

**Exploring Provincial Government Use of Instagram for Mental Health Outreach and
Education Aimed at Youth in New Brunswick, Canada**

By

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Abstract

Youth mental health in Canada is declining, while their use of social media holds steady. This combination provides an opportunity for provincial governments and Regional Health Authorities to utilize social media for outreach and education regarding mental health aimed at youth. Previous research demonstrates that governments have used social media for healthcare information-sharing, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies further demonstrate that social media is a popular choice for youth seeking information about their health. This research comprises a case study exploring how the provincial government and two Regional Health Authorities in New Brunswick, Canada, have used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth. Applying social exchange theory and social cognitive theory, a content analysis was conducted analyzing the topics and themes of Instagram posts published by the Government of New Brunswick and its two Regional Health Authorities between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023. Overall, findings indicate that there was little outreach aimed at youth regarding mental health and that these limited posts focused foremost on sharing support resources and recruiting or featuring staff. Prominent themes included supporting treatment and prevention, building connections, and fostering community. Mental health is an area of public health that merits intentional content from the New Brunswick healthcare system to promote positive mental health and mental health education so as to, in turn, positively influence the quality of life of young New Brunswickers.

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Dedication

For Dad. I love you and I miss you. I know you are proud of me.

Exploring Government Use of Instagram for Mental Health Outreach and Education Aimed at Youth in New Brunswick, Canada

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Everyone has mental health. The Public Health Agency of Canada (2020) defines mental health as the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of people which affects thinking, feelings, and actions. Although often used interchangeably, poor mental health and mental illness are not the same thing. One in five Canadians will experience a mental illness (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2021). Someone can experience poor mental health and not be diagnosed with a mental illness, meanwhile someone diagnosed with a mental illness will have times of positive mental health and well-being (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2021). Knowing the difference is critical to support people with or without a diagnosed mental illness. Since mental health is a key element of overall health, along with physical and spiritual health, government must support public mental health to support overall health.

In Canada, and across the world, youth mental health continues to decline. Statistics Canada's 2022 report, *Self-rated mental health decreases after another year of the COVID-19 pandemic*, shows the self-rated mental health of Canadians declined between September 2021 and February 2022 compared to September and December 2020. The 2022 data shows that high self-rated mental health has continued to decline over the years, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Statistics Canada defines high self-rated mental health as participants who reported their mental health as 'excellent' or 'very good'. Pre-pandemic, from January to December 2019, 73% of youth aged 12 to 17 considered their mental health to be excellent or very good (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Comparing data from September to

December 2020 with data from September 2021 to February 2022, high self-reported mental health in this age group decreased from 67% to 61% (Statistics Canada, 2022a). In New Brunswick, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the factors reported to have the greatest negative impact on mental health included the possibility of oneself or a loved one catching the virus, social isolation due to physical distancing and the economic downturn of the pandemic (Magalhaes et al., 2021). Young adults and individuals with existing mental health conditions reported a higher level of negative impacts on mental health for some of these factors, as well as greater increases in negative behaviours and less confidence in their ability to recover from mental health challenges due to the pandemic (Magalhaes et al., 2021). A continual decline in Canadian youth mental health is worrisome as negative mental health impacts overall health and the country's economic future.

This trend is not isolated to Canada. Elsewhere in the world, youth mental health is also declining. Data collection that began in 2019 in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore, and South Africa shows a decline in self-rated levels of mental health (Newson et al., 2021). Across these countries, there was an 8% decline from 2019 to 2020 and another 3% decline in 2022 compared to 2021 (Newson et al., 2021). The results from Newson and colleagues (2021) are similar to the trends reported by Statistics Canada (2022c), with a larger drop from 2019 to 2020 and a continued, but slower decline in the following years. Youth continually rating their mental health low is a concern because mental health impacts all aspects of health.

This study defines youth as individuals between the ages of 12-18 (grades 6-12). This age group consists primarily of “digital natives” whose brains are still developing and are at risk of mental health concerns as they experience pressure to conform and struggle with identity

(Prensky, 2001; WHO, 2021). Digital natives, a term coined by American writer and speaker on education Marc Prensky in 2001, describes people who grew up with the Internet. The term was created to describe how digital natives learn differently than the generations before them and that their education system was created for the old way of learning. Digital natives think and process information differently than generations before them because of their access to the Internet and social media (Prensky, 2001). The youth described in this study have spent their lives on the Internet and using social media. Those aged 12-18 have never lived in a world without Facebook, which was created in 2004, and many have never lived in a world without Instagram, created in 2010 (Eldridge, 2023; Hall, 2023). Facebook is the largest social network in the world, with nearly three billion users as of 2021 (Hall, 2023). On Facebook, users create profiles, upload photos, write updates about their lives, join groups, play games, and connect with one another (Hall, 2023). Instagram is another popular social media platform, which is similar to Facebook but focuses on visual content with shorter captions that can be posted to a long-term feed or a 24-hour story (Eldridge, 2023).

The highest share of people in Canada living in rural areas is in Atlantic Canada, with more than 380,000 New Brunswickers living in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Rural Canadians face mental health concerns at similar levels to Canadians in urban centres, but rural communities have more barriers due to limited funding and staffing, as well as less access to resources due to their geography (Goforth et al., 2017). This may compound the degree to which mental health concerns impact an individual's quality of life. The New Brunswick Health Council (2022) reported that 62% of students in grades 6-12 rate their mental health as good, fair or poor, and symptoms of anxiety and depression have continued to rise in this age group since 2015. Students in New Brunswick find it difficult to receive the help they need for mental health

concerns for various reasons. More than 17,000 students needed to see or talk to someone about a mental or emotional problem and, of these students, 3,400 did not (New Brunswick Health Council, 2022). Fifty-two per cent said it was because they felt uncomfortable trying to get help (e.g. talking to a trusted adult), and 21% stated it was because they did not know where to get help (New Brunswick Health Council, 2022). The provincial government may not be capable of eradicating all mental health problems, but it can pursue public outreach and education so those in need know where to access help. Failure to address mental health problems, particularly in youth, is a public health issue as it can impede development and have widespread consequences on people and the economy.

Health communication facilitates and promotes health information exchange between healthcare professionals and the public (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014). ‘Health communication’ is an umbrella term describing strategies used to inform people about their individual health and public health concerns. One strategy is using social media for knowledge dissemination. Proper health communications are deliberate in their creation and consider the message’s accuracy, readability, appeal to the audience, format, cultural appropriateness, and dissemination method (National Cancer Institute, 2004). Sometimes communicators may overestimate the health literacy levels of their audience. Using social media means there is a large audience with varied health literacy levels. It is necessary for health communicators to consider different methods of distribution for health messaging as the world—and the people living in it—change. Adaptation is critical for messaging to remain relevant and reach the largest audience possible to then promote positive change. Youth in Canada spend on average, five hours a day on social media, with female students significantly more likely than males to spend more time on social media

(Boak et al., 2020). This makes social media a valuable distribution method to use if aiming to communicate about health to youth, especially female youth.

Nearly all Canadian homes with children under 18 use the Internet (a reported 98%), demonstrating the prevalence of the technology in everyday Canadian life (Statistics Canada, 2021). Technological advances are changing how people search for health-related information for personal and educational purposes, and there is more use of the Internet and social media. Studies have shown that youth use the Internet as their primary source of health information, especially those with limited access and financial barriers (Basch et al., 2018). The availability of information on the Internet and social media allows people, especially digital natives, to fulfill their informational, emotional, and social desires through their smartphones at any time (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Research demonstrates a desire for quick answers rather than delaying for an appointment with a physician.

Given the growth of social media usage among digital natives, challenges with youth mental health in New Brunswick and a growing body of health communication research regarding disseminating information on social media, there is an opportunity for New Brunswick's regional health care systems and government to use their social media platforms for targeted public outreach and education. The New Brunswick Department of Health website promotes its social media accounts and encourages viewers to 'connect' with the Department of Health on various platforms (Government of New Brunswick, n.d.). In 2023, some links led to pages that the provincial government did not run, including a linked X (formerly known as Twitter) account, [@NBHealth](#). Despite the user's bio stating they were not affiliated with the provincial government; it was included on the Department of Health's website but has since been removed. This is misleading for youth who are searching for reliable mental health information

and resources through social media. Such challenges in the provincial government's social media presence are a barrier to effective mental health education and public outreach via social media.

Mental Health in New Brunswick

New Brunswick is home to many cultures, has rural and urban areas, and is the only officially bilingual province in Canada. This makes New Brunswick a unique area for this case study due to its diversity in language, culture, and age, as well as differences in the availability of resources in cities compared to rural communities. In 2021, New Brunswick's total population was approximately 775,610, with about half of this population living in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2023). New Brunswickers are entitled to basic, universal, government-funded healthcare through federal and provincial taxes. Like all Canadian provinces, New Brunswick is responsible for its own healthcare system. The province is divided into seven health zones managed by two separate healthcare systems: Vitalité Health Network and Horizon Health Network. The Vitalité Health Network is francophone-managed whereas the Horizon Health Network is anglophone-managed. The northern part of the province is dominated by Vitalité Health Network where French is predominantly spoken, with fewer than 33% of people living there identifying as English speakers (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Southeastern New Brunswick includes facilities run by both Regional Health Authorities. According to Horizon Health Network's website, there are five hospitals in the network that offer emergency mental health services—one in each of Fredericton, Miramichi, Moncton, Saint John, and Upper River Valley (Horizon Health Network, n.d.).

On February 18, 2021, high school student Lexi Daken went to Fredericton's Dr. Everett Chalmers Hospital, one of the five hospitals in the Horizon Healthcare Network boasting emergency mental health services (Fortnum, 2022). Daken's school guidance counsellor, a

trusted adult who believed Daken needed help, took her to the emergency room. The next day the emergency room physician referred Daken to the Victoria Health Centre, a community mental health centre in Fredericton. This fax referral was forwarded to Daken's Integrated Service Delivery clinician, but there was never a psychiatry referral as the emergency room physician intended. A few days later, on February 24, Daken died by suicide. The 16-year-old's death sparked public outcry, and the New Brunswick provincial government promised changes to the 'holes' in the youth mental health system. Seven months later, a report stated that Daken's death was preventable and was caused by the lack of support, issues with information flow, and limited resources in the youth mental health care system in New Brunswick (Fortnum, 2022).

Information flow in healthcare is critical to ensure patients receive the best available care and saves time, effort and cost (Al Harbi et al., 2024). Patient flow impacts the quality of care, staff workload and patient outcomes (Al Harbi et al., 2024). To improve patient outcomes, the flow within the hospital and healthcare system at large must improve (Al Harbi et al., 2024). Daken is one youth in the province and her story is of someone who followed all the recommended steps, like talking to a trusted adult and seeking professional help, and still the youth mental health system failed her.

Following Daken's death, the New Brunswick government planned to strengthen its mental health response by implementing 21 recommendations with focus on community addiction and mental health services, emergency departments, and education (Department of Health, 2021). The recommendations include providing trauma-informed care to emergency department staff and first responders, launching a provincial awareness campaign for addiction and mental health crisis response services, re-establishing the use of 811 as a mental health response hotline, and developing and distributing mental health crisis care education materials to

the public. The purpose of the recommendations is to reinforce the government's inter-departmental addiction and mental health plan by prioritizing education and community mental health (Department of Health, Addiction and Mental Health Branch, 2021).

One day before Daken's death, New Brunswick's Department of Health, Addiction and Mental Health Branch released its *Inter-Departmental Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan: Priority areas for 2021–2025 Addiction and Mental Health Branch* (Inter-Departmental Plan) (2021). This five-year action plan aims to address the increasing demand for addiction and mental health services. It recognizes that, since 2016, there has been a 33% increase in demand for youth services and less than half of high priority cases have received treatment within national benchmarks. The Inter-Departmental Plan recognizes the importance of the Stepped Care Model, the Four-Pillar Approach, and the Icelandic Prevention Model.

