

Protocol for a Comprehensive Evaluation of Canada's Student Mental Health Network

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Abstract

Background: Prevalence estimates for mental health-related problems, including above-average stress, psychological distress, and symptoms of mental illnesses have increased significantly among Canadian post-secondary students. As demand for downstream mental treatment has surpassed many institutions' abilities to deliver timely care, there is a need for innovative, upstream supports that foster mental health promotion and mental illness prevention among this population.

Objective: Supported by an extensive network of student volunteers, Canada's Student Mental Health Network is a virtual, one-stop shop for centralized mental health education and evidence-based resources, tailored to post-secondary students. This article describes a protocol for the comprehensive evaluation of the Network.

Methods: Development of the Network was developed using a Participatory Action Research framework. Network content is created and curated by students and reviewed by subject matter experts. The proposed program evaluation will include both a formative process evaluation and a summative impact assessment to determine the feasibility, acceptability, and utility of the Network in addition to assessing change in the three primary outcomes of interest: mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking behaviour. Participants will be recruited directly from the Network website using "rolling" recruitment approach to allow for continuous data collection and evaluation. A combination of qualitative (i.e., interviews) and quantitative (i.e., surveys) methods of data collection will be used.

Results: The process evaluation of the Network will begin in September 2022, collecting data for one year with follow-up surveys sent every four months. In September 2023, the impact evaluation will begin using the same follow-up schedule. Data collection will then remain ongoing to facilitate continued evaluation of the Network. Reports detailing evaluation data will be released annually.

Conclusions: The Network is a novel and innovative method of delivering universal mental health promotion to Canadian post-secondary students by providing centralized and freely accessible mental health education and resources, created by students and validated by subject matter experts. The continued creation and curation of resources for the Network will be ongoing, in order to meet the evolving needs of the target population.

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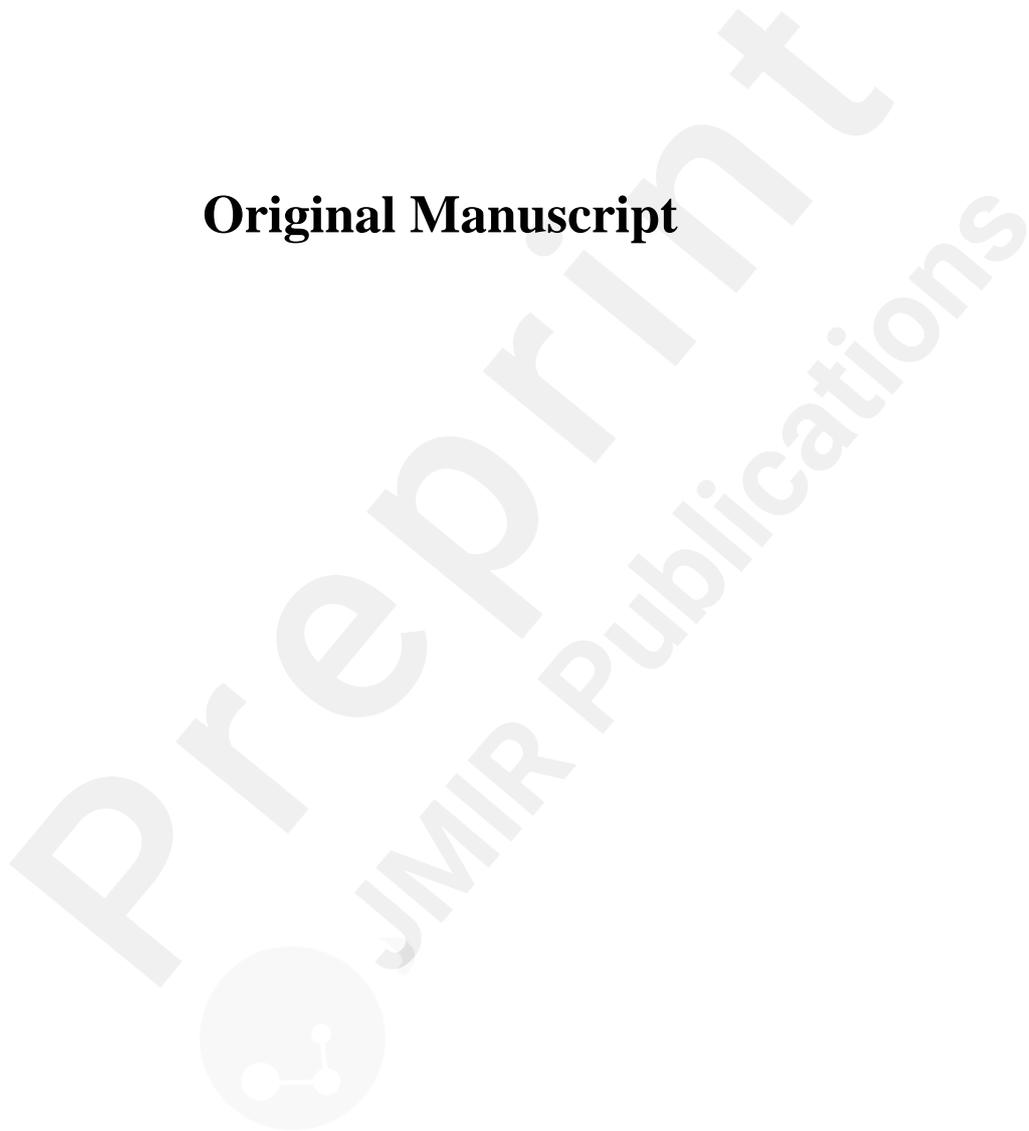
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Introduction

