YOUNG ADULTS' PRACTICES IN SEEKING ONLINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

In recent years, young adults have increasingly turned to online resources for psychological support, yet research on this widespread phenomenon remains scarce in Serbia. To address this gap, a quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted to explore the characteristics of internet use for accessing Online Psychological Support (OPS) among young adults (N = 379; ages 18–25; 63.2% women, 36.8% men), focusing on reasons to seek support, life domains, online resources, forms, and adverse experiences. Data were gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire via Google Forms and analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests in SPSS 21. The results show that almost half of the respondents (46.2%) use OPS, with women engaging in it more frequently than men. Young adults primarily seek OPS for information on psychological symptoms and ways to cope with them (69.4%), for personal growth in the absence of acute difficulties (42.9%), and for managing immediate psychological issues (40.3%). Major life domains for which OPS is sought include education/work (51.1%), personal growth (48.0%), and intimate relationships (46.6%). Respondents most frequently use search engines (74.5%), podcasts (55.2%), and YouTube (52.4%) for support, while formal online counselling and psychotherapy are rarely used (2.8%). Regarding the forms of OPS used, respondents most commonly engage with informational videos and texts (56.3%) and the practice of sharing experiences (46.5%). Most participants (68.9%) had no adverse experiences with OPS, although some encountered unprofessional or unreliable information. By highlighting current practices and potential challenges, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the use of OPS among young adults in Serbia.

Keywords: Internet psychological support, purposes, life domains, resources, adverse experiences.

1. Introduction

With the rising availability and use of the internet in the last decade, an increasing number of people have been using it for various forms of Online Psychological Support (OPS) and mental health improvement (Horgan, Sweeney, 2010; Mitchell, McMillan, Hagan, 2017; Pretorius et al., 2019; Pretorius, Chambers, Coyle, 2019). This trend was further amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which opportunities for psychological support through social contact and in-person professional support were significantly reduced. As a result, people became more inclined to use the Internet for psychological support, both through professional online sessions and through more informal forms of mental health support—emotional support via online communities and forums, on social networks, self-help and meditation apps, chatbot advice, etc. (Saha et al., 2020; Torous et al., 2020; Wind et al., 2020). Research indicates that due to higher digital literacy and a greater emphasis on online content, young adults are more likely to seek psychological help online than older individuals (American Psychological Association, 2022). When considering the use of OPS in this age group, it is particularly relevant that prevalence data indicate that young adults are more susceptible to mental health challenges, and it is also the age at which most mental disorders first manifest. The most common challenges during this period include elevated levels of psychological distress and stress related to life changes, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies (Patel et al., 2007; Suvisaari et al., 2009; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010).

2. Design

Although the use of OPS is an empirically confirmed and widespread phenomenon, research on it remains scarce in Serbia. To address this gap, a quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted using a survey to gather data on the characteristics of internet use for accessing Online Psychological Support (OPS) among young adults.

3. Objectives

The study aimed to gain insight into the characteristics of OPS use among young adults and to examine potential negative experiences when using the internet for psychological support. Data collection focused on the following aspects: purposes of seeking OPS in young adults, life domains for which OPS is sought, internet resources for obtaining OPS, forms of OPS, and adverse experiences with OPS.

4. Variables

We examined various aspects of OPS in young adults, including the purposes for seeking OPS, the life domains in which it is sought, the internet resources used to obtain it, the forms it takes, and adverse experiences related to it, and tested their association with gender using chi-square tests.

5. Methods

5.1. Sample
The study included 379 respondents recruited using the snowball sampling method. The respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, of both sexes, with 63.2% being women and 36.8% being men.

5.2. Instruments
A pilot study was conducted among 30 young people to specify operational variables that would be included in the research. Based on the results, a self-report questionnaire, Online and Offline Psychological Support (OOPS, Hrnčić & Stajkić, 2024), was developed for the broader study. The data about OPS were collected on eight items: two related to gender and age, and six related to the mentioned criterion variables, out of which one measured frequency of using OPS and respondents would select one answer on a five-point Likert scale ("Do you seek psychological support on the internet and how often?"). For the remaining five questions, respondents answered multiple-choice questions (where more than one answer could be selected) with 7-11 structured response options and the option "Other", allowing participants to add personal answers and experiences. For example: "What form of psychological support do you seek online?" (11 response options provided, plus the "Other" option).

5.3. Procedure
The Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia, granted approval for the research. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms and filled out anonymously. Responses to all questions were mandatory, and the completion time was approximately 15 minutes. Data were collected over a seven-day period in December 2024.

5.4. Data processing
Descriptive statistical methods and the chi-square test, using SPSS, were employed for data analysis.

6. Results

When considering the frequency of OPS use among young people, the findings reveal that nearly half of the participants (46.2%) use OPS, with women (55.8%) significantly more likely to engage than men (29.5%) [$\chi^2(1) = 24.566$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 379$].

As for the purpose of seeking OPS, young adults most commonly turn to it to gain information about psychological symptoms, their causes, and ways to overcome them (69.4%), for personal growth and development in the absence of difficulties (42.9%), and for alleviating immediate psychological issues (40.3%). No gender differences were observed in the purposes for which OPS was used.

