

Invisible Struggles: Investigating Rural Mental Health Displays on Instagram

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Introduction

- About 65% of rural counties in the U.S. do not have a single psychiatrist or psychologist available
- Rural teens are significantly less likely to seek therapy due to stigma and lack of mental health education
- A 2017 study found that residents in rural areas often don't seek mental health services because they don't understand the benefits
- Social media platforms like Instagram are now being used to talk about mental health—but engagement varies by location
- Currently, less is known about how rural teens use Instagram to talk about mental health or whether posts under #ruralmentalhealth get less attention
- The purpose of this study was to explore how rural mental health is discussed on Instagram and the barriers teens in rural areas face in seeking support
- Research Question 1: Are posts under a rural mental health hashtag engaged with less than posts under a more general mental health hashtag?
- Research Question 2: What mental health topics are discussed within public Instagram posts under the hashtag?

Methods

Design

This was a content analysis study on Instagram

Subjects/Search Strategy

The subjects of my study were

150 public Instagram posts:

- 75 posts under the hashtag
- #ruralmentalhealth
- 75 posts under the hashtag #mentalhealth, for comparison,
- Posts were in English, public, and related to mental health.

Data Collection

Instagram hashtags were chosen based on the topic of the study. Data was collected on Google Sheets.

Measures

Variable	Coding Criteria
Likes	Frequency (# of likes on the post)
Comments	Frequency (# of comments on the post)
Mental Health Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Depression- Anxiety- Stress- Loneliness/Isolation- Any other objective diagnoses
Stigma	Presence of the word "Stigma" in the post or the post's caption
Coping/Treatment	Presence of coping strategies or treatment options in the post or the post's caption
Who Posted It?	Mental Health Organization/Professional or

Analysis: Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, n) were calculated for engagement variables across two groups of Instagram posts: those under the hashtag #ruralmentalhealth and those under #mentalhealth. Descriptive statistics (n and %) were calculated for the content-based variables for posts under

Results

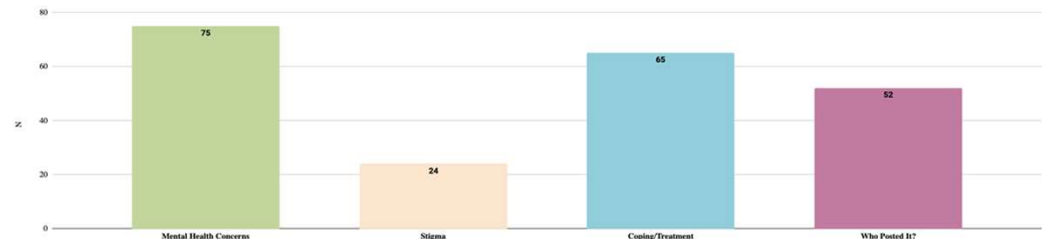
Subject Information (Figure 1 & 2)

- "For this study, N = 150 public Instagram posts analyzed under two distinct hashtags. 75 posts under #ruralmentalhealth and 75 posts under #mentalhealth.
- The average (mean) likes under #ruralmentalhealth was 72.03 (SD = 223.41)
- The average (mean) comments under #ruralmentalhealth was 2.75 (SD = 7.24)
- The average (mean) likes under #mentalhealth was 35061.00 (SD = 49026.48)
- The average (mean) comments under #mentalhealth was 208.36 (SD = 368.41)

Main Points (Figure 3)

- All 75 (100%) posts included presence of Mental Health Concerns
- 24 (%) of posts included presence of Stigma
- 65 (%) of posts included presence of Coping/Treatment
- 52 (%) of posts met the criteria for being posted by a mental health professional/organization

Presence of Content Variables Under #RuralMentalHealth



Conclusions

Key findings

- All of the public posts under #ruralmentalhealth included in the study referenced mental health concerns, showing that people do want to share their experiences, even in rural settings.
- Stigma was present in several posts, confirming that fear of judgment still exists, especially in smaller communities.
- Posts under #mentalhealth received more likes and comments on average, suggesting that rural mental health content gets less engagement.
- Coping and treatment strategies were less commonly mentioned than mental health concerns, showing that not all posts under #ruralmentalhealth included both concerns and possible coping strategies or treatments.

Limitations

- The study only used public Instagram posts, which may not represent all rural voices—many people may not share personal struggles online or may use private accounts where posts aren't publicly available.

Implications

- Mental health organizations should consider using social media to reach rural youth and provide education on counseling and support options. There is a need for more online campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health in rural communities.
- Future research can include interviews or surveys with rural teens to better understand their personal experiences beyond social media. Comparing different platforms (e.g., TikTok, Facebook) could help capture broader online conversations around rural mental health.

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Average Mental Health Likes vs Rural Mental Health Likes

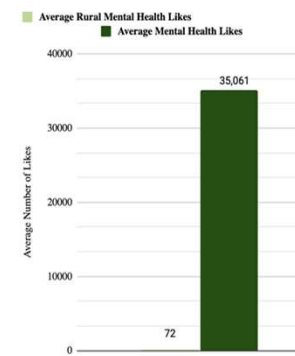


Figure 1

Average Mental Health Comments vs. Rural Mental Health Comments

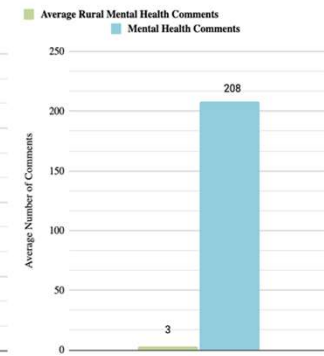


Figure 2

Figure 3

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