Prevalence estimates for mental health–related problems, including above average stress, psychological distress, and symptoms of mental illnesses have increased significantly among Canadian postsecondary students over the past several years.¹ Excessive stress among students has been linked to a number of negative academic (i.e., decreased performance, decreased motivation) and health (i.e., anxiety and depression) outcomes.^{2,3} Data collected from Canadian post-secondary institutions through the 2019 National College Health Assessment II survey ($n= 55\ 284$) revealed large proportions of students feeling hopeless (63.6%), overwhelmed (88.2%), and anxious (68.9%) within the past 12 months. Additionally, many students reported receiving a past-year diagnosis of anxiety (24%), depression (20%), or both (16%).⁴ Existing research has explored the variety of stressors students experience within the post-secondary setting, spanning the academic, learning environment, campus culture, personal, and interpersonal domains.^{5,6}

The COVID-19 pandemic produced additional, novel stressors, with national data suggesting post-secondary aged Canadians were the most likely to report increased symptoms of anxiety and depression over the course of the pandemic⁷. Strategies to address post-secondary mental health have emerged at the national, provincial, and institutional levels.⁸ At the post-secondary level, many institutions have attempted to improve student mental health by offering both upstream and downstream mental health services.^{8,9} Upstream services aim to intervene prior to the development of symptoms of mental illness, while downstream interventions (i.e., counselling, pharmacological therapy) aim to treat individuals who have already reached a clinical threshold. Over the past decade, demand for downstream campus mental health services has surpassed

institutions' capacities to deliver timely care.¹⁰ Placing additional focus on upstream mental health promotion and mental illness prevention resources may contribute towards alleviating the current bottleneck observed at the treatment level by encouraging students to implement appropriate forms of help-seeking that align with their level of need. Students with a lower level of need (i.e., those experiencing mental health deterioration but who have not yet become symptomatic or reached a clinical threshold) may benefit from lower-intensity, upstream options. Bolstering upstream options like mental health promotion may also improve students' resilience and provide education regarding adaptive and effective coping mechanisms, helping students better manage stress.

While some form of mental health promotion is offered on most post-secondary campuses, a national review of mental health and well-being services on Canadian post-secondary campuses found that only 70% of respondents felt students were well-informed about available resources on campus, and about mental health issues in general.¹¹ Many respondents (84%) also indicated that they felt there was room for improvement with respect to the mental health promotion efforts currently offered on their campus, suggesting that some gaps remain at this level of service.¹¹ Mental health promotion activities were highly varied, with some offering programs aimed to inform students about available campus mental health services, reduce stigma, and educate students about mental illness. Other institutions focused on outreach, aiming to encourage students to seek help when needed.¹¹

This suggests a need for a comprehensive and universal approach to mental health promotion. With the overall aim of filling these gaps, Canada's Student Mental Health Network (hereafter, "the Network") is a virtual one-stop shop for mental health education and evidence-based resources, tailored specifically to post-secondary students and provided in a centralized, accessible location. This article describes a protocol for the comprehensive evaluation of the Network, including a formative process evaluation and a summative impact assessment. The key objectives of this evaluation are to determine the feasibility, acceptability, and utility of the Network in addition to assessing change in the three primary outcomes of interest: mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking behaviour.

Methods

Project Overview

Development of the Network website (www.studentmentalhealthnetwork.ca) was initiated in 2020 and is ongoing. The project was created in line with the concept of participatory action and design research. This involves engaging participants to work alongside researchers as contributors, helping to provide a deeper understanding of their thoughts, needs, and experiences.¹² In line with this approach, all content on the Network is created and curated by students and reviewed for validity by subject matter experts (i.e., researchers, healthcare practitioners) using a collaborative, participatory approach to the co-creation and translation of knowledge. The Network targets three primary objectives, to: 1) improve mental health literacy, 2) encourage the development of strong social support networks, and 3) improve awareness of resources and encourage appropriate help-seeking. As such, content on the website is centered around three pillars: learn, connect, and access.

