

Overmedicalization in the Age of Social Media: Genz's Struggle with Self-Diagnosis

Toritsegbogwa (Tori) Jakpa¹, Monaami Pal²

¹ Office of Accessibility and Disability Services, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, MD.

² Purdue University Polytechnic Institute, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.

BACKGROUND

Research studies have shown that there is a close relationship between the pharmaceutical industry and the American Psychiatric Association, leading to a tendency amongst mental health professionals to interpret everyday emotional suffering to be a medical condition which needs treatment. This is also fueled by the social media culture and the rise of influencers in the health and well-being industry. Our goal is to investigate how self diagnosis affects Generation Z. This issue of overmedicalization and self diagnosis is amplified by socioeconomic factors such as limited access to mental health services, geographic disparities in availability of healthcare, stigma associated with seeking medical help, and insurance affordability.

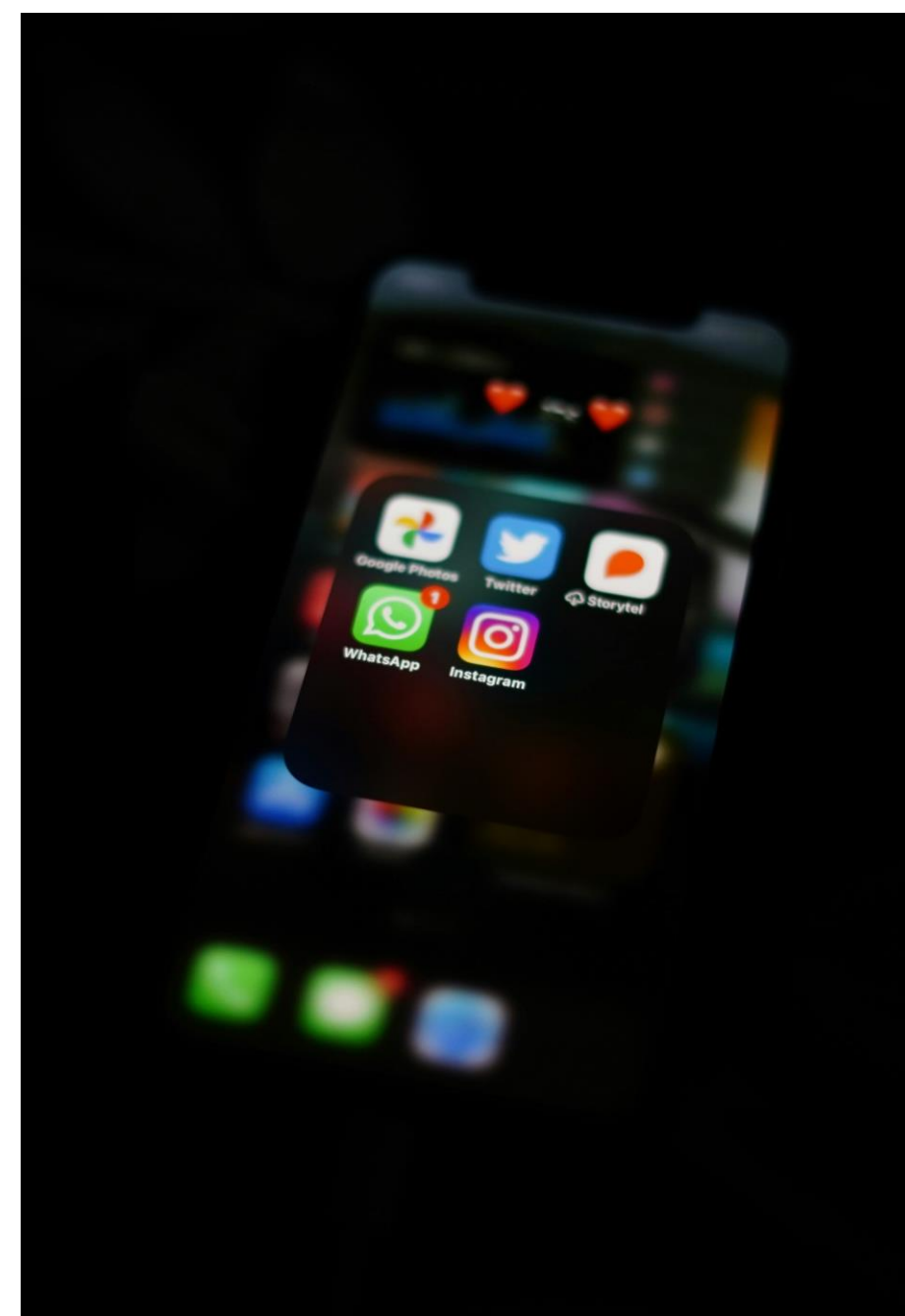


Fig. 1 Social media profoundly influences Gen Z's mental health perceptions, fostering self-diagnosis and contributing to the overmedicalization of common emotions due to pervasive online content and barriers to professional care. (Image Credit: Shyam Mishra)

