

## Information Management Behavior Related to the Self-Diagnosis of Mental Health Disorders by the Generation

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**ABSTRACT**

The rapid growth of social media, particularly TikTok, has significantly influenced how Generation Z accesses and manages mental health information, leading to an increasing trend of self-diagnosis. However, previous studies have primarily focused on the impacts of self-diagnosis rather than the underlying information management process, creating a research gap. This study aims to explore how Generation Z manages mental health information on TikTok and how this process contributes to self-diagnosis behavior. Using an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with Generation Z TikTok users and an expert informant, selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo 12. The findings reveal that information exposure initially occurs passively through TikTok's algorithmic For You Page, which later develops into active information seeking. The interpretation and selection of information are largely influenced by emotional validation rather than scientific reasoning, while social interaction reinforces perceived credibility. This process leads to the formation of self-perception and self-diagnosis decisions. The study concludes that self-diagnosis is a subjective and gradual outcome of information management driven by media dependency. Theoretically, this research extends information behavior and media dependency frameworks, while practically emphasizing the need for improved digital mental health literacy and professional guidance.

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### INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues are one of the important issues that have received a lot of attention. In the Southeast Asia region, the prevalence of mental health conditions is estimated at 13.2%, equivalent to 260 million people living with various mental health disorders. Based on the survey, around 15.5 million Indonesian adolescents experienced mental health problems in the last 12 months, and 2.45 million of them met the criteria for at least one mental disorder. Mental health has become a global issue that has attracted the attention of various circles, from academics, governments, to the general public. The increasing cases of mental health disorders have also encouraged the rise of awareness campaigns through social media. WHO (2024) (Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survei, 2023).

In a pre-research interview conducted online via Zoom Meeting on December 3, 2024, Siti Sa'diah Syam, M.Psi., a clinical psychologist, gave her views on the phenomenon of mental health in today's technological era. In the interview, he said:

"Mental health cases have existed for a long time, actually, only because the access in the past was not as wide as it is now, indeed technology affects the individual's awareness related to himself". Behind the ease of access and distribution of information, problems arise when individuals use information spread on social media to identify or assess the existence of disorders or diseases they experience without expert confirmation or called self-diagnosis. Self-diagnosis refers to the process by which an individual diagnoses himself or herself with a medical condition or disease based on perceived symptoms. (Jutel & Nettleton, 2011)

The abundance of online sources of information about diseases and health disorders has become easy access for individuals to self-diagnose. Siti Sa'diah Syam explained that due to the high public awareness of mental health disorders, they have a tendency to want to know more (pre-research interview, December 3, 2024). The trend of mental health cases is getting more crowded because people are finally aware of the identification related to the disorder. The dissemination of this information makes individuals feel like they have symptoms of a mental disorder after being exposed to related content. (Sukmawati et al., 2023) (Elisa Febriana & Ulfa Amalia, 2024)

Efforts to spread public understanding of mental health problems are believed to be one of the factors contributing to the increasing recognition of individuals with mental health disorders. Social media is now used to promote mental health by mental health professionals, as well as (Schomerus et al., 2012) public figures who can expand the dissemination of mental health information to various circles. In voicing concerns about mental health, people are often inspired by public figures they admire and seek to emulate those figures who are also open about their struggles (Katz et al., 2021).

So this phenomenon has developed into a trend on social media, where mental health issues are perceived as a way to get social attention or validation. It also states that the validation and support received from people on social media as well as Yoon et al. (2024) online communities is one of the motivations for this behavior. It is also driven by exposure to content on social media that often portrays mental disorders as a trend or social identity, which ultimately encourages suggestive behavior among its users (Vaterlaus et al., 2015).

Usually, people self-diagnose because initially they feel curious and confused about the condition, pressure, or negative emotions they experience and feel. The relationship between information retrieval and coping mechanisms arises when individuals face various circumstances due to intolerance to uncertainty and stimuli. A person will carry out communication behavior according to his needs and desires. In other words, behavior is generally driven by the desire to obtain a certain goal. This statement is in line with the one that states that curiosity or curiosity triggers a person to start looking for information and begin to compare with the symptoms experienced with the aim of understanding what he feels. These feelings lead to behaviors to find disorders or conditions that they feel the same. So when viewed in the context of (Wilson, 1997) (Pratama et al., 2023). Maelani et al. (2025) (Maskanah, 2022) self-diagnosis, this behavior is used as a way out in

understanding and managing what they feel. Individuals with moderate and high knowledge of mental health tend to engage in self-diagnosis behaviors regarding their mental health with information sources coming from the internet or social media. Although good mental health literacy can help with understanding mental health information and oneself, it does not necessarily guarantee that individuals will avoid the tendency to self-diagnose. Individuals with low mental health knowledge, meanwhile, tend to feel fine and do not (Maelani et al., 2025) self-diagnose mental health disorders. The phenomenon underscores the importance of understanding how individuals manage exposure to the information they obtain in the practice of self-diagnosis.