Learn

Mental health literacy (MHL) refers to “understanding how to obtain and maintain positive mental health; understanding mental illnesses and their treatments; decreasing stigma related to mental illnesses; and, enhancing help-seeking efficacy (knowing when and where to seek help and developing competencies designed to improve one’s mental health care and self-management capabilities)”¹³ MHL has been identified as a foundational component in mental health promotion and mental illness prevention.¹³ Improved mental health education not only enables an individual to recognize changes in their mental health and wellbeing, but also empowers them to respond appropriately.^{13,14} Given that MHL is context-specific, it is important for resources to be tailored appropriately to the target population (i.e., students) and the post-secondary setting.¹⁵

The *learn* section of the Network facilitates access to free and reliable mental health education across a variety of topics relevant to students and the post-secondary setting. Education is provided in an interactive, accessible, and aesthetically appealing format, including the following features: 1) a series of online mental health education modules, created by Network volunteers and validated by subject matter experts; 2) a curated

library of informational and educational TedTalks; 3) a library of free, online mental health courses; and 4) a library of mental health workshops and training programs available through many post-secondary institutions as well as in the community.

Connect

The development of a healthy *social support network* is a key predictor of positive mental health outcomes and overall wellbeing across the life course, but particularly during adolescence and early adulthood.^{16,17} The majority of Canada's post-secondary students are emerging adults (defined as ages 18-25 years), a critical time for brain development.¹⁸ Students navigate a number of major transitions during this time, including the transition to the post-secondary setting, integration into a new social environment, and increased autonomy and responsibility. A lack of social support when faced with these adjustments can lead to social isolation, loneliness, and homesickness.¹⁸ In fact, many students struggle to form new, meaningful friendships at university or college and can find it difficult to maintain pre-existing relationships, such as those with their parents or childhood friends.^{19,20} Together, breakdown of previous social ties and difficulty finding a new social support network at school can result in mental health deterioration.²¹ Social support has also been found to be a protective factor against student burnout.²² Burnout is common in students in academic settings, and is linked to psychological distress and perceived stress.^{23,24}

The goal of the *connect* section of the Network is to encourage students to develop healthy social support networks by providing access to resources designed to encourage peer connection. These resources include: 1) a clubs portal, which provides single-click access to student club listings for every university and college across Canada; 2) the Student Mental Health Network Podcast, featuring interviews with subject matter experts (e.g., researchers, faculty members, physicians, mental health practitioners, and more) and students on a variety of topics relevant to student mental health, including sharing lived experiences; 3) a library of online peer connection resources designed to foster community among like groups (e.g., Togetherall, Youthline, We Matter, etc.); and 4) a Connections Toolkit, focused on forming and maintaining healthy relationships with peers, family members, significant others, and more.

Access

Common perceived barriers to *seeking help* for a mental health problem among post-secondary students include a preference for self-management,²⁵ lack of time,^{25,26} stigma,^{26,27} and lack of awareness around availability of resources.²⁶ Structural barriers also exist; students are sometimes surprised to learn of the mental health related services and supports available to them through their institution and frequently report not knowing where to physically access them.²⁸ This is particularly evident on sprawling campuses where wellness services are split across several different buildings, rather than in a centralized location.²⁸ Additionally, some students are predisposed to structural barriers as a result of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, or gender.²⁹ Increasing awareness of available services and supports and recognizing the needs of specific student groups is essential to supporting the diverse mental health needs of the post-secondary population.²⁹

Another issue related to students' access of mental health services and supports lies in the fact that many students are defaulting to seeking help from high-intensity, downstream services (i.e., counselling, pharmacotherapy) when their level of mental health need does not necessarily align with this level of help-seeking. There is a need to *increase awareness* of lower-intensity, upstream services and supports available on many campuses, such as peer support, mental health promotion workshops and events, and community-building opportunities. Redirecting students experiencing a lower level of mental health need to upstream resources will contribute towards alleviating the pressure on downstream campus mental health services and ensure more timely downstream care for students who require it.^{30,31}

Rather than provide services, the goal of the *access* pillar of the Network is to improve students' awareness of existing resources and services available to them, as well as to improve education regarding appropriate levels of help-seeking. These resources include: 1) a mental health resource bank, which includes one-click access to Student Wellness Services websites for every university and college across Canada, as well as a library of community mental health resources (both in-person and online) at the provincial and national levels; 2) a library of evidence-based and/or physician recommended mental health mobile apps; 3) an interactive mental health services map detailing locations of mental health support on Canadian campuses

across the country; and 4) a bank of stress management resources tailored specifically to post-secondary students based on the stressors detailed in the Post-Secondary Student Stressors Index.³²

