

# Tapping into Mental Wellness: How Social Technologies are Helping Young Adults Self-Manage their Mental Health

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## 1. Introduction

Mental health issues are common among youth, with 1 in 7 young people globally experiencing disorders like depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders [1]. However, 77% of these cases are rarely treated or acknowledged [1,2,3]. The Covid-19 pandemic has further negatively impacted youth well-being, especially due to various stressful and traumatic factors [2]. Adolescence is a critical time for the social and emotional development of young adults, which shapes their mental well-being [1].

In today's technology-driven world, being online and using social media has become an integral part of the lives of children and young people [3]. In recent decades, HCI researchers have started studying the design of digital interventions to support the personal well-being of people [4,5]. Many young people who would otherwise not seek formal mental health support, are interested in using digital interventions such as smartphone applications and online therapy for managing wellbeing [6]. Youth are using technology such as apps, forums, social media, chatbots, and tangible devices as means to self-regulate their mental health [7,8,9]. However little is known about how people use different technologies for managing mental wellbeing, why, and the support or challenges they encounter in managing wellbeing across different technologies. There is a further need to understand this in the case of youth, who are growing into an existing technology ecosystem that is not necessarily designed for them.

In this project, we address the following research questions:

- 1) How and why do youth use different online social communities to self-manage their mental wellbeing?
- 2) What challenges do youth encounter in using online social communities? What do they find helpful?

To address the research questions, we conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 8 young adults aged 18-26 who use social technologies to manage their mental wellbeing. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that the participants primarily use social technologies for sharing life events, staying connected with friends, finding relaxing and mentally healthy content, and seeking social support for managing their mental health. However,

the study also identified challenges, such as negative impacts from certain features or content, that may hinder these platforms from meeting individuals' intended self-management goals. This research provides valuable insight into how youth use social community technologies to manage their mental wellbeing and highlights ways in which various technologies can either support or hinder these goals.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Participants**

We recruited 8 young adults between the ages of 18 and 26 through word of mouth in our social networks. Inclusion criteria for our study were age 18-26 years, residing in the US, ability to speak English fluently, and using technology for their mental wellbeing. Our sample consisted of 3 male and 5 female graduate students.

### **2.2 Study Procedures**

Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview via video conferencing over Zoom. Each interview was conducted by three researchers, with one researcher taking the lead of asking questions, one taking notes, and one asking additional follow-up questions. Interviews ranged in length from 40 – 80 minutes. The interview protocols included questions about participants' technology use, their experiences, and their mental wellbeing. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently manually transcribed for analysis by the researchers.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

After transcribing the interviews, we analyzed the data collaboratively on a shared Google document. We used open coding to analyze the interview transcripts. We conducted line-by-line analysis to come up with an initial set of codes and memos. These codes helped us conceptualize initial ideas and identify initial themes and categories in our data. We then conducted a round of thematic analysis, identifying emerging themes in our data while keeping our research questions in mind. All of this was done collaboratively to ensure consistency in our analysis. Our themes included the technologies participants were using, motivations behind their use, when and how they were using those technologies, and any challenges they faced. We had a broader set of themes followed by subsequent sub-themes. This entire process was conducted over Miro.

### **2.4 Ethical Considerations**

We obtained informed consent from all participants prior to the interviews in this study. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their responses would be kept confidential.