This process of self-diagnosis is increasingly complex and challenging as individuals access information through social media, where narratives related to mental health are often subjective and widespread. As a result, the boundaries between normal emotions and mental disorders become blurred due to the narratives spread on social media. It is important to have expert confirmation in understanding mental health information, "if there is no one to direct the community, it will eventually become (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025) an unfounded self-diagnosis" (Sa'diah, pre-research, December 3, 2024). This opinion is in line with a statement in the journal entitled Maskanah (2022) *The Phenomenon of Self-Diagnosis in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Mental Health* where it is said that "The characteristics of self-diagnosis are characterized by bias and the absence of confirmation from experts. This behavior is influenced by a cognitive component which is the individual's knowledge of his or her state". When the cognitive component that the individual forms is to have a mental disorder on the basis of self-diagnosis, then he will form a self-concept that he or she really has a mental disorder. People who self-diagnose are indeed proven to be biased, where they interpret the symptoms they have in line with the disease they believe they have. A study shows that the practice of (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025) self-diagnosis has the potential to influence the way individuals interpret their psychological condition and cause the diagnosis to become a reality. These actions risk having negative impacts, such as misdiagnosis, improper treatment, and worsening the individual's mental state. (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025) (Yoon et al., 2024)

On the other hand, stating knowledge about mental health disorders can be helpful in preventing mental disorders to Maelani et al. (2025) self-help strategies to overcome the problems you are having. Self-diagnosis also has a positive effect, namely by building a sense of concern for others and oneself by understanding the psychological symptoms felt. This is why they argue mental health literacy plays an important role in the recognition of mental health problems and the search for help for them (Elisa Febriana & Ulfa Amalia, 2024).

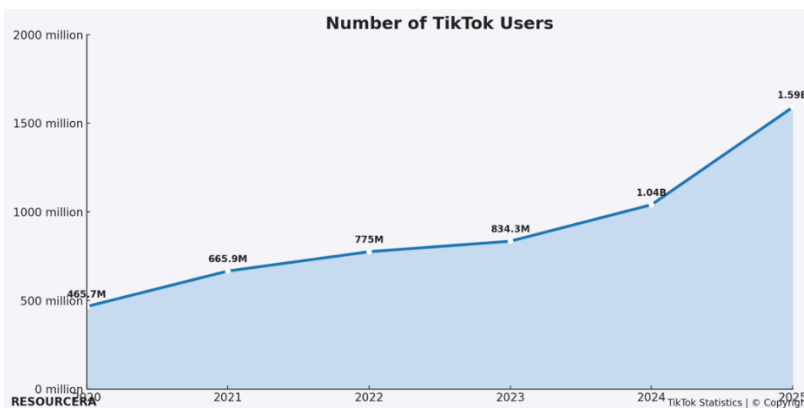
The development of information and communication technology has brought about a major change in the way people access and manage information. Social media is present as a new medium that not only facilitates social interaction, but has also evolved to become a major source of information for its users. Through analysis, some teens turn to social media to seek information about mental health. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) (Newman et al., 2021) Faverio et al. (2025) Social media platforms are used as a source of mental health information. In its survey, 34% of teens said they get information about mental health on

social media, and 63% said social media platforms are an important way for them to get information about mental health. Online health information searches have become the preferred way due to the availability and coverage of information, search convenience, affordability of access, and anonymity. The public's dependence on using social media as a source of mental health information is based on different motives. (Jia et al., 2021)

In his journal entitled *Information Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, through several other studies, it was found that individuals tend to expose themselves to ideas that match their interests, needs, or attitudes and avoid messages that contradict their predisposition. People will be more likely to direct their search for information towards information that fits their stereotypes. Wilson (1997) Wilson (1997)

The reasons for seeking health information online are diverse. Most agree that searching for health information online can provide sensitive health information that they find difficult to talk about in everyday life, obtain a diagnosis of health problems, and be instantaneous. The limitations in the health care system are also the reason for some people that self-diagnosis is natural and inevitable. Access to help with experts is considered too expensive and takes a lot of time. Especially in countries that do not have an easy and equitable free health system like Indonesia. But the use of social media as a primary source of information certainly comes with risks, in a survey conducted by , involving more than 25,000 participants in more than 25 countries found that 86% of online media users (Jia et al., 2021) (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025) Sean Simpson (2019) believe they have been exposed to fake news. Among them, 86% reported that they initially believed the news to be true. These results show that misinformation on the internet is so massive, that it is possible for individuals to get misinformation and make a false diagnosis of themselves.

