

Background

- College suicide prevention efforts increasingly incorporate digital and community-based supports, including telehealth services, mental health applications, artificial intelligence (AI) tools including chatbots, and online peer support (Lattie et al., 2019).
- Traditional interventions remain essential, but access is limited by stigma, shortages of mental health professionals, cost, scheduling barriers, and disruptions in continuity of care. Digital mental health interventions are increasingly viewed as a promising supplement because they are scalable, flexible, relatively low-cost, accessible, private, and appealing to “digital native” college students (Liu et al., 2023).
- Prior research suggests that although many college students express interest in digital mental health tools, sustained engagement remains limited and may be influenced by concerns related to credibility, privacy, usability, and trust (Melcher et al., 2022).
- However, less is known about how student attitudes toward technology, social media, and self-care shape willingness to engage with different forms of help-seeking. Understanding these attitudinal pathways may strengthen dissemination and implementation of multilevel suicide prevention strategies across college campuses.

Research Questions

What attitudinal factors are associated with different mental health help-seeking pathways among college students?

Are attitudes toward digital mental health resources associated with willingness to engage with digital supports?

Are these relationships consistent across demographic groups?

Methods

Design & Sample

Cross-sectional survey of 315 college students.

Measures

Participants reported demographic characteristics, help-seeking intentions across 10 potential support sources, and attitudes toward:

- mental health technology and AI tools,
- social media and mental health, and
- self-care and stress management.

Help-Seeking Pathways

Support sources included informal, campus-based, community-based, crisis, and digital options, including friends/family, professors, counseling center, telehealth, community therapists, 988/hotlines, apps, AI tools, and social media.

Analysis

Logistic regression models examined whether attitudinal factors predicted endorsement of each help-seeking pathway while controlling for degree level, academic discipline, age, living arrangement, racial identity, gender, and sexual orientation. Interaction terms tested whether associations varied across demographic groups.

Attitudinal Pathways

“I use self-care techniques that help me manage stress effectively.”



Associated with endorsement of therapist in community and/or university counseling center for mental health support.

(OR = 1.75, p < .05 / OR = 2.08, p < .05)

“Social media has a positive impact on people struggling with suicidal thoughts.”



Associated with endorsement of university virtual provider (e.g., TimelyCare) or therapist accessed via telehealth.

(OR = 4.33, p < .01 / OR = 2.13, p < .05)

“I would recommend mental health-related technology (e.g., mental health apps, AI tools) to someone experiencing suicidal thoughts.”



Not associated with endorsement of therapy. However, associated with endorsement of university virtual mental health provider.

(OR = 4.05, p < .01)

Less than 10% of the sample endorses the use of apps, AI tools or social media for mental health support.

Conceptual Model

<i>Therapeutic Orientation</i>	<i>Social/Digital Orientation</i>	<i>Crisis/Tech Orientation</i>
Self-Care Endorsement Community Therapy University Counseling Center	Positive Social Media Beliefs Digital Pathways (University or Private Providers)	Endorses Apps for Suicide Prevention Virtual Mental Health Supports Lower Endorsement of Therapy

Interpretation & Implications

- Findings suggest that mental health help-seeking pathways may be shaped not only by access or demographic factors, but also by attitudinal orientations toward different forms of support. Positive beliefs about trust, usefulness, legitimacy, and self-management may be associated with distinct help-seeking preferences across digital and traditional pathways.
- Results also suggest that openness to digital mental health supports is not uniform. While relatively few students endorsed using AI tools, apps, or social media directly for support, positive attitudes toward these resources were associated with greater willingness to engage digital pathways. In contrast, endorsement of self-care practices aligned more closely with community-based therapeutic services, including telehealth and in-person therapy.
- Together, findings may reflect distinct orientations toward mental health support systems among college students, with different beliefs shaping which forms of support feel psychologically acceptable, credible, or accessible.

Limitations

- Findings are based on cross-sectional self-report survey data and cannot establish causal relationships.
- Help-seeking variables reflected endorsement or willingness rather than observed behavior.
- The study examined attitudes toward digital mental health resources broadly and did not assess specific platforms or clinical effectiveness.
- Some demographic subgroup analyses may have been limited by smaller category sizes.
- Findings may not generalize beyond the sampled college population.

Contact Information

Stephen Oby, PhD, LCSW-C
sjoby@salisbury.edu
410-543-6304

Cassidy Zeller, LCPC
cezeller@salisbury.edu
410-543-6070

Salisbury University
1101 Camden Ave.
Salisbury MD 21801

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