The Inter-Departmental Addiction and Mental Health Action Plan recognizes the Stepped Care Model as the first step towards improvement of the mental healthcare system in the province (Department of Health, Addiction and Mental Health Branch, 2021). This is a person-centered approach which accounts for peoples' needs and readiness for treatment. The model is designed to help meet the needs of users with the least intensive and most effective options. This benefits healthcare providers and those receiving care. As an open and flexible mode, collaboratively patients and providers can decide to "step up" or "step down" the intensity of the level of care in according to level of need, which may change over time. The flexibility to adjust care based on needs, intention for collaboration, and patient-centered care makes the care-seeking individual feel valued.

Recognizing the multifaceted nature of mental health issues, concurrently with the Stepped Care Model, the Government of New Brunswick also uses the Four-Pillar Approach.

This approach to drug and alcohol use is based on the four pillars of prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and community safety. Promoting protective factors, reducing risk factors, and recognizing the social determinants of health that impact mental health and addiction are foundational to population health promotion and prevention. The prevention aspect of the plan involves "... addressing the underlying causes of drug use, not just the drug use itself" (p.3), which includes education. The plan's goal of improved mental health access is measured by a reduction of wait time while an improvement of population health is measured by a reduction in substance use in young adults. These goals do not have specific values that are measurable in their reduction of substance use and improvement of mental health. Evidence-based goal setting improves goal attainment, and one method is SMART goals (Clarke et al., 2009). SMART is an acronym used for goal setting variables that have a higher likelihood of achievement because the goals are **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**greed to, **r**ealistic, and **t**imely (Clarke et al., 2009). Without specificity in the Inter-Departmental Plan, it is difficult to determine what level of reduction is the goal of the provincial government. The Government of New Brunswick should be specific in their goal setting in its action plan.

Finally, one of the twelve key priority initiatives from the Inter-Departmental Plan is the implementation of a guiding document for population health and prevention, including a New Brunswick-specific version of the Icelandic Prevention Model (Department of Health, Addiction and Mental Health Branch, 2021). The Icelandic Prevention Model uses a community-driven approach to identify risks and create protective factors to prevent future substance use disorders in youth (Sigfúsdóttir, 2009). Instead of targeting specific behaviours, it considers the contextual influences in the lives of youth, allowing for collaboration and two-way communication between government and policymakers with the groups impacted by resources. This aligns with the

priority initiative of addressing the underlying causes of drug use, not just the drug use itself. The Icelandic Prevention model is a step towards preventative mental health care rather than reactive healthcare. Preventative care has many positive benefits for community members and governments, including lower risks and costs.

Amid continual declines in youth mental health, the New Brunswick Department of Health (2021) released an Inter-Departmental addiction and mental health Plan that included the province's Stepped Care Model and their desire to implement a New Brunswick-specific Icelandic Prevention Model. These models emphasize the promotion of protective factors for mental health concerns. One path to promote and educate is through the social media as it provides a channel for collaboration and two-way communication, if done properly. Social media offers a space for governments and policymakers to interact with youth and other stakeholders impacted by publicly funded resources.

Purpose of the Study

The New Brunswick government has existing social media accounts, and it reasons that the provincial government is aware that using their social media is a way to capture the attention of youth because it did so for specific COVID-19 outreach (Silberman, 2021). The present study examines how the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities (Horizon Health Network and Vitalité Health Network) have used their respective Instagram accounts for mental health outreach aimed at youth. This case study focused on New Brunswick because of its diverse linguistic, cultural, and demographic qualities. The research explores how the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network use Instagram generally and specifically for mental health outreach and education aimed at youth. This is the first exploration of New Brunswick and its use of Instagram for mental health

outreach. Education is the first step to a healthy population and, given the declining youth mental health, it is important for the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities to leverage the potential of social media and to share high-quality mental health information.

This research aimed to examine how the New Brunswick provincial government and the two Regional Health Authorities used Instagram for mental health outreach aimed at youth between 12-18 years old (grades 6-12). This research used content analysis methodology to explore these social media accounts so as to understand presented and missing content. This study analyzed Instagram posts from the Government of New Brunswick and its two Regional Health Authorities between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023. Horizon Health began posting on Instagram in February 2018, while the New Brunswick provincial government followed in December of the same year. In June 2019, Vitalité Health Network began using their page. The date range of September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023 were chosen to capture a period of time when all three Instagram pages were in use. This time frame includes before, during, and after the strictest lockdowns in the province due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when youth mental health was dramatically impacted by changes to their daily lives (Newson et al., 2021).

This research analyzes how the provincial government and its two Regional Health Authorities used their respective Instagram accounts for mental health education and outreach aimed at youth amid the declining rates of positive mental health in New Brunswick.

Specifically, this study asks the following research question:

How have the New Brunswick provincial government and its two Regional Health Authorities used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth?

To address this overarching question, this study explores the following three sub-questions:

- a) *How prevalent is content about youth mental health?*
- b) *What topics related to youth mental health were the Government of New Brunswick and the two Regional Health Authorities posting about on their Instagram platforms?*
- c) *What are the re-occurring themes in the mental health-related posts aimed at youth?*

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This study explores how the Government of New Brunswick and its two Regional Health Authorities have used social media for mental health outreach and education aimed at youth.

This chapter reviews literature related to key topics in this study, as follows: government use of social media, the relationship between preventative care and public education, the negative impacts of social media on mental health, youth information-seeking behaviour on social media, and uses of social media for mental health outreach, education, and communication.

Government Use of Social Media

Social media is not only used by individuals trying to connect with others, but also by government entities to communicate with general and targeted audiences. The Government of Canada is a member of the Open Government Partnership, a global, multilateral initiative with 76 countries who have joined since 2011 (Global Affairs Canada, 2023). The objective of the Open Government Partnership is to promote transparency from the government and empower citizens. One way to create open dialogue between international governments and the public is social media because of its ability for public engagement. Research has shown these platforms are not often used to engage in two-way interactions and collaboration but, instead, for governments to release information about programs to its citizens. Gintova (2019) examined interaction on Twitter between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and public Twitter users and found that this government department interacted with users, but in a limited way, and avoided conversations on policy or controversial issues, essentially using their platform like customer service. Gintova (2019) argued that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada used social media as a new way to respond to uncontroversial questions, giving the public another option to communicate with the department. This did not lead to meaningful two-

way interactions between the public and government. The findings from Gintova's (2019) research led to several recommendations to inform approaches to social media use for government departments, including that departments should clearly indicate what issues will be addressed on their platforms and make an effort to understand their target audiences. The Government of New Brunswick has one Instagram account, not one for each department, as in Gintova's 2019 study. A variety of topics, from health to tourism, are discussed on the Government of New Brunswick's Instagram account. The breadth of topics impacts who chooses to follow the Government of New Brunswick's account since some may not be interested in all aspects of government activity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was critical for information to be spread in a timely manner without physical contact due to disease transmission. Instagram's popularity as source of health information increased during the pandemic, as many governments decided to use this method to communicate with the public (Mello et al., 2023). MacKay and colleagues (2022) examined COVID-19 messaging in Instagram content posted between December 2019 and March 2021 by Canadian news media, politicians, public health and government, science communicators, brand influencers, and celebrities. MacKay and colleagues' (2022) research looked at the severity, susceptibility, barriers, benefits, and calls to action in posts. Their research found an overall low presence of these factors in captions and images. As a result, many viewers remained indifferent to such content and posts from government entities had lower than average engagement. Similarly, Mello and colleagues (2023) conducted a quantitative content analysis of COVID-related posts published between January and December 2020 to determine how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) communicated the threat of the pandemic, incorporated calls to action in Instagram posts, and

leveraged their credibility as health organizations. The researchers found that threat information was limited, but there were many posts with calls to action (Mello et al., 2023). The researchers emphasized the importance of combining multiple factors, such as severity and calls to action, in the same post to further empower viewers.

Preventative Care and Public Education

The first step of an effective healthcare system is public education (Hahn & Truman, 2015). Understanding is the foundation to a strong healthcare system. Health communication facilitates and promotes health information exchange between healthcare professionals and the public. The more people know and understand, the healthier they will be (Hahn & Truman, 2015). Someone who can understand the health information presented to them is health literate (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014). Health literacy is a critical component of healthcare because the more health literate a population is, the more it will understand and follow health advice (Hahn & Truman, 2015). This leads to a healthier population as they adhere to evidence-based interventions. Effective health communication aimed at youth needs to be easily accessible and written in simple language (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014). Health communication strategies can be anything from interpersonal communication to educational entertainment on Instagram. It is crucial for communicators to consider different methods of distribution for health messaging as the world changes and innovative opportunities present themselves. Methods could include new social media platforms or shifts in how messaging is disseminated, such as press conferences being livestreamed on YouTube rather than traditional television. Messages must be created with purpose, accuracy, appropriateness, and appeal, and audience must be considered (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014).

Preventive care saves lives and has the power to lower the cost of healthcare (Smetanin et al., 2011). Currently, Canada's healthcare system is reactive, not preventative (Kong, 2022; Wise et al., 2016). The system waits for someone to become sick or be in distress before providing care, rather than providing protective factors and tips. Canadian healthcare professionals rely on patients to reach out and access the system when they have noticeable symptoms, making them active seekers of care. Yet often patients are simultaneously passive recipients of the interventions chosen by practitioners without much collaboration (Wise et al., 2016). The mental health effects of COVID-19 have shown that a reactive approach cannot account for the pressure of unexpected events, such as a pandemic, because a reactive healthcare system cannot prevent crises from happening in the first place (Canadian Mental Health Association Alberta Division, 2021). Visits to a healthcare practitioner are often symptom-focused rather than root-cause or patient-centred (Wise et al., 2016). Addressing the root causes of poor health requires collaboration and honesty from practitioner and patients.

Merriam-Webster defines 'crisis' as "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, *especially*: one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome." ("Crisis", n.d., emphasis in original). Losing thousands of Canadians each year to preventable causes, such as mental health concerns and suicide, is an undesirable outcome. Indeed, it is a crisis. For instance, Health Canada estimates that an average of 12 Canadians die by suicide each day (2023b). Gordon (1983) proposed a classification system for disease prevention that the World Health Organization (WHO) uses (2004). The three categories of prevention are universal, selective, and indicated (Gordon, 1983). Universal prevention refers to interventions targeted at the public when there has not been an increased risk identified. Selective prevention targets individuals or subgroups whose risk is significantly higher than

average, by their biology, psychology, or social risk factors. Indicated prevention targets high-risk individuals who are identified as having minimal, but detectable, signs or symptoms foreshadowing a mental disorder or biological markers indicating a predisposition for mental disorder but who do not meet diagnostic criteria for the disorder at the time. Using this system, healthcare providers can compare the risk of an individual getting a disease to the cost, risk, and discomfort of the preventative care to then decide what type of prevention to use, if any. This is similar to the Stepped Care Model as it is designed to meet the needs of users with the least intensive and most effective option based on their needs (Department of Health, Addiction and Mental Health Branch, 2021).

A report prepared on behalf of the Mental Health Commission of Canada estimated the health and economic impact of mental illness in Canada from 2011 to 2041 (Smetanin et al., 2011). In 2011, it was estimated that over one million Canadians aged 9-19 were living with mental illness and that this number would rise to almost 1.2 million by 2041. This report also estimated a 2% inflation rate, which was sound until the economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, when a stark increase in inflation in Canada began. Inflation was an average of 1.6% from 2011-2020, then rose to 3.4% in 2021 and 6.8% in 2022 (Macrotrends, 2023). Nonetheless, the estimated total direct costs of mental illness were estimated at more than \$22 billion dollars in 2011 and, by 2041, an increase of more than 4.6 times was predicted (Smetanin et al., 2011). Accounting for the direct and indirect economic impact, it was expected that between 2011-2041 the nominal annual costs of mental illness would increase by over 6-fold (Smetanin et al., 2011). This financial burden does, can, and will take a toll on the Canadian economy and healthcare systems.

