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Communicating Calm: Exploring the Role of Social Media Framing in Positive Psychology-based Anxiety Self-help

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Abstract. Considering that anxiety is prevalent among college students and tends to be addressed through social media for emotional support. Existing research has overlooked the influence of information presentation formats on reception outcomes. This study utilises mental health-related posts on Chinese social media platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu as case examples, employing qualitative analysis and literature reviews to explore how different emotional styles in social media content (e.g., emotional tone, visual presentation, and information design) affect users' experiences of online mental health information. Results suggest that calm tones and simple visuals help create supportive experiences, whereas highly stimulating designs or rigid language may increase stress. Although positive psychology can promote well-being, its effectiveness depends on balanced expression that acknowledges negative emotions. The findings point to a gap between engagement-driven design and users' emotional needs, underscoring the importance of more adaptive approaches. These results provide practical guidance for developing empathetic digital interventions and contribute to understanding how message framing operates in social media environments.

Keywords: Message framing, Positive psychology, Social media content, Emotional tone, Mental health support

1. Introduction

Anxiety is a common emotional issue among young people, especially university students who often feel pressure from studies, friendships, and future plans. In recent years, many students have turned to social media platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu for emotional support. These platforms are full of mental health messages, and some of them are influenced by positive psychology. This approach focuses on emotional growth by encouraging hope, personal strengths, and self-acceptance [1].

However, the way messages are expressed can influence how people feel when reading them. Even if the content is helpful, the emotional tone, choice of words, and visual design can still affect whether the reader receive message feels calming or overwhelming. For instance, soft language and gentle visuals may help users feel supported, while overly cheerful or distant messages might be harder to accept during times of stress [2-4].

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Previous studies have explored the integration of information framing and psychological knowledge in the field of advertising, primarily focusing on the benefits of word choice for information, without addressing research on emotional transmission and mental health relationships. Additionally, there is limited literature examining how emotional expression influences users' responses to mental health content. Furthermore, existing research has largely centred on 'what to say' rather than 'how to say it' [2,5]. Since positive psychology is currently primarily used as a means to alleviate anxiety, this gap is particularly evident in social media environments.

Therefore, this study explores how different emotional styles in social media content based on positive psychology influence the emotional experiences of university students. Through a review of popular mental health posts and a student questionnaire survey, it aims to understand which types of expression are more helpful in supporting emotional well-being in online environments.

This study deepens the integration of positive psychology and information frameworks, contributing to the construction of more empathetic and emotionally attuned online environments and supporting the precise optimisation of digital interventions targeting young people. For university students at higher risk of anxiety and digital fatigue, this study can also help shape more responsive mental health support forms on their social media platforms [6].

2. Message framing

2.1. Emotional tone and user response

The way emotional content is communicated plays a key role in how it is received. In daily life and public mental health messages, a calm and warm tone often makes people feel more comfortable and willing to open up. If the tone is too harsh, cold, or difficult to understand, it may cause discomfort or lead people to ignore the message. This is especially true when people are already feeling vulnerable or stressed [3].

These effects are even more noticeable in online spaces. On social media, where posts are short and quickly consumed, tone becomes a powerful tool. A soft and caring tone can help the message feel more supportive and easier to take in, while a distant or overly cheerful tone may make the message feel forced or disconnected from the user's current mood [4]. For messages about mental health, how the content sounds is just as important as what it says. This shows that in emotional communication, especially on social media, the delivery style can strongly affect user response.

2.2. Visual framing and emotional impact

How emotional messages are presented visually also shapes how users feel. On platforms like TikTok and Xiaohongshu, many mental health posts use bright colours, fast transitions, or strong background sounds to attract attention [1]. While this can increase views, it may not be helpful for users who already feel anxious or tired. Intense visuals or loud sounds can feel overwhelming and may even increase stress [5].

In contrast, messages that use calm colours, simple layouts, and slower pacing tend to feel more soothing. These visual elements make the content easier to accept, especially for users dealing with emotional stress. Even the way words are chosen can change the feeling of a post. For instance, phrases like "You must stay positive" or "Don't ignore your stress" may seem helpful, but the use of strong terms like "must" or "don't" can create pressure. People under stress may feel guilty or frustrated if they cannot follow this advice [7].

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Studies show that many young users feel emotionally drained after repeated exposure to such content, or they may avoid it altogether [4]. This suggests that the visual and verbal framing of emotional content needs to be handled carefully, particularly when trying to support people who are already struggling.

2.3. Tailoring emotional messages for diverse user needs

To make mental health content truly supportive, its design and tone should match the needs of its audience. Users respond differently to the same message. A message that one person finds helpful might feel overwhelming or even upsetting to someone else. This is especially important when talking to university students, who often face stress from study, social pressure, and uncertain futures. Their emotional needs are diverse, which means that the information content and presentation style should also reflect this diversity.

For example, content designed for students could use familiar language, speak to common situations like study stress or loneliness, and offer calm encouragement instead of instructions. Visuals could be kept simple, with slower transitions and fewer effects to avoid sensory overload. By taking the specific needs of this group into account, mental health content becomes more relevant, approachable, and helpful.

Adjusting the tone and design of emotional information to suit the needs of different users, especially university students navigating emotional challenges in digital spaces, can maximise the effectiveness of mental health support information.