Social media usage has increased drastically in the past decade, particularly among Generation Z. Data from shows that TikTok has at least 1.59 billion users worldwide as of January 2025. Resourcera (2025)



**Figure 1.** TikTok App User Data January 2025  
Sources: Resourcera (2025)

Based on data from Statista (2023), more than 60% of TikTok users globally are from Generation Z, a group born between 1997 and 2012. The high use of TikTok in this age group marks the way they search, access, and share information. Of the various countries,

Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest proportion of online health information search behaviors reaching 85%. This percentage is much higher when compared to European countries, the United States, and several other Asian countries. The data shows the high use of TikTok by Generation Z in Indonesia, which provides a broad context regarding how this group searches and manages information through digital platforms (Jia et al., 2021).

The high intensity of this information exposure cannot be separated from TikTok's role as one of the most widely used digital platforms by Generation Z. The rapid popularity of TikTok, especially among Generation Z, makes this platform a major source of information dissemination, including information related to mental health. The phenomenon of self-diagnosis of mental health among Generation Z is inseparable from the characteristics of TikTok's social media, which provides an easy way for users to communicate, easily access through mobile phones, and express their opinions. On TikTok, the video with #mentalhealth reaches 17 billion views which shows how easy it is to access information about mental health. found 89% of respondents (Fan et al., 2023) (Corzine & Roy, 2024) Elisa Febriana & Ulfa Amalia (2024) self-diagnosed after viewing psychology-themed content on TikTok. They get the content through recommendations or "For You Page" (FYP) on TikTok with the type of content they encounter is a video that mentions certain characteristics or directly mentions psychological disorders, this means that exposure to massive information about mental health plays a role in self-diagnosis behavior.

In the journal *TikTok and the Prevalence of Self-Diagnoses and Psychological Disorders Among Teen Users*, it was revealed that TikTok is considered a very supportive place in worsening mental disorders and self-diagnosing (Yoon et al. (2024) ), especially users who are still teenagers who are very easily affected by content on TikTok. It was found that many teens diagnosed themselves after seeing TikTok creators share their personal experiences of having a mental disorder. Many TikTok users have diagnosed themselves to gain recognition from other users. (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025)

Individuals who have done self-diagnosis tend to reject the opinions of experts and prefer to trust TikTok users who have the same opinion. It also shows an individual's dependence on the media, where they prefer to consume information through social media. One of the reasons why this platform is so popular is that the algorithm runs on content graphs, not social graphs. This means that the content submitted on the tiktok application is entirely based on the interests of its users. (Yoon et al., 2024) (Mardiana & Maryana, 2024)

According to a survey conducted by, 1 in 4 people have diagnosed themselves with a mental disorder based on information found on social media with Gen Z being the generation with the most self-diagnosing based on social media content at 30%. finding, almost every week, articles appear in the media questioning whether this generation is indeed more vulnerable to mental health problems. For the post-millennial generation, mental health challenges have become commonplace. They are used to talking about these issues openly, even considered as a form of authenticity to share what they are experiencing

as well as a way to deal with various pressures in the digital era. (Redshaw, 2025) Katz et al. (2021)

This condition makes Generation Z a significant group to be studied more deeply regarding the behavior of health information management on social media, especially in the context of self-diagnosis. Self-diagnosis often occurs in this generation because they are going through a stage of emotional development. This generation is growing up with greater awareness and acceptance of mental health issues, in a society that is increasingly understanding medical terms and the rise of diagnoses such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and cultural changes that tend to consider daily stress as a medical problem. It is not surprising that a mental health diagnosis has become one of the hallmarks of their identity. As a generation born and developed in the era of social media, Gen Z easily gets an abundance of information online and has difficulty filtering that information. This generation grew up in the digital era with extensive access to information, but often faces challenges in verifying the veracity of the information received. Therefore, it is important to study how Generation Z receives, searches, selects, and interprets the mental health information they obtain through social media as part of the information management process. This process plays a role in shaping an individual's understanding of the psychological state of the self, which can lead to (Katz et al., 2021) (Underhill & Foulkes, 2025) (Twenge, 2017) self-diagnosis given the high intensity of exposure to information that is difficult to filter.