Study Design

The proposed program evaluation will include a formative process evaluation and a summative impact assessment. The key objectives of this evaluation are to determine the feasibility, acceptability, and utility of the Network in addition to assessing change in the three primary outcomes of interest: mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking behaviour. The logic model we have developed for the purposes of evaluating the Network can be found in Supplementary File 1. Process evaluations are intended to assess two key components of program function: 1) whether the program is reaching the intended targeted population (*acceptability*), and 2) whether its delivery and function is consistent with program design specifications (*feasibility*).³³ Impact assessments are intended to assess observed change in the outcomes of interest and estimate the degree to which that change may have occurred in the absence of the intervention (*utility*).³³ Alignment of evaluation design with initiative lifespan is imperative. For example, conducting an impact assessment when a program is too “young” for observable change to have occurred in outcomes of interest may lead to the incorrect conclusion that the program or initiative is not effective. Given that the Network is a newly developed initiative, beginning with a formative process evaluation that focuses on user experience in terms of feasibility and acceptability is therefore an appropriate first step. A summative impact assessment will then be conducted after the Network has been in operation for a minimum of one year.

Increasingly, mixed methods approaches to studying complex public health problems have been recommended, as the use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in tandem provides a more holistic and thorough understanding than either approach individually.³⁴ A concurrent mixed methods study design will be used to facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of the Network, where quantitative data will be used to assess website metrics and outcomes of interest and qualitative data will be used to evaluate user experience and provide depth of understanding.

Measures

Process Evaluation

Data for the process evaluation phase of this project will be drawn from three sources: (1) online surveys, (2) Google Analytics, and (3) cognitive interviews (Table 1).

The online survey will include questions related to sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, year of study, level and area of study, estimated grade point average), important website attributes (e.g., appearance, content, interactivity, inclusivity/representation, accessibility), and perceived acceptability and feasibility. The survey will include a combination of closed-ended, quantitative and open-ended, qualitative responses.

In order to collect information regarding the reach and coverage of the Network in terms of website engagement and user experience, we will analyze website metrics collected through Google Analytics. These metrics include total number of users, average number of users (weekly, monthly, annually), average engagement time (time spent on each component of the website) and user “stickiness” (average length of visits), page views, event counts (clicks, file downloads), and user region.

We will use individual, cognitive interviews employing a “think aloud” technique³⁵ to further evaluate user experience and highlight gaps in our delivery. Participants will be asked to screen share over Zoom as they navigate through the Network website and talk us through their navigation, identifying content-related issues or preferences as well as any navigational challenges. Collecting this additional in-depth, qualitative data on website attributes and navigation will augment the quantitative data collected through Google Analytics and allow us to identify gaps and areas for improvement to ensure the best possible user experience.

Table 1. *Process Evaluation Measures*

Mode of Data Collection	Component	Measures/Item	Qualitative/Quantitative

Online Survey	Sociodemographic Characteristics	Age Gender Ethnicity Year of Study Level of Study Area of Study Grade Point Average	Quantitative
	Website Attributes	Appearance Content Interactivity Inclusivity/Representation Accessibility	Both
Google Analytics	Website Engagement and User Experience	Total number of users Average number of users (weekly, monthly, annually) Average engagement time Page views User stickiness (average length of visits) Event counts (visits, clicks, scrolls, file downloads) User location (country, region, city)	Quantitative
Cognitive Interviews		User experience Website navigation	Qualitative

Impact Assessment Evaluation

Data for the impact assessment evaluation of the Network will be drawn from two sources: (1) online surveys, and (2) interviews (individual and group) (Table 2).

Similar to the online survey employed during the process evaluation phase, the impact assessment survey will include questions related to sociodemographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, year of study, level and area of study, estimated grade point average) and important website attributes (e.g., appearance, content, interactivity, inclusivity/representation, accessibility). However, the impact assessment survey will also include several validated instruments designed to evaluate change in each of the outcomes of interest (e.g., scales evaluating mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking behaviours). The majority of the survey will consist of closed-ended, quantitative questions, with a few open-ended, qualitative response options. More in-depth descriptions of each of the selected measures and their associated

psychometric properties can be found in Supplementary File 2.