### **3. Demystifying Mental Health**

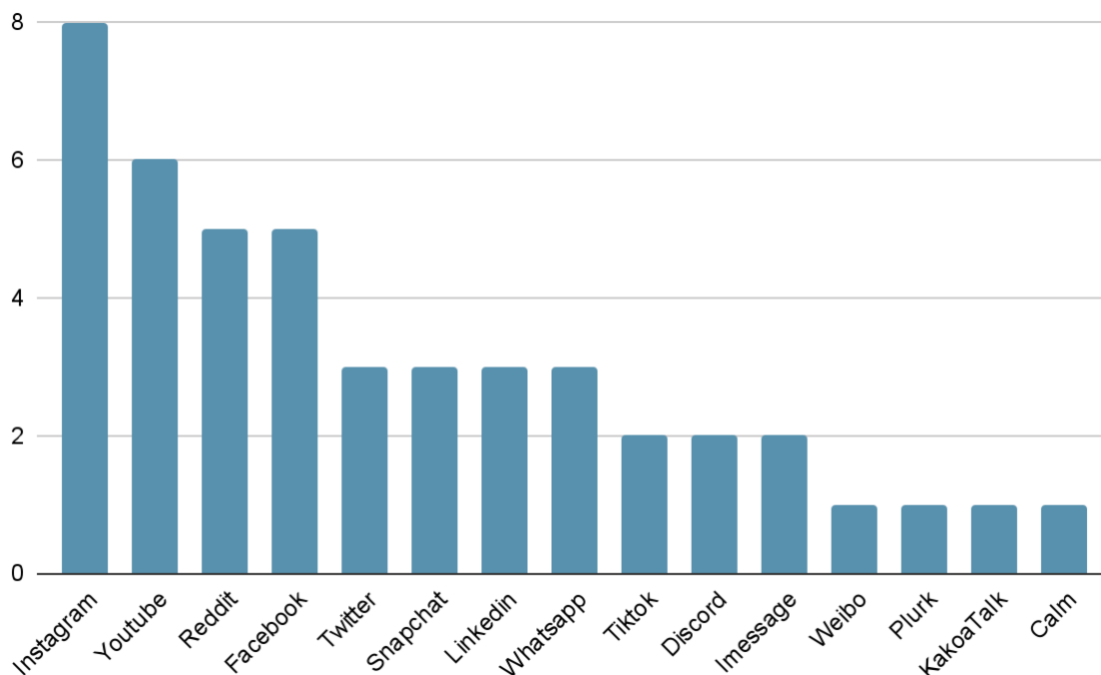
We first began by understanding what mental health meant to our participants. It was important for us to get their perspective on what mental wellbeing meant to them and how they took care of it. We found that most participants (N=8) perceived mental health as a state of balanced well-being where they can manage their emotions, thoughts, and daily life. They also recognized that mental health can be affected by the ups and downs of their daily life. A normal state of life for them involves keeping up with a daily routine, staying consistent with daily habits, feeling calm and not experiencing negative emotions. Moreover, feeling relaxed and not worrying about anything was perceived as a key indicator of good mental health. Participants reported that having a sense of control over their lives and being informed about their future plans helped them feel mentally healthy. Conversely, an uncertain future caused anxiety and discomfort. Physical health was also linked to mental health, with participants reporting that regular exercise and quality sleep improved their mental well-being. In turn, they acknowledged that mental health could impact their physical health and daily function, highlighting a reciprocal relationship between mental and physical health.

As for how they take care of their mental wellbeing, the most commonly mentioned approach was physical activity, such as taking a walk or exercise. Participants associated physical health with mental health and believed that exercise could greatly improve their mental health. Another frequently mentioned aspect was connecting with friends and family, which provided emotional support and a sense of indirect companionship. Participants, however, also valued alone time as it allowed them to focus on themselves and avoid external stress. Distraction was identified as another effective self-management approach, and participants engaged in activities such as watching movies or funny videos, interacting with the social community on video games, and browsing shopping websites. Finally, expressing feelings to others was found to be helpful for venting and feeling better, and participants often used social media as a means of expressing themselves without burdening others. Overall, these findings suggest that individuals use a range of strategies to manage their mental health, and that a combination of approaches may be necessary for effective self-management.

## 4. Keeping it real...ly digital!

### 4.1 Technology to the rescue: which platforms do you turn to?

To be able to understand how our participants sought support for their mental health from various platforms, we first asked them about the platforms that they were using. We started the discussion by asking “What are some examples of online social communities that you regularly interact with?” The most commonly used platforms were Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Youtube, and Discord. In addition to these platforms, some participants also mentioned using Plurk, and a chinese social media platform called Weibo. Surprisingly, Tiktok was mentioned by just one participant, however not in the context of supporting their mental health. Apart from social media platforms, two of the participants mentioned apps such as Calm and myFitnessPal that they use for managing their mental and physical health. In addition to this, some participants mentioned using messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, iMessage, and Facebook Messenger. We found that all of our participants used multiple platforms instead of relying on just one platform to fulfill their needs. This finding is in line with Eleanor et al.’s study in which they found that people used a diversity of technology channels within their technology ecosystem to support collaborative self-management interactions for depression [10].



...does this count as a social community platform?

We found that each participant had their own interpretation of what a social community meant. This interpretation usually stemmed from the way they were using the platform. It was interesting to see the range of interpretations we got. Most participants thought of “online social community platforms” as social media platforms, whereas others interpreted them as being wellbeing applications such as Calm and myFitnesspal.

When asked about social community platforms, almost all of our participants referred to the mainstream social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter etc. However, P2 interpreted our question as just asking about mental health applications specifically. We had to further probe into the conversation in order to talk about the other platforms that they used. Interestingly, none of our other participants talked about applications specifically targeted at mental health. They interpreted social community platforms as just the social media platforms. We are not sure if this was because they only used social media platforms and not any wellbeing applications or if they did not count wellbeing applications as social community platforms.

Moreover, although Youtube is widely considered as a social media platform, 3 out of 8 of our participants did not think of it as a social community platform. They admitted to using it, however were unsure to call it a “social community platform”.

*“I am not sure whether Youtube counts as social media... So basically any streaming service or YouTube where I can watch stuff that I like, those would be the other platforms I will use other than social media.” - [P6]*

In addition to this, one of our other participants (P8) brought up Youtube in the conversation later. When asked why they didn’t mention Youtube earlier along with other applications, they responded: “Oh I didn’t consider it as a social platform.” Similarly, P8 was also unsure if Whatsapp counted as a social media platform: “I don't know if WhatsApp counts as a social media platform” even though they were using it in social ways to “chat and have conversations with their friends.”