MAD STUDIES AND CRIP THEORY

Mad studies is an emerging academic field that challenges the dominant medical model of mental illness. The medical model of mental illness views mental distress as a chemical imbalance in the brain, treatable with medical interventions. **Mad studies proposes that madness and mental distress should be understood through the lens of lived experience** which is viewed as a valuable source of knowledge in mad studies, highlighting the perspectives of those who have been labeled as "mad". **Crip theory is a field of study that challenges ableist norms and assumptions about disability.** It seeks to dismantle norms and imagine new ways of being in the world. In addition to these, we aim to highlight the challenges faced by individuals who work to balance accepting their disability along with the societal pressures to operate normally, which is also termed as authenticity in disability; an effect of the rise in social media influence and over medicalization of mental illnesses.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

1. By incorporating crip theory and mad studies, higher education institutions can redefine what success looks like for each student. **Success** can be seen not as constant achievement or productivity but **as progress that respects individual needs and well-being.**
2. This includes shifting from punitive policies for missed classes or late assignments to more **inclusive practices** that recognize different abilities and mental health statuses.
3. Higher education should move beyond offering commercialized mental health and wellness programs and instead **create support systems that are community-based, inclusive, and holistic.** This can include peer support programs, student-led advocacy groups, and curricula that incorporate disability and mental health awareness.

CONCLUSION

Hence, when these frameworks are applied to different aspects of higher education, students would be encouraged to **think critically** and reflect on questions such as **what is considered normal**, what truly needs medical intervention; paving the way to important conversations in the social media space and would lead to an informed decision-making process when it comes to taking charge of one's health and well-being. **These initiatives and services can be freely given to students** by their wellness or health centers, so they aren't worried about socioeconomic factors like costs of service or inaccessibility to mental health services. In addition, the **collectivist ideology** drawn from mad studies and crip theory promotes an **inclusive and supportive** community, pushing back against the isolating effects of social media algorithms and the individualistic focus of modern healthcare systems.

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MENTAL HEALTH

Social media plays a significant role in influencing perspectives of mental health. **Social media is almost like a double-edged sword as it offers both significant benefits and notable drawbacks.** On one side, it creates a wealth of information on the importance of mental health as well as raising awareness of the stigmatization of mental health. While the other side fosters a culture of comparison where users compare their lives to polished and filtered versions of others' lives. In today's digital age, the dark side of social media seems more prominent in its influence on mental health. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (X), expose young people to influencers and users who openly discuss their experiences and diagnoses, sometimes leading viewers to self-identify with conditions without confirmation from a professional. Consequently, this leads to inaccurate self-perceptions, informal or self-diagnosis, exploration of self-assessment tests, anxiety, and more. In addition, **it risks oversimplifying and overgeneralizing complex diagnoses like Bipolar Disorder, Borderline personality disorder (BPD), Depression, and Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).**

The dark side of social media also brings about secondary root causes like healthism. **Healthism is a set of attitudes and beliefs that places keen emphasis on personal health as a measure of wellbeing.** It creates this belief that if someone is not striving for optimal health, they're failing. It creates room for conditions like orthorexia, bulimia, anorexia and unhealthy habits like exercise addiction, calorie counting, body checking, hydration extremism and dietary obsession. Healthism is extremely harmful, but users are blind to the side effects as influencers and other creators on social media continue to push the idea of "being the best version of yourself". We see many examples of this happening in popular trends like "75-day hard challenge", which emphasizes discipline and may prompt unhealthy behaviors to achieve a certain level of fitness. The trend "Chlorophyll water", and other fads **marketed by influencers and content creators as quick fixes for health and beauty often lacking scientific backing and leading to misinformation on its effectiveness.** Similarly, content like "What I eat in a day" and "Girl dinner" promote restrictive eating habits that can be detrimental to one's physical and mental health.

