

***"It seems that everyone has
got something":
Exploring adolescents' attitudes towards
self-diagnosing with mental health
problems***

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Overview

- Introduction
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Findings
- Conclusions and Implications



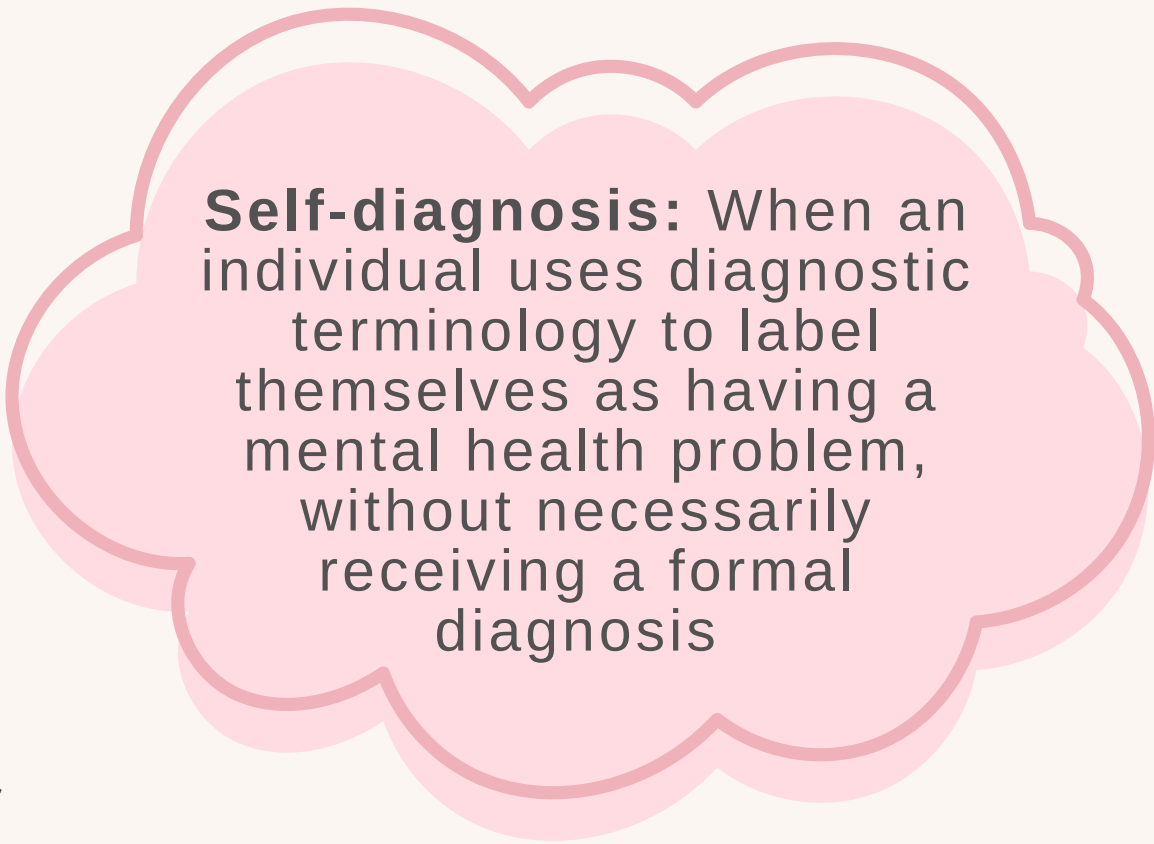
Introduction

- Rates of reported mental health problems among young people is ever-increasing and we want to understand why
- One debate, called the **prevalence inflation hypothesis** (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023), suggests that increased reporting rates is bidirectionally associated with increased mental health awareness efforts, which works through:
 - **Improved recognition** - better recognition and more accurate reporting of mental health problems
 - **Overinterpretation** - milder, transient symptoms of distress being misinterpreted as mental health problems



Introduction

- Linked to this hypothesis is the concept of **self-diagnosis**, which is increasingly common in young people
 - Pilot study of 57 treatment-seeking young people for low mood/anxiety found that 71% had self-diagnosed (Armstrong et al., 2025)
- Self-diagnosis is influenced by the internet and social media
 - “Dr Google” phenomenon (Jutel, 2017)
 - In Armstrong et al.’s (2025) study, 65% of those who self-diagnosed were informed by social media



Self-diagnosis: When an individual uses diagnostic terminology to label themselves as having a mental health problem, without necessarily receiving a formal diagnosis

Introduction

Benefits

- Increased self-awareness and understanding
- Heightened autonomy
- Better access to support and resources
- Limited research, both qualitative and quantitative
 - Self-diagnosed depression as “fake”, professionally diagnosed depression as “real” (Dixon-Ward & Chan, 2022)
 - Self-diagnosis is acceptable if used to understand self or seek support, but also contributes to public misunderstanding, distrust, and disbelief (Underhill & Foulkes, 2024)
- Since identity development is a critical part of adolescence, it seems important to better understand what self-diagnosis looks like in this population from a bottom-up perspective

Drawbacks

- Perceived as attention-seeking
- Reduced agency
- Self-fulfilling prophecy

Research Questions

1

What are adolescents' attitudes towards and experiences of self-diagnosing with mental health problems?

2

What factors do adolescents believe influence the self-diagnosis of mental health problems?

3

What do adolescents believe are the implications of self-diagnosing with mental health problems?

