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Mental Health in the Pre-Digital and Post-Digital Eras: An Epigenetic Perspective

Vincenzo Maria Romeo[1,2*]

[1]Department of Culture and Society, University of Palermo, Italy
[2]School of Psychoanalytic and Group Analytic Psychotherapy SPPG, Reggio Calabria, Italy

[*]**Corresponding author:** Vincenzo Maria Romeo, Department of Culture and Society, University of Palermo, Italy; School of Psychoanalytic and Group Analytic Psychotherapy SPPG, Reggio Calabria, Italy

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1. Abstract

The evolution of mental health across historical epochs has been profoundly influenced by sociocultural and technological changes. The advent of the digital era has introduced significant shifts in the epidemiology, diagnosis, and treatment of psychiatric disorders. In the pre-digital era, mental health care was primarily based on in-person clinical assessments, limited diagnostic tools, and restricted access to specialized services. The post-digital era, however, has witnessed the rise of telepsychiatry, digital phenotyping, and artificial intelligence-driven diagnostics, which have transformed psychiatric practices. While these advancements have expanded access to care and improved early intervention strategies, they have also raised ethical concerns, such as data privacy and the potential over-reliance on digital tools. Additionally, the role of social media in shaping mental health outcomes has become a major research focus, with evidence linking excessive screen time to increased anxiety and depression. This paper examines the epigenetic trends in psychiatric disorders over the past four decades, highlighting the major differences between pre-digital and post-digital mental health landscapes. By analyzing these changes, we aim to provide insights into the benefits and challenges of digital mental health interventions and explore future directions for research and clinical applications.

2. Introduction

Mental health, a fundamental aspect of well-being, has undergone substantial transformations across historical periods, shaped by cultural, economic, and technological factors. In the pre-digital era, psychiatric disorders were diagnosed primarily through clinical interviews, behavioral assessments, and subjective symptom reporting. Access to mental health services was limited by geographic constraints, socioeconomic disparities, and societal stigma, which often resulted in delayed or absent treatment [1]. The conceptualization of mental illness has also evolved; whereas early psychiatric models were largely influenced by psychoanalytic theories [2], later decades saw the emergence of more biologically oriented frameworks, such as the biopsychosocial model [3].

Epidemiological studies from the mid-20th-century provide insights into the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in pre-digital societies. For instance, early community-based surveys indicated that major depressive disorder (MDD) affected approximately 2-3% of the population, with substantial underreporting due to diagnostic limitations [4].

Schizophrenia prevalence was estimated at roughly 1%, with variations depending on geographic and cultural factors [5]. In children, neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were significantly underdiagnosed, largely due to lack of awareness and standardized diagnostic criteria [6].

The advent of digital technologies has introduced profound shifts in mental health epidemiology and treatment. Internet-based mental health interventions, telepsychiatry, and artificial intelligence-driven diagnostics have expanded access to care, but they have also contributed to new challenges, such as digital addiction and cyber-related stressors [7]. The growing reliance on digital platforms for social interaction has raised concerns regarding their impact on adolescent mental health. For example, studies have shown a correlation between excessive social media use and increased rates of depression and anxiety in young populations [8]. Moreover, large-scale epidemiological research has indicated a rise in psychiatric diagnoses, which may partly reflect improved awareness and diagnostic precision rather than a true increase in disorder prevalence [9].

The digitalization of psychiatric epidemiology has also allowed for more comprehensive data collection and analysis. Electronic health records, wearable technology, and digital phenotyping now enable researchers to track behavioral and physiological markers of mental illness with unprecedented precision [10]. While these advancements offer promising avenues for early detection and intervention, they also raise ethical concerns regarding data privacy and the potential for algorithmic bias in psychiatric assessments [11].

As society continues to navigate the complexities of the digital age, it is essential to strike a balance between leveraging technological innovations for mental health care and mitigating their unintended consequences. Future research should focus on optimizing digital tools for psychiatric assessment and intervention while ensuring that they complement, rather than replace, traditional therapeutic approaches. By integrating insights from epidemiology, neuroscience, and digital psychiatry, we can develop more effective and equitable mental health strategies for both children and adults in the modern era.

3. The Demarcation between the Pre-Digital and Post-Digital Eras

The transition from the pre-digital to the post-digital era represents a paradigm shift in mental health care, shaped by advancements in technology, diagnostic methodologies, and treatment accessibility. The pre-digital era was characterized by limited diagnostic precision, reliance on subjective clinical interviews, and significant barriers to accessing mental health care, particularly for individuals in rural or economically disadvantaged areas [12]. In contrast, the post-digital era has seen a rapid proliferation of digital tools, electronic health records, and telepsychiatry, facilitating more timely and accurate diagnoses [13].