WORD CLOUD - POPULAR TERMS IN GEN Z MENTAL HEALTH HASHTAGS

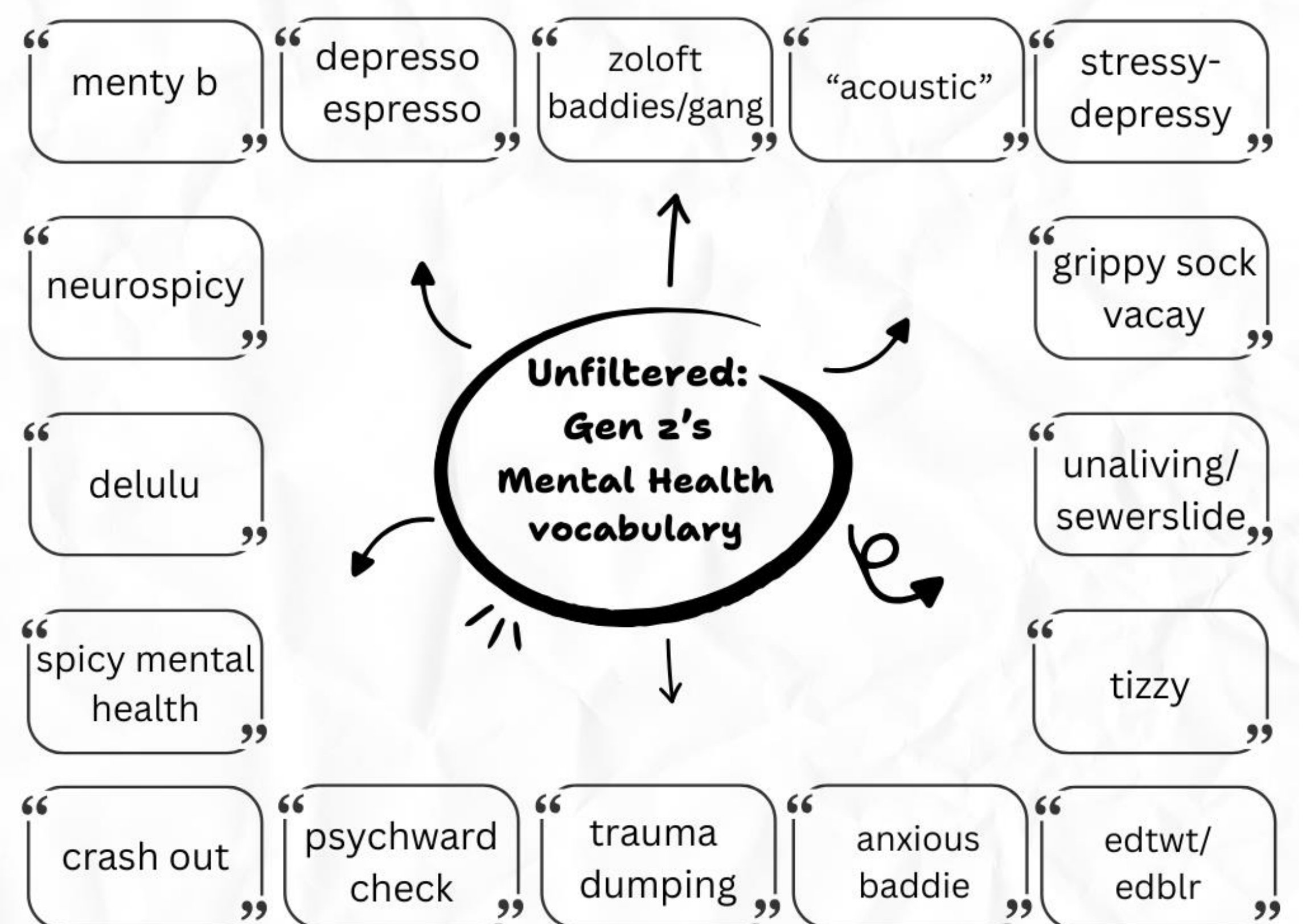


Fig. 3: This visual explores a collection of slang and phrases commonly used by Gen Z when discussing mental health. Found through a deep dive into social media trends and digital conversations, these terms—ranging from humorous ("menty b") to serious ("unaliveing")—highlight how openly mental health is being talked about among this generation. While this open dialogue can help reduce stigma and foster peer support, it's important to recognize the potential downsides. The casual tone of these phrases may sometimes lead to misinformation or trivialize the seriousness of mental health conditions when used out of context. This visual invites viewers to reflect on how language shapes our understanding of mental health, and how we can use it more mindfully.

