

A Study on Digital Storytelling as a Tool for Mental Health Advocacy: A Study of Gen Z Social Media Consumption in Chennai

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Abstract:

This study investigates the role of digital storytelling as a persuasive and participatory medium for mental health advocacy among Generation Z social media users in Chennai. Grounded in media psychology and participatory culture theories, the research explores how narrative-based content such as short-form videos, personal vlogs, and interactive reels' fosters awareness, empathy, and openness toward mental health conversations. Employing an indepth interview, assessing engagement patterns across Instagram, YouTube. that capture users' emotional responses and interpretations of digital mental health narratives. The findings reveal that authenticity, peer relatability, and narrative intimacy significantly enhance the perceived credibility and emotional impact of advocacy content. However, factors such as algorithmic bias, performative activism, and digital burnout were found to limit sustained engagement. By situating these insights within the urban cultural context of Chennai, the study highlights the potential of localized digital storytelling to advance mental health advocacy and shape inclusive communication strategies for the Gen Z demographic.

Keywords:

Digital storytelling, Social media engagement, Media psychology, Generation Z, Digital narratives.

Introduction :

Mental health challenges among Generation Z have escalated worldwide, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and pervasive social media engagement, yet India's youth confront distinct cultural taboos that stifle dialogue. In Chennai, where nearly 40% of residents are under 25 (Census 2021), Instagram and YouTube command daily screen time, enabling self-disclosure while risking performative wellness fads. Digital storytellingthrough Reels, vlogs, and short videos fuses visual artistry with raw testimony, dismantling barriers to vulnerability. This study reframes it as a catalyst for mental health advocacy, probing its power to redefine Gen Z narratives in a South Indian metropolis.

While scholarship on social media's psychological effects abounds, scant attention addresses Gen Z's proactive use of these tools for advocacy in Global South settings. Predominant quantitative analyses prioritize likes and shares, sidelining qualitative depths like authenticity's role in bilingual Tamil-English storytelling. Chennai's digital landscape, shaped by Kollywood influencers and regional memes, equips Gen Z with hybrid identities ripe for platform-tailored expression. This lacuna demands phenomenological methods to privilege participants' voices over data aggregates.

Anchored in a qualitative framework, this inquiry dissects digital storytelling's impact on mental health advocacy via Chennai Gen Z's social media habits. Centering user-created content, it illuminates narrative tactics that dismantle stigma, especially for underserved groups amid kinship and societal constraints. Rooted in constructivist epistemology, the work fuses media studies with public health advocacy, spotlighting visual communication's pivot in digital empowerment.

These revelations offer actionable pathways for Indian academics, policymakers, and initiatives, where mental health infrastructure trails digital savviness. As Gen Z pioneers micro-visual activism,

decoding these dynamics can reshape visual communication syllabi and amplify outreach efforts.

Research Objectives:

To explore users' emotional responses and interpretations through qualitative interviews.

Research question:

- 1) What grabs your attention most in short mental health videos on Instagram or YouTube like real stories or fancy edits?

- **Review of Literature:**

1. Digital Storytelling and Narrative Communication

Digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful communication tool that combines narrative, visual media, and personal expression to convey complex social issues (Lambert, 2013). Unlike traditional informational campaigns, digital storytelling emphasizes lived experiences, emotional resonance, and participatory engagement. Scholars argue that narratives foster deeper cognitive and emotional processing, enabling audiences to relate personally to abstract or stigmatized topics such as mental health (Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative transportation theory suggests that individuals immersed in stories are more likely to adopt attitudes and beliefs aligned with the narrative message, making storytelling particularly effective for advocacy purposes.

With the rise of social media platforms, digital storytelling has become increasingly decentralized and user-generated. Short-form videos, vlogs, and interactive reels allow individuals to share personal mental health journeys, creating peer-driven narratives that challenge dominant medicalized or stigmatized representations of mental illness (Couldry, 2008). These formats prioritize authenticity and emotional intimacy, which are critical factors in audience trust and engagement.

2. **Social Media and Mental Health Advocacy**

Social media platforms have become central spaces for mental health advocacy, awareness, and peer support. Research indicates that platforms such as Instagram and YouTube facilitate both informational and emotional support through visual storytelling and community interaction (Naslund et al., 2016). Mental health advocacy on social media often adopts a narrative-driven approach, using personal testimonies to normalize mental health discussions and reduce stigma (Corrigan et al., 2012). Studies have shown that exposure to mental health narratives online can increase empathy, awareness, and willingness to seek help, particularly among younger users (Betton et al., 2015). However, scholars also highlight tensions within digital advocacy, including the risk of oversimplification, performative activism, and the commodification of mental health content for visibility and engagement metrics (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Algorithmic amplification further shapes which stories gain visibility, often privileging emotionally intense or aesthetically curated narratives over nuanced discussions.

