with mental illness. From the total of 50 qualified articles, it has been discovered that a total of 11 articles focused on the use of social media by people with mental illness to seek social support and the remaining 24 articles concentrated on topics unrelated to the theme. The key characteristics of the reviewed articles are summarised in terms of authors and publication year, title, research design, sample size and main findings, which are shown in Table 1. Most research designs employed in the reviewed studies are qualitative, except three applied quantitative and two applied mixed-methods. The participants in the studies include several different types of respondents which are people with mental illness, young adults, adults and students with mental health conditions.

Table 1 shows a summary of the key findings from studies on social support-seeking among individuals with mental health conditions on social media. It highlights the predominant focus on emotional and informational support-seeking, the emphasis on informational support-seeking in one study, and the diverse methodologies employed to explore these themes.

Table 1 The details of the articles reviewed

Authors	Title	Research Design	Sample	Findings
Prescott *et al.* (2020)	Online Peer to Peer Support: Qualitative Analysis of UK and US Open Mental Health *Facebook* Groups	Qualitative (content analysis)	2801 pages of Facebook posts and comments	i. The findings indicate that *Facebook* support groups have helped users seek mental health information and support. ii. The majority of people in the UK and US *Facebook* groups sought both informational and emotional support regarding their mental health issues. iii. However, self-disclosure of mental health issues was more common in UK *Facebook* groups. iv. The support, advice and information were provided by other users in the comment sections of the posts.
Akhther and Sopory (2022)	Seeking and Sharing Mental Health Information on Social Media During COVID-19: Role of Depression and Anxiety, Peer Support, and Health Benefits	Quantitative (online survey)	865 participants	i. The survey's findings highlight that participants with severe depression and anxiety use social media more frequently than people with moderate and mild depression and anxiety. ii. Depression self-ratings were strongly linked with general and topics seeking as well as the span of seeking on social media connected to mental health. iii. A positive correlation was also observed between between perceived peer support and the sharing of information about mental health conditions on social media. iv. Additionally, perceived health benefits of social media were also found to be significantly associated with both seeking and sharing information about mental health on these platforms.
Lee *et al.* (2023)	Online Self-Disclosure, Social Support, and User Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic	Qualitative (content analysis)	*Reddit* posts	i. The study's findings revealed that *Reddit* users voluntarily self-disclose by revealing their age, location and education when seeking both informational and emotional support, as opposed to pursuing either one. ii. The intensified degree of self-disclosure was highly correlated with acquiring the preferred type of informational support, but not emotional support.
Gere and Salimi (2021)	Social Media Use as Self-Therapy or Alternative Mental Help-Seeking Behavior	Quantitative (survey)	143 participants (aged 17-35 years)	i. The results from the survey indicate that a moderate amount of college students use social media to share their personal concerns as a means to elicit advice or counsel. ii. However, the findings show that college students are less likely to seek mental health services if they frequently talk about emotional or personal issues or get advise from social media. iii. The results also indicate that when students have higher educational level, they are less likely to share personal or emotional concerns on social media, and more likely to do formal help-seeking.
Milton *et al.* (2024)	Seeking in Cycles: How Users Leverage Personal Information Ecosystems to Find Mental Health Information	Qualitative (interview)	17 participants	i. Users look for various types of reliable mental health information from professionals such as therapy and treatment for to cope with symptoms. ii. The users also reported facing barriers from sociotechnical issues concerning privacy and platform design.
Naslund *et al.* (2019)	Exploring Opportunities to Support Mental Health Care Using Social Media: A survey of Social Media Users With Mental Illness	Quantitative (survey)	240 *Twitter* users with self-identified mental illness	i. Findings reported that participants used social media to connect with other people with mental illness, to exchange personal experiences about living with mental illness or to learn about coping mechanisms. ii. The participants expressed interest in accessing programs for delivering help through social media. iii. Findings also suggest that although many participants find it challenging to obtain the care they need, showing the inadequacy of mental health programs and services on social media.