It was interesting to see the different ways participants looked at these platforms. We found that their perspectives were mostly influenced by the way they were interacting with that platform. For example, P8 did not consider their interactions on youtube as “social”. They just went to Youtube with the goal of watching content or reading other people’s comments, not commenting or engaging with other people.

*“I don't know, I guess. I guess because I'm not. I'm just watching some content and not interacting with it. In a social sense. I mean, I know there are comments and I can post a comment and rather I read other people's comments. But those comments are never my goal or my are never the reason that I use YouTube for.” - [P8]*

Similarly, P6 also went to Youtube with the goal of “streaming” rather than socializing. Hence, they were unsure of referring to Youtube as a “social” community platform.

In contrast to this, P2 considered Youtube to be a social community platform, however they were only using it with the goal of consumption and not giving.

*“If I'm going to YouTube, my first thought is I'm just consuming. I'm not giving anything.. On YouTube in general, yes, you can comment, but usually I'm not very, it's my personal thing. I won't be very active on it and just get there for consumption.” - [P2]*

Based on these findings, we were able to deduce that for some, just because a platform holds a social affordance, that does not make it a social media platform. The sociality of a platform is decided by how that user interacts with the platform. However, for other people, their personal interactions did not define the way they looked at social community platforms. Instead, they just went along with the mainstream perceptions of those platforms.

## **4.2 App-solutely curious: What's your motivation behind using these platforms?**

While our participants used a multitude of platforms, they had different reasonings behind going to each platform. In some cases they went to platforms with specific intentions and goals, whereas in others they decided to casually use those platforms. For example, participants only went to LinkedIn when they had a professional goal such as getting updates about people in their industry, or networking. However, most participants used Instagram casually in their daily routine except for instances where they would specifically go to Instagram to post a negative experience or seek support from their friends.

### **a. Jack-Of-All-Trades**

One of the reasons behind using a specific platform by people was multiple affordances of that platform. Participants wanted to be able to do multiple things on one platform. For example, on Instagram they were able to post content on their feeds, stories in addition to viewing stories, browsing reels, and chatting with friends. Similarly, they could send snaps on Snapchat along with watching videos from content creators. Contrary to this, they were only able to view reels on Tiktok. This made Tiktok an undesirable platform for most of our participants. They felt they could use Instagram as an alternative to Tiktok as Instagram had a lot more to offer apart from just viewing reels. Similarly another participant thought there was no difference of content between Tiktok and Instagram. They seemed to prefer Instagram over Tiktok as it has multiple uses and a better algorithm for reels.

*“I never use Tiktok as it is redundant.. only for singular usage purposes to specifically watch reels.”  
- [P6]*

*“Instagram and snapchat can connect with people other than watching videos.. I prefer apps with multiple usage purposes over one with only a singular purpose.” - [P6]*

*“From what I've seen a lot of people post on Tik Tok also post the same thing on Instagram.” - [P4]*

### **b. The Content I see Better be Worth my Scrolling Time**

Apart from using a single platform for multiple purposes, the content of each platform also determined which platform the participants were using. One of the participants mentioned that she wanted to be able to save her time by watching multiple things on her feed at once. For example, on twitter you could see multiple tweets without having to scroll on your screen compared to the layout of Instagram where you could only see one post at a time.

Most of the participants also valued the quality of content that they were browsing on these platforms. Two of them mentioned using Youtube as it had constructive better quality content, with well-designed videos. Other participants mentioned liking instgram's reel recommendation algorithm. One of the participants said they used Reddit because it provided them better content in terms of seeking advice compared to Google's search engine. They thought Reddit had more positive content than negative. In addition to seeking good quality content, the participants also valued timely updates. One of them mentioned that they used Snapchat more as most content creators they followed updated content earlier on Snapchat compared to Instagram, while other content creators only posted videos on Snapchat. Similarly, another participant thought that information on Reddit was more up-to-date than Google. Moreover, some of the participants seemed to prefer platforms with focused content which offered fewer distractions. This was contrary to our previous finding in which participants preferred platforms with multiple purposes. For some participants, the multiple affordances of a platform were distracting. They thought those distractions would lead them into doom scrolling, making them addicted to the platform.

Participants also preferred platforms in which they had agency and visibility over their content. For example, they used Instagram as it allowed them to see who viewed their story, liked their posts. They also appreciated the ability to archive their posts on Instagram. In addition to this, participants liked that they only saw content of people they chose to follow on platforms such as Instagram and Plurk. Some of the participants liked controlling the content they were viewing by blocking people they wanted to cut off from. In terms of visibility, participants liked Instagram as it only allowed stories to exist for a limited amount of time. The story would disappear after 24 hrs and it would be like they never posted anything. This time limit gave them the opportunity to freely express themselves.

### **c. Technology that Speaks my Language**

Some of our participants had a preference for social media platforms that had language accessibility features. Instagram's translation feature was particularly highlighted, as it made the platform easier to use for those who faced language barriers. Additionally, Instagram's picture format was also seen as convenient by participants. The study also noted that one of the Asian participants preferred using Weibo due to its Chinese language support, which allowed them to post in Chinese and made them feel more comfortable reading and writing in their native language. These findings highlight the importance of language accessibility features in social media platforms for users who face language barriers.