The Media System Dependency Theory provides an understanding that the use of media carried out by individuals adjusts to the informational needs they feel. Media is used as a place to achieve certain goals that are constantly changing, causing dependence. In this study, this dependency is understood as part of the process of how Generation Z manages the mental health information they receive. This theory can help examine how Generation Z's dependence on TikTok media as a source of mental health information plays a role in the information management process which then contributes to the formation of perceptions, and decision-making related to their psychological condition in the practice S.J. Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976) of self-diagnosis of mental health disorders. To better understand the process, it is also important to review how individuals behave in seeking information.

David Ellis (1989) develop a theory of information seeking behavior. This theory focuses on the behavioral aspects of search interactions, specifically on how individuals interact with their sources of information. This theory has given rise to a lot of research on information seeking behavior, one of which is the information search behavior model by T.D. Wilson. Build a concept that can be used to understand how a person manages exposure to the information they acquire. This model is relevant because it can help understand the stages that Generation Z goes through in searching for mental health information on TikTok, ranging from the emergence of information needs, Wilson (1981) passive attention, passive search, active search, ongoing search, to the use of information in self-diagnosis practice.

The behavior of mental health information management is an important aspect that needs to be studied to better understand the phenomenon of self-diagnosis of mental health

disorders. Several previous studies have examined the phenomenon of self-diagnosis of mental health disorders, such as studies by those that highlight how social media users think about Underhill & Foulkes (2025) self-diagnosis, as well as studies that examine the causes, methods, and effects of Elisha Febriana & Ulfa Amalia (2024) self-diagnosis of mental health disorders. The behavior of seeking mental health information through online media is found in this practice of self-diagnosis. However, these studies emphasize more on people's thinking about self-diagnosis, and the impact of content on these behaviors without delving into how the information management process takes place.

Wilson (1997) emphasizing the importance of research that focuses on the communication aspect in the search for health information through mass media. Considering the changes in the digital media ecosystem that often occur, it needs to be balanced with the latest studies. This study takes a position to fill this gap by examining the behavior of mental health information management by Generation Z on the TikTok platform that occurs in the self-diagnosis behavior of mental health disorders. Thus, this study not only complements the existing literature, but also presents new perspectives related to the dynamics of communication and information management in the era of social media.

The phenomenon of self-diagnosis of mental health disorders on social media cannot be separated from the way individuals manage the mental health information they receive. In the context of algorithm-based social media such as TikTok, users not only act as recipients of information, but also as actors who actively interpret, select, and use information according to subjective experiences and perceived emotional states. Seeing the phenomenon of self-diagnosis that is increasingly widespread among Generation Z and the lack of studies on how the process of managing mental health information takes place on social media platforms such as TikTok, this research is important to be conducted. Thus, this research is expected to provide new insights into information management behavior and support the development of more effective mental health education strategies in the social media era.

This study aims to deeply understand the behavior of mental health information management by Generation Z on the TikTok platform in the context of the practice of self-diagnosis of mental health disorders, by analyzing how exposure to mental health information is experienced by Generation Z, how the process of selecting and interpreting the information takes place, and how the process of interpreting mental health information contributes to the formation of self-perception and encourages the emergence of practice of self-diagnosis of mental health disorders.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research method used an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design to gain a deep understanding of the behavior of mental health information management by Generation Z on TikTok in the context of self-diagnosing mental health disorders. The research subjects were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of Generation Z active TikTok users who had been exposed to and used mental

health content as a reference for understanding their own psychological conditions, as well as one expert informant for source triangulation.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore the subjective experiences of informants related to information exposure, the process of interpreting and selecting information, and the formation of perceptions and self-diagnosis decision-making. The data obtained were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis with the help of NVivo 12 software to identify key patterns and themes, while data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Exposure to Mental Health Information on TikTok**

Information exposure is understood as the initial condition when the informant is first confronted with mental health content, either intentionally or unintentionally, before undertaking the process of further information management.

The results of the interviews showed that initially the majority of informants did not actively seek mental health information, but received exposure passively through the For You Page (FYP). Informants argue that the emergence of content about mental health arises by itself. This actually follows the pattern of TikTok's algorithm that adjusts to previous user activity, such as the duration of watching similar content, searching, or interactions such as likes and saves. Although initial exposure generally occurs passively through FYP, some informants state that after feeling psychological discomfort they seek answers to what they feel through TikTok.

