

Mental Health Information Seeking of University Students in Croatia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe some of the key findings of studies on university students' mental health information seeking. It also presents an interdisciplinary study aimed at investigating how university students in Croatia search for information about mental health and what sources of information they use. The study used the quantitative method, i.e., university students completed an online questionnaire. The results of the study show that the respondents mainly use the internet to search for information about stress and anxiety. Respondents sometimes or rarely search for information about mental health. Although most of the respondents have faced mental health difficulties in the past academic year, they have not sought psychological counseling. Listening to music and being with family or friends are the most common ways respondents cope with mental health difficulties. This study can help to support the mental health of university students by integrating some psychological content into higher education.

KEYWORDS

mental health; information seeking; university students; survey; Croatia

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health refers to the mental well-being that helps people manage stress, learn and work well, among other things. It is important for decision-making, relationship building, and not only personal but also community development. Mental health conditions can be associated with mental disorders or psychosocial disabilities that can lead to difficulties in coping with everyday life (World Health Organization, 2022).

Regarding the mental health of university students, the results of a global survey (Auerbach et al., 2018) showed that 35% of undergraduate students reported at least one mental health disorder (hypo/mania, major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, alcohol use disorder, and substance use disorder). Jenkins et al. (2020) found that symptoms of depression and anxiety among university students in the UK were associated with their psychological well-being through impaired general health, decreased socialization, and lower energy (fatigue). Medlicot et al. (2021) found in their exploratory study that university students experienced improvements in their mental health after participating in a mindfulness-based course and that students' well-being was influenced by mindfulness, self-compassion, and resilience. An online survey in the UK showed that the mental health of university students deteriorated during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the cancellation of important events (56%), poor personal relationships, or financial situation (40%). Students who reported higher levels of depression exercised less and had poor communication with friends or family (Chen & Lucock, 2022).

Wei et al. (2015) used literature reviews to examine mental health literacy in the context of identifying mental health difficulties, reducing stigma, and improving help-seeking behavior. Gorczynski et al. (2017) found in an online survey that UK university students with mental health difficulties had higher levels of mental health literacy, and most of the respondents reported accessing mental health information online. A study about mental health information seeking among undergraduate students in Iran (Mahmoodi et al., 2022) showed that most of them obtained information online through social media and during school or university education. Respondents mainly used search engines on websites to obtain information about mental health. Students received little information from health care workers, although they considered them to be the most trusted source of information. According to the quantitative study conducted in the UK (Gorczynski, Sims-Schouten, & Wilson, 2020), the majority of university students (78%) suffered from mild or more severe symptoms of distress. Most of the respondents used online platforms or services to seek information on mental health difficulties (70%) and they primarily sought support from intimate partners and friends. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) found in their mixed methods study that university students in China used online sources (e.g., search engines, social media, etc.) to meet their mental health information needs, which were mainly related to work pressure, self-understanding, and study stress. A recent online survey in Croatia (University of Zagreb) found that most of the university students experienced mental health difficulties (73.2%), but did not seek professional help (76%) due to environmental anxiety, financial constraints, and lack of information

about mental health in general. One of the reasons why respondents did not seek help may be the fact that more than half of them (60%) did not know that the university offered psychological counseling. Students take care of their mental health by meeting with people close to them, taking time for themselves, listening to music, watching movies, etc. (Srednja.hr, 2022)

METHOD

This research aims to investigate the information seeking of university students in Croatia in the field of mental health, considering the following research questions:

- Why do university students search for mental health information?
- What information sources do university students use to find information about mental health?
- How do university students deal with difficulties related to their mental health?

The study was conducted using a quantitative method as a part of the Human information behavior course in the MA study program. An online survey (Google) was sent to university students from December 5, 2022 to January 6, 2023 via social media (Facebook) and the e-learning platform (Moodle). Participation in the study was completely anonymous, as the respondents were asked for their personal health information. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek. The sample consisted of 338 respondents. The questionnaire included general demographic questions (gender, age, place of study, study program); questions about the frequency of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression; questions about the search for and use of mental health information (frequency, reasons, success in finding information); coping with mental health difficulties; opinion about the inclusion of mental health topics in the study program; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health; awareness and use of psychological counseling at the university or elsewhere. Although most questions were of a closed-ended type, respondents had the opportunity to add their responses to almost all questions. In addition, three questions were open-ended. The data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. Due to space limitations of this article, only some of the research findings are presented in tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

More female respondents (78.1%) than male respondents (21.6%) participated in the survey, and only one respondent identified as the other gender (0.3%). Most students are between 18 and 24 years old (93.5%) and they study in Osijek (69.2%), followed by Zagreb (14.5%), Slavonski Brod (8.3%), and other cities such as Požega, Pula, Rijeka, Varaždin, etc. (8%). Almost half of the respondents are studying in the field of humanities and social sciences (44.7%). Less represented in the sample are students of economics (14.2%), electrical engineering and computer science (9.1%), law (5.9%), architecture (3%), food technology (2.4%), and medicine (1.5%).

Most of the respondents feel stressed often (37.3%), sometimes (33.7%), and every day (21.9%). About one-third of them experience burnout often or sometimes (35.8%); they feel anxious sometimes (33.1%) or rarely (24.8%); and they are depressed sometimes (30.2%) or rarely (31.1%). These findings are not surprising and can be explained by the many academic obligations that students must meet. All results are presented in Table 1.