One of the defining characteristics of the post-digital era is the emergence of big data analytics, which enables real-time monitoring of psychiatric symptoms and population-wide epidemiological studies [14]. Digital interventions, such as smartphone applications and virtual therapy platforms, have made mental health services more accessible, though they have also introduced new challenges related to digital literacy and data privacy [15]. Moreover, the increased use of social media and digital communication has altered social interactions and mental health risk factors, creating novel stressors such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and information overload [16].

While digitalization has improved early detection and intervention strategies, it has also led to concerns regarding over-reliance on technology for mental health care. The rise of AI-driven diagnostics and automated therapy chatbots has raised ethical and practical questions about the dehumanization of psychiatric care [17]. Furthermore, the digital divide continues to pose a barrier to equitable mental health access, with socioeconomically disadvantaged populations having less access to reliable internet connectivity and digital resources [18].

4. Mental Health in the Pre-Digital Era

Historically, psychiatric epidemiology relied on community-based surveys and structured clinical assessments. Mid-20th-century research revealed significant discrepancies in mental disorder prevalence across different countries and demographic groups [19]. One of the major limitations was the lack of standardized diagnostic tools; the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM) only gained widespread adoption with its third edition in 1980 [20]. Prior to this, psychiatric conditions were often categorized using broad, inconsistent definitions, leading to variability in prevalence estimates [21].

A critical issue in the pre-digital era was the stigma associated with mental illness, which discouraged individuals from seeking treatment [22]. Public perceptions of psychiatric disorders were often influenced by cultural narratives rather than scientific evidence, leading to widespread misconceptions and discrimination [23]. Consequently, individuals with schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety disorders were frequently institutionalized, sometimes under inhumane conditions [12]. Psychiatric hospitals, though intended for care, often functioned as long-term confinement facilities, with limited therapeutic interventions available [24].

The epidemiology of childhood psychiatric disorders was particularly underdeveloped in the pre-digital era. ADHD, now one of the most commonly diagnosed pediatric conditions, was scarcely recognized before the 1970s [25]. Similarly, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was initially considered a rare condition, with early estimates suggesting a prevalence of 1 in 10,000 children [26]. Many neurodevelopmental disorders were misattributed to parental influences or environmental factors, delaying the recognition of their biological basis [27].

Access to mental health care in the pre-digital era was largely constrained by socioeconomic and geographic factors. Rural communities had limited or no access to specialized psychiatric services, while urban centers often had overcrowded and underfunded facilities [28]. Additionally, mental health treatment was primarily psychoanalytically oriented until the rise of pharmacological interventions in the 1950s and 1960s [29]. The introduction of antipsychotic medications, such as chlorpromazine, marked a turning point

in psychiatric care, facilitating deinstitutionalization and enabling community-based treatments [30].

Despite the challenges of the pre-digital era, important epidemiological studies laid the groundwork for modern psychiatric research. Large-scale surveys, such as the epidemiologic catchment area (ECA) study in the United States, provided crucial insights into the distribution and determinants of mental disorders [21]. These studies underscored the need for more rigorous diagnostic criteria and improved access to mental health care, paving the way for contemporary epidemiological methods.

5. The Digital Transformation and its Impact on Mental Health

The digital era has revolutionized mental health epidemiology by enabling large-scale data collection and more accurate prevalence estimates. The global burden of mental disorders has increased significantly, with major depressive disorder (MDD) affecting 280 million people worldwide, and anxiety disorders impacting over 301 million individuals. Among children, diagnoses of ADHD and ASD have risen sharply, with prevalence rates reaching 5-10% and 1-2%, respectively. This increase may reflect improved diagnostic precision rather than true incidence growth.

One of the major shifts introduced by the digital era is the increasing reliance on technology for mental health screening and intervention. Digital phenotyping, which involves analyzing behavioral data collected from smartphones and wearable devices, has provided novel insights into psychiatric conditions [31]. For example, passive data collection from mobile applications has been used to monitor sleep patterns, speech variability, and movement patterns, which are critical indicators of mood disorders such as bipolar disorder and depression. This real-time data collection allows for earlier detection of mental health deterioration and timely intervention.