Some informants stated that mental health content began to appear frequently after they experienced certain emotional conditions, such as academic stress, burnout, overthinking, or confusion about themselves. In this context, TikTok is perceived as being able to read the psychological conditions of its users, thus giving rise to content that is felt to be relevant to the situation being experienced by informants. This reinforces the intensity of exposure to content about mental health because informants tend to watch the content to completion, interact, or search for similar content.

In addition to passive exposure, some informants also experience semi-active exposure, namely when content that initially appears on FYP triggers curiosity, thus encouraging informants to search for certain terms or symptoms they feel through the search column on TikTok. Informants interpret TikTok as the main entrance to mental health information, where initial exposure is not always based on clearly defined informational needs, but is triggered by a combination of algorithms, user emotional states, and characteristics of easy-to-consume content. Where, the informant also admitted that TikTok was used as their main place in seeking information about mental health disorders because of the ease of access and format of the content offered. Informants stated that in just one like or search, they were often presented with similar content which meant repeated or continuous exposure.

This condition is in line with the views of expert informants who stated that social media, especially TikTok, is currently used as an initial reference by Generation Z to identify their mental health conditions. However, professionally, social media cannot be

used as the main source for information search. He sees TikTok as often used as the initial stage of recognition and self-awareness of the psychological condition they feel and argues that this is something that cannot be avoided.

### **Interpretation and Selection of Mental Health Information on TikTok**

Interpretation is understood as a subjective process when informants interpret the relevance of information to their perceived personal experiences, while selection refers to the way in which informants determine which information is deemed worthy of trust, retention, or action.

The data obtained shows that a sense of emotional connectedness (relatability) is the main door in the process of interpreting information. Informants tend to pay more attention to content that describes everyday experiences that are similar to the conditions they are currently experiencing. This kind of content is often perceived as a reflection of their own experiences. In this process, the informant does not always make critical assessments based on medical or psychological knowledge. Rather, emotional validation is the main indicator that a piece of content is considered meaningful. When the informant feels that the content represents the emotional experience they are experiencing and there is confirmation that what they feel is indeed a nuisance, the information is likely to be accepted as meaningful to the informant.

The selection of information is then influenced by the perception of the credibility of the source. Informants generally distinguish between content created by professionals (psychologists or psychiatrists) and content created by non-professional individuals. Content from professionals is considered more trustworthy because it is seen as having a scientific basis, while some informants still trust content based on personal experiences that show real examples of what they are experiencing so that they are more connected to what the informant feels.

In addition to sources, social interactions within the platform, such as reading comments or seeing other users' responses, or saving content also affect information selection. Comments from other users who claim to have experienced similar things reinforce a sense of validation and increase confidence that the information is relevant. At this point, the selection process is no longer individual, but takes place in a collective social space.

Even so, the meaning and selection of information is also accompanied by ambiguity and a lot of confusion. The informant revealed that the many psychological terms circulating on TikTok actually caused confusion about their condition. The informant also admitted that several times they received content that did not match what they felt, even though it was still in the context of a disturbance that they previously felt was suitable for them. This situation shows that the process of managing information does not always produce clarity, but can also reinforce psychological uncertainty about what they are feeling. Informants interpret and select mental health information on TikTok through a combination of emotional aspects, credibility, and social interaction dynamics, not solely through rational or scientific considerations.

Psychologist Siti Sa'diah Syam explained that when a person feels a disturbance, he needs an action to respond to it. This is where the process of interpreting and selecting

information as a form of response occurs. In the process of interpreting information, it is said that there is often bias, where individuals more easily receive information that is in accordance with their subjective experience. At this stage, the informant does not always directly diagnose himself, but rather tries to understand the emotional state he feels and the information received. The emergence of doubt is also one of the individual's defense mechanisms, where he states that a person will definitely weigh the content they see with what they feel. Factors such as who delivers or owns the content, and how the background is selected.

### **Perception and Decision Formation in Self-Diagnosis of Mental Health Disorders**

The results showed that repeated exposure to mental health content that was considered relevant encouraged informants to do symptom matching. Informants began to compare their personal experiences with the characteristics or narratives of mental health disorders presented in TikTok content. This process is done as an effort to understand and label emotional experiences that were previously confusing.

In this process, informants develop the perception that the condition they are experiencing has similarities with certain disorders, such as anxiety, depression, bipolar, OCD, or attachment issues. Labeling often provides temporary relief because it helps informants understand what they are feeling. However, at the same time, the label can also reinforce the belief that they have a certain disorder, even without professional confirmation.