Among the eleven examined areas of life, OPS is most frequently sought for education and/or work (51.1%), personal growth without any immediate difficulties (48.0%), and romantic relationships (46.6%). Men are more likely to seek OPS concerning finances (men 25.5% vs women 13.3%) [$\chi^2(1) = 4.51$, p = 0.034, N = 221] and relationships on social networks (men 18.2% vs women 4.8%) [$\chi^2(1) = 9.86$, p = 0.002, N = 221], while women rely on it more for education and/or work (women 56.6% vs men 34.5%) [$\chi^2(1) = 8.06$, p = 0.005, N = 221].

Out of nine possible OPS sources, young people most frequently use search engines (74.5%), podcasts (55.2%), YouTube videos (52.4%), and social media (47.6%), and somewhat less frequently, AI tools (26.9%). Online counselling and psychotherapy are rarely used (2.8%). Interestingly, men are more likely to use online communities and forums than women (men, 22.6% vs. women, 8.8%) [$\chi^2(1) = 7.07$, p = 0.008, N = 212]. In contrast, women make greater use of professional mental health websites than men (women, 24.5% vs. men, 9.4%) [$\chi^2(1) = 5.50$, p = 0.019, N = 221].

Regarding the forms of OPS that respondents most frequently access, they most commonly engage with informational videos and texts (56.3%) and share personal experiences (46.5%). New emerging OPS tools are used in a somewhat smaller percentage, but still, significantely-37.6% of participants listen to music for mental health (alpha, theta, delta waves, different Hz frequencies for anxiety relief, etc.), practice breathing exercises (20.7%), meditations (18.8%), consume spiritual content (16.9%), practice affirmations (16.4%). Young adults are least likely to seek sessions with a coach (4.2%), a therapist (4.2%), or a brief chat with a professional (2.8%). There were no gender differences in these practices, except that women were more likely than men to consume informational videos and texts (women, 60.6% vs. men, 43.4%) [$\chi^2(1) = 4.80$, p = 0.028, N = 213].

When it comes to the adverse effects of OPS, most participants (68.9%) reported having no negative experiences at all. The only significant adverse experience involves encountering unprofessional and unreliable information and support (25.6%). All other negative experiences were nearly absent: worsening of mental health (3.2%), insufficient anonymity (2.4%), and online abuse (2.3%). No gender differences were found concerning negative experiences.

Since multiple chi-square tests were used to analyse gender differences, the possibility of false positives cannot be ruled out. For a more conservative interpretation, a Bonferroni correction may be applied to adjust the significance threshold. Given that the study's questions included 7–11 response options, the adjusted significance level for $\alpha = 0.05$ would range between $\alpha = 0.004$ and 0.007.

7. Discussion

The findings show that nearly half of the sampled young adults use Online Psychological Support (OPS), and women engage significantly more frequently than men. This result is consistent with previous research suggesting that young women, possibly due to higher digital literacy and openness to help-seeking, access online mental health resources more frequently (Pretorius et al., 2019). In line with the literature, respondents most sought OPS for information about psychological symptoms and strategies for overcoming them (Horgan & Sweeney, 2011; Pretorius et al., 2019b). These findings reinforce the notion that the internet serves as a key source of psychoeducation, especially in a developmental period characterised by increased vulnerability to mental health issues (Patel et al., 2007).

Interestingly, a substantial proportion of participants sought OPS for personal growth rather than for acute psychological distress. This mirrors the growing emphasis on mental health care in younger generations, who might be using online platforms not only to address difficulties but also to foster well-being and personal development. Moreover, men were more likely to seek help regarding finances and social media relationships, whereas women focused more on educational and work-related issues. Societal norms and gender roles may influence such differences.

Regarding the types of online resources used, search engines, podcasts, and YouTube were the most favoured. These channels offer immediate, flexible, and often free information, which may partly explain their widespread use (Pretorius et al., 2019b). Professional online counselling, however, was seldom utilised, suggesting that while young adults are open to OPS, formal telepsychology services may remain underused, possibly due to cost, lack of awareness, preference for less structured forms of online interaction, or reluctance to seek professional help (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007).

The study also highlights that most users had no adverse experience with OPS. However, the main negative experience reported was encountering unprofessional or unreliable information, which was already pointed out as a concern in the literature (Pretorius et al., 2019a, 2019b). This emphasises the importance of digital literacy and the need for regulating and promoting credible online psychological resources. No significant gender differences emerged regarding negative experiences, suggesting that the quality of support and information may be equally variable across sources used by both women and men.

The study could benefit from more context on how local societal and cultural factors, such as the stigma of mental health challenges and social norms of help-seeking, influence OPS use in young adults. Future research could also benefit from a more diverse sampling strategy that would represent the demographic structure of the young adult population.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to the scarce literature on OPS use among young adults in Serbia, revealing that a substantial percentage of young adults turn to internet-based resources for psychological support. Women appear to be more frequent users than men, although the reasons for seeking help—ranging from education to personal growth—do not differ significantly by gender. Participants primarily rely on easily accessible online resources, such as search engines, podcasts, and social media, with seldom use of formal online counselling.

Most respondents reported generally positive experiences that speak to the potential benefits of OPS. However, concerns about encountering unprofessional help or unreliable information highlight the need for stronger regulations and the promotion of validated resources. Addressing these issues could lead to safer, more effective OPS, encouraging more young adults to seek support.

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