### **d. Seamless Transition is the Key**

One participant in the study mentioned that they enjoyed using Discord as it offered the convenience of cross-platform usage on both their phone and laptop. The participant appreciated that Discord allowed for seamless transition from chatting to calling, unlike other platforms. While WhatsApp also offered call features, Discord's hopping on a server feature was seen as more convenient as it was the usual way of interacting on that platform. The participant noted that Discord's endless cross-platforming capability made it easy to stay connected with friends and colleagues across different devices.

### **e. Keeping up with Friends in the Digital Age**

One major reason behind participants using a platform was that their friends were also using that platform. Most of the participants used Instagram because their friends were on that platform. One participant said that they prefer Instagram over Whatsapp as their community mostly uses Instagram. Similarly, one of the participants mentioned using discord as they had most of their close friends there. Most of the participants said they wanted to stay connected with their friends by getting updates about their lives. Instagram allowed them to get to know about the daily lives of their friends through their stories. Similarly, one of the participants said they used Twitter to see the content shared by their friends, professors, and celebrities. The participants also expressed the fear of missing out by not staying connected to their friends on social media.

*“I like the feeling that I'm getting updated from my friends and my close people. So yeah, it's like not the action of watching Instagram. it's not like the action itself, it doesn't make me happy.” - [P3]*

### **f. Stayin' Sane with Tech**

For some of the platforms, participants explicitly mentioned that they use those platforms because they help them manage or maintain their mental health. Instagram was the most widely talked about platform in this context. Most participants referred to Instagram as helpful for their mental health. One of them mentioned that videos on instagram help them get out of their depression and anxiety. Another participant discussed how instagram helps them navigate through grief and pain.



In addition to this Instagram was also looked at as having content that would help boost peoples' self-confidence.

While some participants explicitly referred to the platforms as helping their mental health, others used terms such as “helping mood”, “relieves emotions”, “relieves stress”, “distracts me”. One of the participants said they use Twitter because seeing posts that interest them and are funny makes them feel happy. In addition to this, they also felt happy by posting content on Twitter. Similarly, other participants claimed that Youtube helped them improve their mood, and relieve stress through entertaining content when they felt depressed. In addition to this, one of the participants who used Plurk said that the content there made her happy.

In line with previous research by Elenaor et al. which found that people used bundles of technology and social media tools to emotionally self-regulate themselves by managing their mood [9], many of our participants also claimed to use social community platforms to help “reset” their mood and seek distraction from stress and negative thoughts. Participants used youtube as a temporary distraction when they wanted to run away from reality. Similarly, they went to Instagram for cheers and to help distract themselves from negative thoughts. The short videos on Instagram were a source of instant stimulation for them. One of the participants also mentioned using Snapchat as following certain content creators there offered them distraction and helped their mood.

#### **g. From Likes to Love: Seeking Social Support**

We found that our participants used online social communities to seek social support from their friends and families. One aspect of social support was just being able to vent online to their community. One of the participants mentioned that she found it convenient to vent through text based posts on Weibo. Similarly, another participant said that Plurk and Twitter were spaces that allowed her to complain about things online.

In addition to venting, many participants sought communities online that shared similar experiences as them. They were using these platforms to build a support system for themselves online. They wanted to be part of safe spaces and online communities that could relate to their struggles. We found that our participants thought Facebook, Plurk, Instagram, Reddit, and LinkedIn were spaces for them where they could find communities. One of our participants mentioned that posts on Facebook groups make her realize that she is not the only one struggling.

*“So for that group...it helps to know that, like, I'm not the only one struggling.” - [P4]*

While some participants vented just to relieve themselves of the emotional burden, others sought social support from their online communities. One of the major reasons behind them using these platforms was to be part of communities that could offer support to them. They wanted their friends to help them. For example, one participant said that their community on Discord would always

help each other and offer advice in difficult times. They chose platforms based on how receptive their friends were. One of the participants mentioned using Reddit as people actively engage with posts over there. Similarly, another participant mentioned they used Instagram as their community actively engaged there and they received instant replies. Others said they used Instagram to seek emotional support and motivation from others.

*“On Discord, we have a group for this. We have our gaming group and we're quite close. So I often pop a message there and someone responds and we hop into our Discord call often immediately.” - [P6]*

Social support did not always mean positive affirmations to the participants. One of our participants mentioned she used LinkedIn as it helped her face the reality and get back on track in her professional career. However, she would only do this in extreme situations where it was crucial for her to accept the reality and fight her way through it.

#### **h. Virtual Friends vs Real Friends**

Most of the participants seemed to choose platforms on the basis of who they got to interact with on that platform. For example, some participants used Twitter and Plurk as they did not have any real life friends on that platform which allowed them to be themselves and post unfiltered content. On the other hand, they had lesser privacy on Instagram where they had to filter out content for their real life friends. One of the participants in our study who used Plurk really valued virtual friendships. They referred to Plurk as a “very special place” where they felt comfortable. They preferred venting on Plurk as they had an emotional connection with their virtual friends and did not want to spread negativity and bad things to their real life friends on other platforms. They thought virtual friends would be able to help them without carrying their emotional baggage.