Barriers to Accessing Professional Mental Health Care for Gen Z

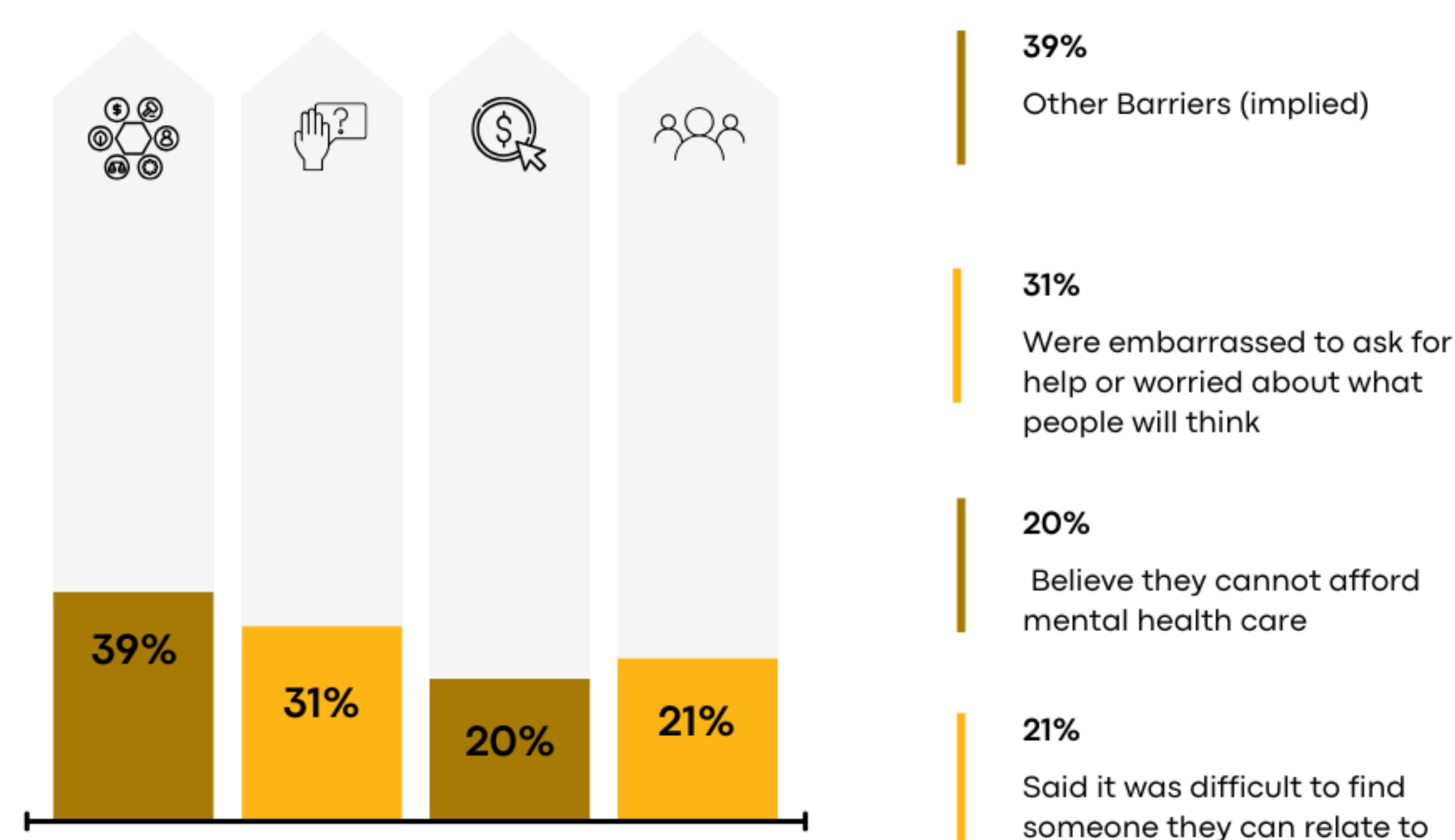


Fig. 2: The bar chart illustrates the key barriers Gen Z youth face in accessing professional mental health care, based on a nationwide survey conducted by Harris Poll in partnership with Blue Shield of California. The online survey, held from May 31 to June 13, 2023, gathered responses from 1,368 individuals aged 14 to 25. According to the results, 61% of respondents reported experiencing obstacles when seeking mental health support. The most common barrier, reported by 31%, was feeling embarrassed to ask for help or worrying about what others might think. Another 21% said it was difficult to find a mental health professional they could relate to, while 20% believed they could not afford care. Additionally, 39% cited other, unspecified barriers. These findings highlight the ongoing need to reduce stigma, improve representation within mental health professions, and increase access to affordable services for young people.

REFERENCES

References are available in the accompanying digital handout.