Social media has played a dual role in the mental health landscape. While online communities can provide social support and reduce feelings of isolation, excessive social media use has been linked to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem [8]. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social comparison, cyberbullying, and problematic internet use, which have been associated with increased suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviors [32]. Furthermore, the role of influencers and mental health advocacy on platforms like TikTok and Instagram has led to increased mental health awareness but has also contributed to the risk of self-diagnosis and misinformation [33].

Telepsychiatry has emerged as a key innovation in digital mental health, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that telemedicine consultations for psychiatric care can be as effective as in-person visits, especially for follow-up appointments and medication management. However, disparities in access to digital tools remain a concern, as individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or rural areas may have limited internet connectivity and technological literacy, restricting their ability to benefit from telepsychiatry services.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning have also influenced psychiatric diagnostics and treatment. AI-driven chatbots and virtual therapists, such as Woebot and Wysa, provide cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)-based interventions that help individuals manage stress, anxiety, and depression [34]. While these tools can augment mental health services and increase accessibility, concerns regarding data privacy, ethical implications, and the lack of human empathy in AI-driven therapy remain challenges that need to be addressed [35].

The gamification of mental health interventions has gained traction, with applications like SuperBetter and MindDoc integrating game mechanics to encourage users to engage in self-care practices [36]. These interventions have shown promise in improving mood and cognitive function, particularly in individuals with mild to moderate depression. However, the long-term efficacy of gamified mental health interventions is still under investigation, and more randomized controlled trials are needed to validate their effectiveness.

Despite the benefits of digital mental health innovations, the overuse of technology has introduced new psychiatric concerns, such as internet gaming disorder (IGD) and smartphone addiction [37]. The inclusion of IGD in the DSM-5 as a condition warranting further study underscores the need to better understand the implications of digital addiction on overall well-being [38]. Moreover, emerging research highlights the potential impact of excessive screen time on cognitive development and attention regulation, particularly in young children.

6. Social Media and Psychiatric Disorders

The widespread use of social media has emerged as both a risk factor and a potential tool for mental health management. Excessive screen time, cyberbullying, and social comparison have been linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety, particularly in adolescents [32]. Studies have suggested that individuals who spend more than three hours per day on social media are more likely to experience symptoms of mental distress, including emotional dysregulation and suicidal ideation [8].

Social comparison theory posits that individuals use social media to compare themselves with others, often leading to negative self-perception and increased psychological distress [39]. Research has demonstrated that passive social media use (e.g., scrolling without engaging) correlates more strongly with depression than active use (e.g., commenting, posting) [40]. Moreover, adolescents who engage in social comparison on Instagram report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and anxiety [41].

Cyberbullying has become a pervasive issue, particularly among young users of digital platforms. A meta-analysis found that cyberbullying victimization is significantly associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation [42]. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying extends beyond school settings, making it difficult for victims to escape the psychological effects [43].

On the positive side, social media has facilitated the dissemination of mental health resources and support networks. Online therapy platforms, such as BetterHelp and Talkspace, have expanded access to professional care, especially for individuals facing barriers to in-person therapy

[33]. Additionally, peer support communities on platforms like Reddit and Facebook provide individuals with mental health conditions a space to share experiences and coping strategies [16].

Digital interventions leveraging social media have also shown promise. For instance, interventions that use automated chatbots to provide cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) strategies have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety [34]. However, concerns remain regarding data privacy, misinformation, and the potential for algorithm-driven content to exacerbate mental health issues [44].

7. Most Discussed Mental Health Topics: 1980-2000 *vs.* 2000-2020

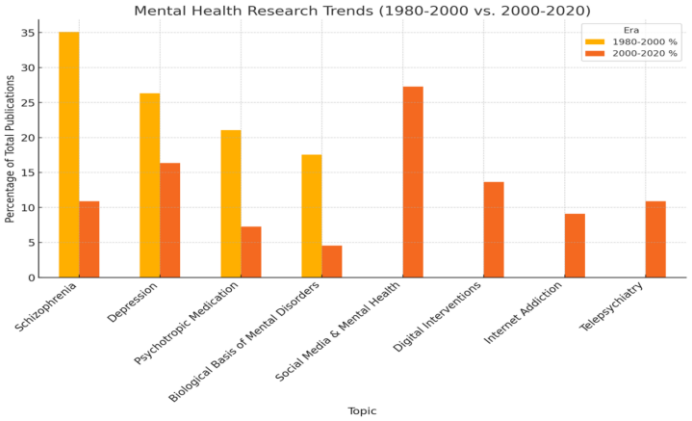
The most discussed mental health topics have shifted significantly between the two decades before and after the widespread adoption of digital technologies. Between 1980 and 2000, the most prevalent topics in mental health research included schizophrenia, depression, the biological basis of psychiatric disorders, and the effects of psychotropic medication [45]. In contrast, the post-2000 era has seen a surge in research on digital mental health, internet addiction, social media's impact on psychological well-being, and telepsychiatry [8].

