

FREQUENCY, ADVANTAGES, DRAWBACKS AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SEEKING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT IN-PERSON AND ONLINE

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Abstract

This study examines how young adults engage with in-person psychological support (IPS) and online psychological support (OPS), with a particular focus on the frequency of use, perceived benefits, reasons for avoidance, and potential gender differences. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, and 379 participants (aged 18–25) completed a self-report questionnaire assessing various dimensions of help-seeking behaviour. Descriptive statistics and the chi-square test were used for data analysis. Findings reveal that IPS is used more frequently (58.8%) than OPS (46.2%), with women more likely than men to seek both forms of support. Regarding IPS, participants most frequently turn to friends and parents, while formal professional assistance, such as psychotherapists or psychologists, is considerably less common. The main perceived advantages of IPS include richer verbal and nonverbal communication, an easier assessment of sincerity, and deeper emotional connection—women value this last aspect more strongly than men. The most prominent reasons for avoiding IPS are the difficulty of opening up emotionally to people in person and the cost of professional support. OPS users most frequently cite free access, faster availability, and anonymity as key advantages. However, doubts about the credibility of online sources and a preference for independent problem-solving limit its broader usage. Men, in particular, report a greater tendency to “endure life” without informal or professional help. Interestingly, more participants report having sought support when responding to specific questions about their experience, suggesting that actual usage rates may exceed initial self-reports. Study findings highlight the coexisting roles of IPS and OPS in the help-seeking behaviours of young adults, underscoring the influence of gender, cultural context, and perceived practical barriers on their choices.

Keywords: *Young adults, in-person psychological support, online psychological support, internet, gender.*

1. Introduction

Traditionally, individuals seek psychological support from people in their immediate surroundings. However, in recent years, young adults have increasingly turned to the internet for online psychological support (OPS) due to factors such as greater digital literacy, convenience, and a reduced sense of stigma when seeking help online (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017; Pretorius et al., 2019a, 2019b). Still, in-person psychological support (IPS) remains an option valued for its immediate human connection and nonverbal cues (Pretorius et al., 2019b). Seeking psychological support among young adults is an important area of research, given that this age group face numerous life changes accompanied by significant distress and a higher prevalence of mental health issues—anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies—compared to other age groups, and it is also the period when most mental disorders first manifest (Kessler et al., 2007; Patel et al., 2007; Suvisaari et al., 2009; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Although studies have been exploring and comparing OPS and IPS (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017; Pretorius et al., 2019b), continued research remains essential because each year, young adults demonstrate increasing reliance on digital platforms, and new forms of online assistance such as innovative apps and AI tools emerge and gain popularity.

2. Design

A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted using an online questionnaire to gather data on the characteristics of young adults' use of in-person and online psychological support.

3. Objectives

The study aimed to compare the seeking and experiences of IPS and OPS among young men and women, focusing on the frequency of seeking these types of support, their perceived advantages, reasons for avoidance, and gender differences.

4. Variables

We examined the association between gender and several variables related to help-seeking behaviors, including the frequency of seeking IPS, the individuals from whom IPS is sought, the frequency of seeking OPS, the perceived benefits of both IPS and OPS, and the reasons for avoiding seeking IPS and OPS.

5. Methods

5.1. Sample

A total of 379 individuals participated in the study, all of whom were between the ages of 18 and 25. Both genders were represented, with women making up 63.2% and men 36.8% of the sample.

5.2. Instruments

A pilot study was conducted among 30 young people to specify operational variables. 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 on IPS and OPS were collected through nine items: two that registered gender and age, and seven related to the mentioned criterion variables, out of which two questions required respondents to select one answer from a five-point Likert scale reflecting the frequency. For example, "Do you seek psychological support in person, outside the internet?" For the remaining five questions, respondents answered multiple-choice questions (where more than one answer could be selected) that were constructed with 8-12 structured response options and included the option "Other", which allowed participants to add personal answers and experiences. An example is: "Which advantages of using the internet for psychological support are most important to you personally?" (8 response options provided, plus the "Other" option).

5.3. Procedure

The Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, Serbia, approved the research. It was administered online via Google Forms, using snowball sampling, and participants completed it anonymously. Responses to all questions were mandatory, and the completion time was approximately 15 minutes. Data were collected over seven days in December 2024.

5.4. Data processing

Data were processed using descriptive statistical methods and the chi-square test (SPSS 21).

6. Results

In the total sample, when asked whether they sought and how frequently they sought psychological support, a significantly higher percentage of respondents sought IPS (58.8%) compared to online help (46.2%), [$\chi^2(1) = 39.53$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 379$]. Additionally, women (55.8%) were significantly more likely than men (29.5%) to seek OPS [$\chi^2(1) = 24.566$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 379$]. A similar result was obtained for IPS, where 67.9% of women sought support compared to 43.2% of men [$\chi^2(1) = 22.265$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 379$].