Methods

Recruitment

Four schools (3 state, 1 private)



Sample

24 adolescents, aged 13-17 years old (M = 15.58, SD = 1.61). Majority identified as women/girls (n = 17), White British (n = 13), and cisgender (n = 22)



Data collection

One-to-one semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams (M = 39 minutes, range = 27-51 minutes), including vignette



Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis



Methods

The vignette

Alex is a 15-year-old girl and has just started Year 10. Since the beginning of the school year, she has begun to feel increasingly low and gets tearful over small things. She is struggling to get out of bed in the morning and has found it difficult to concentrate in some of her classes, which is starting to impact some of her grades. She is also less sociable than she used to be, preferring to stay at home rather than go into town to see her friends. One day when scrolling through TikTok, she sees a video from a popular influencer sharing that they have depression. When Alex looks through the influencer's videos, she finds other videos related to this such as: "Do you ever feel too exhausted to get up in the morning, despite getting 8 hours sleep? You're not lazy, you're depressed" and "If you do these 5 things, you have depression". The next week in school, when Alex's friends ask her how she is, she tells them that she has depression.

Findings

1 Acceptable versus unacceptable motives for self-diagnosis

2 Rules for determining (in)authenticity

3 Self-diagnosis is the only viable route for support

4 Modern adolescence is fertile ground for self-diagnosis

Acceptable versus unacceptable motives for self-diagnosis

An explanation versus an excuse

“By diagnosing yourself with something it makes you feel better, it makes you feel like, yeah, this is why I do this and it’s not just me being lazy or whatever.” (Louise)

“If [...] they use[a self-diagnosis]as a reason not to try and just be a good person in general [...] it’s not a lack of understanding stemming from a mental health issue or neurodivergence, it’s actually just them using that as a reason to behave in a way that isn’t otherwise acceptable.” (Lydia)

Acceptable versus unacceptable motives for self-diagnosis

In-depth and considered versus on a whim

“You don't diagnose yourself with social anxiety because you were anxious at one party. You do it because of along-term feeling of anxiety.”
(Rupert)

“If you're newly diagnosed or you've newly discovered something, you might be a bit misinformed, and you might misinform the people around you. And then it might cause a bit more confusion because everyone is like, 'Oh, is this how [this disorder] works?'" (Victor)

Acceptable versus unacceptable motives for self-diagnosis

Seeking help versus seeking attention

“It differentiates yourself and makes you kind of more at the forefront of everyone. If it’s you and your siblings, if you’re the depressed kid, your parents will put the attention on you. In class, your teachers will focus on you.” (Ella)

“I think potential dangers [of self-diagnosing] could be almost discrediting people who actually have those mental health issues.”
(Georgie)

Rules for determining (in)authenticity

“They’d be like, ‘Oh I have autism and ADHD and depression and anxiety and I’m bipolar’ and it was like, okay and you’re 14, does this really make sense?”
(Florence)

“I find a lot of the people that I know that might actually have something don’t really post about it compared to the people that do.” (Louise)

Self-diagnosis is the only viable route to support

Formal diagnostic pathways are inaccessible

“After COVID there was a massive waiting list to get formally diagnosed. It takes ages. Either you’re referred by your school or you have to pay a good £3,000 to get diagnosed so a lot of people, they kind of just lived with their own self-diagnosis.”
(Eden)

“It would be like, ‘You’re fine, just pray about it, just do this, do that’ instead of understanding.”
(Tessa)

Self-diagnosis is the only viable route to support

Gaining access to relational support

“If I can recognise that I’m exhibiting these symptoms now and I can explain that to my friends so they can accommodate me, even if in the future I find out that I don’t officially have this condition, it can still be helpful in the short term.” (Dean)

“You might feel more understood with these other people that have the same traits and stuff, I think. And you might be able to talk with them about what you’re going through since you know they’ll understand.” (Rory)

Self-diagnosis is the only viable route to support

Enabling practical support

“Instead of waiting for four years and not having any help whatsoever [...] if you self-diagnose and say, ‘I might have autism’, you can then maybe talk to the school and get some things put in place for you.” (Tessa)

“You say, ‘oh, I just wanted to go and see the school counsellor’, you might get denied.”(Charlie)

Modern adolescence is fertile ground for self-diagnosis

The widespread yet contradictory use of diagnostic language

“Everybody doesn’t necessarily know depression in detail, but everyone is aware of what depression could be. So if someone says, ‘I’ve got depression’, people are like, ‘Oh, okay, I kind of know how it is’ so you don’t have to also go into details.” (Victor)

“Quite often someone will say they have PTSD, but usually they don’t mean it literally.”
(Charlie)

Modern adolescence is fertile ground for self-diagnosis

Social media fuels (mis)information

“Because of the way that social media algorithms work [...] it can feel like everyone saying something, when in reality, it’s a very small fraction of people.”
(Lydia)

“We were 13 and had just come out of the pandemic so we were all very online. I think self-diagnosis, it’s actually quite rooted in being online.” (Mars)

Conclusions & Implications

Adolescents apply a similar moral framework as adults to self-diagnosis, using implicit rules to guide their response

Attitudes towards self-diagnosis have the potential to reinforce stigma, invalidate others and discourage help-seeking

Self-diagnosis is a pragmatic workaround to an inaccessible system; fix the system

Adolescents have a different relationship to diagnostic language than previous generations



PRUDENCE
TRUST



And a big thank
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Thank you for listening!

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Our pre-print is
available to read
here

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