Online interviews will be held in both individual and focus group formats, depending on recruitment. A semi-structured interview guide will be used to assess students' perspectives on changes in the outcomes of interest as well individual understandings of mechanisms that may have contributed to the change (e.g., improved mental health literacy because of completion of Network modules). Interviews will be used to evaluate students' experience engaging with the website, as well as their perceptions of potential mechanisms through which they observed change in their mental health education, connections with members of their social support network, and help-seeking attitudes and behaviours.

Table 2. *Impact Assessment Evaluation Measures*

Mode of Data Collection	Component	Measure/Item	Qualitative/Quantitative
Online Survey	Sociodemographics	Age	Quantitative
		Gender	
		Ethnicity	
		Year of Study	
		Level of Study	
		Area of Study	
		Grade Point Average	
	Mental Health	Perceived Stress Scale, 4-item ³⁶	
		Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, 6-item ³⁷	
		Brief-Post-Secondary Student Stressors Index ⁶	
Mental Health Literacy	Mental Health Literacy Scale, Adapted ³⁸		
	Social Distance Subscale of OMS-WA ³⁹		
Social Support and Resilience	Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support ⁴⁰		
	Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (10-item) ⁴¹		
Help Seeking	Barriers to Care Evaluation, Revised ⁴²		
	Self-Stigma of Seeking Help Scale ⁴³		
	General Help Seeking Questionnaire ⁴⁴		
Interviews	User Experience and Impact of Website Engagement	User experience	Qualitative
		Website navigation	
		Perceived impact	

Procedure

Participants and Recruitment Strategy

Canadian post-secondary students who have engaged with the Network are the target population for the proposed evaluation. Students attending any type of post-secondary institution (i.e., college, university, etc.) and studying across levels, areas, and years of study will be eligible to participate. Participants will be recruited directly from the Network website via an open call on the main page as well as through the Network's social media channels, inviting users to participate in the evaluation. A "rolling" recruitment approach will be utilized, leaving the survey open indefinitely, which will allow for continued data collection as new users engage with the Network over time and contribute to the ongoing evaluation of the resource. Rolling recruitment approaches have been shown to reduce recruitment delays and improve statistical power by minimizing the effects of loss to follow-up.⁴⁵ Given the age of the Network, we will begin with launching the process evaluation survey, which will be available from September 2022-August 2023. In September 2023, the process evaluation survey data will be closed and replaced with the impact assessment survey. Students do not have to have participated in the process evaluation to participate in the impact assessment.

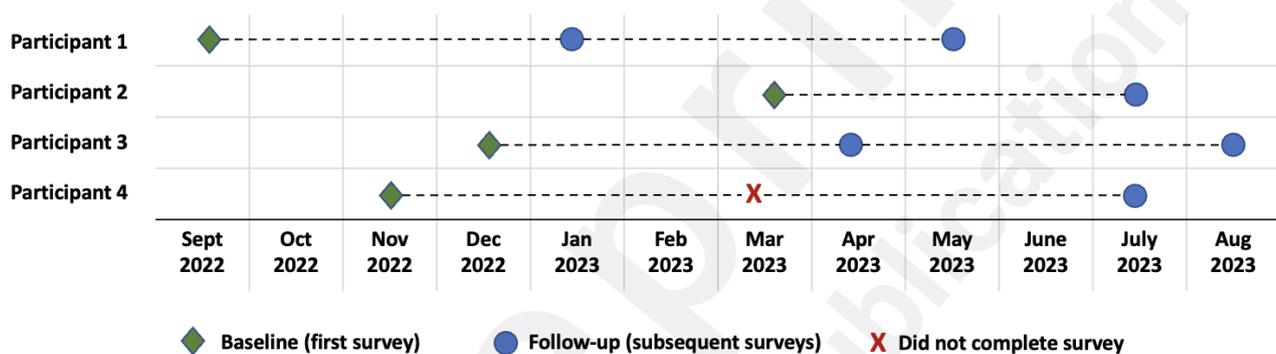
Data Collection and Processing

Survey data will be collected through Qualtrics. Prospective participants will be directed to the "research" section of the Network and presented with a link to the online survey. A Letter of Information (LOI) for the evaluation, communicating participants' rights with respect to withdrawals, refusal to answer questions, and data confidentiality will be presented on the first page of the survey. After reviewing the LOI, prospective participants will indicate consent in order to progress. The process evaluation survey will consist of 12-15 questions (closed and open-ended) and is expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The impact assessment evaluation survey will consist of 20 questions (closed-ended) and is expected to take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Following submission of their first survey (i.e., their baseline), participants will be invited to submit a

follow-up survey every four months, with responses tracked longitudinally over time. The process evaluation survey will open for initial submissions in September 2022, but participants can submit their first survey at any time (see Figure 1). Participants who “miss” a follow-up survey will still be sent a subsequent follow-up when another four months have passed, unless they choose to opt out of receiving additional surveys. In September 2023, we will discontinue the process evaluation survey in favour of the impact assessment survey. As with the process evaluation, follow-up impact assessment surveys will be sent to participants every four months, with responses tracked over time. Some questions from the process evaluation survey will carry over to the impact assessment, and as such, we will continue to link data where possible between survey iterations.