Interestingly, the study found that the practice of self-diagnosis does not always take place absolutely. Many informants show a reflective awareness of the limits of self-diagnosis, which is the understanding that information on TikTok cannot replace professional diagnosis. This awareness makes some informants ambivalent, on the one hand feeling helped and understanding themselves better, but on the other hand still doubting the accuracy of the labels they pin on themselves.

The decisions taken after this process vary. Some informants choose to keep TikTok as the main source of information and emotional support without taking further action by continuing to watch content that they feel helps them overcome the mental health disorder they have labeled. Some informants are encouraged to consult professionals for a more in-depth explanation and official diagnosis, but others do not make this decision because they are often influenced by other factors such as mental readiness and timing. Some informants have consulted professionals but are not satisfied and finally return to using TikTok as a place to find answers to the disturbances they feel. TikTok is perceived by informants as the most helpful place in dealing with the harassment they believe in.

Informants practicing self-diagnosis on TikTok cannot be understood solely as a wrong or haphazard act, but rather as part of the process of managing information in a state of psychological uncertainty. TikTok acts as a space for the formation of meaning and perception, which then influences the direction of informants' decisions related to their mental health. The ease of access and the form of presentation of TikTok also make this platform often used as a place to search for information.

Expert informants affirm that in a clinical context, this phenomenon is often found in Generation Z patients, where social media serves as a stepping stone to awareness to

seek more appropriate help. Expert informants admitted that it is difficult for Generation Z to come directly to experts due to the lack of support from the environment, especially parents. But he still emphasized the importance of professional confirmation to avoid bias and misperceptions of mental health conditions, both through online and in-person consultations.

Thus, self-diagnosis in the context of this study is not only understood as an act of self-diagnosis, but as part of the process of managing information and making initial decisions related to a person's mental health.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Key Informant and Expert Informant Data Findings

<b>Information Management Stage</b>	<b>Information Findings of Generation Z</b>	<b>Expert Informant Views</b>
Exposure to Mental Health Information on TikTok	Informants see mental health disorder content through TikTok's FYP that appears repeatedly without intentional or deliberate searches and makes TikTok the main source of searching for information about mental health.	TikTok is commonly used as a primary source of mental health information but should only be used as a starting handle before consulting a professional
Interpretation and Selection of Mental Health Information on TikTok	Informants interpret content based on their suitability with personal emotional experiences and comments from other users. The informant also considers who the content spreaders.	This is a form of bias. It's important to look at the content creator's professional background.
Perception and Decision Formation in the Practice of Self-diagnosis of Mental Health Disorders	The informant finds a designation or term that describes the perceived disturbance and tries to overcome it according to the information obtained through TikTok content.	There needs to be confirmation from experts or professionals in diagnosing mental health disorders. TikTok can only be a stepping stone to professional help.

Source: Processed Researcher, 2025

## Data Analysis Process Using NVivo 12 Coding of References

**Table 2.** Coding of References Information Exposure

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Number of Coding References</b>	<b>Presentage</b>
Nodes\\Information Exposure\\Active Information Search	13	43,4%
Nodes\\Information Display\\FYP	10	33,3%
Nodes\\Information Display\\Recurring Display	7	23,3%
Total	30	100%

Source: Processed Researcher, 2025

The results of the thematic coding showed that the active information search subtheme had the largest proportion of occurrences, indicating that although initial exposure often occurs passively through the informant's FYP, informants tend to continue the process of actively managing information when they feel that the content received is

relevant to the conditions experienced. In addition, it also shows informants' dependence on TikTok in searching for information when they feel a mental uncertainty.

**Table 3.** Coding of References Interpretation and Selection of Information

Codes	Number of Coding References	Percentage
Nodes\\Information Interpretation and Selection\\Emotional Validation	20	38,50%
Nodes\\Information Interpretation and Selection\\Content Reliability	11	21,20%
Nodes\\Information Interpretation and Selection\\Interaction with content	10	19,20%
Nodes\\Meaning and Information Selection\\Scepticism	6	11,50%
Nodes\\Interpretation and Selection of Information\\Ease of Understanding Content	5	9,60%
Total	52	100%

Source: Processed Researcher, 2025

Based on the results of the thematic coding above, the subtheme of emotional validation is the most dominant aspect in the process of interpreting and selecting information. This indicates that informants tend to interpret and receive information based on emotional connection or feelings of being understood by TikTok for the conditions they are experiencing. The subtheme of content reliability and interaction with content that has a significant portion shows the selection process or consideration of the credibility of the content creator as well as through the opinions of other users through the comment column. Interaction with content also includes *a save feature* which means that the informant feels a match for the perceived distraction and the interest to see the content at another time. While skepticism, which is in a much different proportion from emotional validation, reveals that informants are more likely to receive information that is emotionally correlated with themselves rather than questioning the truthfulness of the information.

