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Review Article

Digital Peer Support Platforms and Student Well-Being: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The growing number of mental health issues among learners has raised the issue of new and available support systems in institutions of learning. Digital peer support systems have become a new avenue to well-being promotion among the students by offering peer-to-peer emotional and psychosocial support via online and mobile-based technology. The current paper will examine how digital peer support tools can be used to facilitate the well-being of students, what opportunities are presented by them in the educational setting, and what problems and drawbacks may be identified related to their use and implementation. The research took the qualitative study design as a systematic review of available literature. The search of the databases (Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect) using keywords pertinent to digital peer support platforms, student well-being, online peer interaction, and the opportunities and challenges related to those was carried out. The literature chosen was critically analysed, reviewed, and thematically processed according to the aims of the study. The results of the study show that digital peer support systems are important in improving the well-being of students through emotional support, social connectedness, help-seeking behaviour, and belonging in the academic community. Among the opportunities presented by these platforms, there is higher accessibility to support services, less mental health stigma, the development of life skills, and support for inclusive and student-centred learning environments. Nevertheless, the article also sheds light on various issues, including digital inequality, privacy and confidentiality, quality assurance problems, ethical issues, and sustainability of engagement, and cultural sensitivity. The research concludes that although digital peer support systems cannot be used to substitute professional mental health services, they can be effectively used to supplement institutional support systems. They are a useful element of an overall student well-being system in the 21st -century education environment when thought through in an ethical manner and carefully incorporated into a strategic plan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of student well-being has increasingly become a burning concern in modern education because academic pressure and social isolation, mental disorders, and doubts about career and social life have become factors of mounting pressure. Worldwide, it is reported that anxiety levels, depression and emotional distress levels among students are steadily increasing, especially in universities (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021; OECD, 2019) ^[15, 8]. The sudden digitalization of the educational process that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased has also reshaped the learning space of students, usually diminished face-to-face education and increasing the sense of isolation and disconnection (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020) ^[1]. As a way of addressing these issues, learning institutions are considering alternative and complementary processes to help students cope with their psychosocial requirements. Digital peer support platforms are online or mobile-based systems that support peer-to-peer emotional and psychosocial support of people with common experiences, age, or social conditions (Dennis, 2003; Naslund et al., 2016) ^[4, 7]. In school, students can communicate through discussion boards, chat programs, social networking systems, or institutionally-supported online portals, which will give students a place to support one another through problem-solving (Eysenbach et al., 2004; Pretorius et al., 2019) ^[5, 9]. The main features of the digital peer support platforms are peer-based support based on lived experience, emotional and social support, mediated interaction through technology, and voluntary involvement (Dennis, 2003; Gillard et al., 2017) ^[4, 6]. These platforms are designed to reduce social isolation, encourage positive help-seeking practices and supportive learning and psychosocial communities between students, especially in digitally mediated learning contexts (Naslund et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2022) ^[7, 11].

The digital peer support is becoming an effective solution to the problem as students are able to get connected, share their experiences and give either emotional or informational support to one another via online forums, mobile applications, and social networks. The principles on which these platforms are based are peer support, which has the motives of sharing lived experience, empathy, and mutual understanding as some of the factors contributing to psychological well-being (Dennis, 2003) ^[4]. The online version is more accessible, anonymous, and immediate, which makes peer support of students especially appealing, as they might be reluctant to use formal counselling services due to stigma or fear of judgment (Pretorius et al., 2019) ^[9]. An expanding literature has begun to note the possible usefulness of digital peer support in terms of mental health and well-being. The research indicates that peer connection through the internet can alleviate psychological distress, enhance emotional control, and a sense of belonging, among the youths (Naslund et al., 2016; Pfeiffer et al., 2011) ^[7]. A study of online mental health communities shows that peer support may improve self-efficacy and coping skills, especially when the platforms are organised and moderated (Eysenbach et al., 2004; Gillard et al., 2017) ^[5, 6]. Peer support has been associated with enhanced academic engagement, retention, and social

