

Exploring the Pathways for Mental Health Education of College Students in the Social Media Era

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Abstract: This article provides an in-depth analysis of common psychological issues faced by college students in the social media era. It discusses in detail the numerous challenges confronting mental health education in this context and proposes a series of optimization strategies. These include innovatively integrating new concepts into mental health education, strengthening the construction of the mental health education team through a combination of full-time and part-time staff, building a comprehensive online and offline service system for mental health education, and fostering a collaborative school-family-society tripartite environment for psychological development. The proposed measures aim to enhance the effectiveness of mental health education for college students.

Keywords: Mental Health Education; Social Media Era; College Students

1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education and 17 other departments jointly issued the "Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Students' Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023–2025)," emphasizing the need to improve various safeguard measures and truly place mental health work in a more prominent position [1]. College students are at a critical stage in the formation of their outlook on life and values. While their thinking tends to mature and stabilize gradually, their psychological structure remains relatively fragile, and contradictions in self-concept are often prominent. Consequently, their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are highly susceptible to environmental influences, which may lead to psychological crises. The emergence of the social media era has brought about rapidly updating and fragmentary online information, characterized by broad interactivity and the

transcendence of spatial and temporal constraints. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and QQ provide college students with access to vast amounts of information. While this can broaden their horizons, it also poses significant challenges to their mental well-being. Therefore, it is imperative for universities to adopt systematic approaches to improve the mental health education system. By accurately identifying the psychological characteristics and needs of college students in the social media context, universities should construct a multi-dimensional psychological counseling framework, establish a comprehensive mental health support system, and facilitate the holistic development of students.

2. Primary Manifestations of College Students' Psychological Distress in the Social Media Era

The 54th Statistical Report on the Development of the Internet in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) shows that as of June 2024, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.09967 billion, an increase of 7.42 million compared to December 2023. The Internet penetration rate reached 78%, and short - video users accounted for 95.5% of the total Internet users [2]. College students, characterized by active thinking, strong learning abilities, and ample discretionary time, have emerged as one of the primary user groups on social media platforms. However, due to their relatively lower self-control, limited social experience, and lack of relevant knowledge and skills, this demographic is particularly vulnerable to "Internet traps", which may contribute to a range of mental health issues.

2.1 The Negative Impact of Internet Addiction on Learning

Contemporary college students, often referred to as "digital natives," are generally more

proficient in operating social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat compared to the general population. This is particularly true for the current generation of students, primarily those born between 2003 and 2007—often termed the “Post-00s generation”—who grew up during the golden age of China’s economic boom. Benefiting from both material abundance and ample access to cultural and intellectual resources, they exhibit strong curiosity toward novel and unfamiliar phenomena and frequently use social media platforms to gather diverse types of information. In a mental health education classroom survey conducted as part of this study, questionnaire data revealed that 92% of the sampled college students used their mobile phones for four or more hours per day. Nearly 20% reported daily usage exceeding ten hours. The top five most frequently used applications, ranked by duration and frequency of use, were Douyin, Kuaishou, Weishi, Taobao, and Taobao Live. Online games, short-video addiction, and other internet-based activities have become significant challenges among college students. Excessive engagement with online content severely impairs both the quality and efficiency of learning. Firstly, prolonged exposure to short videos and social media consumes substantial amounts of valuable after-class time, leading to decreased concentration and a decline in academic performance. Secondly, students with relatively weaker self-control may unconsciously become addicted to these virtual platforms, resulting in wasted study time and poor academic outcomes. This may further contribute to anxiety symptoms by the time of graduation, ultimately jeopardizing their mental health [3].

2.2 Interpersonal Relationship Issues Arising from Virtual Social Networking

In the social media era, college students have shifted their modes of self-expression to various social platforms and dating apps, with social media playing a central role. These platforms provide diverse and convenient avenues for students to share life updates, showcase talents, and present either idealized or authentic versions of themselves. Although online social interaction transcends temporal and spatial constraints, its anonymous and fragmented nature often results in superficial emotional connections. The lack of genuine emotional communication in such virtual interactions may

lead students to neglect face-to-face relationships inadvertently, gradually eroding their interpersonal skills. Over time, this can foster feelings of loneliness and lead to increased detachment from real-life social situations, potentially culminating in social anxiety or avoidance in offline contexts. This phenomenon not only adversely affects individual psychological well-being but may also impair college students’ broader social adaptability.