Promoting public education is one way that healthcare can shift from reactive care towards preventive care. Funding mental health initiatives has been shown to produce net cost benefits (Roberts & Grimes, 2011). Health promotion and illness prevention yields a positive return on investment (Roberts & Grimes, 2011). The profitability of promoting mental health demonstrates the urgency to push policymakers for change (Roberts & Grimes, 2011). Research suggests that mental health promotion, mental illness prevention, and early intervention targeted at youth provides a significant financial gain for the government in economic and opportunity costs. More than 6.7 million Canadians struggle with mental illness and it is the leading cause of disability in Canada preventing nearly half a million employed Canadians from attending work each week (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 2023). Treatment of chronic disease, including mental illnesses, costs Canadians about \$68 billion in direct healthcare and \$122 billion in productivity losses (Wise et al., 2016). Canadians collectively spend \$950 million each year on private psychotherapists, demonstrating the urgent need for Canadian mental healthcare to shift towards preventative care (CMHA, 2018). Providing preventative care allows people to be in control of their mental health until it reaches a point when external help is necessary. Since there is little to no preventative mental healthcare, professionals are seeing people in worse states than they need to be.

The Social Impact Bonds model has emerged as a tool that focuses on positive health outcomes and collaboration. This model requires the government to pay for services only if the pre-agreed target health outcomes are achieved (Wise et al., 2016). If they are not met, the individual must pay for their care. Since payment is contingent on outcomes both patient and physician are highly motivated for change (Wise et al., 2016). The financial liability causes both parties to take treatment more seriously than they otherwise may have. Since every Canadian has

mental health, financial investment and attention to mental healthcare are necessary. Investing in effective programming can prevent mental illness, delay onset, reduce impact, and help individuals thrive.

The Negative Impacts of Social Media on Mental Health

A simultaneous advantage and burden of social media is how it is fundamentally interactive. People can connect with others anytime and anywhere. Social media can connect friends and family, enable physicians to communicate about different ailments from around the world, and allow patients to access a support system—even in times of quarantine. Though there are many positives, not all communication online is kind. Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person, often designed to purposefully hurt them (Ben-Joseph, 2022). Cyberbullying can include photos, messages, or anything posted or sent online to intimidate another person (Ben-Joseph, 2022). This form of bullying is associated with adverse mental health outcomes for adolescents, but there are also less severe, common but negative experiences on social media including name-calling, unwanted attention, or exclusion. (Skogen et al., 2023). Skogen and colleagues (2023) had over 3,000 Norwegian youth read statements about negative experiences on social media regarding unwanted attention or negative acts of exclusion. The results showed that both were consistently positively associated with self-reported symptoms of depression and anxiety and negatively associated with mental well-being. As youth are online for many hours a day, they are exposed to various and unique experiences that can negatively impact their mental health unlike any generation before (Boak et al., 2020).

Social media is increasingly prevalent in the lives of youth and health practitioners should be able to assess risks and understand the relationship between social media and its relationship to mental health. Using six focus groups of English youth aged 11-18 years old,

O'Reilly (2020) investigated the 'good', 'bad' and 'the ugly' about social media use and mental health. Strong peer relationships, social skills, and support networks are important for overall well-being, and social media allows for that connection. One of the main positive aspects of social media is the interconnectedness. The negative aspects included the overuse of social media and the potential for favoring online connections over in-person connections. The youth also focused on how adults in their lives did not understand the pressures of today's social world and the impact of phones, Internet, and social media. The focus group frequently discussed the less severe, negative experiences they had online, especially the feeling of missing out and seeing content about events they were not included in. Participants in O'Reilly's (2020) study also mentioned a pressure to 'look' a certain way online and get an adequate number of likes. Additionally, Lee and colleagues (2020) found that getting fewer likes on social media elicited emotional distress in youth. In their first of three studies, they found that youth who received fewer likes in a randomized assignment felt more strongly rejected. The second study found that negative responses to receiving fewer likes was also associated with greater reported daily depressive symptoms, demonstrating the repetitive negative impact of social media on youth (Lee et al., 2020). In the third study by Lee and colleagues (2020), students who already felt victimized by their peers were shown to be even more vulnerable to the impacts of negative mental health experiences due to fewer likes on social media. The negative impact of social media on youth mental health, both rejection and depressive-like symptoms, cannot be ignored. Youth feel the need to continue using social media more than ever before due to these pressures.

Social Media and Youth Information Seeking Behaviour

Fifty-nine percent of teens ages 13 to 17 use Instagram and, of these teens, 47% use the platform daily (Anderson et al., 2023). Ninety-six per cent of participants reported they use the

Internet daily. Since youth are using the Internet and social media so often, it makes it a worthwhile area for investigating its use for mental health outreach, education, and treatment (Anderson et al., 2023). A 2020 study assessing the Internet-based health information-seeking behaviour of 12- to 14-year-olds in Austria found that this age group uses the web to seek information regarding health, but it is rather superficial (Maitz et al., 2020). Often students visited the first three results presented by the search engine and did not consider whether the information was a paid advertisement (Maitz et al., 2020). Youth tended to trust webpages when the owner of the webpage was a healthcare professional (Maitz et al., 2020). Studies have shown that older youth, like university students (ages 17-18), use the Internet as their primary source of health information (Basch et al., 2018). A study by Basch and colleagues (2018) had novel findings that, not only were university students more likely to visit the Internet for health information than see a practitioner, but those with limited access, busy schedules and financial barriers were most likely to use the Internet for health information purposes. Croatian youth were found to use Internet 'very often', using search engines, social media, and specific health-related forums for health information seeking purposes (Martinović et al., 2023). This study asked participants to select what health information they would like to know more about and nearly a quarter of participants (26.2%) desired more information about depression (Martinović et al., 2023). Youth often will use the Internet for health information seeking purposes rather than seeing a healthcare professional due to various barriers however, their research may be superficial, and they may trust content created by healthcare professionals whether or not it is high quality (Basch et al., 2018; Maitz et al., 2020; Martinović et al., 2023). This creates an opportunity for the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities to create high quality mental health content aimed at youth where they are searching for health information.

Studies have demonstrated social media as a peer support network tool, but also as a learning tool (Naslund et al., 2016). A study examined the level of trust girls aged 12 to 18 had in online health information and the link to their level of eHealth literacy. Results demonstrated that participants' eHealth literacy was associated with online health information seeking behaviours (Gulec et al., 2022). It also found that parents are a significant role model in youths' online health information seeking behaviours, which highlights the importance of fostering those skills now, to help future youth (Gulec et al., 2022). Ridout and Campbell (2018) conducted a systematic review of the use of social media networking sites in mental health interventions for youth. The authors identified five interventions and evidence suggested that young people find social networking-based interventions highly usable, engaging, and supportive. Therefore, in meeting youth where they are—on their phone screens—there is an opportunity to improve mental health and mental health literacy. The usefulness and safety of using online methods was frequently mentioned (Ridout & Campbell, 2018). It was found that successful interventions included clinicians who moderated the site to guide conversations but not censor them, creating a safe and supportive environment (Ridout & Campbell, 2018).

O'Reilly and colleagues (2019) examined the potential of social media for promoting mental health in youth aged 11 to 18. They wanted to see how effective this intervention could be from the perspective of adolescents, people working in education, and mental health practitioners. Participants were cautious about using social media for mental health promotion due to their beliefs about the negative impacts social media can have on mental health. Citing Instagram specifically, one participant discussed a social media 'challenge' where youth would post a photo of something that makes them happy each day, promoting well-being. Participants also acknowledged that seeing role models discuss mental health challenges, tips, and resources

promoted positive mental health. O'Reilly and colleagues (2019) argue that using social media shows strong potential for health promotion. With digital technology playing an increasingly important role in healthcare and health and science literacy, Mehmet and colleagues (2020) examined consumer engagement with a social marketing digital media strategy. This study was done before the emergence of COVID-19 when the use and the importance of online outreach increased immensely. Mehmet and colleagues (2020) focused on providing health information to rural communities. The goal was to provide support across a spectrum of care, including mental illness. Collaborating with people living with mental illness and carers, a strategy and website were created to improve quality of life by providing equal access to healthcare. It was noted that this collaboration lengthened the process, but it ensured its benefit and effectiveness.

Social Media for Mental Health Outreach, Education, and Communication

New media refer to devices that allow for and enhance communication, the communication that people engage in as they use those devices, and the organizational forms that people create and build around those devices and practices (Lievrouw, 2011). The Internet and its platforms, like Instagram, are considered new media. Four key factors distinguish it from other media and older technologies: hybrid technologies, continuous reorganization, sense of ubiquity, and how it is fundamentally interactive (Lievrouw, 2011). At any point someone can connect with anyone else in the world. This can be important for health communication as physicians in one country may have never seen a rare malady and they can communicate with other professionals about treatment and prevention. It can also help connect to support systems. One in five Internet users have tried to find others with similar health concerns in hopes of connecting and discussing their experiences (Fox, 2011). Researchers in New England asked 240 Twitter users who self-identified as someone with a mental illness to complete a survey about

their mental health condition, use of social media for mental health and their interest in accessing mental health programs delivered through social media (Naslund et al., 2019). About a quarter (22%) of respondents were from Canada and respondents under 35 years old were more likely to use Instagram compared to older people. The findings suggest that using social media to reach people living with mental illness is possible and organizations, such as the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities, could leverage social media to make evidence-based mental healthcare more widely available (Naslund et al., 2019). Furthermore, participants also indicated they would be interested in programming to assist with communicating with doctors and navigating the current healthcare system.

Digital natives maneuver this space with ease and, though health professionals continue to be the first choice for most, online resources are a significant source of health information (Fox, 2011). Digital natives are people who grew up with the Internet (Prensky, 2001). These youth have spent their lives on the Internet and on social media because of the era they were born. People who are 12 to 18 years old have never lived in a world without Facebook and some have never lived in a world without Instagram (Eldridge, 2023; Hall, 2023). The presence of new media as a constant and is seemingly everywhere affects everyone. Since it is fundamentally interactive, users have significant control over their choice of information (Lievrouw, 2011). Youth choose information that is relevant and accessible to themselves and their lives, including health information.

As technology becomes more widespread and affordable, health information on the Internet will continue to grow. New media allows for increased interactions and more information to be shared (Moorhead et al., 2013). By distributing mental health communications aimed at youth through new media, youth will be more knowledgeable about their health,

available resources, and how to prevent crises. This method of delivering health information is faster and may relieve some of the current burden placed on the healthcare system as people can independently find information.

In 1997, Health Canada stated that "the potential of the Internet to assist and empower individuals by providing high-quality information in multiple forms of media... is an extremely positive aspect of the Internet" (as cited in Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014). Not all the information on the Internet regarding mental health is high quality. People can be assisted and empowered by the information found on the Internet but can be harmed by misinformation. Health communication is sometimes of subpar quality and low reliability, which is a risk to public health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created the Clear Communication Index (CCI), a research-based tool to help science communicators develop and assess material to ensure it is first-class (CDC, 2019). It was developed to identify the essential characteristics that enhance clarity and help the public understand messages. The CCI is a tool for science and health communicators to develop and assess products for audiences, regardless of the format and distribution method (CDC, 2019). The CCI contains 20 items, each with a numerical score of zero or one. The individual scores are converted to an overall score on a scale of 100, with a 90 or higher a passing mark. The CCI assesses products' main message and call to action, language, information design, state of the science, behavioural recommendations, numbers, and risk. Using this tool before publishing content ensures the creation and dissemination of effective communication (CDC, 2019). People favor health communication revised with the CCI (Baur & Prue, 2014). Respondents answered 10 questions about original or CCI-revised messaging and for 90%, the redesigned messaging was rated higher, regardless of participants' education levels (Baur & Prue, 2014). Gagen and Kreps (2019) used the tool to evaluate 10 office and six

agency's health websites, under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health. These government sites are used to provide the public health information in an engaging manner. Results demonstrated that, in general, the sites are well-designed and communicate effectively but that the home pages of several of the sites are a barrier due to their design (Gagen & Kreps, 2019). The homepages did not have a call to action in an active voice or a single main message, which can be confusing for users. The CCI, and the positive results in using the tool, demonstrates the importance of intentionality in health education, communication, and outreach, especially for products aimed at youth and those with lower health literacy rates.