integration, particularly in the online and blended classroom setting (Thomas et al., 2022; Tinto, 2017) ^[11, 12]. Nonetheless, several studies also warn against blindly applying digital peer support tools. The challenges that have been documented include misinformation, peer training deficiency, ethical issues, and weak mechanisms of crisis management (De Choudhury and De, 2014; Berry et al., 2017) ^[3, 2]. Also, marginalised students are still impeded by the unequal access to digital tools, and this issue has been long-standing in regard to the digital divide (UNESCO, 2021; Van Dijk, 2020) ^[13, 14]. The current research is important in a number of ways. First, it adds to the expanding body of research on the topic of student well-being by critically analysing the opportunities and challenges related to digital peer support platforms. Second, the research study provides information to educational institutions interested in effective, economical, and student-based well-being interventions that supplement professionally based mental health services. Third, the study enlightens policymakers and platform designers to conduct responsible and inclusive implementation as it emphasises ethical, accessibility, and quality-related issues. Lastly, the research will, in the post-pandemic educational context, be especially timely, as it is probable that the digital support systems will continue to be part of the student support systems.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the present study are to:

- 2.1 Analyse the role of digital peer support platforms in promoting student well-being.
- 2.2 Identify the opportunities offered by digital peer support platforms within educational contexts.
- 2.3 Examine the challenges and limitations associated with the implementation and use of digital peer support platforms in promoting student well-being.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative research design and was primarily based on a systematic review of existing literature. In accordance with the objectives of the study, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to explore the role, opportunities, and challenges of using digital peer support platforms in promoting student well-being. Relevant academic literature was collected from reputed databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and ScienceDirect, as well as from selected scholarly web sources. Keywords including “Digital Peer Support Platforms”, “Student Well-Being”, “Online Peer Interaction”, and “Opportunities and Challenges” were used to identify appropriate studies. Each selected source was carefully reviewed, analysed, and interpreted. The extracted content was then systematically organised and categorised in alignment with the specific objectives of the study.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Role of Digital Peer Support Platforms in Promoting Student Well-Being

The digital peer support platforms are becoming more important in facilitating student well-being by meeting

emotional, social, and psychological needs in digitally mediated learning spaces. Student well-being is a complex concept that includes emotional stability, social connectedness, mental health, and a feeling of belonging within academic communities (OECD, 2019) [8]. The past years have seen the continued effects of increased academic stress, social isolation, as well as mental health issues that the COVID-19 pandemic only contributed to highlighting the shortcomings of traditional support systems based in institutions (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020) [1]. It is against this background that online peer support websites have become available as informal and student-friendly channels to supplement official mental health services. Among the main functions of digital peer support platforms, there is improvement of emotional support and alleviation of psychological distress. Such platforms allow students to express themselves, communicate experiences, and get an understanding response through fellow students who also have the same academic and personal difficulties. Mutual lived experience-based interaction leads to validation and emotional reassurance of peers, which is essential in reducing a sense of anxiety, stress, and feelings of loneliness (Dennis, 2003; Naslund et al., 2016) [4, 7]. It has been shown that students tend to be more open to discussing mental health issues in peer-oriented digital environments than they would be in a counselling situation because of a lesser degree of stigma and fewer perceptions of judgment (Pretorius et al., 2019) [9]. Online peer support sites are also critical towards fostering social connectedness and a sense of belonging, which are key elements of student well-being. Chat-based groups, online discussion forums, and peer mentoring systems provide the means of long-term interaction outside the classroom, especially in online and blended learning. Research has demonstrated that peer support leads to social adaptation, academic persistence, and academic success of students in higher education (Tinto, 2017; Thomas et al., 2022) [12, 11]. Digital peer platforms reduce isolation and improve institutional attachment because they create favourable academic communities. The other significance of the digital peer support platforms is that they contribute to positive help-seeking behaviour and mental health literacy. Peer-led discussions expose the students to the coping strategies, self-care practices and access to mental health resource information. This kind of exposure has the potential to normalise help-seeking and promote an early intervention prior to psychological distress turning into a severe mental health condition (Rickwood et al., 2007; Eysenbach et al., 2004) [5]. Through this, digital peer support is a preventative and promoting rather than a remedial tool. Moreover, online peer support systems are accessible and scalable, and they are especially useful in situations where the available mental health services of any kind are insufficient or overworked. Their affordability and flexibility also enable institutions to access big and diverse student groups, such as learners who might have limitations due to time, geographic, or stigma (Naslund et al., 2016) [7]. Nevertheless, researchers underline the fact that such platforms are most efficient in case of their combination with

professional support systems and ethical and safety frameworks (Berry et al., 2017) [2].