Interestingly, a significantly higher number of respondents answered positively to the question of whom they specifically turn to for IPS (88.4%) compared to when they were asked if and how often they seek IPS without specifying from whom they seek it (58.8%).

Regarding the choice of a person participants turn to IPS, those who respond positively to seeking IPS dominantly turn to friends (81.2%), however, also parents (56.1%), intimate partners (46.3%), and other family members (31.6%), while seeking support from a psychotherapist (11.0%), psychologist (26, 7.8%), psychiatrist (3.0%), teacher (2.1%) and life coach (1.2%) is much less frequent.

There were no significant gender differences in the choice of preferred IPS sources, except for two marginally significant findings: more women than men sought OPS from parents (59.5% vs 49.1%, $\chi^2(1) = 2.897$, $p = .089$, $N = 335$) and friends (83.7% vs 75.9%, $\chi^2(1) = 2.897$, $p = .089$, $N = 335$). Although gender differences did arise when answers for psychotherapist, psychologist, and psychiatrist were merged: significantly more women (22.9%) than men (10.2%) turned for IPS to at least one of those experts [$\chi^2(1) = 7.757$, $p = 0.005$, $N = 335$].

Results showed again that more respondents answered positively about the advantages of IPS (76.3%) compared to when asked whether and how often they seek IPS without specifying its advantages (58.8%). This suggests that the number of IPS users is higher than reported. Among those who seek IPS, the most frequently cited **advantage of IPS** was richer verbal and non-verbal communication (73.4%). Respondents also highlighted easier assessment of sincerity in communication (55.0%), better effects of support (48.1%), easier and deeper emotional connection (47.4%), feeling of greater security and acceptance (47.1%), and the possibility of support through physical touch (21.8%). Women (54.4%) more often than men (33.0%) cited an easier and deeper emotional connection [$\chi^2(1) = 11.628$, $p = 0.001$, $N = 289$] as a benefit.

The most common reasons for **avoiding IPS** were difficulty in opening up emotionally in person (36.2% of those who avoided IPS) and overcoming psychological issues independently (34.2%). Other reasons include: lack of interest in IPS (27.5%), the cost of in-person professional support (26.8%), more time and organisation required for in-person professional support (22.1%), feeling stressed by people (18.8%), a belief in simply enduring life without seeking help (16.8%), lack of anonymity (13.4%), fear it will lead to a worsening of symptoms (4.7%), and the belief that psychological problems cannot be resolved in this way (4.7%), or that personal growth and development (in the absence of difficulties) cannot be encouraged with IPS (4.7%). Women (43.8%) more frequently than men (25.0%) cited challenges of emotional openness [$\chi^2(1) = 8.877$, $p = 0.003$, $N = 149$] and costs of professional IPS (female 34.8% vs male 15.0%) [$\chi^2(1) = 87.177$, $p = 0.007$, $N = 149$]. There was a marginally significant difference between women and men in the likelihood of citing that the reason for avoiding in-person professional support is that it requires more time and organisation (female 27.0% vs. male 15.0%) [$\chi^2(1) = 8 = 2.976$, $p = 0.084$, $N = 149$]. Men (30.0%) more frequently than women (7.9%) held a belief in simply enduring life without seeking help [$\chi^2(1) = 12.575$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 149$]. Additionally, men more frequently reported a preference for independently overcoming their difficulties (female 24.7% vs. male 48.3%) [$\chi^2(1) = 8.877$, $p = 0.003$, $N = 149$].

Results showed again that a higher number of respondents answered positively about the **advantages of OPS** (57.0%), compared to positive answers on the general question of whether and how often they seek OPS (46.2%), revealing that the potential number of OPS users might be much higher. Among those who seek OPS, the most frequently cited advantages include: free access (73.1%), simpler and faster access (68.5%), and greater privacy and anonymity (51.9%). Less cited advantages were easier connection with people who have similar experiences (18.1%), easier access to professionals (14.4%), and easier and faster exit from communication (14.4%). Women (73.1%) significantly more often than men (56.7%) highlight the advantage of easier and faster access [$\chi^2(3) = 5.410$, $p = 0.020$, $N = 216$], while there are no significant differences in other variables.

The most common reasons for **avoiding OPS** were overcoming difficulties independently (43.5% of those who avoided OPS), lack of interest (32.7%), and doubts about the expertise and reliability of online sources (29.9%). Less common responses included: a belief that psychological problems cannot be resolved in this way (20.6%), alienated and impoverished communication (18.7%), belief in simply enduring life without seeking help (13.1%), doubts about anonymity (10.7%), a belief that personal growth and development (in the absence of difficulties) cannot be encouraged with OPS (9.8%), fear that the symptoms will worsen with the use of OPS (4.7%) and difficulties in comprehending internet content on this subject (4.7%). Men (42.9%) reported not using OPS more frequently than women (25.2%) due to a lack of interest [$\chi^2(1) = 7.406$, $p = 0.007$, $N = 214$]. Also, men more frequently held a belief in simply enduring life without seeking help (female 7.3% vs male 20.9%) [$\chi^2(1) = 8.459$, $p = 0.004$, $N = 214$], and had a preference for independently overcoming their difficulties (female 35.8% vs male 53.8%) [$\chi^2(1) = 6.953$, $p = 0.008$, $N = 214$].