Social media can be used for health communications to provide the public with access to health information at their fingertips anytime they desire. Instagram was used during the COVID-19 pandemic by many health organizations including the World Health Organization, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Center for Disease Control, and National Health Services London. Community-based healthcare systems and the organizations with a concentration on policy and oversight on health mandates differed. Community-based healthcare systems (National Health Services London and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) had smaller, more niche audience to engage (Malik et al., 2021). Their content focused on empathy, gratitude, reassurance, and positive messaging targeted towards healthcare workers with the goal of fostering a sense of community and responsibility within their audience by humanizing healthcare personnel. On the other hand, the WHO and the CDC key messaging focused on self-efficacy, sense-making, and what people can do at an individual-level (Malik et al., 2021). Mello and colleagues' (2023) qualitative study found that between January and December 2020, the CDC relied more heavily

on depictions of self- and response efficacy, whereas the WHO appealed more frequently than the CDC to collective efficacy. Neither visually modeled behaviors nor leveraged scientific evidence or experts with great frequency. With such a larger audience in different sectors of the world, their focus on health mandates and that the audience follow the mandates to prevent infection. The CDC and the WHO also created content about the impacts of the pandemic, including mental health challenges. Understanding the target audience for health communications is essential. This can be done by analyzing user profiles or conducting surveys of those who are already connected. Organizations, including government departments, can compare their audience to their intended target audience and create strategies to engage those users they are not reaching (Gintova, 2019). Knowing the current and targeted audience allows public relations officers to tailor messaging that aligns with the values, interests, and preferences of the target audience. The delicate balance of having sufficient information without overloading feeds is important for public relations officers in healthcare to learn and involves conducting a thorough analysis of their current content. Understanding an audience can also help to anticipate potential concerns, mitigate risk, and build authentic connection with the audience. Malik and colleagues (2021) found that more than half the posts from the organizations studied were infographics. As Instagram is a free photo-based platform, it is an effective tool for organizations with varied budgets. The researchers emphasize how Instagram is an ‘ideal’ venue for reaching youth during times of crisis since youth do not rely on mainstream media as their main source of news (Malik et al., 2021).

Images are useful tools for health communication. Health literacy is a critical component of healthcare because the more health literate a population is, the more it will understand and follow the health advice in cases of varied health literacy levels, using imagery can help the

audience better comprehend messaging (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014). People with low health literacy levels find visuals to be a useful as they can provide a quick overview of and context to the information in printed materials and improve understanding of written materials (van Beusekom et al., 2016). People with low literacy rates demonstrated an interest in images that show exactly what they have to do to acquire the skills necessary and understanding of reason to take medication (van Beusekom et al., 2016). A systematic review regarding image-based social media and its public health implications found that non-suicidal self-injury was popular to post and view on Instagram and the platform did not prevent underage profiles from being exposed to alcohol and e-cigarette advertisements (Fung et al., 2020). Since the social media platform does not have barriers in place to prevent youth from seeing images and advertisements regarding illegal substances, it may glamorize them, leading youth to future struggles with use (Fung et al., 2020). The review found concerns of a lack of information diversity and the exposure to undesirable content (Fung et al., 2020). Imaging is a useful tool for government health communication, but it is also important to recognize what others are putting on social media surrounding public health.

Youth spend considerable time on their phones, on the Internet, and on social media. Some mental health professionals use social media to share mental health-related content, similar to what may be shared in a therapy session, with the public by using common, relatable scenarios (Pretorius et al., 2022). This is known as a mental health influencer, like how there are influencers in other areas such as literature, fashion, and travel. Influencers are social media users who have a reputation for expertise in their niche. Research demonstrates that health influencers positively impact health communications. Malik and colleagues (2021) found that health influencers received higher levels of engagement than accounts posting factual health

information, even if that information included images of celebrities. Pretourius and colleagues (2022) examined the most popular social media accounts on Instagram and TikTok, the role their content plays in improving mental health literacy, and what format and tools were used to create it. Over 100 Instagram posts were analyzed, and it was found that the purpose of two thirds of the posts were about education -information related to medical facts or a published article - but only two were outreach or awareness-based -like a public service announcement (Pretourius et al., 2022) For many of these mental health influencers, social media is an extension of their practice as a mental health professional. Audience engagement was critical and prioritized so many posts were for entertainment purposes or encouraging their products or services, rather than improving mental health literacy. The existence of mental health influencers—that is, people with a following on the Internet discussing mental health—breaks barriers of stigma and debunks myths on what a mental healthcare practitioner looks like. Ultimately, this promotes health information-seeking by normalizing supports that are available for those struggling with their mental health. Overall, influencers create engaging content that strengthens an account's reach allowing more viewers to learn.

Research has shown that young people with mental health challenges seek information related to mental health from Internet sources (Martinović et al., 2023). Youth have also stated that they turn primarily to social media platforms for mental health information and support (Ridout & Campbell, 2018). Although youth view content from government sources on these platforms, there is also the dynamic of peer support and peer-information sharing occurring on these platforms (Mackay, et al., 2022). Boak and colleagues (2020) found that 87% of students use social media sites daily and 21% spend five or more hours each day on social media, making

it a space for the New Brunswick provincial government, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network to communicate with youth about mental health.

The New Brunswick government maintains active social media accounts and understands that using these platforms can effectively capture the attention of youth, as demonstrated COVID-19 (Silberman, 2021). This study investigates how the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities utilized their Instagram accounts to share mental health outreach and education. New Brunswick was selected for this case study due to its diverse linguistic, cultural, and demographic characteristics. The research aims to show how the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network use Instagram both broadly and specifically for mental health outreach and education targeted at youth. This is the first study to explore the use of Instagram by New Brunswick and its healthcare authorities in this context. Education is a fundamental step towards a healthy population, and given the declining mental health among youth, it is crucial for the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities to disseminate high-quality mental health information for young people.

Chapter Three: Methods

This study explored how the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities (Horizon Health Network and Vitalité Health Network) have used their Instagram platforms for mental health outreach aimed at youth. To do so, this study analyzed the prevalence of coverage as well as the topics and themes focused on in the associated posts.

Context for the Study

New Brunswick, like the rest of Canada, is grappling with a mental health crisis. The compounding impact of cost of living, social isolation due to the pandemic, and being a member of a linguistic and cultural minority has highlighted mental health issues in New Brunswick. The New Brunswick healthcare system continues to be strained while dealing with significant losses of staff and services while need increases. The fewer people waiting in emergency rooms in New Brunswick, the better care those in need will receive. Providing support for New Brunswickers and removing barriers is critical for well-being and the province's economy. Provinces are responsible for their own healthcare systems, which heavily influences the care, support, and resources surrounding mental health. In 2021, New Brunswick's Department of Health (2021) released an Inter-departmental addiction and mental health plan, which recognizes that since 2016, there has been a 33% increase in demand for mental health services for youth and less than half of high priority cases were receiving treatment within national benchmarks. In September 2022, the New Brunswick Health Council (2022) released a report that showed 47.8% of students surveyed reported symptoms of anxiety, while 41.7% reported symptoms of depression.

This reality signals a need to meet youth where they are – online – to promote mental health outreach and education. The New Brunswick government and its Regional Health Authorities can promote resources about mental health and educate followers to positively

influence youth mental health, in turn lessening the burden on the healthcare system. Analyzing the Regional Health Authorities and the New Brunswick provincial government's social media use may offer insight into the government's priorities by examining the topics and themes prioritized on Instagram.

Inclusion Criteria

The primary dataset comprised Instagram posts about mental health aimed at youth posted by the New Brunswick government and its two Regional Health Authorities (Horizon Health Network and Vitalité Health Network). These organizations have an Instagram presence and have healthcare mandates in New Brunswick.

All the posts related to mental health (images with associated captions) shared by the three accounts on Instagram between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023, were reviewed ($n = 2,643$) to determine if they met inclusion criteria. Horizon Health began posting on Instagram in February 2018, and the New Brunswick provincial government followed in December of the same year. In June 2019, Vitalité Health Network began using its page. Thus, the date range of September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023, was chosen to capture a period of time when all three Instagram pages were in use. It is important to note that September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023, includes the period before, during, and after the strictest lockdowns in the province due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, which impacted the lives and mental health of youth in New Brunswick. To be included, posts had to be Instagram posts, not a reel, highlight or story, and they had to be written in English. Although New Brunswick is a bilingual province, the decision was made to focus on English content to maintain consistency and depth in the analysis, which can be challenging when dealing with multiple languages. Focusing on English allowed a more detailed and cohesive examination without the risk of repetitiveness that might arise as there was

a lot of bilingual content, which may have been repetitive. The researcher also felt more competent and comfortable analyzing posts in English. In cases of bilingual posts, written in both English and French, only the English content was included. To be included, a post needed to relate to mental health, including (but not limited to) containing the key words “mental health”, “well-being”, “mental illness”, and “depression”. Posts with mental health-related content that did not explicitly state they were about mental health (e.g. “feeling stressed?”) were also included in the study. To capture posts related to youth specifically, the caption had to explicitly mention ‘child/children,’ ‘youth’, ‘teen’, or ‘students’, or use a photo of youth in the post. An example is this post of August 11, 2020, by Horizon Health Network:

Are you or your child worried about heading back to school? 🤔📚 We are here to help!

Horizon mental health professionals will be providing tips to help manage the stress and worry associated with returning to school during COVID-19, so we want to hear from you.

Share them below and we'll incorporate them into our tips. ↩️

#backtoschool #COVID19 #nbhealth #mentalhealth #education #school



Data Collection

All Instagram posts related to mental health from the three Instagram pages were manually collected in February 2024. The three accounts were publicly accessible, and all posts were manually collected along with the date of the post, link, and post caption. An identification number was created for each post and an Excel spreadsheet was created to maintain the data.

From September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023, a total of 2,643 posts were shared by the Government of New Brunswick ($n = 925$), Horizon Health Network ($n = 1304$), and Vitalité Health Network ($n = 414$). Based on the inclusion criteria, across the three accounts, 179 of these posts were related to mental health generally. Of these 179 posts, 32 were aimed at youth mental health specifically. Thus, the final data set comprised these 32 posts for analysis.

Content Analysis

Krippendorff (2018) defined content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). Content analysis has a quantitative and a qualitative methodology and can be used in an inductive or a deductive fashion (Bengtsson, 2016). For this study, analytical codes related to key topics and themes using inductive coding.

To gain a broad understanding of the mental health-related content, the 147 posts about mental health generally (i.e., excluding the 32 posts specific to youth mental health) were analyzed to understand the topics discussed. This process began with pilot study of a random sample of 55 posts. Codes were developed iteratively, and the coding guide was refined accordingly. This guide was then applied to coding the 147 posts about mental health generally. This process was repeated for the 32 posts related to youth mental health specifically. Codes were developed iteratively during the early stage of coding to ensure that it yielded a coding

structure that would enable a meaningful analysis of the youth-specific content to be analyzed. During this phase, a description of each code was created to guide the coding process (see Appendix A). This guide was then applied to all 32 posts.

After extracting the 32 youth-specific mental health related posts from the larger sample, inductive coding was used to identify and organize themes. A comprehensive set of analytical thematic codes were systemically developed, grounded in the detailed observations from working with the posts. Through an iterative process, these codes were refined as patterns, and significant themes in the data emerged.

Codes were distinct but not mutually exclusive, meaning a post's caption could be coded for multiple variables. The focus of the coding was the caption itself; the coding considered the image only when there was uncertainty. Neither comments from followers nor user account information informed the coding.