*“I feel more comfortable in an anonymous place. Talking with someone not really near to you, not really close to you, makes me feel more comfortable. Because they don't really understand you, or they won't like, really deep to you.” - [P7]*

Similarly, another participant preferred using Weibo as they had more close friends on that platform and felt like they could have more intimate conversations. A few of the participants mentioned using Instagram because of its “close friends” feature on the story.

Moreover, they used Plurk as they could follow certain content creators, comics, and anime content there. Similarly, other participants interacted with celebrities, influencers and content creators on other platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Some of these content creators were found across multiple platforms, while some of them had accounts on only a single platform. For example, one of the participants mentioned using Snapchat since the content creator they follow only posts there.

Lastly, one of the participants mentioned using LinkedIn because they got to interact with the people from their professional sector there.

### **i. From Memes to News**

Lastly, we found that our participants used online social technologies to seek information about things and engage with entertaining content. One of the participants mentioned using Twitter and Plurk for their hobbies. Others mentioned using Twitter and Instagram to seek mental health related information, jokes, cat videos, memes, and dumb humor. Facebook was also mostly used to seek information from different groups.

## **4.3 Spill the tea, How Do You Use These Platforms?**

After gaining insight into the participants' platform preferences and reasons behind their choices, we proceeded to examine the various methods through which they engaged with each platform. Our study identified two primary themes: passive interactions and active interactions. Participants mainly used YouTube passively to consume content without engaging in commenting. However, the remaining platforms were used for both passive and active interactions.

### **a. Social Support through Digital Hugs and Virtual high-fives**

As previously observed, the primary motive for our participants to use online technologies and social communities was to receive social support. They accomplished this through various means. Participants either sought help from their friends individually or as a group. Private chats on platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram Messenger, and iMessage were commonly used for individual support.

*“For me personally, messaging friends, like on a one on one, or even just like group chat have been helpful to just kind of help me vent.” - [P4]*

In contrast, group support was sought on platforms such as Whatsapp, Discord, Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram. One of the participants mentioned that they felt better after talking to friends individually on Whatsapp. However, in other cases they would seek group support on Discord either on chat or hop on a call if needed. Contrastingly, another P2 mentioned that they used Whatsapp for group support from their friends.

Some of our participants used Facebook and Reddit to join relevant communities for support. For instance, P4 shared they were part of a mental health group on Facebook called “Subtle Asian Mental Health”. Rather than asking for explicit advice on the group, P4 preferred interacting passively by reading posts from other people about their mental health and experiences. Sometimes they would use the “care” reaction on Facebook to show their support for the group. P2, P4, P6 mentioned being part of specific communities on Reddit to seek information and advice from

people. P2 also mentioned using smaller communities on Instagram where they could share their mental wellbeing issues with close friends. Similarly, P4 also mentioned using Instagram to vent to close friends.

Some participants preferred to use Instagram to share updates on their mental wellbeing, while others preferred to text their friends when they were experiencing distress. P4 found that posting on Instagram did not necessarily make them feel better, but they felt better by texting their friends as it helped them reflect on their feelings. On the other hand, some participants found posting on their Instagram stories to be a great way to vent, as they had a time limit of 24 hours and friends could support them by liking or replying to their story. However, some participants were more selective about what they posted on their Instagram account, and preferred to vent on other platforms, such as Plurk, where they could share negative feelings with virtual friends without spreading negativity to their real-life friends. P7 explained that they created a new Twitter account because too many friends had joined their old account and they no longer felt comfortable sharing personal information there. Meanwhile, P4 expressed a preference for seeking advice from close friends rather than joining public groups on Facebook. We found that participants used different platforms in different ways to share their thoughts and feelings depending on the audience they had there.

According to some of our participants, they found it helpful to follow Instagram accounts that provided information and resources related to mental health. P2, P4, and P8 shared that they followed accounts that raised awareness about mental health. They expressed that these accounts assisted them in coping with their grief and pain. Furthermore, a few of our participants reported following mental health professionals and accounts that represented their ethnic communities. They argued that mental health issues could differ across cultures and that following individuals from their own ethnicity made it more relatable for them.

While some participants actively sought support, others preferred simply posting on social media to feel better. They did not necessarily want others to respond to them. P7 mentioned that they used Plurk to just express themselves, without seeking responses from people. Moreover, she felt that sometimes strangers on social media could be unkind which impacted them more than strangers being nice to them. P1 also mentioned that they did not always look for active interaction while venting on Instagram, sometimes even a like from their friends would suffice. In contrast to this, P3 and P5 stated that they looked for active support and encouragement from their friends through comments and story replies on Instagram. They felt bad if their friends did not reply to them.