3. **Emotional Engagement and Narrative Intimacy**

Emotional engagement plays a central role in the effectiveness of digital mental health storytelling. Media psychology research indicates that emotionally evocative narratives can influence attitudes by eliciting empathy, identification, and self-reflection (Oliver et al., 2018). Narrative intimacy — created through direct address, confessional tones, and visual closeness — enhances perceived authenticity and trustworthiness.

However, continuous exposure to emotionally intense content may also lead to digital fatigue and emotional burnout. Studies highlight that while users may initially engage deeply with mental health narratives, prolonged exposure without supportive structures can result in disengagement or desensitization (Diefenbach & Anders, 2022). This paradox underscores the importance of balance in advocacy storytelling.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how digital storytelling functions as a tool for mental health advocacy among Generation Z social media users in Chennai. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate as the research seeks to understand participants' subjective experiences, emotional responses, and interpretations of narrative-based mental health content rather than to measure quantifiable outcomes. Grounded in media psychology and participatory culture

theories, the study focuses on meaning-making processes and the perceived impact of digital mental health narratives.

The research employs in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection to capture nuanced insights into how Gen Z users engage with, interpret, and emotionally respond to mental health advocacy content on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

Population and Sample

The population for the study consists of college-going students in Chennai belonging to the Generation Z age group (18–21years). This demographic was selected due to their high social media usage and active participation in digital storytelling cultures.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the following criteria:

- Aged between 18 and 24 years
- Currently residing or studying in Chennai
- Active users of social media platforms, particularly Instagram and YouTube
- Regularly exposed to or engaged with mental health-related digital content

A total of 15 participants were interviewed, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, academic background, and social media usage patterns to capture varied perspectives.

Data Collection Method

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the study's objectives and theoretical framework. The guide included open-ended questions related to:

RQ1: How do the types and formats of mental health content consumed on social media influence users' emotional responses, perceptions of authenticity and credibility, peer and community influence, and experiences of engagement or digital fatigue?

Interpretation:

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Platform Referenced	Key Interview Excerpt (Condensed)	Initial Code	Emergent Theme
P1	20	Female	Instagram	"Unfiltered mental health videos feel like listening to a friend."	Raw self-disclosure	Authenticity over aesthetics
P2	21	Male	Instagram	"Simple talking videos hold my attention more than edited reels."	Minimal editing	Authenticity over aesthetics
P3	21	Male	Instagram, YouTube	"Tamil or mixed English stories feel more relatable than foreign content."	Cultural proximity	Peer relatability & local context
P4	19	Female	Instagram	"Seeing someone my age talk about anxiety makes me feel less alone."	Peer identification	Emotional connection & validation
P5	19	Female	Instagram	"Breakdown and recovery stories feel honest and comforting."	Emotional realism	Emotional connection & validation

P6	22	Male	YouTube	"Long vlogs explain mental health better than short reels."	Narrative depth	Platform-specific engagement
P7	22	Male	Instagram	"Too much mental health content makes me tired after some time."	Emotional overload	Digital fatigue
P8	20	Female	Instagram	"I watch but don't like or comment due to fear of judgment."	Passive viewing	Silent engagement
P9	18	Female	Instagram	"College pressure and family expectations feel very Chennai-specific."	Contextual relevance	Peer relatability & local context
P10	23	Male	YouTube	"Personal stories change how I think about mental health."	Attitude shift	Emotional impact of narratives
P11	23	Male	Instagram	"Some creators use mental health just for views."	Performative content	Performative activism
P12	21	Female	Instagram	"Same sad music and captions feel repetitive."	Algorithmic repetition	Algorithmic fatigue
P13	21	Female	YouTube	"Vlogs feel like a conversation, not awareness content."	Narrative intimacy	Platform-specific engagement
P14	20	Male	Instagram	"Peer stories feel more trustworthy than expert videos."	Peer credibility	Authenticity & trust

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Platform Referenced	Key Interview Excerpt (Condensed)	Initial Code	Emergent Theme
P15	20	Male	Instagram	"Watching others talk openly gives me courage even silently."	Emotional reassurance	Silent engagement

Thematic Analysis of In-Depth Interview Data

The interview data presented in Table X were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' perceptions and emotional responses to mental health-related digital storytelling on social media platforms. Through iterative coding and constant comparison, six dominant themes emerged, reflecting how Generation Z users in Chennai engage with, interpret, and emotionally process narrative-based mental health content on Instagram and YouTube.

1: Authenticity Over Aesthetic Appeal

A prominent theme across the interviews was participants' preference for authentic and minimally edited content over visually polished or highly aestheticized mental health videos. Participants expressed that raw self-disclosure, direct address, and conversational formats enhanced trust and emotional connection. As reflected in responses from P1, P2, and P14, content that appeared "real" and unscripted was perceived as more credible and relatable than influencer-style productions.