4.2 Opportunities Offered by Digital Peer Support Platforms within Educational Contexts

There are several opportunities presented by digital peer support systems that assist in improving student well-being and enhancing educational support systems in modern learning settings. With growing acceptance of digital and blended formats of teaching in educational institutions, learners have difficulty with social isolation, academic anxiety, and reduced availability of formal mental health care. Online forums, chat-based applications, peer mentoring systems, and institutionally managed digital portals are types of digital peer support platforms that offer new opportunities to mitigate the following concerns: creating linked, supportive, and inclusive academic communities (Naslund et al., 2016) [7]. Improved access to psychosocial support will be one of the major opportunities that digital peer support platforms will offer. Digital peer services, unlike traditional counselling services, which are limited by time, space, and access to professionals, are available at all times and at all locations, provided there is an internet connection. This malleability allows learners to request and get assistance whenever they find it necessary, especially at a time when academic stress is high, like when they are taking exams or starting college (Pretorius et al., 2019) [9]. Many platforms are also asynchronous, and therefore, students can study according to their own pace of learning, thus there is less of an obstacle caused by time and scheduling. The second opportunity is that of a reduction in stigma linked with the help-seeking behaviour. Studies have shown that a good number of students do not seek formal mental health services because of the fear of being judged or labelled socially. The digital peer support services may be anonymous or semi-anonymous and establish a secure environment where students feel freer to raise emotional issues and have peers with whom they can share their experiences (Rickwood et al., 2005; De Choudhury and De, 2014) [10, 3]. The normalisation of help-seeking may prevent the further development of mental health problems and lead to an early intervention. Online peer support groups also help enhance social connectedness and belonging, which are important predictors of student well-being and academic persistence. Students have supportive relationships through constant interaction with their peers, which is not limited to the classroom setting. The research has demonstrated that peer support can improve the social integration and engagement of students, especially when studying online and in blended classes, where informal interaction is scarce (Tinto, 2017; Thomas et al., 2022) [12, 11]. This kind of connectedness has a positive impact on motivation, retention and the overall success in academics. The sites also provide a chance to learn and acquire life skills, which is peer learning. By discussing together, students can provide and receive coping, problem-solving, and academic tips, which will help develop emotional intelligence, communication, and resilience. The involvement of peers as supporters can also build further leadership, empathy, and responsibility in students, and this will help make

them a whole person (Dennis, 2003; Gillard et al., 2017) ^[4, 6]. Institutional sense of it is that digital platforms of peer support systems offer an inexpensive and scalable system of support. Since the number of student mental health services required is growing in demand, and access to trained professionals is inadequate, peer-based online solutions will be able to support the current systems of the institution and reach a larger population without excessive cost (Naslund et al., 2016) ^[7]. Moreover, used in tandem with professional services and with the ethics-based approach, such platforms may help to identify any risky students earlier on and enable timely referrals (Berry et al., 2017) ^[2].