Apart from engaging with friends, some of our participants also sought inspiration from influencers and celebrities on social media. P2 mentioned following Influential Speakers on LinkedIn who talked about their mental wellbeing. They felt inspired by the content those speakers

shared. Similarly, P5 mentioned they used Youtube to follow Influencers who shared their positive lifestyle. They used vlogs on Youtube as a source of inspiration for them to improve their lifestyle.

### **b. Keeping Tabs on Your Friends' Lives Through Social Media**

Apart from seeking social support, we found that our participants used social media to stay connected with their friends. They wanted to stay updated about their lives by following their stories, posts, and reels on Instagram. P3, P4, P5, and P7 mentioned that they used Instagram to keep in touch with the lives of their real life friends. Similarly, P7 also used Plurk to stay updated about their virtual friends. P1 mentioned using LinkedIn to stay updated about the professional lives of other people in her field as that helped reduce her anxiety. Contrary to this, some participants mentioned that looking at their friends' posts on Instagram did not seem to help their mental health in any way.

*"So cause Instagram for me is really like a way for me to know what my friends are doing now. Yeah, it's just a way it a place may mean on the say, oh, yeah, someone is doing something now."*  
- [P7]

Many of the participants liked staying in touch with their friends by sharing content such as memes, videos, news etc with them. P1 thought that sharing content with friends was a great way of staying connected. Moreover, the main reason P8 used Instagram was because their friends shared content such as cat videos, and funny memes there.

*"I have friends that only share cat videos. We share I guess funny stuff from some video games, or TV shows that we both know that we have talked about in the past some time maybe."* - [P8]

### **c. Post, Browse, Repeat**

We found that most participants posted content on Instagram stories to seek support. P1 mentioned they liked asking questions on their stories to seek help. They also mostly used text to express themselves. Similarly, P4 mentioned posting stories on Instagram to vent out her anger and frustration over major events. Apart from that, participants also put up content in posts on their feed. P1 mentioned that they posted on Instagram mostly to highlight cultural differences for their American friends. On other instances, they used Weibo as they could communicate in Chinese there. They also did yearly reflections on Weibo. P1 and P7 mentioned that they liked posting positive life updates on their Instagram account. P3 mentioned that they liked posting emotional things on their private Instagram account. P7 only posted interesting posts, pictures, or emotions on their Twitter account.

Apart from posting, participants passively interacted with platforms by browsing content. The type of content they browsed was mostly for entertainment purposes and highly depended on their interests. Most participants mentioned browsing memes, video game content, cat videos,

motivational videos, and funny videos on Instagram and Youtube. P1, P4, P5, P6, and P8 mentioned that watching videos on Instagram helped them laugh and feel relaxed. P3 used LinkedIn to browse for relevant news in her career field. Similarly, P7 and P8 mentioned using twitter to get the latest news and updates about the world.

#### **4.4 App-ointments: When do you use these platforms?**

For our analysis, we also looked at when our participants were going to these platforms. We found two types of uses: intentional and casual. For some of the platforms, participants went to them with specific intentions in mind such as to message friends. Whereas for other platforms, participants casually used them. The most frequently used platforms were the ones that the participants used casually, whereas the other platforms were used occasionally only when they wanted to achieve a specific goal.

##### **a. Just Killing Time**

Instagram was the most commonly used social media platform amongst all participants. Many participants reported using Instagram in their daily lives without a specific purpose, browsing content on the app during free time or when feeling bored in class. They felt like using Instagram did not require dedicated attention, and hence they could use it anywhere and anytime.

*“I don't think it was particularly with a goal. But yeah, I just wanted to get some clarity in my head. Like I was feeling like I have my mind a little bit cluttered with too many thoughts.” - [P2]*

They did not always specifically open Instagram to look for information regarding mental health or get support. Instead, they casually went to the platform as part of their daily routine. None of the participants reported intentionally using Instagram to look for information to manage their mental wellbeing. Instead, it was described as a part of their daily routine rather than a deliberate coping mechanism. Plurk was another platform that was used casually by the participants. P7 mentioned they used Plurk daily without having any goal.

##### **b. Social Media with a Mission**

Facebook and Reddit were two of the platforms that were used intentionally by the participants. For example, they only went to Facebook and Reddit when they wanted to look for specific information in a group or subreddit. P6 used Reddit only as a backup when other platforms would fail to fulfill their needs. Apart from P3 who used LinkedIn casually, others only went to LinkedIn with a specific professional purpose in mind. P1 and P2 thought using LinkedIn required dedicated attention so they could not use it in classes. Similarly, P2 used Youtube only with a goal in mind instead of casually browsing it. P1 reported using Twitter only to open content shared by their friends.

*“Specific. If I have a question, then I go to YouTube to search it, but I won’t just randomly search it.” - [P5]*

Similarly, participants only went to texting platforms when they wanted to talk to their friends. P6 and P8 reported using Whatsapp when they wanted to message friends. However, they would transition to Discord if their friends would be unresponsive on Whatsapp.

There were also instances where participants used Instagram intentionally. For example, P3 used Instagram when they felt mildly depressed. P5 used Instagram when they felt lonely, depressed, and sick. Both P1 and P3 mentioned that they avoided posting on Instagram if they felt extremely depressed. They found it difficult to filter their thoughts in such an extreme state of mind.

