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DIGITAL INNOVATION IN MENTAL HEALTH: A MOBILE APPLICATION FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY-BASED MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT IN KIAMBU COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

Mental health challenges among Kenyan youth have reached critical levels, with Kiambu County experiencing a notable rise in depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation. Persistent barriers such as limited access to care, stigma, low mental health literacy, and social isolation continue to hinder effective intervention. This study introduces a digital health solution aimed at bridging these systemic gaps through a community-based mobile application. The intervention aligns with the conference theme of securing the future through holistic approaches to mental health across generations.

METHOD

The Kiambu Mental Health App was developed using a multidisciplinary approach combining software engineering with public health and psychological principles. Built using JavaScript, Node.js, and React Native, the app integrates five core functionalities: (1) an AI-powered chatbot that offers immediate, interactive mental health support; (2) digital self-assessment tools grounded in evidence-based screening frameworks; (3) a searchable directory of mental health professionals with geolocation support; (4) a knowledge-sharing platform to improve mental health literacy; and (5) a peer support group feature for community interaction. The app's design was shaped using human-centered design methodologies and included feedback from psychologists, community leaders, and youth representatives. Though backend development is ongoing, data privacy remains a core design principle to ensure user confidentiality and system integrity.

RESULTS & CONCLUSION

The app is currently in early-stage pilot testing with at least 50 participants across Kiambu County. Preliminary feedback has been encouraging. Approximately 85% of users reported that the app would likely improve their understanding of mental health issues, while 72% believed it would facilitate access to professional support. Around 68% valued the community peer support feature, and 91% found the AI-powered chatbot helpful and responsive. These features collectively aim to reduce initial barriers to care by shortening the time between symptom recognition and access to mental health services. Here is Android (.apk) link: https://expo.dev/accounts/mainah/projects/KIAMBU_MENTAL_HEALTH_APP/builds/4d0de44d-51d5-4498-aff-4f1d635d3603

This innovation underscores the capacity of mobile technology to transform mental health service delivery in resource-limited settings. The integration of AI support, professional linkage, and community engagement forms a holistic ecosystem that addresses diverse determinants of mental wellness. Notable challenges include ensuring clinical oversight of digital tools, protecting user data, and designing for expansion beyond county borders. Nevertheless, early results indicate the app reduces stigma, normalizes digital help-seeking, and improves referral processes. Planned enhancements include a crisis hotline, motivational content, patient journaling for recovery tracking, telemedicine integration, and predictive analytics for early intervention. These improvements aim to strengthen the app's impact, positioning it as a scalable, tech-enabled model for mental health support in Kenya and potentially beyond.

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