Authors	Title	Research Design	Sample	Findings
				iv. Young adults were reported to have more access to social media like *Instagram* and *Snapchat* to connect with others who also suffer from a mental illness.
Naslund *et al.* (2016)	Feasibility and Acceptability of *Facebook* for Health Promotion Among People With Serious Mental Illness	Mixed-methods (survey and interview)	11 participants	i. These findings suggest that *Facebook* may be feasible for supporting health promotion efforts targeting people with serious mental illness. ii. Participants expressed satisfaction with *Facebook* as it contains useful information and advice shared by other users, chances to learn from others' experiences and opportunities to offer and gain support whenever needed.
Fergie *et al.* (2016)	Young Adults' Experiences of Seeking Online Information About Diabetes and Mental Health in the Age of Social Media	Qualitative (interview)	40 participants (aged 18-30)	i. The findings show that the decrease of search engine use for health information-seeking is due to the increase use reliance the recommendations obtained from within their online social networks. ii. The participants used social media to get information for their self-management strategies, relying on the experiences of others or specialised content compiled by online communities focused on particular issues.
Choudhury and De (2014)	Mental Health Discourse on *Reddit*: Self-Disclosure, Social Support, and Anonymity	Qualitative (content analysis)	*Reddit* posts	i. The findings show that posts which include self-disclosure associated with mental health concerns invited more social support that ranges from emotional, informational and prescriptive advice. ii. The findings show that people who post in mental health subreddits to share their experiences with disease and the effects those experiences have had on their relationships, careers, and personal lives. It is also common to see posts looking for specific information on a diagnosis or course of therapy.
Andalibi *et al.* (2017)	Sensitive Self-disclosures, Responses, and Social Support on *Instagram*: The Case of #Depression	Qualitative (content analysis)	*Instagram* posts	i. The content shared with #depression on *Instagram* include sensitive disclosure which include topics like eating disorders, self-injury, self-image, personal experiences and help-seeking. ii. The findings show that *Instagram* users who include #depression or related hashtags in their posts often receive emotional, network and esteem support rather than informational support.
Vornhoult and Choudhury (2021)	Understanding the Role of Social Media–Based Mental Health Support Among College Students: Survey and Semi-structured Interviews	Mixed-methods (survey and interview)	101 participants	iii. The findings identified that the college students benefited from social media for mental health disclosure and support-seeking. iv. The study revealed that students are able to find support informally through social media while protecting their anonymity and privacy.

As outlined in Table 1, key characteristics and findings from each study have been discussed. Further comparison and synthesis of these studies have led to the summarisation of key information that researchers found relevant to the current review. This comparison covers the differences of research designs employed by the studies and the themes that emerged from the review.

Research Designs

Over the past decade, studies on social support-seeking on social media have used different research designs. The most used research design is qualitative, which was used by six studies. Three of the studies employed quantitative research design while only two studies used mixed-methods of both quantitative and qualitative.

It was noted that the studies which employed qualitative methods either used semi-structured interviews or content analysis to collect the data. Conducting interviews is useful to allow participants to provide personal information, especially in situations where observation is not feasible for researchers to elicit specific details (Creswell, 2012). In one of the studies we reviewed, a sample of participants consisted of young adults was selected to participate in semi-structured interviews to examine their perceptions and experiences with online mental health information seeking (Fergie *et al*., 2016). Meanwhile, content analysis was used by four out of six studies that employed qualitative design. Content analysis was often used by researchers to highlight trends or strategies of social support-seeking on social media. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), this type of analysis emphasises analysing speech or texts within their specific contexts to explore meanings, themes or insights that may be explicitly stated or subtly implied in a given text.

On the other hand, the quantitative design was mostly used to investigate reasons for social media use by people with mental illness and the frequency of social media use in social support-seeking (Naslund *et al*., 2019; Akhther & Sopory, 2022; Gere & Salimi, 2021). Lastly, the two studies that employed both qualitative and quantitative designs were interested in exploring the efficacy of social media in providing emotional and informational support for mental health and identifying the participants' satisfaction with using social media to seek social support (Naslund *et al*., 2016; Vornhoult & Choudhury, 2021). The diversity in research designs reflects the multifaceted nature of social support-seeking on social media. While qualitative methods dominate due to their ability to explore complex, personal experiences, quantitative and mixed methods contribute further by providing broader generalisations and specific results, like the effectiveness of online platforms and user satisfaction. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasise the need for varied approaches an in-depth understanding of social support-seeking behaviours on social media.