Figure 1. Visual depiction of rolling recruitment strategy



Participants will be compensated for their submission of each survey with an entry into a prize draw for a chance to win one of several electronic gift cards. Participants who elect to further participate in an interview will be compensated with an additional entry in the prize draw for their completion of the qualitative interview. Prize draws will be completed at the end of each academic term (i.e., December and April each year).

At the end of the survey, participants will be asked whether they would be interested in participating in an interview to further discuss their engagement with the Network. Participants who express interest will be contacted by e-mail to indicate their preference for either a one-on-one interview or focus group interview, depending on recruitment numbers. We will attempt to place students from the same region in focus groups together to encourage participants to draw on common experience and promote idea sharing⁴⁶. Participants will be provided with a letter of information and asked to verbally consent to keeping discussions confidential as well as to interviews being recorded and transcribed. Individual interviews will be one-hour in length, while the length of focus group interviews will depend on the number of participants included. All interviews

will be facilitated over Zoom to accommodate collaboration with participants across Canada and led by the Principal Investigator or a Research Assistant trained in qualitative research methodology.

Risk Mitigation

The risk associated with the proposed evaluation is low. However, in order to mitigate any feelings of elevated stress or emotional distress participants may feel after completing the survey and interview, we will provide the contact information for campus Student Wellness Services across the country as well as the link to the access section of the Network.

Analysis

Process Evaluation

Quantitative survey data and website metrics collected through Google Analytics will be analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, measures of central tendency and dispersion) using R statistical software. Qualitative survey data will be coded in NVivo using a thematic analysis framework.⁴⁷ Two research assistants will independently review interview data and generate initial codes, subsequently meeting to share interpretations and develop a codebook. A third reviewer will be available to break ties where disagreements arise. Research Assistants will then return to the data to generate initial themes and categories.

Cognitive interview data will be analyzed through the use of the problem codes displayed in Table 3, which were adapted from those proposed by Willis (2005) for use in the evaluation of new survey tools.⁴⁸ Following each interview, corrective action will be taken to assess identified problems, ensuring that each interview provides maximum value to the improvement of the Network. In the event that a new issue arises that is not captured by existing problem codes, a new code will be added to the list for use in subsequent interviews.

Table 3. *Cognitive interviewing problem codes*

Problem Code	Description	Corrective Action
(1) Clarity	Participant was confused by website content	Revise content

(2) Relevance	Respondent felt that website content was not relevant to post-secondary student mental health and wellbeing	Revise content Remove content
(3) Redundancy	Respondent felt that website content was repetitive or redundant, or could be combined with another content piece	Revise content Remove content
(4) Bias	Respondent felt the presentation of website content was biased or leading in some way	Revise content Remove content
(5) Missing	Respondent felt there was content missing from the website	Add content
(6) Navigation	Respondent felt website content was difficult to navigate or locate	Optimize navigation Revise content organization
(7) Accessibility	Respondent felt website content was not accessible	Optimize accessibility
(8) Representation	Respondent felt website content did not represent all equity-deserving groups	Optimize representation Revise content

Impact Assessment

Both descriptive (e.g., frequencies, measures of central tendency and dispersion) and inferential statistics will be calculated for quantitative data collected through the impact assessment survey using R statistical software. We will explore 1) relationships between sociodemographic variables and outcomes of interest (i.e., mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking), 2) the degree of change in outcomes of interest over time, and 3) the relationship between degree of engagement with the Network and degree of change observed in outcomes of interest. Trend analyses examining change in stress, mental health, and the primary outcomes of interest over time will be conducted once enough data has been collected to facilitate these analyses.

Transcripts derived from individual and focus group interviews will be coded in NVivo using a thematic analysis framework⁴⁷ using the approach described above. Qualitative interview data will be triangulated with participants' quantitative survey data, with qualitative data used to provide more context and facilitate a more in-depth understanding of user experience and the mechanisms of change in outcomes of interest.