There may be an increased risk of false positives because the study relied on multiple chi-square tests to explore gender differences. A Bonferroni correction can be applied to the reported results to achieve a more conservative approach to significance testing, thereby adjusting the significance threshold. Since the questions in this study had 8–12 response options, the adjusted significance level for $\alpha = 0.05$ would range from $\alpha = 0.004$ – 0.006 .

7. Discussion

Although the use of OPS in Serbian young adults reaches almost 50%, the study confirms that they still seek traditional in-person psychological support (IPS) more frequently, which is consistent with research highlighting the value of face-to-face connection (Horgan & Sweeney, 2010). Young adults predominantly seek IPS in friends—an expectation aligned with this life stage, followed by parents. In contrast, formal professional psychological help is rarely sought, a trend noted in other studies as well, which attribute it to young people's reluctance to seek professional help (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007).

Women reported higher rates of both IPS (67.9%) and OPS (55.8%) compared to men (43.2% for IPS; 29.5% for OPS), which aligns with earlier evidence that men generally show a smaller willingness to seek help (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007), reflecting traditional gender roles and social norms.

Regarding perceived advantages, those who use IPS mostly cited richer verbal and nonverbal communication as well as the ability to better assess sincerity. Among OPS users, the most commonly mentioned benefits were free access, easier and faster availability, and anonymity, reflecting findings that convenience is a significant draw for seeking OPS (Pretorius et al., 2019b). Women more frequently valued a deeper emotional connection in IPS and easier, faster access in OPS, suggesting gender-specific preferences.

The most important drawbacks to IPS include difficulty opening up in person and cost, echoing concerns about stigma and expenses (Mitchell et al., 2017). OPS avoidance stemmed primarily from a preference for independence (43.5%) and a lack of interest (32.7%), with 29.9% citing concerns over reliability—mirroring general scepticism about online information (Torous et al., 2020). Men more frequently endorsed “enduring life without help” (30.0% for IPS; 20.9% for OPS), again suggesting possible cultural or societal norms that discourage their help-seeking.

These results may partly reflect the local Serbian context, where professional services can be less accessible, and emerging OPS forms—such as AI chatbots—have not yet fully gained trust. Nonetheless, the growing reliance on digital platforms underscores a need to investigate how newer modalities might shift help-seeking patterns over time.

The most frequently cited drawbacks to IPS included difficulty with emotional openness and the cost of turning to professional support, confirming concerns about stigma and expenses (Mitchell et al., 2017). OPS avoidance stemmed primarily from young people's preference for independent problem-solving, lack of interest in OPS and doubts about the trustworthiness of online sources, which is a widely recognised factor (Pretorius et al., 2019b). Men more often than women expressed a belief in “enduring life without seeking help” (30.0% for IPS; 20.9% for OPS), again pointing to cultural norms that discourage male help-seeking.

These results may partly reflect the local Serbian context, where professional mental health resources can be less accessible and emerging OPS forms (e.g., new apps, AI tools) have not yet fully gained recognition and trust. Future research could examine whether the continual growth of OPS sources alters these patterns over time and how sociocultural factors influence the evolution of help-seeking behaviours.

The consistent finding that more participants reported experiences of using IPS and OPS than previously reported as having used them suggests that the number of users of both IPS and OPS may be higher than previously self-reported. For IPS, it could go from 76.3% (percentage of respondents citing different IPS advantages) to 88.4% (percentage of respondents citing preferred persons for IPS). For OPS, it could be close to 57.0% (percentage of respondents citing different advantages of OPS). The repeated finding of higher positive answers about the percentage of use of IPS and OPS on more specific questions than general ones regarding the same dimension is in line with a previous finding of the same authors in studying social attitudes, suggesting that the effect of the level of abstraction of questions is robust and manifests across different domains (Stajkić, Hrnčić, & Blagojević, 2025).

We conclude that future research on this topic could benefit from employing alternative data collection methods, as reliance on self-reports may lead to social desirability or recall biases. Additionally, employing a more systematic sampling strategy could enhance the representativeness of the findings. The sample for this study was obtained through snowball sampling, which may limit its generalizability to the broader population of young adults.

8. Conclusion

This study highlights notable differences in how young adults engage with IPS and OPS and the specific advantages and barriers each form of support carries. While IPS remains the more frequently used option, OPS offers a convenient and anonymous usage experience that many participants find appealing. Gender differences, such as women's emphasis on deeper emotional connections and men's tendency to rely on self-sufficiency, suggest underlying cultural factors and can guide the development of tailored interventions. Efforts to enhance online support tools, primarily through credible online platforms, may encourage broader participation in seeking psychological help among young adults.

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