Theoretical Framework

This research is rooted in social exchange theory and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001; Blanchard, 2008). Social exchange theory aims to maximize benefits and minimize costs of interactions with others. Online social networks allow for a higher quantity of social exchanges between the population and the government at a much lower cost than offline. Within the context of this research, this theory suggests value in the provincial government and its two Regional Health Authorities using social media for public outreach and education. Social exchange theory suggests that organizations understand relationships in a transactional way, in part, to maximize benefits and minimize costs for themselves (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The relationship between government and the public is a critical one since the public has power in Canada's democratic state. The public decides who makes up the government, and individuals

can push for change where they believe the government is ineffective. For some Canadians, one such area of government inadequacy is mental healthcare.

Youth are using the Internet for healthcare by creating and joining online health communities (Yan et al., 2016). These communities can be dedicated health forums or created by individuals as patients have begun to be health influencers (Heiss & Rudolph, 2022). Yan and colleagues (2016) applied social exchange theory to examine how online health community users' knowledge sharing behaviour is affected by reputation, sense of self-worth, and the cost of sharing. This research extended social exchange theory to a new research setting—online health communities—while evaluating the costs of general and specific health information sharing. Yan and colleagues (2016) found the biggest costs differed based on the type of knowledge being shared. Executional costs include time, material, and financial resources and were the biggest consideration when sharing general knowledge. When sharing specific knowledge, there was a higher cognitive cost (Yan et al., 2016). This is because specific knowledge often comes from experience, with people recalling their pain and discomfort, which can bring up negative feelings. Heiss and Rudolph (2022) investigated how different types of people follow health influencers for various reasons. People who have had cancer used the platform most for social interaction and expression motivations, while those who had not had cancer themselves followed for the perceived information gain and behaviour change (Heiss & Rudolph, 2022). For the government, the information would be general knowledge, since an organization would not have emotions or personal health experiences to share. Individuals choose which relationships and communities to invest in and trust based on the benefits to them. People will follow organizations on social media for the perceived benefit, so if there is a perceived benefit between

youth, the provincial government, and Regional Health Authorities, more youth will follow and engage with the organizations online (Heiss & Rudolph, 2022).

Social cognitive theory describes the influence of individual experiences, the actions of others, and environmental factors on one's health behaviors. A 2011 study demonstrated that investing in mental health has shown net cost benefits (Roberts & Grimes, 2011). Moeini and colleagues (2019) used social cognitive theory to examine the effectiveness of a web-based intervention for depressive symptoms in female high school students. There were different modules on the website for various social cognitive theory constructs including self-efficacy, outcome expectations, social support, and goal setting. Results demonstrated that symptoms of depression decreased in the group after 12 weeks (Moeini et al., 2019). This study shows the applicability of social cognitive theory to designing and disseminating appropriate information and used youth, just as the present study aims to explore. The present study does not aim to evaluate behaviour changes; rather, it aims to evaluate how the Government of New Brunswick and the Regional Health Authorities used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth during the specified period.

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this research was to examine how the Government of New Brunswick and its two Regional Health Authorities have used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth. From September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023, a total of 2,643 Instagram posts were shared by the Government of New Brunswick ($n = 925$), Horizon Health Network ($n = 1304$), and Vitalité Health Network ($n = 414$). Of these Instagram posts, 179 were about mental health: 38 by the Government of New Brunswick, 102 by the Horizon Health Network, and 39 by the Vitalité Health Network. Much of the excluded content related to health generally, not mental health specifically, with the COVID-19 pandemic being the dominant focus of such posts. Of the 179 mental health-related posts, 32 were about youth mental health, specifically. Vitalité Health Network posted 15 Instagram posts regarding mental health aimed at youth, while the Government of Canada posted nine and Horizon Health Network posted eight.

The primary research question asked: *How have the New Brunswick provincial government and its two Regional Health Authorities used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth?* Addressing this question began by understanding the prevalence of posts, as noted in Sub-Question A. Of the 2,643 total Instagram posts published by the provincial government and the two Regional Health Authorities, fewer than 7% ($n = 179$) of total posts were about mental health. Mental health outreach and education aimed specifically at youth comprised just more than 1% ($n = 32$) of total posts by the three organizations. Nearly 18% ($n = 32/179$) of all posts about mental health were youth specific.

Topics

To address the primary research question, this study further explored the topics focused on in the posts aimed at youth mental health that the Government of New Brunswick and the

Regional Health Authorities published on their Instagram platforms (*Sub-Question B*). In the 32 youth-specific Instagram posts, the Government of New Brunswick, Vitalité Health Network, and Horizon Health Network primarily posted about six topics related to mental health. As noted, coding was not mutually exclusive, as one post could be about more than one topic. From most to least prevalent, the mental health-related posts aimed at youth focused on the following topics: support resources ($n = 22$ posts; 69% of total posts included this topic), staff feature or recruitment ($n = 9$; 28%), future mental healthcare plans ($n = 6$; 19%), addiction ($n = 5$; 16%), specific awareness events ($n = 3$; 9%), and positive messaging ($n = 2$; 6%). See Table 1 for complete definitions and examples of topic categories.

‘Support resources’ was the most frequent topic aimed at youth posted by the three organizations. Vitalité Health Network shared the most mental health support resources aimed at youth with 12 Instagram posts, the Government of New Brunswick posted six and Horizon Health Network posted four. Here, the provincial government and two Regional Health Authorities provided youth with tips ($n = 7$; 32%) and also directed youth to other support resources such as programs ($n = 10$; 45%), websites ($n = 9$; 41%), hotlines ($n = 6$, 27%), and facilities ($n = 3$, 14%). Foremost, posts contained a combination of a website, program, and hotline, as in the following example of a post by Vitalité Health Network on July 28, 2021:

#mentalhealth, WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!

Meet the Dieppe’s Child and Youth Team from the Beauséjour Zone

The Child and Youth teams are made up of various professionals who work with children, teens, and their families to help them improve their mental health.

You’re not alone. If you need help, contact one of these services, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

➔ CHIMO: 1-800-667-5005

➔ Kids Help Phone: text TALK to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868

➔ Tele-Care: 811

➔ 211 NB: 211

➔ #NAVIGAPP <https://nb.bridgethegapp.ca/youth/>

Child and Youth Services: <https://bit.ly/3enZeK9>

Mobile Crisis Response Services: <https://bit.ly/3r3tCxc>



La santé mentale
c'est l'affaire
de tous! Mental Health,
we're all in this
together!

RÉSEAU DE SANTÉ
vitalité
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#mentalhealth, WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!

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- ➔ 211 NB: 211
- ➔ #NAVIGAPP

Liked by :
July 28, 2021

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Table 1
Definition of Topics with Examples of Youth-Related Content

Topic Codes	Definition	Sample quote from caption
Specific awareness events	Posts about a specific day such as Mental Health Awareness Month. This category does not include holidays such as Christmas or St. Patrick's Day.	"Students across the province had a great week participating in all sorts of fun activities for the Ring a Bell campaign. This annual event focuses on creating positive discussion and support for mental health among youth." (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2022a).
Addiction	Posts that reference addiction and/or cessation addictive behaviour	"Vaping is not without risks. Let's talk about it now!" (Réseau de santé Vitalité, 2020).
Positive messaging	Posts that promote positivity, kindness, or wellbeing	"James M. Hill students are very community minded! Project ETS was one of Horizon's 2019 Community Health Recognition Award winners for the work being done to lobby for changes to mental health services offered at their school." (Horizon Health Network, 2019).
Staff feature or recruitment	Posts that highlight mental health staff working in regional health authorities or try to recruit new staff	"Here is Annie Chiasson, Clinical Coordinator for the Shippagan's Child and Youth Services, in the Acadie-Bathurst Zone." (Réseau de santé Vitalité, 2021).
Support resources	Posts that provide a resource to users. Includes tips, programs, facilities, and hotlines.	Feel free to use the following resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Caraquet: 506-726-2030 ◆ Shippagan: 506-336-3367 ◆ Tracadie: 506-394-3760 (Réseau de santé Vitalité, 2022).
Future mental healthcare plans	Posts that reference plans for future facilities, improvements in care, and funding	A pilot project is being launched to help communities find ways to reduce substance use among youth. (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2022b).

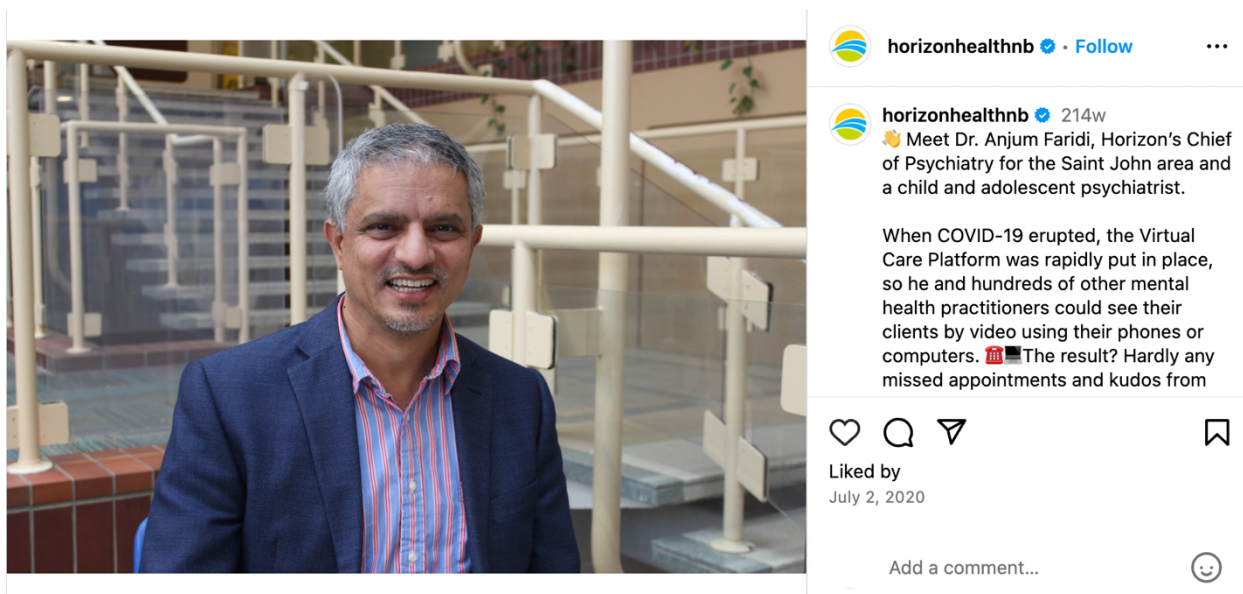
The second most frequently posted topic was staff features or recruitment. Vitalité Health Network shared the most with six, Horizon Health Network with two, and the Government of New Brunswick posted one. Consider the following example posted by Horizon Health Network on July 2, 2020:

👋 Meet Dr. Anjum Faridi, Horizon's Chief of Psychiatry for the Saint John area and a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

When COVID-19 erupted, the Virtual Care Platform was rapidly put in place, so he and hundreds of other mental health practitioners could see their clients by video using their phones or computers. 📞💻 The result? Hardly any missed appointments and kudos from the clients!

Learn about how video technology was a great success with clients (link in bio).

#nbhealth #mentalhealth #COVID19



Finally, the third most frequent topic within mental health-related posts aimed at youth was future mental healthcare plans. These posts discussed future facilities ($n = 1$; 17%) and improvements in care ($n = 4$; 66%) and other future mental healthcare plans ($n = 1$; 17%. The

Government of New Brunswick shared four youth-specific future posts, while the Regional Health Authorities each shared one. Consider the following example posted by the Government of New Brunswick on December 12, 2022:

The site of the Provincial Youth Treatment Centre, which will enhance mental health services for young New Brunswickers, has been chosen to be built on Salisbury Road in Moncton. The facility, for youth aged 12 to 18, will provide specialized treatment in an environment that is more home-like than a traditional hospital setting.