**Table 4.** Coding of References Perception and Decision Formation

Codes	Number of Coding References	Presentage
Nodes\\Perception and Decision Formation\\Coping Accordingly Perceived Interference	9	37,5%
Nodes\\Perception and Decision Formation\\Labeling or Self-Diagnosing	8	33,3%
Nodes\\Perception and Decision Formation\\Professional Consulting	7	29,2%
Total	24	100%

Source: Processed Researcher, 2025

Based on the results of thematic coding using NVivo 12, the subtheme of coping according to disturbances is believed to be the most dominant aspect at the stage of forming perceptions and decisions, which means that informants tend to take self-adjustment steps based on the disturbances they believe are in accordance with the conditions being



However, in this study, the algorithm-based social media context expands Wilson's model because the passive exposure that occurs is not neutral. TikTok's algorithm actively constructs a personalized, repetitive information environment, accelerating the shift from passive attention to continuous search. The research conducted by found that exposure to mental health on TikTok is quite low due to its informant's preference for content that is not related to health, so TikTok's algorithm that personalizes FYPs according to the preferences and interactions made by its users, rarely shows content or information about mental health. This means, unconsciously, informants have shown interest in mental health information from the beginning which eventually triggers the emergence of content about mental health that continues to appear on their TikTok pages. This is also supported by the habit of informants to seek answers about mental discomfort felt through the TikTok application as the earliest step. The informant also stated that mental health content often appeared on their pages. TikTok, with its algorithmic system, allows for repeated exposure that slowly shapes the user's attention and interest in a particular issue. Hafiez et al. (2024)

This finding is in line with previous research that states that information search plays a role as a starting space in the process of understanding oneself. When an individual conducts information search activities, the person definitely expects answers to the health conditions he or she is experiencing. (Rudianto, 2022)

If associated with Media Dependency Theory, exposure to this information indicates the early stages of media dependence that arise when individuals are in a state of uncertainty. When informants do not understand what they are feeling, TikTok becomes the first source of information that is accessed and considered relevant. TikTok not only functions as an entertainment medium, but also as a medium that has a role in the life of informants to obtain information, a means of interaction, and the formation of identity. This condition reflects the functional relationship between Generation Z and TikTok as a media system that helps individuals understand their psychological state ( (S.J. Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) (Zahra et al., 2023) *understanding*), which is one of the main goals of an individual's dependence on media in daily life. (S. J. Ball-Rokeach, 1985)

### **Meaning and Selection of Information as a Subjective and Emotional Process**

At this stage, this study found that the meaning and selection of mental health information on TikTok was more influenced by emotional validation than rational or medical considerations. Informants interpret mental health content through emotional connection. Content that explicitly describes everyday experiences, emotions, or symptoms similar to the informant's condition is more acceptable. This emphasizes that the meaning of information is not objective, but is built through the subjective experience of the informant. Information is considered correct or relevant not only because of its scientific validity, but because of its conformity with their perceived experience. These findings are in line with the concept of Health Information Seeking Behavior which places the search for health information as a coping strategy, so that information is not only used to acquire medical knowledge, but to gain a sense of understanding and validation to help adjust to disease. In the findings of this study, the emotional aspect plays an important role in the process of interpreting and selecting health information. Although the majority of informants stated that they prefer content that comes from professionals, the alignment of

the informants' emotional feelings with the content consumed remains a major factor in content selection. (Normansyah et al., 2024) (Lambert & Loiseau, 2007)

Social interaction in the TikTok application is also a process of interpreting and selecting information. Informants often read comments on content that they are interested in or appropriate to dig up more information and select whether the content is appropriate for themselves and seek validation and similarities from other people's experiences. In a study conducted by , it was stated that adolescents tend to seek validation and support regarding their condition based on information obtained through the internet. In his book, he writes "on the internet, you can find a community where you can listen and express yourself, and instant validation of your code, whatever it is". This statement shows that the internet, in this study, the TikTok platform, has a tendency to be a place to search for validity for oneself which is the process of interpreting mental health information. Nurismawan et al. (2024) (Nurismawan et al., 2024) Elliott (2003)

During this process, the informant has experienced doubts about the information received. This is driven by informants' awareness of the reliability of content and the limitations of information. According to the Media Dependency Theory, the research findings show that informants' dependence on TikTok includes the need for self-understanding due to the uncertainty they feel. This can be seen through the process of interpretation and information selection that occurs where informants often return to TikTok to find more information about a disturbance they feel. The stronger the sense of ambiguity of eating, the higher the relationship with the media. When viewed through the Model, this stage falls into the continuous search ( (S. J. Ball-Rokeach, 1985) Wilson (1997) *ongoing search*), where the informant has basic knowledge of the disturbance they feel and continues to search for information to build deeper information. So, with continuous exposure to information and mental uncertainty, the informant encourages the informant to believe that a mental health disorder exists in him.