Dissemination of Results

The overarching goal of the proposed evaluation – and the development of the Network itself – is to provide opportunities for knowledge translation and exchange that support post-secondary student mental health and wellbeing. To that end, a technical report detailing evaluation results as well as a summary of Network resources will be made publicly available on an annual basis, with reports released in August. Network users will be invited to sign up for a mailing list through which they will receive a copy of each report as they become available. We will also seek to share our annual reports through organizational connections such as the Best Practices Network⁴⁹ and the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health.⁵⁰ Transparency in communication of the results of our ongoing evaluation of the Network will contribute towards a positive community impact by allowing institutions to examine the efficacy of the network as a universal mental health promotion initiative. Results may also inform improvements to campus-specific mental health promotion and mental illness prevention resources and programming.

Results

Phase 1 of this project entailed the development of the Network website, including the curation and creation of relevant resources for the online space. This work began in March 2020 and is ongoing. Moving forward, creation and curation of content for the Network will be an ongoing process that will continue to be informed by the evolving needs of our target population. Phase 2 will begin in September 2022 and will entail the informative, process evaluation component of the study. At this time, the process evaluation survey will be launched, collecting data until the end of August 2023. In September 2023, the process evaluation survey will be closed and replaced with the impact assessment survey. This final phase will be ongoing, consisting of repeated impact assessment evaluation to assess the utility of the Network and observed change in outcomes of interest with respect to student mental health. Results of each evaluation will be made publicly available through the Network annually.

Discussion

Aims and Strengths of the Network

This paper describes the development and proposed evaluation of the Student Mental Health Network, a novel initiative designed to deliver universal health promotion to Canadian post-secondary students. The Network is a low-barrier virtual hub, that aims to promote mental wellbeing by fostering mental health literacy, promoting strong social support networks, and improving student awareness of existing on- and off-campus mental health services. The Network will fill gaps in student mental health strategies at post-secondary institutions across Canada that do not have the resources to provide sufficient, comprehensive upstream mental health promotion. Further, it may help alleviate the long wait times and general overwhelm that downstream mental health services currently face by increasing students' awareness of the spectrum of available services from high- to low-intensity and directing students to services that align with their level of need. As a virtual hub for education, connection, and service navigation, the Network takes a comprehensive approach to mental health promotion that is accessible to all Canadian post-secondary students.

The accessibility of the Network is vital to its utility and is an important strength of the project; it is available to all post-secondary students online at no cost. Content is developed and curated by student Network volunteers and is then reviewed by subject matter experts and/or healthcare practitioners for validity and reliability. This "for-students, by-students", participatory approach to development ensures that content is meaningful and tailored to the target audience, while maintaining relevance and timeliness. Given the nationwide accessibility of the Network and recruitment for the participatory research design, there will ideally be wide sample variation spanning post-secondary institutions across the country. This may allow for identification of inequities in the outcomes of interest (i.e., mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking) between regions. Further, relationships between sociodemographic variables and these outcomes of interest will be investigated, and findings can be used to tailor the development of future website content to combat identified inequities. Lastly, although the Network takes an upstream, health promotion-focused lens, it also serves to connect a generation of students with an interest in mental health and wellbeing. Through the provision of information and facilitation of social connection, the Network may empower

collective action to advocate for institutional, political, and service-level change in current approaches to post-secondary mental health - "for-students, by-students." The Network is a first-of-its-kind initiative that aims to fill the urgent, evidence-supported gaps in student mental health through an innovative, collaborative design.

Limitations

The novelty of the Network is both a strength and a limitation, as there is currently no set process for developing or evaluating this form of content. It is challenging to predict what uptake of the site will look like, but web usage statistics and social media interactions have demonstrated that the Network is receiving increasing attention from students since it was made public in May 2022. In terms of the analysis, it is not possible for residual confounding to be eliminated and observed changes in outcomes will be attributed to the Network alone. There will also inevitably be some loss to follow-up, although a rolling recruitment strategy and raffle entry with each completion of the survey will be used to limit the effect on study power. Currently, the site is only available in English, and thus will be less accessible to French-dominant parts of Canada, international students, immigrants, and other groups who do not speak English as their first language. Further, not all students have equitable access to technology and social media, or time to navigate the Network and participate in voluntary surveys. Lastly, there will be variation in relevancy to post-secondary students across the nation. At the time of this publication, Network volunteers are exclusively university students, with the majority attending schools in Ontario. Therefore, the curation of some content may be less relevant to student populations at colleges and polytechnical institutes, as well as those outside of Ontario.

Conclusion

The Student Mental Health Network is a virtual, one-stop shop for mental health education and evidence-based resources, developed using a participatory "for-students, by-students" approach. The goal of the Network is to provide universal mental health promotion to post-secondary students across Canada, filling existing gaps in upstream resources provided by individual post-secondary institutions. The Network will also facilitate improved access to existing resources by providing a centralized, online location. This paper outlines a protocol for a comprehensive evaluation of the Network, including both a formative process evaluation and a summative impact assessment, with the goal of assessing the feasibility, acceptability, and utility of the

Network. Three primary outcomes of interest identified as key to promoting student mental health were identified: mental health literacy, perceived social support, and help-seeking behaviour. Moving forward, students will continue to collaborate on creating and curating content for the Network to ensure continued relevance and alignment with best practices. The Student Mental Health Network and its resources are available online to students across Canada, free of charge.

Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

Abbreviations

Student Mental Health Network (The Network)

Mental health literacy (MHL)

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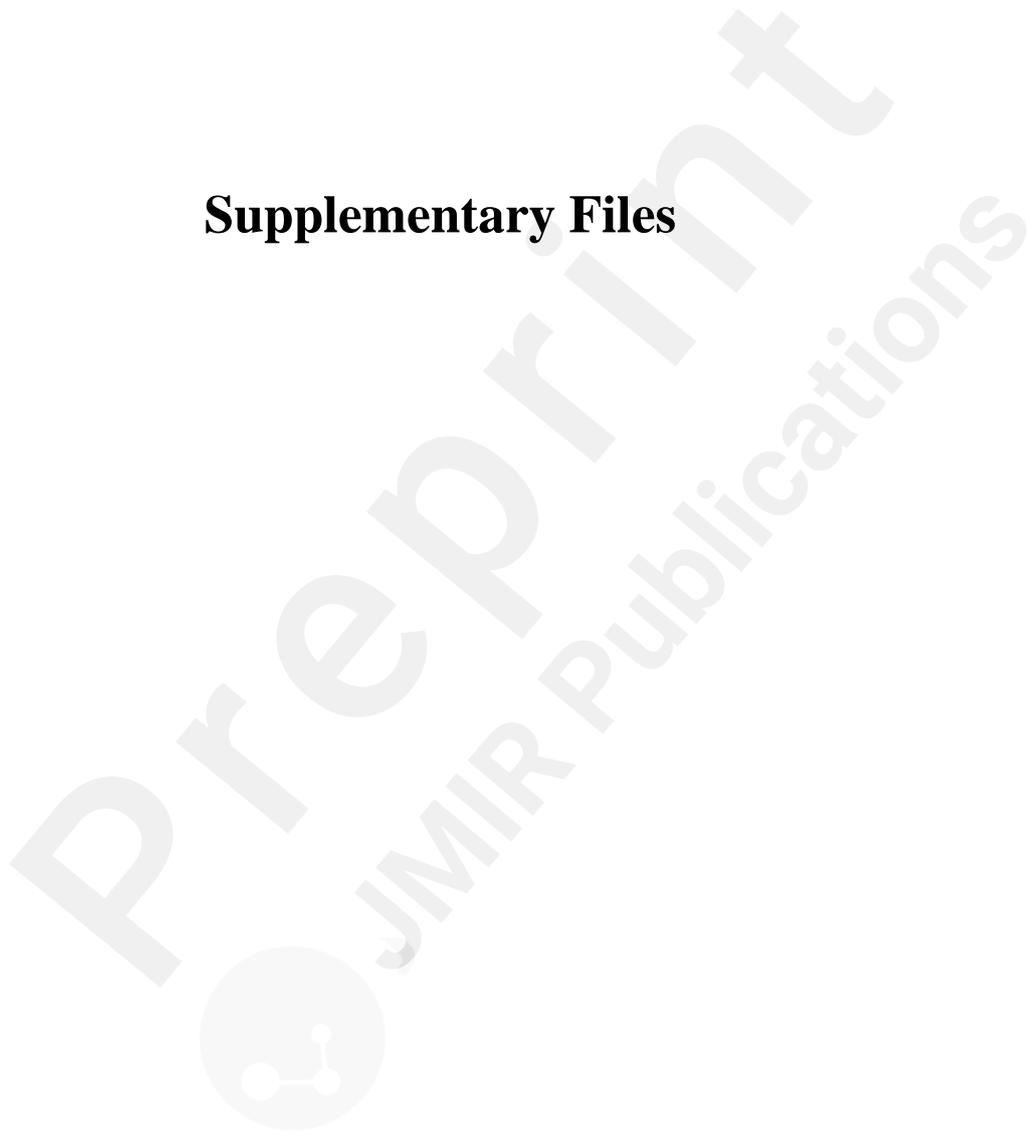
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Supplementary Files



Multimedia Appendixes

Measurement Index.

URL: <http://asset.jmir.pub/assets/9981819ab1d537f0f6b948bb48be9dd8.docx>

Website Engagement and User Experience.

URL: <http://asset.jmir.pub/assets/59aec5c310fb1c0968ada4131082aa22.docx>