To set this data in its wider context of content related to mental health broadly, the posts about mental health generally ($n = 147$) (i.e., excluding those with youth-focused content) were independently analyzed to understand dominant topics. From most to least prevalent, the topics were: support resources ($n = 108$ posts; 73% of posts included this topic), staff recruitment or feature ($n = 65$; 44%), specific awareness events ($n = 63$; 42%), addiction ($n = 14$; 9%), spreading positivity ($n = 11$; 7%), future mental healthcare plans ($n = 5$; 3%), and other topics ($n = 5$; 3%). Other topics included reducing wait times for treatment, adapting to COVID-19, and

promoting physical activity. Note that the percentage equals more than 100% as the same post could be about more than one topic. See Table 2 for a topic comparison between Instagram posts focused on youth mental health and those focused more generally.

Table 2

Comparison Between Instagram Posts Aimed at Youth and Generally

Topic	Aimed at youth (%)	General mental health content (%)
Specific awareness events	9%	42%
Addiction	16%	9%
Positive messaging	6%	7%
Staff feature or recruitment	28%	44%
Support resources	69%	73%
Future mental healthcare plans	19%	3%

Of note, the topic of ‘future plans’ was more common in Instagram posts related to youth mental health than mental health generally, with 19% of youth-related posts focusing on this topic compared to 3% of posts about mental health generally. Also, coverage of events was more popular in posts about mental health generally than youth mental health specifically.

Themes

Sub-Question C asked: *What are the re-occurring themes in the mental health-related posts aimed at youth?*

Analyzing the 32 youth-specific Instagram posts published by the Government of New Brunswick, Vitalité Health Network, and Horizon Health Network resulted in the following five themes, from most to least prevalent: Supporting treatment and prevention ($n = 19$ posts; 59% of posts contained this theme), building connections ($n = 14$; 44%), fostering community ($n = 10$; 31%), and the themes of involving parents in change and celebrating government achievements

were equal ($n = 9$; 28%). Note that the percentage equals more than 100% as the same post may contain multiple themes. See Table 3 for complete definitions and examples of these themes.

Table 3

Definition of Themes with Examples of Youth-Related Content

Theme	Definition	Example
Fostering community	Emphasizing community involvement and initiatives, such as local projects and campaigns	The Ring a Bell campaign and the Youth-to-the-Rescue challenges. (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2022a; Réseau de santé Vitalité, 2022b).
Building connections	Fostering relationships and support networks among individuals, families, and professionals	Promotion of talking with others, connecting with mental health services and community support during crises. (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2022a).
Supporting treatment and prevention	Showcasing available treatment and intervention strategies for mental health and substance use issues	Explanation of new therapy models and specialized treatment centers (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2022c).
Involving parents in change	Involving parents and guardians in supporting mental health and well-being, and advocating for changes in services	Tips for managing back-to-school anxiety and talking to youth about vaping (Réseau de santé Vitalité, 2020).
Celebrating government achievements	Communicating achievements and progress made by government initiatives in improving health services	Updates on new facilities, successful implementation of virtual care platforms (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2023).

Supporting treatment and prevention was the most common theme posted by the three organizations. Vitalité Health Network shared the most posts that showed support for mental health treatment and prevention with 10 Instagram posts. Horizon Health Network posted five while the Government of New Brunswick posted four. The following post by Vitalité Health Network on January 6, 2023, offers an example of this theme:

Jessica Dufour Ouellet and her colleagues on the Children-Youth Teams now offer a single-session therapy service making mental health and addictions services more accessible.

For more information: <https://www.vitalitenb.ca/en/news/one-time-therapy-children-and-youth-quick-access-mental-health-and-addiction-services>"



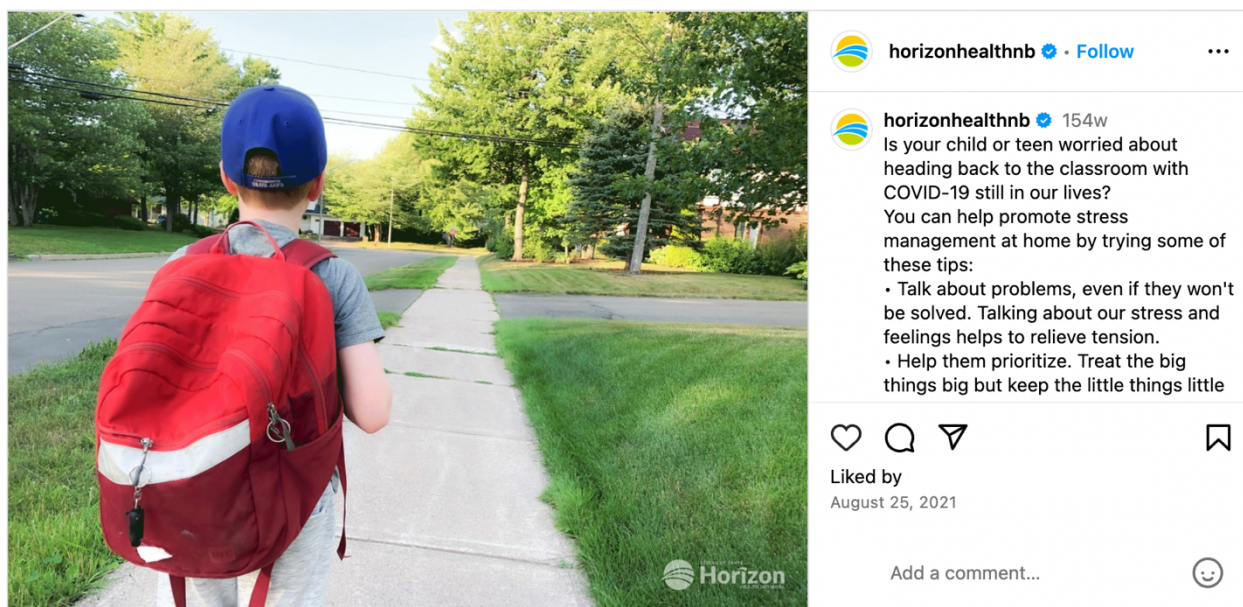
Secondly, building connections was a prominent theme throughout the mental health posts aimed at youth. These posts encouraged youth to talk to others about mental health, focused on fostering relationships and creating support networks. Vitalité Health Networked posted seven Instagram posts related to the theme, Horizon Health Network posted four and the Government of New Brunswick posted three. Here is an example of this theme in a post by Horizon Health Network on August 25, 2021:

Is your child or teen worried about heading back to the classroom with COVID-19 still in our lives?

You can help promote stress management at home by trying some of these tips:

- Talk about problems, even if they won't be solved. Talking about our stress and feelings helps to relieve tension.
- Help them prioritize. Treat the big things big but keep the little things little by accepting the small stresses in life, and problem solving around the big stresses.
- Focus on basic healthy behaviours. You can battle the negative effects of stress by taking care of sleep, nutrition, exercise, and leisure time.

#BackToSchool #COVID19 #School #NBHealth #NewBrunswick



Finally, fostering community was the third most prominent theme in the content analyzed. These posts emphasized community involvement and initiatives. The Government of New Brunswick posted five posts that demonstrated the value of fostering community. Vitalité Health Networked posted three and Horizon Health Network posted two. The following post by Vitalité Health Network on April 22, 2020, offers an example of this theme:

#YouthToTheRescue - Challenge # 1 Make your world move! - Between 5 and 17 years old, you need to do 1 hour of physical activity a day.

- Between 18 and 65, it's 150 minutes a week.

- Share your photos or videos of your activities with us by using the

#YouthToTheRescue and @FJFNB in your posts.

- 7 gift cards of \$50 (iTunes or GooglePlay) to be won.

-Have fun!

#YouthToTheRescue - Be part of the solution.

CONCOURS
#JeunesÀLaRescousse

FAIS BOUGER TON MONDE

La recommandation est de faire:

- 1h d'activité physique par jour si on a entre 5 et 17 ans.
- 150 minutes d'activités physiques par semaine si on a entre 18 et 65 ans.

Partage tes photos ou vidéos (sans voix) avec le #JeunesÀLaRescousse.

vitalité
RÉSEAU DE SANTÉ
HEALTH NETWORK

FJFNB
Fédération des jeunes francophones de l'Amérique du Nord

PAR-POUR
les jeunes

IGA

vitalitenb · Follow

#JeunesÀLaRescousse – On fait partie de la solution.

#YouthToTheRescue - Challenge # 1 Make your world move! - Between 5 and 17 years old, you need to do 1 hour of physical activity a day.
- Between 18 and 65, it's 150 minutes a week.
- Share your photos or videos of your activities with us by using the #YouthToTheRescue and @FJFNB in your posts.
- 7 gift cards of \$50 (iTunes or GooglePlay) to be won.
-Have fun!

#YouthToTheRescue - Be part of the solution.
See translation

Liked by
April 22, 2020

Add a comment...

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This study aims to understand how the Government of New Brunswick and the New Brunswick Regional Health Authorities used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth aged 12 to 18 years old from September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023. More specifically, this study examined the prevalence of coverage as well as the topics and themes related to youth mental health that New Brunswick's government and Regional Health Authorities shared via their Instagram posts.

The New Brunswick provincial government and its two Regional Health Authorities infrequently used Instagram for mental health outreach and education specifically aimed at youth. However, when they did post about youth mental health, which represented just more than 1% of total posts during the period under study, there was a focus on the topics of support resources, staff features or recruitment, and future mental healthcare plans. Dominant themes in posted content were supporting treatment and prevention, building connections, and fostering community.

A distinct difference among the three Instagram accounts was the quantity of total posts. The francophone Vitalité Health Network published 414 posts between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023. In the same period, the Government of New Brunswick published 925 posts, and the Horizon Health Network published 1,304. The anglophone Regional Health Authority posted more than three times the amount of Instagram posts than the francophone-managed account. Vitalité Health Network and francophone speakers dominate the northern part of the province. Fewer than 33% of people identify as English speakers in that area (Statistics Canada, 2022b). There is a need for accessible mental health resources in both official languages across

the province, especially in the region's primary language. There was content posted by the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network in both languages. Often the captions were presented in English and in French, or the same visual was posted twice, once with an English caption and once with a French caption.

The Government of Canada has stated that, in Canada, “every person should have access to health services where and when they need them, including in the official language of their choice. The quality of communication with a health provider can affect the quality and safety of the care someone receives” (Health Canada, 2023a). Low literacy and limited language skills are associated with lower educational attainment and worse health outcomes (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2014). Limited literacy is a barrier to accessing health information, proper medication use, and utilization of preventive services. People must be able to receive mental healthcare in both official languages and have access to well-trained interpreters. Culturally competent healthcare providers are necessary because they mitigate the adverse health impacts of poor language skills. The provincial government, through its Regional Health Authorities, needs to be active in developing and employing strategies to meet diverse populations' language and literacy needs, including online communication (Villaire & Mayer, 2007). Competent mental health care in both official languages is key for positive public mental health in New Brunswick. Not providing this is a failure by the New Brunswick healthcare system.

New Brunswick has two Regional Health Authorities: The Vitalité Health Network and Horizon Health Network. The provincial government and these two units can be viewed as a unified front regarding healthcare, especially public healthcare issues such as the mental health crisis in the province. The Government of New Brunswick funds hospitals and is responsible for services provided by health professionals and public health promotion. The provincial

government boasted its 2023-2024 budget on Instagram as one that provides a “strong, dependable public health-care system that is responsive to the needs of New Brunswickers” (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2023). The Instagram post discussed specific budgetary items such as \$129.5 million for wage increases, nearly \$30 million for recruitment and retention and \$207 million for addiction and mental health services (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2023). The Government of New Brunswick did not announce how these funds would be split between the Regional Health Authorities and other healthcare programs on their Instagram account.

Given that 59% of teens ages 13 to 17 use Instagram and, of them, 47% use the platform daily, having so few Instagram posts specific to this audience is a lost avenue for the provincial government and the provincial health authorities for mental health outreach and education (Anderson et al., 2023). Selecting and understanding the target audience for messaging is essential for the provincial government and its Regional Health Authorities. Youth must be considered a target audience on Instagram, given their use of the platform and online time (Gintova, 2019). The findings from Gintova’s (2019) research led to several recommendations to inform approaches to social media use for government departments, including that departments should clearly indicate what issues will be addressed on their platforms and make an effort to understand their target audiences. Knowing the target audience creates opportunities tailor messaging that aligns with the audience’s values, interests, and preferences.