2.3 Anxiety Stemming from Excessive Engagement with Online Information

The rapid dissemination and extensive interactivity of social media have transcended traditional spatial and temporal constraints, significantly enhancing the efficiency of information transmission [4]. While college students gain access to an overwhelming amount of information through social media, some of this content—particularly negative or contradictory reports, including extreme incidents related to public health, safety, and social stability—can exert substantial psychological pressure on individuals or groups. On the other hand, such exposure also presents valuable opportunities for cognitive growth, value reassessment, and personality development [5]. In light of this, universities must enhance the effectiveness of mental health education in the social media era. It is essential to equip college students with the ability to critically evaluate information, manage their emotional well-being, and mitigate the stress caused by information overload. By fostering these competencies, students can cultivate a healthier psychological state, facilitating their personal growth and future contributions to social development.

2.4 The Potential Impact of the Information Cocoon Effect on Group Mental Health

In the social media era, the overwhelming volume of online information and the difficulty in distinguishing between true and false content pose significant challenges to college students’ information cognition and judgment. Without adequate media literacy and critical thinking skills, students are prone to becoming trapped in “information cocoons,” making certain groups particularly vulnerable to mental health risks. For instance, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may develop severe

inferiority complexes and negative emotions when exposed to peers displaying luxurious travels or affluent lifestyles on platforms such as WeChat and QQ. Those sensitive about interpersonal relationships may turn to virtual networks to seek emotional fulfillment through online interactions or activities, which can lead to emotional suppression and related issues in real life [6]. Moreover, students with low self-control are susceptible to being influenced by harmful content, resulting in distorted values and behavioral tendencies. Therefore, to help college students break free from “information cocoons”, it is essential to continuously implement media literacy education, mental health guidance, and behavioral interventions, guiding them toward healthier information consumption and psychological adaptation.

3. Challenges to College Students' Mental Health Education in the Social Media Era

3.1 Inadequate Psychological Crisis Intervention Mechanism

The psychological crisis intervention mechanism in universities has yet to be fully established. Significant challenges remain, including imprecise early warning indicators, ambiguous judgment criteria, and delayed responses to psychological crises. In particular, cases involving deliberate concealment or self-isolation of psychological distress pose serious difficulties for current intervention measures, which often fail to address and manage these mental health crises effectively. There is a pressing need to improve existing methods. It is recommended that a graded, dynamic, and integrated online-offline psychological crisis intervention model be established. This model should define the target scope of intervention, implement effective categorization within that scope, and provide precise crisis intervention and full-cycle tracking for high-risk groups. Additionally, a comprehensive mental health literacy program should be developed for all students to form a holistic support network encompassing prevention, intervention, and development. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to enhance the four-tier psychological crisis prevention and intervention system-spanning the university, schools, classrooms, and dormitories-and to streamline psychological crisis referral channels. This will enable comprehensive monitoring of students'

psychological status and emotional issues through mapping, prevention, counseling, timely intervention, and follow-up. Such a structure allows for early warning before a crisis emerges, facilitates intervention for at-risk students, and supports prompt decision-making. Furthermore, attention must be paid to the methods and approaches used in intervention. Care should be taken to avoid triggering psychological defense or shame among students. Emphasis should be placed on leveraging the strengths of social media for positive publicity, transforming negative incidents into constructive life experiences. This approach helps students develop resilience through adversity and enhances their psychological well-being, thereby contributing to a healthier and more positive campus psychological environment.

3.2 Limited Awareness of Psychological Help-Seeking Among College Students

Interactions with students exhibiting psychological concerns reveal that their limited awareness of seeking psychological help often stems from a lack of scientifically sound mental health knowledge. When facing psychological difficulties, most students tend to rely on self-adjustment or discuss issues with parents and friends, rather than actively seeking support from professional psychological counselors. Furthermore, some students perceive seeking help from mental health professionals as an indication that they suffer from mental illness, which evokes feelings of shame and inferiority, thereby further discouraging help-seeking behavior. Additionally, some students are simply unaware of practical details such as the location of the university's mental health education and counseling center, the modes of consultation available, or the procedures for scheduling appointments. This lack of information results in a situation where students do not know how to access help even when it is available. These findings highlight the need for universities to develop a comprehensive mental health promotion system. It is crucial to overcome the current limitations in publicity coverage and depth of engagement, and to foster a campus culture in which “everyone values psychological well-being and knows how to seek help.” Through these efforts, universities can enhance students' self-efficacy in psychological help-seeking and self-

regulation, promote a correct understanding of the value of mental health education, and reduce stigma associated with mental health services.