4.3 Challenges and Limitations Associated with the Implementation and Use of Digital Peer Support Platforms

Although the concept of a digital peer support platform as an effective instrument of fostering student well-being has gained increasing popularity, it is associated with a range of obstacles and limitations to its application and successful use in the educational setting. These issues are of a technological, ethical, organisational, and psychosocial nature, which should be looked at critically to ensure the responsible and effective incorporation. Digital inequality and inequality of access to technology are among the leading challenges. Not all students have good internet access, the right digital devices, and digital literacy abilities. This Internet gap may result in a situation where marginalised or socioeconomically disadvantaged students are excluded, and thus the inclusion purpose of digital peer support platforms becomes invalid (van Dijk, 2020) ^[14]. The platforms, in that case, can be unintentionally strengthening the current educational and social inequities instead of alleviating them. The other major limitation is related to privacy, confidentiality, and data security. The sharing of personal and emotional information is usually sensitive and will occur on digital peer support platforms. A lack of effective data security systems or vague privacy statements can subject users to the dangers of data leakage, misuse of personal data, or even unwarranted tracking (Berry et al., 2017) ^[2]. The anxiety over loss of confidentiality may lower the motivation of students to freely interact, thus preventing the extent of peer support interaction. The question of quality assurance and the reliability of the support offered by peers is also a problem. Also, in contrast to professional mental health services, peer support platforms are based on students who might not be trained in counselling or crisis management. As a result, misinformation, improper advice, or ineffective reactions to severe psychological distress are also possible (Gillard et al., 2017) ^[6]. Extreme cases, where high-risk situations like suicidal ideation are not determined in time, may lead to serious consequences unless professional intervention is provided. Also problematic to the implementation of digital peer support platforms are ethical issues and role ambiguity. Constant exposure to the suffering of others can cause peer supporters to be emotionally overwhelmed, burn out, or become secondary traumatised. Peer supporters might not be in a position to balance their supportive role with their personal well-being, especially when there are no clear guidelines, supervision, and support structures (Dennis,

2003) ^[4]. Also, the ambiguity between peer support and professional care may lead to confusion about responsibility and accountability. The other challenge is with regard to constant engagement and participation. Students lose interest in many digital platforms over time and grow uninterested or feel that it is irrelevant to their studies; they may have alternative academic tasks. Active and meaningful engagement must be maintained through constant moderation, updating of content and institutional commitment, which might be challenging to sustain in education environments with fewer resources (Pretorius et al., 2019) ^[9]. Digital peer support platforms are also constrained by cultural and contextual factors. Cultural norms, mental health stigma, and language barriers affect the desire of students to talk about emotional issues online. Stage designs that are insensitive to the local sociocultural settings may not appeal to the various student groups (Rickwood et al., 2005) ^[10].

5. CONCLUSION

Online peer support systems have become an innovative and effective technique for the increasing mental health and well-being demands of students in the modern learning contexts. In the case of such platforms, which are designed thoughtfully, implemented ethically, and supervised sufficiently, they may serve as sustainable and inclusive mechanisms of offering emotional and psychosocial support. They provide the students with good platforms to interact with peers, have experiences and support one another, thus benefiting their general well-being. It should, however, be stressed that digital peer support platforms cannot replace professional psychological or psychiatric interventions, especially where there are severe mental health issues involved. The research paper demonstrates the complex nature of digital peer support systems in promoting the well-being of students by improving emotional support, promoting social connectedness, promoting the development of help-seeking behaviour, and complementing the provision of institutional mental health services. These sites play a role in the formation of facilitative academic communities that are attentive to the psychosocial requirements of students in the 21st-century educational milieu through encouragement of peer-led interactions in secure online spaces. Moreover, the digital peer support platforms entail vast opportunities for educational institutions by increasing access to support services, lowering stigma relating to mental health problems, boosting social belonging, and helping to develop the relevant life skills, including empathy, communication, and resilience. They may be very important in promoting inclusive, student-centred, and responsive learning conditions when incorporated into larger institutional well-being programs. Although these advantages exist, the research also mentions several problems and weaknesses related to the use and continued existence of digital peer support portals. Problems of digital access, privacy and confidentiality, quality assurance, ethical concerns, long-term user engagement and cultural sensitivity are issues that are critical. To overcome these difficulties, effective policy frameworks, effective technological protection, organised education and supervision of peer supporters, and tight

coordination with professional mental health services are needed. Only in this way, with all such extensive and strategic actions, can the potential of digital peer support platforms be used to their full capacity without putting the safety, well-being, and trust of students at risk.

Finally, online peer support systems are an important part of a comprehensive student support system. Improved through the adoption of responsible and inclusive approaches, they can be of great value in ensuring the well-being of students and fortifying the mental health ecosystems of institutions in a more digital educational landscape.

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