3. Positive psychology

3.1. Foundations of positive psychology in online anxiety support

Positive psychology focuses on the strengths and positive experiences that help people build emotional well-being. It uses ideas such as hope, personal abilities, and supportive relationships to help individuals feel more balanced [8]. This approach is different from traditional methods that mostly focus on fixing problems or symptoms.

In recent years, positive psychology has become more common in everyday life, including schools, healthcare, and online spaces where people talk about mental health. It offers practical ways to manage stress and encourages a more hopeful attitude in daily situations. For university students, who often experience pressure from academics and social life, these strategies may be particularly useful. Online platforms like TikTok and Xiaohongshu are major sources of mental health information for this group, and they often engage with content based on positive psychology.

Positive psychology also encourages people to understand and accept their emotions, even the difficult ones. Some studies show that when people focus on their strengths and develop simple habits like daily reflection or self-kindness, they are better able to cope with stress [8]. This makes positive psychology a useful foundation for creating supportive content on social media. When expressed through calm and clear language, such messages may help university students feel more in control and less overwhelmed.

3.2. Applying positive psychology in social media content

On platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu, many mental health posts are shaped by the principles of positive psychology. These posts aim to create a peaceful and gentle emotional atmosphere. For example, videos often use soft music, warm colours, and slow speaking styles to

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help viewers relax [1]. Messages commonly remind people to take things slowly, appreciate small moments, and accept their feelings as they are. Phrases like “you are enough” or “rest is okay” are frequently used to offer reassurance. Some posts also include simple exercises like deep breathing or self-talk to encourage calmness [8].

These methods are based on well-established positive psychology techniques that help people build emotional stability. In real-life settings, they have been shown to support well-being, and when adapted into short videos, they become more accessible to users. For university students who may not seek professional help, this content provides an approachable way to manage emotional stress in everyday life [9]. It reflects how positive psychology ideas can be turned into practical self-help tools that meet students where they already are, on social media.

3.3. Challenges in applying positive psychology online

Although positive psychology content can support emotional health, it may not be helpful for everyone. Messages that only focus on being happy or thinking positively can feel out of touch for individuals facing serious stress or emotional struggles. For instance, if a university student has been under long-term pressure, hearing phrases like “stay positive” may seem unhelpful or even frustrating [5].

Some research suggests that focusing too much on positive thinking can cause users to feel pressured to hide their real emotions rather than process them [4]. Because of this, even kind-sounding messages might discourage emotional honesty. To truly support different emotional needs, content should help students face hard feelings with kindness and clarity, not just promote good ones.

This balance is especially important on social media, where messages are short and often emotionally simplified. When positive psychology is applied with care through soft tone, relatable language, and calming visuals, it is more likely to support university students in meaningful ways, especially during stressful times.

4. Discussion

This study shows that emotional tone and visual framing in social media content play a significant role in shaping user experience. Calm and gentle tones combined with simple visuals can create a sense of safety and support, while overly cheerful or intense elements may increase discomfort for students who already feel anxious [3,5]. Social media platforms typocally prioritize engagement and visibility, using bright colours and fast pacing to attract attention, which may conflict with the need for calm and supportive designs [1]. This contradiction highlights the ongoing challenge of creating content that is both emotionally sensitive and widely accessible [6].

Another important issue relates to the way positive psychology is adapted into online content. While messages based on hope and self-acceptance can improve emotional well-being, its impact is not universal. Emphasize happiness or optimism alone may feel unrealistic for those facing severe stress [8], and could even trigger feelings of inadequacy if users cannot meet the suggested emotional state [4]. This raises concerns about whether short-form media can adequately convey the balance that positive psychology requires, which includes validating negative emotions as part of healthy coping. If this balance is missing, the supportive value of these messages may be reduced.

Furthermore, the broader social and technological context must also be considered. Algorithms on platforms like TikTok control what users see, creating both opportunities and risks. These systems can amplify supportive communities but also circulate misleading or overly simplistic

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mental health advice [5]. Exposure to repeated messages that present a narrow view of well-being can shape users' beliefs about mental health in ways that are not always helpful [7,9-10]. Therefore, improving mental health content online is not only about individual message design but also about the structures that deliver these messages. Future strategies should integrate psychological insights with platform-level considerations to reduce harm and strengthen user trust.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how emotional tone, visual framing, and message design influence the reception of positive psychology-based content on social media. A calm tone and simple visuals were found to support emotional well-being, whereas overly stimulating designs or rigid language may increase stress for users already experiencing anxiety. Additionally, this findings highlight the equally important roles of tone, visual elements, and emotional nuance in shaping user responses and well-being. It contributes to the growing body of work connecting message framing theory with emotional processing in digital environments. While prior research has focused primarily on message content.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis was limited to a single platform and a small sample of posts, and user comments, while informative, may not fully represent internal emotional states or silent viewers. Additionally, direct user-level data such as interviews or real-time emotion tracking were not included. Future research should address these gaps by exploring emotional framing across different platforms and culturally diverse formats, and by examining individual differences such as anxiety levels or personality traits. Employing richer methodologies, including physiological measures or diary-based designs, could provide deeper insights into emotional processing in social media environments.

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