As noted, many of the excluded posts focused on health generally, rather than mental health specifically, with the COVID-19 pandemic as the primary focus of these posts. The COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, and the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (CDC,

2023). More than three years later, on May 5, 2023, the WHO ended the public health emergency of international concern (CDC, 2023). This study evaluated Instagram posts from September 1, 2019, to August 31, 2023, and so it includes content from before the outbreak, during the peak, and then once it was no longer considered a public health emergency. Studies have demonstrated that, in Canada and across the world, youth mental health continued to decline during this period. Statistics Canada's 2022 report, *Self-rated mental health decreases after another year of the COVID-19 pandemic*, demonstrated the decline between September 2021 and February 2022. The 2022 data shows that high self-rated mental health continued to decline over the years, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2022a). There were a lot of social media posts during the COVID-19 pandemic about restrictions and updates which had lower than average engagement (MacKay et al., 2022). This research did not examine engagement levels, but there may be a difference in mental health content engagement and COVID-19 content engagement due to the fatigue some were feeling with the pandemic. Mello and colleagues (2023) found that there were often calls to action in regard to COVID-19 content which aligns with support resources being provided for mental health content in the present study. Combining more content about mental health during the pandemic's peak may have been beneficial for youth exposed to the Instagram posts by the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network and Vitalité Health Network on Instagram.

This study found limited content about the government's plans for addiction and mental health services in the general context, but more when examining youth-specific content. Based on the perspectives of youth, education workers and mental health professionals, O'Reilly and colleagues (2019) argue that using social media shows strong potential for health promotion, and

it is evident that the provincial government and two Regional Health Authorities recognize that youth are the demographic impacted most by future changes to the mental healthcare system.

Within the general mental health context, a reoccurring combination of *Specific Awareness Events, Staff Recruitment and Features, and Support Resources* was posted often by Horizon Health Network and was redundant in format, making it less engaging to readers. Posting a ‘cookie-cutter’ content may give readers the impression that the same information is being provided each time and may have readers skipping over the post. Furthermore, posting about mental health only on specific awareness days gives the impression that mental health is only important on select days. This perpetuates the stigma surrounding mental health by only giving it thought during specific days rather than it being incorporated as an essential factor of everyday life. Stigma works against the mental health movement by isolating those struggling with their mental health. This may cause a reluctance to ask for help or to get treatment, creating a disconnect between those who need help and those who provide it.

Health influencers and role models participating in mental health discourse on Instagram receive higher levels of engagement, strengthen an account’s reach, and promote positive mental health overall (Malik et al., 2021; O’Reilly et al., 2019; Pretourius et al., 2022). Though the medical staff may be considered role models to some youth, there is an opportunity for the Government of New Brunswick and the Regional Health Authorities to use youth leaders, sports figures, and local celebrities to promote positive mental health. Recognizable faces will encourage engagement with the content and break the stigma.

The staff included in these posts agreed to use their names and faces on the Regional Health Authorities and provincial government’s social media accounts. Using staff members as mental health influencers, rather than just naming them and their occupation, could be powerful

for followers. Mental health influencers break barriers of stigma and debunk myths about what a mental healthcare practitioner looks like. This promotion of health information-seeking normalizes that supports are available for those struggling with their mental health (Pretourius et al., 2022). In the general mental health content, Horizon Health Network promoted blog posts written by staff with mental health tips and encouraged people to click the link in their Instagram bio. In youth-specific content, Vitalité Health Network added links to the caption, but those were not clickable links. Infographics and other information from websites should be shared directly on Instagram rather than directing followers to click links so readers benefit from the content. Agorapulse's Social Media Lab tested if organizations using "Link in Bio" in their caption was an effective strategy and found that it was not very effective (Ayres, 2019). On average, there were two clicks per post, and with each new post the organization was required to change the link in their bio to align with their most recent content. Ayres (2019) stated that expecting followers to take the time is incorrect and this strategy may lessen the engagement and reach of the account. Therefore, using the staff to promote mental health as influencers directly on Instagram rather than through links would have created more engagement and a larger audience.

O'Reilly and colleagues (2019) examined the potential of social media for promoting mental health in youth aged 11 to 18 to see how effective this intervention could be from the perspective of adolescents, people working in education, and mental health practitioners. Citing Instagram specifically, one participant discussed a social media 'challenge' where youth would post a photo of something that makes them happy each day to promote wellness. In the general mental health content, Horizon Health Network created a *Hopeful Monday* initiative. *Hopeful Monday* was a series of posts on Mondays throughout the summer of 2021 to promote everyday joy, such as seeing the sunrise, crafting, and time with family. Horizon encouraged followers to

share what brings them happiness in a direct message or comment. Similarly, in the youth-specific content, Vitalité Health Network encouraged the #YouthToTheRescue program for youth to share their fun physical activities with others. Encouraging positive mental health by discussing everyday joy and movement is a protective factor for positive mental health in youth.

On October 18, 2022, the Government of New Brunswick posted the following on Instagram: “A new pilot project to help communities develop long-term solutions to reduce substance use among youth is launching in New Brunswick”. This pilot was produced from the information learned with the three-year ACCESS Open Minds project which ran out of national funding in 2021, but the province of New Brunswick continued to fund the centres as the research demonstrated the need and value of the centres (Cox, 2021). In November 2022, the Canadian Government announced up to \$18 million in funding for integrated mental health and substance use projects for youth. According to Dr. Samuel Weiss, Scientific Director at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health, and Addiction, the aim of the program is that “when completed, not a single youth between the age of twelve and twenty-five will be left without access to the health and social services they need the most” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2022). This ‘network of networks’ aims to support provincial and territorial health networks.

Dubé and colleagues (2019) examined the implementation of the ACCESS Open Minds framework in Caraquet, a dominantly francophone region in New Brunswick. Despite the challenges of being a rural, francophone community, both youth and researchers saw the benefits of the project. They created a mobile ‘safe space’ to allow for assessment and counselling and provided youth with the skills to support others during mental health crises. This creates a positive cycle of mental health support and de-stigmatization for the community. This facility

was valuable to the community and province. Yet the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities did not showcase this facility to the public as much as they could have to promote mental health resources in the province.

Building connections and fostering community were two prominent themes throughout the youth-specific mental health content posted by the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities. The five-year New Brunswick Inter-Departmental Addiction and Mental Health plan includes a New Brunswick-specific version of the Icelandic Prevention Model, discussed via Instagram by the provincial government on November 4, 2022. This community-driven approach identifies risks and creates protective factors to prevent future substance use disorders in youth (Department of Health, Addiction and Mental Health Branch, 2021; Sigfúsdóttir, 2009). This model allows for collaboration and two-way communication between government and policymakers with the groups impacted by resources provided and emphasizes community. The ACCESS Open Minds in Caraquet is a facility that aligns with these desires but was not promoted as a success on Instagram. This missed opportunity to this program often suggests a lack of intention for what is being posted on Instagram.

The inflexible hours of receiving traditional mental health care are a notable barrier for youth (Brown, 2016). Youth are often juggling school commitments, extracurricular activities, and familial obligations. They also may face stigma in seeking mental healthcare and do not want to ask parents for assistance in making and driving to appointments. Many mental healthcare services in Canada operate traditional working hours, limiting the availability of appointments outside school time for youth. They can miss school and explain their whereabouts or wait. Mental healthcare hours, compared to the daily lives of youth, delay access and perpetuates the mental healthcare gap, furthering the mental health crisis. Youth use the Internet

and social media for health information-seeking but do not tend to evaluate if the information is coming from a reputable source (Maitz et al., 2020). Providing high-quality information from leading physicians in the province can create a space where parents do not worry about the accuracy and reliability of the information being provided to their children and youth receive information where they already are—that is, on social media.

This research is rooted in social exchange theory and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001; Blanchard, 2008). Social exchange theory maximizes benefits and minimizes costs of interactions with others. Instagram allows for a higher quantity of social exchanges between the population and the government at a much lower cost than town halls or other in-person interactions. Using Instagram allows the provincial government and its two Regional Health Authorities to educate youth who may be unlikely to come to in-person government events. The Instagram content posted centers around hotlines, rather than educating others on how to notice signs and symptoms in friends, resources available in person such as drop-in centers, and educational tools that viewers can use in their daily lives. Sharing health information can be costly, but sharing specific knowledge was found to have a higher cognitive cost since it comes from experience (Yan et al., 2016). As an organization, the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities share general knowledge without emotions or personal health experiences.

Pretourius and colleagues (2022) found that accounts that used influencers and storytelling for mental health outreach, rather than just factual, basic information, had more engagement and reach. Storytelling is a method of health communication that include anecdotes, testimonials, and other stories, similar to what health influencers do (Shen et al., 2015). Shen and colleagues (2015) found that narratives delivered through audio and video were more likely to have a strong persuasion impact than narratives expressed in print. Using audio and video

content can create stronger emotions and are better at persuasion compared to print. Furthermore, the use of well-known community members as mental health influencers could have the same impact as when celebrities discuss their health conditions. Previous research has shown that the publicity generated by celebrity announcements of a cancer diagnosis can lead to increases in information seeking, booking preventative care, and in media coverage (Chapman, McLeod, Wakefield, & Holding, 2005). The benefits of storytelling and using mental health influencers demonstrates that using Instagram to share health narratives would be a strong method of health communication for the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities. The existence of mental health influencers also aids in breaking stigma and debunking myths. This promotes health information-seeking by normalizing supports that are available for those struggling with their mental health. With all of this considered, the cost of using Instagram as a mental health outreach and education tool remains low. This is a cost-effective method for the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities. There is an opportunity to have staff discuss their personal health stories on behalf of the organization similar to health influencers, but the organization must ensure that these individuals are emotionally supported while sharing their story because of the personal costs associated with sharing personal experience. Many of the mental health influencers shown in Pretourius and colleagues' research (2022) used social media as an extension of their practice as a mental health professional, which opens up an opportunity for the Regional Health Authorities to use staff in influencer-type roles to promote mental health education.

Social cognitive theory describes the influence of individual experiences, the actions of others, and environmental factors on one's health behaviours. Studies demonstrate that investing in mental health has net cost benefits (Roberts & Grimes, 2011). The experience and

environmental factors of a government and Regional Health Authorities that support and use social media for mental health education and outreach creates a more health-literate population and, thus, a healthier population. The Government of New Brunswick and Regional Health Authorities did not utilize their Instagram for mental health-related content to demonstrate support, care, and prioritization of youth mental health.

Digital natives learn differently than the generations before them because of their access to the Internet and social media (Prensky, 2001). Today, youth seek health information differently than their parents and are negatively impacted by social media in a way generations before them never experienced. However, the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network can use Instagram to promote preventative care strategies and public education. Using social media for mental health outreach, education, and communication is worthwhile, yet this study demonstrated that it was not a priority for the organizations during the period examined.

The purpose of this research was to examine how the Government of New Brunswick and Regional Health Authorities used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth. Between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023, less than 7% of the examined Instagram posts were explicitly aimed at youth ages 12-18. This demographic is active on social media and spends considerable time on the platform. This demonstrates a missed opportunity for the Government and shows a lack of prioritization for this demographic when it comes to mental health outreach and education. Next, the topics were examined, demonstrating that the provincial government and two Regional Health Authorities focused on support resources, staff feature or recruitment, and future mental healthcare plans. Of all content posted, the COVID-19 pandemic

was the topic shared most often. There was ample opportunity to share content about the pandemic combined with mental health, but these opportunities were not often seized.