3.3 Multiple Challenges Faced by College Instructors in Providing Psychological Counseling

As the cornerstone of ideological and political education for college students, university counselors serve as organizers, implementers, and guides in students' daily ideological, political, and administrative management. However, counselors are often overwhelmed by heavy and complex daily responsibilities related to ideological education and student affairs. This high-intensity workload often results in delayed identification, guidance, and resolution of students' psychological concerns. In the social media era, the incidence of psychological issues among college students has risen significantly. Full-time psychological counselors face staffing shortages, while also having to balance teaching and research responsibilities. Moreover, college students' psychological states are dynamic and diverse, requiring tailored intervention plans based on individual conditions and specific issues. This situation places higher demands on the humanistic competence and counseling experience of mental health educators. Therefore, under existing constraints, how to optimize the teaching structure and enhance the professional capabilities of the mental health education team has become a critical issue that universities must address seriously.

3.4 Mental Health Education Activities Requiring Expansion and Innovation.

After years of development, investment in mental health education has continued to increase, and operational conditions have markedly improved. However, traditional approaches to instruction, promotion, and offline counseling continue to constrain the reach of mental health education, limiting broader participation in related activities. In the social media era, it is imperative for universities to leverage the diverse functionalities of online platforms to explore innovative models for mental health education and implement integrated online-offline educational strategies. For example, universities can effectively organize thematic mental health activities for

college students through social media. These may include online group counseling sessions, psychological film appreciation events, and other promotional activities during key occasions such as the "College Student Mental Health Day on May 25" and "World Mental Health Day on October 10". Such initiatives can contribute to the effective prevention of mental health issues among students, enhance awareness of psychological well-being, and help establish a more robust mechanism for the prevention and management of mental health challenges in collegiate environments [7].

4. Effective Approaches to College Students' Mental Health Education in the Social Media Era

4.1 Reshape the Concept of Mental Health Education through Integration and Innovation

Currently, mental health education in most universities remains predominantly focused on addressing psychological abnormalities among students, often neglecting the promotion of psychological well-being for the broader student population. As the social environment in which "Post-00s" college students are raised grows increasingly diverse, the influence of varied social trends has raised the expectations for mental health education. There is a pressing need to shift the educational philosophy from "problem remediation" to "quality empowerment." Through systematic curricula, practical platforms, and environmental development, students' psychological resilience, emotional management skills, and awareness of personal growth should be enhanced in a comprehensive manner. It is essential for universities to keep pace with the times and advance mental health education from a reactive model to one that fosters proactive development.

Mental health education should prioritize prevention and development, shifting from a passive remedial approach to proactive empowerment. By fostering positive psychological qualities and reinforcing constructive guidance, students can enhance their resilience in the face of adversity and facilitate healthy psychological growth. Methods such as psychological quality development programs and group counseling can be utilized to activate innate positive

psychological resources. Concurrently, the goals of life education should be redefined within a broader framework that involves multi-departmental coordination aimed at promoting the holistic development of students. Through innovative formats like the “multi-dimensional classroom,” universities can revolutionize the dissemination of mental health knowledge and experiential teaching, cultivate a campus culture sensitive to “life awareness,” and establish an integrated macro-ecosystem for life education and mental health. This will help guide students in exploring the meaning of life and developing a healthy mindset.

In summary, mental health education in universities should break away from traditional models and embrace integration and innovation as a pathway to promote the comprehensive development of students’ psychological qualities, thereby supporting their overall growth.

4.2 Establish a Team Including Professional and Part-Time Psychological Counselors to Optimize the Mental Health Education Workforce

First, psychological counselors-the core force behind mental health education-are primarily responsible for delivering targeted interventions to students in psychological crisis, providing developmental counseling to the general student population, and fostering psychological literacy across the campus. Universities should adopt policies that encourage them to participate in systematic training, enhance their professional competencies, conduct research on mental health education and the cultivation of positive psychological qualities among college students, and improve their practical skills. Second, university counselors represent a major pillar in the mental health education system. Although most have not received formal training in psychology, they play critical roles in preventive education, mental health promotion, supportive education, and pedagogical guidance within this framework. Accordingly, it is essential to provide counselors with targeted and structured training programs designed to strengthen their abilities in problem identification, communication, dialogue, education, and guidance. Such training will equip them with professional knowledge in mental health, relevant laws and regulations, and basic counseling techniques, thereby

ensuring that their responses to practical issues are both lawful and empathetic [5]. Third, peer counseling, as a form of mental health education that originates from students and serves students, has always played a crucial role in providing college students with mental health education that meets their developmental needs [8]. Mutual support and motivation among peers can, in some cases, achieve effects that surpass those of teachers and parents, proving more persuasive and impactful. Therefore, universities should place greater emphasis on the peer support model, utilize diverse methods to strengthen mental health associations and peer counseling committees, and support the organization of mental health activities. These efforts will enhance the timely identification, guidance, and resolution of students’ mental health concerns.