Mental health difficulties	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Every day
Stress	1.5%	5.6%	33.7%	37.3%	21.9%
Burnout	0.9%	15.7%	35.8%	35.8%	11.8%
Anxiety	10.7%	24.8%	33.1%	21.3%	10.1%
Depression	19.5%	31.1%	30.2%	13.9%	5.3%

Table 1. Frequency of mental health difficulties

As expected, the majority of students search for information about mental health on the internet (83.1%), while less than half of them search for information on social media (43.5%). About one-third of respondents search for information through family members or friends (36.1%), followed by print sources (22.8%) or health care professionals (22.2%), who are the least consulted (Table 2). Similar results are shown in the studies by Gorczynski, Sims-Schouten & Wilson (2020), Mahmoodi et al. (2022), and Li et al. (2022).

Information sources	%
Internet	83.1
Social media	43.5
Family members, friends	36.1

Information sources	%
Print sources (books, scientific journals)	22.8
Health care professionals	22.2

Table 2. Information sources for mental health

Students search for mental health information for several reasons: they are interested in this topic (57.7%), they have difficulties with their mental health (42.9%), they need information for their education (39.1%), and someone in their environment has mental health difficulties (22.2%). Most respondents search for mental health information sometimes (30.2%), rarely (29.3%), and often (18.9%), while a small number of them search for this information never (15.1%) and every day (6.5%). Most students search for mental health information related to stress (69.5%), anxiety (64.2%), and depression (49.1%), which is consistent with their responses about the prevalence of mental health difficulties and with the findings of Li et al. (2022). The findings are presented in Table 3.

Mental health difficulties	%
Stress	69.5
Anxiety	64.2
Depression	49.1
Panic attacks	36.1
ADHD	28.1
Obsessive-compulsive disorder	23.4
Phobia	23.1
Eating disorder	22.8
Bipolar disorder	19.5
Addictions (cigarettes, alcohol, gambling, drugs...)	19.5
Schizophrenia	8.6
Self-harm	8.3

Table 3. Searching for information about mental health

Students rated their ability in searching for mental health information on a scale from 1 (extremely unsuccessful) to 5 (extremely successful) and the results showed that they were mostly successful (mean 3.4) in finding information about mental health (1: 5.9%, 2: 6.8%, 3: 37%, 4: 37.6%, 5: 12.7%). Moreover, 83.1% of respondents indicated that the information they found was helpful, and only 16.9% of students responded that the information did not help them. Students also reported that the information helped them to better understand mental health in general (64.2%), their mental health (61.8%), and the mental health of others (55.6%).

A large number of students experienced mental health difficulties in the past academic year (69.5%), and less than a third of them (30.5%) did not. Most of the respondents did not use mental health counseling at the university or anywhere outside the university (88.5%). They stated that they did not need this type of help (51.2%), they were afraid of judgment and misunderstanding (40.5%), they did not have enough information about counseling (30.8%), counseling was not accessible (24.7%), and there were financial constraints (16.4%). This is consistent with similar findings from a previous Croatian study (Srednja.hr, 2022). The results are presented in Table 4. Slightly less than half of the respondents (53.3%) did not know that psychological counseling was available at the university they attended, about a third (34.3%) was familiar with this, while 12.4% of the students did not know that the university offered psychological counseling.

Reasons	%
I don't have the need	51.2
Fear of judgment and misunderstanding	40.5
Insufficient information	30.8

Reasons	%
Inaccessibility of the service	24.7
Financial constraints	16.4

Table 4. Reasons for not seeking for psychological counseling

Most students cope with mental health difficulties by listening to music (71.6%) and socializing with family and friends (64.5%), which was also found in a recent Croatian study (Srednja.hr, 2022). Less than half of the respondents cope with mental health difficulties by walking in nature (48.5%), reading books (39.9%), using cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, or gambling (39.6%), exercising, meditating or praying (31.1%), cycling (21.9%), etc. All responses are shown in Table 5.

Coping mechanisms	%
Listening to music	71.6
Socialization with family or friends	64.5
Walk in the nature	48.5
Reading books	39.9
Cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, gambling	39.6
Sports	31.1
Meditation or praying	31.1
Riding a bike	21.9
Use of professional help	9.8
Use of apps for concentration and focus	5.9
Use of pharmacological therapy	5.9
Yoga	4.7
Other (games, movies, writing, pets)	3.3

Table 5. Coping with mental health difficulties

Students consider that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their mental health (mean 3.3), which they indicated on a scale from 1 (not affected at all) to 5 (completely affected) (1: 12.1%, 2: 12.7%, 3: 27.9%, 4: 29.3%, 5: 18%). Nearly all respondents believe that mental health topics should be more represented in education (95.6%) through workshops (69.4%), guest lectures (67.4%), regular classes (63.2%), and psychological support groups (55.5%).

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that students search for mental health information primarily online. Many students struggle with some form of mental health difficulties that may be related to their multiple academic commitments. Surprisingly, only a small proportion of respondents seek professional help and about half of them are not familiar with the psychological counseling available at the university. Therefore, it is necessary to promote counseling services more efficiently.

Studies on the information needs of university students in the field of mental health are not much represented in Croatia. Due to the interdisciplinary approach of the study, the research findings can provide valuable insights to health care professionals dealing with mental health. The results may also be useful for information scientists interested in (mental) health information seeking. This study may also raise awareness of the mental health information needs of university students. It is clear that students need more mental health support and universities should consider including psychological workshops or courses in higher education programs. Further studies could use a variety of methods to examine additional factors (such as family or society) that affect students' mental health information seeking.

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