Lastly, P1 reported using Weibo when they wanted to express themselves in Chinese, their native language. However, they used Instagram when they wanted to make posts targeted at their international friends.

## **4.5 Social media struggles: What challenges do you face?**

Since the advent of online social platforms, there has been a lot of discussion over how social community platforms could negatively affect people’s mental health. Indeed, all of our participants agreed that social community platforms have negative impacts on their mental health in certain ways. Drawing from the interviews, we figured out four aspects of online social community platforms’ negative impacts—users, contents, attributes, and usage of the platforms.

### **a. It's the People, Not the Platform**

When asked about the challenges faced on social media, some of our participants believed that the obstacles related to technology may not be solely attributed to the platforms themselves, but rather to the users. Our findings revealed that users can create challenges in two ways: by failing to provide social support and by causing conflicts.

*“I don't really feel there is a problem with the platforms’ problem. If you ask about challenges, the challenge is the friends you have on the platform.” - [P7]*

#### **1. A Social Network that just isn't that Social**

Seeking social support is a common way for people to manage their mental well-being, but failing to receive social support can have negative impacts on their mental health. Participants felt disappointed when their close friends were unable to provide them social support. They felt the need to “perform” on social media in order to keep their friends interested in their accounts [11].

For example, one participant said that they refrain from posting a lot of negative content as their friends might get bored of it.

*“I really want to post more information on my social media platform instead of just the feelings because maybe I think posting too many feelings make others who are seeing your post feel they cannot interact with you.” - [P1]*

We also found that apart from friends, certain individuals turn to mental health influencers on social media platforms to seek support, as these influencers share their personal experiences in managing mental health issues. However, if the influencers' motives are driven by capitalist intentions instead of altruistic ones, the support may fail, leading to negative impacts on the support seeker's mental well-being. Therefore, the motive behind providing social support changes how people feel about it. For example, P2 used the term “capitalist mentality” to describe this situation—the influencers he followed offered support intending to make money, not help people.

*“So you can sometimes be influenced by people who don't really have the intent to really help you. It's more to do with how they are gaining followers, how they are making more money.” - [P2]*

## **2. Trolls, Bullies, and Keyboard Warriors**

Online toxicity was a matter of concern to most of our participants. Even though participants mostly used social technologies to seek positive content and support, sometimes they had to encounter negativity and online hate. This was caused by various reasons such as disagreement and argument over a topic, misunderstanding each other, or expressions made by haters.

P8 mentioned that conflict between users makes comments “full of toxicity” and seeing those toxic comments can trigger bad moods. Similarly, P7 thought that being involved in a conflict that gets you into a bad relationship with virtual friends can cause negative impacts on mental health. They thought it was hard to get away from social media conflicts since social media history remains forever, whereas in real-life you could easily move on.

*“Negative especially from all the replies like someone posts a complaint about something that's going on around in the news. And then people start fighting each other in the comments.” - [P8]*

*“If you get into a bad relationship with someone, this really can impact you because social media is just there everywhere, and you are already used to it.” - [P7]*

### **b. Content that Makes You Frown**

The content of the platforms can be categorized into three types—content created by friends, content created by community members, and other information. The following sections will discuss how each type of content can negatively impact users' mental health.



## **1. What my Friends Post**

We figured out two types of content created by friends that can cause negative impacts on users' mental well-being. The first type of content is the one that can cause a sense of fear of missing out (FOMO). Two participants mentioned that the feeling of missing out can be triggered by friends' Instagram posts sharing social interaction or connections that they were not part of, which can cause negative impacts on their mental health. To avoid negative feelings caused by FOMO, both participants chose to sort of keep away from social media posts. However, the attempt to keep away from content created by friends leads to ambivalence. On the one hand, social community platforms serve as an important medium for them to get friends' updates and stay socially connected with friends, which plays an important role in maintaining their mental well-being. However, on the other hand, they feel the need to stay away from those updates to prevent mental well-being from being negatively affected.

*"Sometimes I actually feel like seeing what other people do can actually make your mental health worse. Like, sometimes I see, oh, wait, this group of people went out to this place. But I'm not a part of it." - [P4]*

The second type of content that can negatively impact users' mental health is the sharing or venting of negative emotions by friends. This can lead to negative moods for the users. Participants may avoid posting such content to prevent "spreading depression" to their friends. However, sharing negative emotions through social media can also be a helpful way to reduce distress. This conflict between expressing emotions to improve one's mental health and avoiding doing so to prevent negative impacts on others' mental health creates ambivalence for users. One of the participants mentioned they did not find venting on social media as a "healthy" way to cope. Some people may want to seek support on social media but may feel guilty if they do not have the emotional capacity to support others.