This theme suggests that perceived authenticity functions as a key driver of engagement and credibility in mental health advocacy, supporting narrative persuasion theories that emphasize realism

and emotional sincerity over stylistic embellishment.

2: Peer Relatability and Local Cultural Context

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of peer-led narratives and cultural proximity. Stories reflecting everyday experiences such as academic stress, family expectations, and urban youth life in Chennai resonated more deeply than generic or Westernized mental health content. The use of bilingual Tamil-English language and culturally familiar scenarios reinforced identification and emotional relevance, as noted by P3 and P9.

This theme highlights how localized digital storytelling strengthens narrative impact by anchoring advocacy messages in shared cultural and social realities, making mental health discussions more accessible within a traditionally stigmatized context.

3: Emotional Connection and Validation

Another significant theme was the role of digital storytelling in fostering emotional validation and normalization of mental health struggles. Participants described feeling less isolated after engaging with personal narratives of anxiety, breakdowns, and recovery. Responses from P4, P5, and P10 indicate that such content helped reframe mental health challenges as common and manageable experiences rather than personal failures.

This finding aligns with media psychology research suggesting that emotionally engaging narratives promote empathy, self-reflection, and attitudinal change, thereby enhancing the advocacy potential of storytelling-based content.

4: Silent Engagement and Passive Consumption

Despite strong emotional engagement, many participants reported engaging with mental health content privately rather than publicly. Fear of social judgment, stigma, and unwanted visibility discouraged users from liking, commenting on, or sharing advocacy content, as highlighted by P8 and P15.

This theme underscores a critical distinction between visible engagement metrics and actual impact. While social media analytics may suggest limited interaction, the data reveal substantial cognitive and emotional engagement occurring beneath the surface, particularly within conservative or stigma-sensitive social environments.

5: Performative Activism and Digital Fatigue

Participants also expressed skepticism toward mental health content perceived as performative or algorithm-driven. Repetitive formats, emotionally manipulative music, and standardized captions contributed to distrust and emotional exhaustion, as articulated by P7, P11, and P12. Continuous exposure to similar narratives led some users to disengage despite acknowledging the importance of the message.

This theme reflects the tension between advocacy and platform economics, where algorithmic amplification may prioritize emotionally intense but shallow storytelling, ultimately reducing long-term engagement and authenticity.

6: Platform-Specific Engagement Patterns

The analysis revealed distinct platform-based differences in how mental health narratives were consumed and interpreted. Instagram Reels were seen as effective for quick awareness and attention capture, while YouTube vlogs facilitated deeper understanding, reflection, and emotional connection (P6 and P13).

This theme suggests that mental health advocacy benefits from platform-sensitive storytelling strategies, where content format and narrative depth are aligned with user expectations and consumption behaviours.

Conclusion

This study explored the use of digital storytelling as a tool for mental health advocacy among Generation Z social media users in Chennai, focusing on their emotional responses, perceptions of authenticity, and engagement with narrative content on Instagram and YouTube. Employing a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, the research provided detailed insights into how young audiences interpret and connect emotionally with mental health narratives in a culturally specific urban Indian context.

The findings indicate that digital storytelling plays a crucial role in raising mental health awareness and fostering emotional validation among Gen Z users. Narratives led by peers—marked by minimal editing, confessional tones, and cultural familiarity—elicited stronger emotional engagement and were perceived as more credible than polished or influencer-driven content. Participants particularly valued stories reflecting their lived experiences, such as academic pressures, family expectations, and urban youth stress, highlighting the importance of localized storytelling in challenging mental health stigma.

The study also revealed that engagement with mental health advocacy content is often private. While participants reported emotional connection, empathy, and reassurance, many refrained from visible interactions like liking, commenting, or sharing due to concerns about social judgment and cultural taboos. This suggests that conventional social media metrics may underestimate the impact of advocacy, emphasizing the need to consider affective and cognitive engagement that remains invisible online.

However, the research identified limitations to sustained engagement, including performative activism, algorithmic repetition, and emotional fatigue. Although digital storytelling can foster awareness and empathy, repeated exposure to commodified or repetitive content can lead to desensitization and disengagement. Platform-specific differences were also noted: Instagram Reels effectively generate rapid awareness, whereas YouTube vlogs support deeper narrative immersion and reflective understanding, underscoring the need for platform-tailored advocacy strategies.

In conclusion, digital storytelling holds significant potential as a participatory and persuasive medium for mental health advocacy among Chennai's Gen Z. Its effectiveness, however, relies on authenticity, cultural relevance, ethical storytelling practices, and balanced emotional framing. By centering users' voices and lived experiences, this study contributes to media psychology, visual communication, and mental health advocacy scholarship in the Global South. The insights can guide content creators, educators, policymakers, and mental health initiatives in designing inclusive, empathetic, and sustainable digital advocacy strategies for young audiences.

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