4.3 Build a Comprehensive Mental Health Education System through Online-Offline Integration

The traditional offline psychological counseling model can no longer adequately meet the diverse needs of students in the new era. In contrast, online mental health education-with its advantages of being unrestricted by time and place, autonomous, private, and high-capacity-has become an effective supplement to university mental health education efforts. Universities should leverage big data and artificial intelligence to establish a collaborative online-offline ecosystem for mental health education, thereby enhancing its effectiveness in the following ways. First, efforts should be made to transform the “variable” of the Internet into an “increment,” constructing a content and discourse system that is compatible with the mental health development of college students in the self-media era [9]. In teaching and education, integrate high-quality online mental health resources and recommend a series of mental health courses to guide students in developing self-awareness, constructively coping with negative emotions, and building mental resilience. Simultaneously, combine these efforts with offline classroom activities to enhance experiential learning and foster a sense of engagement, ultimately forming an integrated teaching model. Second, establish a psychological education system that integrates “Five-Aspect Education”, and innovate through programs such as “Psychology + Discipline”

courses, “Exercise for Stress Reduction” workshops, and “Art Healing Experience” days. By creating a holistic “curriculum-activity-practice” ecology and organizing online psychological knowledge competitions, we aim to build a positive and supportive psychological culture on campus. Third, embed educational resources such as “micro-courses on stress management” and “emotional regulation toolkits” into platform. Establish “online tree holes” that allow anonymous sharing and provide intelligent guidance, offering students a safe and private space for expression. Meanwhile, use AI technology to identify high-risk information and trigger manual intervention for targeted support. Fourth, utilize big data to monitor students’ psychological status in real time, establish individualized psychological records, and forecast potential crisis trends. Develop integrated online and offline intervention mechanisms to improve the timeliness and effectiveness of crisis response, thereby effectively safeguarding students’ mental health.

4.4 Construct a Collaborative School-Family-Society Tripartite Mechanism for Mental health Education.

Research indicates that effective implementation of mental health education—particularly in psychological crisis intervention for college students—requires not only coordination among various stakeholders within the university but also active integration of medical and social resources. In this process, family-school collaboration serves as an essential component and a necessary strategy [10]. First, universities should develop an ecological system for mental health education, incorporating it into the overarching strategic framework of “three-pronged education.” They should leverage classroom teaching as the main channel for delivering mental health content, implement tiered and categorized educational models, and guide students in systematically acquiring mental health knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish a sound mental health assessment mechanism for college students, along with a corresponding early warning and intervention program for psychological crises, to ensure timely detection and effective response to students’ psychological issues. Second, families should prioritize their children’s psychological

development needs by fostering a warm, happy, and harmonious family environment and building a close and supportive parent-child relationship. Parents ought to actively cooperate with schools in educational efforts, fully realizing the fundamental role of family education in promoting college students’ mental health. A positive family atmosphere lays a solid foundation for students’ psychological well-being. Finally, the society should mobilize diverse forces, strengthen ties with relevant professional institutions, improve the social media and online environment, and foster a positive socio-psychological atmosphere. By organizing various educational activities that are innovative in form and practical in significance, the society can help cultivate students’ resilience, stress management skills, and other positive psychological qualities. This will contribute to a broader environment in which the whole society cares about and supports the mental health of college students.

5. Conclusion

In the social media era, comprehensively strengthening and improving mental health education for college students has become a contemporary imperative. It is also crucial for promoting students’ holistic development and enhancing the effectiveness of ideological education. Universities must adapt to these changes and seek opportunities amidst challenges. By accurately understanding the mechanisms of social media communication and proactively leveraging platform advantages, they can continuously expand the scope of mental health education. This will effectively strengthen students’ psychological resilience and help cultivate a new generation capable of undertaking the momentous task of national rejuvenation, thereby injecting robust “psychological” momentum into this endeavor.

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