### **Perception Formation and Self-Diagnosis Decisions**

At the stage of forming perceptions and decisions, informants begin to match symptoms and label or self-diagnose based on information obtained from TikTok. This process is not always interpreted as a medical diagnosis, but rather as an attempt to understand the perceived psychological condition.

Researchers found that informants diagnosed their condition and returned to using TikTok to consume more similar content, or seek follow-up explanations, as well as to find ways to address the disorder they believed they had. This is in line with Media Dependence Theory, where one of the main goals of media dependence is to escape from problems. Informants self-label or self-diagnosis of mental health disorders in order to understand and overcome perceived disorders. In , this information management process includes identifying self-symptoms and compiling responses to perceived conditions (orientation). Stating that the advanced process of information search is the use of information where physical or mental behavior appears in combining the information received into a person. This process can be seen through the formation of informant perceptions and the occurrence of mental behavior, namely self-diagnosis. (S. J. Ball-Rokeach, 1985) S. J. Ball-Rokeach (1985) Wilson (2000)

These findings reinforce the view that the practice of self-diagnosis on TikTok is not absolute but is within the scope of self-exploration or search for meaning influenced by limited access to professional services. Self-diagnosis is considered a form of initial reflection on the psychological condition experienced and helps individuals in overcoming it. This is in contrast to some studies that tend to position self-diagnosis as false or harmful behavior. Like a study conducted by , which found that social media users perceive teens to deliberately label themselves as a mental health disorder in order to gain validation from other friends encouraged by online communities like TikTok. This research shows that in practice self-diagnosis also functions as a self-management mechanism. Underhill & Foulkes (2025)

In a study conducted by, the possibility of a person self-diagnosing mental health disorders can be due to the desire to seek clarity on what they feel. Other studies have also stated that a person tends to self-diagnose as an attempt to understand themselves and seek help. This view is in line with the findings found in this study where informants label or diagnose the disorder they feel to make it easier to find ways to overcome it. reveals that self-diagnosis behavior occurs due to curiosity that shows a lack of mental understanding of oneself and increased self-awareness by realizing the presence of pressure and negative emotions in oneself. Wijaya et al. (2024) (Nurdiana & Rubino, 2024) Sukmawati et al. (2023)

In perspective, this stage represents the Wilson (1999) *information use* phase, where information is integrated into self-understanding and influences actions in the form of self-diagnosis. Thus, the formation of perception and self-diagnosis decisions in Generation Z in this study is understood as the final result of the information management process. Self-diagnosis is present as a form of information use that aims to overcome psychological disorders felt by informants.

From the results of the analysis, the formation of self-diagnosis decisions is not a result of passive information consumption, but the final stage of the information management process. This process shows the role of TikTok as a medium that not only distributes information but also as a space for mediating meaning in the mental health experience by Generation Z.

## CONCLUSION

This study aims to understand the information management behavior of Generation Z in the practice of self-diagnosis of mental health disorders on TikTok social media and concludes that self-diagnosis is a consequence of the information management process that takes place gradually, subjectively, and emotionally. Exposure to mental health information generally occurs passively through TikTok's algorithm, especially the For You Page (FYP) page, which triggers initial awareness of emotional states without being preceded by a clear need for information, then progresses to the stage of interpretation and information selection that is heavily influenced by emotional validation and personal experience. The interpreted information is then used to build self-understanding and orientation to psychological conditions, thus encouraging the emergence of the practice of self-diagnosis as an initial effort to reduce uncertainty and self-understanding, not just as a

medical diagnosis. Theoretically, this study contributes to the study of health communication and information behavior by expanding the application of Media Dependency Theory, Wilson's information-seeking behavioral model, and Health Information Seeking Behavior in the context of algorithm-based social media. Practically, these findings provide implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers to design mental health communication strategies that are more appropriate to the characteristics and emotional needs of Generation Z. The limitations of the study lie in the limited number of informants, the focus on one social media platform, and the reliance on subjective interview data, so further research is recommended to involve more diverse informants. using other methodological approaches, as well as cross-platform comparisons to enrich understanding and support strengthening digital mental health literacy.

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