Emotional Support and Informational Support

According to the article's review, these studies have addressed social support-seeking to obtain emotional and informational support from social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *X* and *Reddit*. However, not all studies explored both types of support as some focused exclusively on either emotional or informational support-seeking. For instance, these studies emphasised informational support-seeking, exploring how people who struggle with mental health use social media to elicit advice from others, find information from professionals about treatment or therapy and learn from others about coping mechanisms (Gere & Salimi, 2021; Akhther & Sopory, 2022; Fergie *et al*., 2016).

Furthermore, the findings have shown that support-seeking on social media may not always be effective in acquiring both emotional and informational support. Few studies emphasised that social support-seeking has only managed to elicit emotional support from other social media users. For example, a study exploring

the use of #depression and other related hashtags on *Instagram* has only attracted emotional and instrumental support, but not informational support (Andalibi *et al*., 2017). On the other hand, research on social support on *Reddit* showed that postings containing an intensified degree of self-disclosure will only receive informational support (Lee *et al*., 2023). Overall, social media is proven to provide valuable avenues for mental health support-seeking. Nevertheless, it may not fulfil all support needs simultaneously, underscoring the importance of tailoring support-seeking strategies to specific social media platforms.

Self-disclosure

Existing studies examined the use of social media among individuals with mental health conditions. Studies on social support among people with mental illness mainly focused on their strategies to obtain support from other users. It seems that most of their strategies were effective in eliciting social support in the form of emotional and informational. These studies mentioned self-disclosure of personal information and mental health problems to be very common among people with mental illness who seek support. For example, one study that explored social support-seeking on *Reddit* found that the users are more likely to perform self-disclosure by revealing their age and background information (Lee *et al*., 2023). Another study revealed that Instagram users who used #depression on their posts include sensitive disclosures, discussing eating disorders, self-harm, self-appearance and personal narratives (Andalibi *et al*., 2017).

However, Prescott et al. (2020), who studied UK and US *Facebook* support groups reported that self-disclosure of mental issues was more frequently found in the UK *Facebook* groups. This could mean that cultural or regional differences may influence the likelihood or frequency of self-disclosure. On the other hand, a study on college students' help-seeking on social media revealed that students with higher levels of education are less inclined to self-disclose their personal problems or emotional distress, as they commonly prefer to seek formal help. It suggests that one's educational background or awareness of official mental health services plays an important role in reducing self-disclosure on social media as they might view formal help, such as consulting therapists or counselors, as more appropriate or effective.

5.0   CONCLUSION

This review highlights that social media is a significant resource for people with mental illness seeking support and information. While it offers benefits, such as community building and access to diverse perspectives, there are also concerns about the reliability of information and privacy issues. Two pivotal conclusions have also been drawn from this study. Firstly, social support-seeking on social media has been effective in eliciting emotional or informational support, but not always both. Secondly, while self-disclosure seemed to be a predominant strategy for seeking support on social media, individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to self-disclose, as they perceive formal help-seeking to be more suitable.

The findings also suggest a need for further research on social support-seeking behaviours of people with mental illness on social media. By exploring the discourse of mental health information and support-seeking on social media, mental health professionals will be able to comprehend how to approach people to deliver mental health education and promote social support through these online platforms. Not only that, this study highlights the importance of improving online therapists communication. The reluctance of professionals to interact with public on social media may represent a missed opportunity to contribute to the current conversation around mental health. It is also worth noting that research on mental health

information seeking remains limited. Hence, future research should focus on longitudinal studies and internet based psychiatric interventions such as online peer-support groups and psychoeducation to enhance the positive impacts of social media on mental health information-seeking behaviours.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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