*"I might be kind of selfish, but I don't want to see my friends or my like other people posting emotional things. Because I know how that impacts me." - [P3]*

## **2. What Other People Post**

Additionally, one participant mentioned that posts from community members could make him do social comparisons, causing negative effects on his mental well-being. For him, it was unavoidable to do social comparisons on community platforms. This is because "we are humans, thus we always compare ourselves with others; and since we are humans, the content related to people can always affect us". Therefore, posts from our online community members can always have negative impacts on our mental well-being with unconscious and unavoidable social comparison behaviors.

*“You start getting deceived by the kind of lifestyle that is being thrown to you from these applications. You start thinking that my life is not like that. So that's one way to feel low about yourself and feel bad.” - [P2]*

Additionally, one of the participants said they did not use Facebook as it had a lot of fake information which lowered their trust. Another participant thought that the number of “garbage” information on Facebook is much more than the information they may find interesting and positive, which can reduce the helpfulness of the platforms in managing mental-wellbeing.

*“Facebook has too many fake accounts. And sometimes they share fake information. So I don't really believe the information is correct on Facebook.” - [P5]*

More than half of the participants expressed negative feelings toward advertisements on social community platforms and wished to remove them. They found the overwhelming amount of advertisements annoying and felt that it decreased their desire to use the platforms. This suggests that platforms should prioritize user experience and reduce the amount of advertisements to create a more helpful and healthy environment for users.

*“After every three swipes, you get an ad and those ads are often unskippable and that becomes more annoying and makes you angrier.” - [P6]*

### **c. The Ugly User Experience**

Our study identified four attributes of social community platforms that participants wanted to improve or remove due to the challenges they posed or their negative impacts. The first attribute is the auto-refreshing feature. Although this feature is intended to keep users up-to-date with new content, two participants noted that it could cause them to miss relevant and interesting information. This sense of missing out, especially on updates from friends, could be frustrating and negatively affect their mental well-being.

*“I was really frustrated that when I read my friend's post, it would go away. it's so frustrating I can't easily read it again.” - [P7]*

The second attribute pertains to privacy concerns, as one participant expressed feeling stressed about the requirement of using a real identity on social community platforms. She preferred a platform that allows her to express herself anonymously. However, she also acknowledged that anonymity can lead to negative language and hate speech on the platform. Thus, anonymity can have both positive and negative effects depending on its usage. Addressing the negative effects of anonymity is a matter that needs to be taken into account.

*“There's a functionality that you can post anonymously. Some people use this to ask for help, that is good. But if you become someplace to blame something together or hate someone together, it will become really chaotic.” - [P7]*

The third attribute is the algorithm that underlies the prioritization of the delivery of content to the users. Two participants hoped that Instagram's algorithm could be improved. One of them mentioned that the current Instagram algorithm sometimes fed him content that was irrelevant or not interesting to him. The other one hoped to prioritize the content of friends' content since she wanted to stay connected with friends and she thinks this kind of interaction with friends (getting updates from friends through social media posts) is “important to her mental health”.

*“Instagram honestly should better its content filters because sometimes the content algorithm completely random often ends up showing me stuff that I have never even interacted with before.” - [P6]*

The fourth attribute of social community platforms is the focus on quantitative metrics, such as the number of likes, followers, and comments, according to a participant. This can lead to users basing their self-worth and validation on these numbers, which can negatively impact their mental health. One participant suggested a shift towards a more qualitative-based approach on social media platforms, where the emphasis is placed on the quality of interactions rather than the quantity of likes or followers. This provides a potential avenue for platform design that prioritizes mental well-being by reducing the emphasis on numerical metrics.

*“A more quality basis, not quantitative, could be a better metric to be able to neutralize the applications and be more helpful for well-being.” - [P2]*

#### **d. The Fear of Getting Addicted**

Participants expressed concern about the risk of addiction to social community platforms, which can negatively impact mental well-being. One participant said that just the act of using social media itself can make her stressed and affect her mental well-being since she fears that she is addicted to the usage of social media. Another participant mentioned trying to stop using social community platforms to improve her mental well-being. However, she got back to the platform after four days because it was difficult for her to discontinue her social connection with friends on social community platforms. This ambivalence highlights the tension between the need to maintain social connections for mental well-being and the need to avoid overuse. Addressing this tension is crucial for effectively using social community platforms to manage mental health.

*“I think I kind of get depressed because I use my phone too much and my social media too much.” - [P3]*

## 5. Conclusion

This study gives an insight into how people use different technologies, especially social community platforms, for managing mental well-being, the reasoning behind the usage, and the support or challenges they encounter in managing well-being across different technologies. The platforms can be helpful tools for people to manage their mental well-being in various ways, such as seeking social support from community members, doing emotion venting, staying socially connected with friends, and seeking information that is beneficial to their mental well-being. However, social community platforms could also pose a threat to people's mental health when the platforms fail to meet those purposes. Apart from this, content on the platforms and attributes and usage of the platforms could also cause negative impacts on people's mental health in certain ways and play a role in the effect of using the platforms to manage mental well-being. Therefore, in addition to gaining insight into how social community platforms could help people manage their mental health, it is also important to understand how the platforms could make it difficult for people to use for managing mental well-being and how to address the negative sides of the platforms.

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