Within both youth-specific mental health content and general mental health content, staff features, and recruitment content was the second most popular topic. Within youth-specific posts, this content was primarily staff features, whereas general content had both staff features and recruitment. Youth are not the target demographic for staffing, and so it reasons that there would be greater focus on featuring staff than recruiting staff. However, it is of note that since these organizations use their Instagram often, in general, as a recruitment tool, the organizations show a priority for staffing rather than preventative care as there were fewer posts related to health education and outreach. Featuring staff could provide an opportunity to have quasi-health influencers, however a one-off post of staff does not do this since the staff are unknown to the public. Staff features can be considered a positive mental health booster for the staff as it shows that their employer values them, their story, and their work. The current use does not benefit youth directly, but if being posted makes the staff feel valued, it has the potential to create a positive work environment which in turn could contribute to providing better care to youth.

Finally, the recurring themes in mental health posts aimed at youth posts were examined and, overwhelmingly, supporting treatment and prevention and building connections were dominant themes. Other themes included fostering community, involving parents in change, and celebrating government achievements. Within mental health-related content, providing resources and supporting treatment was important to the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities as this topic and theme, respectively, were the most frequently posted about and align well. When comparing general mental health content to youth-specific content, it was found that more content about the future was aimed at youth. This focus may create hope for

youth who may be displeased with how the provincial mental health care system is currently run, as such posts may provide a window onto the future of mental healthcare that youth audiences can look forward to with new funding,

Social media continues to be a promising method for health outreach and promotion. However, the COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated the potential to spread health misinformation. This is negative given the influence health content on social media influences youth's health decisions and behaviors. Communications officers and other stakeholders must realize that publishing evidence-based, accurate health information is critical but may not always be enough to engage youth. Using Instagram for education and outreach is not costly for the province. Preventative care is also less costly for the province compared to reactive care, which signals an opportunity for funding to be used in other ways such as paying healthcare providers more which may decrease the necessity of focus on recruitment from the Regional Health Authorities. With the continual decline in youth mental health alongside an increase in time spent on social media, examining their relationship is critical. In promoting mental health education and outreach, the Government of New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities may be able to positively influence the quality of life of young New Brunswickers today and in the future.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study to consider.

One limitation was the selection of the age group of 12 to 18 years old for the focus of this study because, according to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (1998), people under 13 should not be active on social media. Though no such law exists in Canada, many social networks are created in America and should follow these regulations. There is often

nothing except a request for a date of birth without proof to confirm the user is over 13; therefore, ensuring users are 13 or older is not strictly enforced (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, 1998). Legally, 12-year-olds should not be using social media at all, but they are, and because of that 12-year-olds were included in the age range for this study (Rideout et al., 2022).

This study focused on Instagram, but it is not the only social media platform popular among youth. TikTok is a social media app that allows users to view and create short videos and has a unique 'For You Page', a feed that is algorithm-driven and tailored to individual preferences based on previously viewed and liked content. There was a sharp rise in the use of TikTok between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023 (Clement, 2020). The app is particularly popular among people aged 13–29, and data from the United States demonstrates that 32.5% of users are aged 10–19 (Clement, 2020). In March 2023, TikTok was banned from all mobile devices issued by the provincial government, citing the protection of personal information and the private information of government employees (Finance and Treasury Board, 2023). Concerns about the application were also shared by the Government of Canada, which did the same thing three days prior (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2023). TikTok's security risks are why the New Brunswick provincial government does not utilize the platform. This app was out of the scope of the present study. Yet, it is important to note its relevance to this age group as a popular social media and information-sharing platform, particularly during the pandemic.

Other than the rise of TikTok during this time, the date range could also be a limitation of this study given that it encompasses the COVID-19 era. Though the dates include a pre-, during, and post-pandemic time, it is important to be aware of the changes that happened during the

COVID-19 pandemic. This includes what content was being posted, and what messaging was considered important to the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities during that time. Since August 31, 2023, there has been less impact due to the COVID-19 pandemic on post New Brunswickers daily lives, so a newer review of the Instagram content posted by the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network may present different results of what themes and topics, both about youth mental health and otherwise, is being posted.

The decision was made to evaluate only the English part of the bilingual posts and no evaluation of the French-only content. This decision was made due to the majority of the content being repeats of what was already presented in English. It is possible that some content in bilingual posts was not accurately translated from French to English and that there were posts in one language that were not posted in the other. Given that New Brunswick is a bilingual province in a bilingual country, and one of the Regional Health Authorities is francophone managed, it would be important to do a review that includes both languages in the future.

Future Research

The present study examined New Brunswick and its Regional Health Authorities, and there is an opportunity to conduct similar case studies using other provinces and their regional health authorities. In doing so, researchers could demonstrate what each province prioritizes on their social media and see if there is a ‘gold standard’ of mental health education and outreach on Canadian government social media. The discourse on Instagram may differ based on culture, geographic, and demographic considerations from province to province. Existing literature (such as MacKay et al., 2022) relied on COVID-19 communications or was based in countries other than Canada (see Skogen et al., 2023).

Another future research opportunity is to examine the comments received on the Instagram posts of the provincial government and its Regional Health Authorities to explore the relationship between the organizations and their followers. This would allow researchers to examine what level of two-way communication happens on Instagram between the government and the public regarding mental health-related content, similar to the Gintova (2019) study, which examined interactions on Twitter between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and public Twitter users.

Social media is changing how people learn and communicate, and it remains an area worth studying. Most of the research on the topic evaluates how social media negatively impacts mental health; however, it can also be a learning tool. With the continual decline in youth mental health alongside an increase in time spent on social media, examining their relationship is critical.

Conclusion

This research comprised a content analysis of Instagram posts by the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023. During this period, there was minimal outreach aimed at youth regarding mental health. When examining mental health-related content, it was found that the three organizations focused on sharing resources such as websites, tips, programs, facilities, and hotlines. Multiple resources were shared within the same post. These posts were frequently published on specific awareness days, such as National Smoking Week.

The results demonstrated that the New Brunswick Regional Health Authorities and the provincial government infrequently used social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth. The findings indicate that when the organizations did use social media for mental health outreach aimed at youth, the New Brunswick healthcare system prioritizes sharing support resources, staff features, recruitment information, and future mental healthcare plans. Dominant themes in posted content were supporting treatment and prevention, building connections, and fostering community.

Research shows that young people facing mental health challenges often turn to the Internet for information and support, with many relying on social media (Martinović et al., 2023; Ridout & Campbell, 2018). Boak and colleagues (2020) found that 87% of students use social media daily, with 21% spending five or more hours on these sites each day. This online space provides an opportunity for the New Brunswick provincial government, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network to be used as a platform for mental health outreach and education aimed at youth. To improve youth-specific mental health content on Instagram, the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities should post more frequently about the

topic, engage with local influencers, and promote ways youth can support peers struggling with mental health issues.

The content analysis demonstrated a need for more information regarding mental healthcare overall, especially youth-specific content. This thesis contributes to the existing research regarding the use of Instagram for mental health outreach and education and uses New Brunswick as a case study. Despite the minimal current use by the provincial government and Regional Health Authorities, Instagram offers potential for low-cost mental health outreach and education. Given the continual decline of youth mental health in the province and the world, it is important for health organizations such as the Regional Health Authorities and provincial government to promote positive mental health strategies as early intervention during youth can prevent mental health issues from escalating into more severe mental health disorders in adulthood. Furthermore, promotion of positive mental health reduces stigma. Using Instagram and encouraging youth to be involved normalizes conversations around mental health, creating a more supportive environment where young people feel comfortable seeking help. Studies in New Brunswick demonstrate that 52% of youth felt uncomfortable trying to get help such as talking to a trusted adult and 21% did not know where to get help (New Brunswick Health Council, 2022). Government promotion can direct youth into resources and strategies for supporting their mental health and the mental health of their peers.

It is important for healthcare organizations, like the Regional Health Authorities and provincial government to act swiftly to capitalize on the potential of social media as a tool for positive change in the mental health. There is an opportunity for the Government of New Brunswick, Horizon Health Network, and Vitalité Health Network to utilize their Instagram platforms for more mental health-related content aimed at youth to promote preventative care,

which may improve overall mental health in New Brunswick. By engaging with young people where they already spend significant time, these organizations can provide factual and reliable information and counter misinformation. Collaborating with mental health influencers can also help reach a broader audience and encourage open discussions about mental health. Supporting youth mental health in New Brunswick will support all New Brunswickers.

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Appendix

Major Code - Subcode	Definition	Example
Statistics	Post presents a statistic.	“Every #40seconds someone loses their life to suicide.” @who Mental health is an important part of our general health and personal well-being. Know the warning signs. #newbrunswick #nouveaubrunswick #canada #mentalhealth #mentalhealthawareness” (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2019a).
Specific awareness Day/Week/Month. - Specific Horizon Campaign “Hopeful Monday	Posted because of a specific event such as Mental Health Awareness Month, National Suicide Awareness Day, Eating Disorder Week, etc. Does not include holidays such as Christmas, St. Patrick’s Day.	“March 8th marks the beginning of Gambling Awareness Week in New Brunswick. Don’t hide big problems with small talk, start a conversation today” (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2021).
Addiction - Vaping and Smoking - Drugs and Overdoses	Post references addiction and/or cessation addictive behaviour.	“Crystal meth is present in our communities and together, we need to raise awareness of the risks associated with this drug. Kelly Hallihan, Horizon’s Clinical Coordinator of Adult Services at Addiction and Mental Health Services in Miramichi provides her knowledge on compassion, kindness and patience for crystal meth users and their families. Read Kelly’s blog where she shares what she has learned about crystal meth and working with patients and families through the years. Link in bio.  #crystalmeth #mentalhealth #addiction #prevention “(Horizon Health Network, 2020a).
Spreading Positivity	Post promotes positivity, kindness, or wellbeing.	“Everyone could use a smile today!  Earlier this week, staff in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NNICU) at Horizon’s The Moncton Hospital celebrated St. Patrick’s Day by dressing up patients.  A special thanks to our amazing staff and who helped families celebrate the babies’ first St. Patrick’s Day!  And remember: Your mental health is important. The

		<p>outbreak of Coronavirus disease can be stressful, and it's natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during and after a stressful situation. Take the time to focus on yourself and reach out to someone if you need help. Horizon hopes these photos will add some much-needed joy to your day! 😍 #NNICU #preemie #StPatricksDay #preemiepower #mentalhealth #twins #irish" (Horizon Health Network, 2020b).</p>
Staff	<p>Post highlights the staff in regional health authorities, including recruitment for specific mental health professionals</p>	<p>““I love being able to encourage children and youth to see their strength and recognize their capacity,” said Sacha, social worker and expressive arts therapist in the Child and Youth Integrated Service Delivery Program at Horizon’s Teen Resource Centre in Saint John. It’s Social Work Week and Sacha works with youth with addiction or mental health struggles. She is an expert in post trauma recovery, emotional regulation support, and providing parents with guidance in building supportive relationships with their children. Through her work as a social worker, Sacha found she was using her love for the arts as she worked with clients and that it empowered them to see their own resilience. This inspired her to become a professional expressive arts therapist. Thank you, Sacha, for helping people be the best versions of themselves. #SocialWorkWeek #socialwork #socialworker #ExpressiveArtsTherapist #mentalhealth #nbhealth” (Horizon Health Network, 2020c).</p>

<p>Resource</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tips - Program - Facilities - Hotlines 	<p>Post provides a resource to users.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shares tips to promote positive mental health - Shows a program (not hotline) that people can access online or in person - Showcases the facilities in the province that provide mental healthcare - Includes hotline phone numbers 	<p>“Whether it’s a listening ear, helpful information or crisis intervention please know that 24/7 help is available. You can contact TeleCare 811 or CHIMO - a provincial crisis phone line, accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to all residents of New Brunswick. #newbrunswick #nouveaubrunswick #canada @chimohelpline” (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2019b).</p>
<p>Future</p>	<p>Post references the plans for future benefits, facilities, and funding.</p>	<p>“A new pilot project to help communities develop long-term solutions to reduce substance use among youth is launching in New Brunswick. In collaboration with Planet Youth, the five-year project will operate in Saint John, Woodstock, Kent County and the Acadian Peninsula.” (Government NB/Gouvernement NB, 2022).</p>

Appendix: Codebook used for content analysis for topics.

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