In the pre-digital era, schizophrenia research dominated psychiatric discourse, with over 20,000 studies published in peer-reviewed journals between 1980 and 2000, focusing on neurobiology, genetics, and pharmacological interventions [46]. The introduction of atypical antipsychotics, such as clozapine and risperidone, was a major milestone in psychiatric treatment, leading to extensive studies on their efficacy and side effects [47]. Concurrently, major depressive disorder (MDD) was a prominent topic, with approximately 15,000 publications emphasizing neurotransmitter dysfunction and the advent of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) like fluoxetine (Prozac) [48].

The 2000-2020 period has witnessed a paradigm shift in mental health research. Social media and its psychological effects have become a focal point, with over 30,000 studies examining its association with anxiety, depression, and self-esteem [32]. Additionally, digital interventions, including mobile health apps and telepsychiatry, have been widely explored as tools for increasing mental health accessibility, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic [49]. Internet addiction has also emerged as a significant concern, with over 10,000 studies analyzing its impact on cognitive and emotional well-being [7].

The contrast between these two periods highlights the evolving priorities in mental health research. While the pre-digital era concentrated on understanding the neurobiological and pharmacological aspects of psychiatric disorders, the post-digital era has expanded to include the psychosocial and technological dimensions of mental health, reflecting the increasing integration of digital tools in daily life (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mental health research trends.



8. Artificial Intelligence and Digital Psychiatry

Artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced new frontiers in mental health diagnostics and treatment. Machine learning models now assist in identifying early markers of psychiatric disorders through speech analysis, facial recognition, and digital phenotyping [50]. AI-driven speech analysis has been particularly effective in detecting early signs of schizophrenia, depression, and neurodegenerative disorders by analyzing speech patterns and sentiment [51]. Furthermore, digital phenotyping, which collects behavioral data through smartphones and wearables, has provided new ways to monitor mood disorders and predict relapses in bipolar disorder [31].

Telepsychiatry has further enhanced mental health care accessibility, particularly in underserved regions. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of telemedicine, leading to a shift in psychiatric care delivery models [49]. Studies indicate that telepsychiatry can be as effective as in-person treatment for conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with patients reporting high satisfaction rates [52].

AI-based therapeutic interventions, such as digital cognitive behavioral therapy (dCBT) programs, have demonstrated efficacy in treating anxiety and depression. Programs like Woebot and Wysa use chatbot-driven cognitive therapy to provide psychological support in real time [34]. While these tools improve accessibility, concerns remain regarding ethical considerations, algorithmic bias, and data privacy [35].

Neuroimaging research powered by AI has further advanced our understanding of psychiatric disorders. Machine learning algorithms applied to functional MRI (fMRI) scans have enabled researchers to classify and predict psychiatric conditions with greater accuracy than traditional diagnostic methods [53]. These advancements hold promise for precision psychiatry, where treatment plans are personalized based on individual neurobiological profiles.

However, AI applications in mental health also pose challenges. The reliance on large datasets raises concerns about data security and potential biases in algorithmic decision-making [54]. Additionally, the lack of regulatory frameworks for AI-driven psychiatric tools necessitates caution in their widespread adoption [55].

9. Conclusion

The transition from the pre-digital to the post-digital era has fundamentally transformed the landscape of mental health care. While digital technologies have expanded access to psychiatric services, enhanced diagnostic precision, and facilitated early interventions, they have also introduced novel challenges that warrant careful consideration. The growing reliance on artificial intelligence (AI), telepsychiatry, and social media-based interventions raises ethical, practical, and clinical concerns that must be addressed to optimize the benefits of digital mental health care.

One of the most significant advantages of the post-digital era is the increased accessibility of mental health services. Telepsychiatry has played a crucial role in bridging the treatment gap, particularly in underserved areas where traditional psychiatric services are scarce [52]. Digital mental health interventions, including mobile health (mHealth) applications, have empowered individuals to manage their mental health autonomously [56]. However, the effectiveness of these interventions varies across populations, with disparities in digital literacy and access to technology presenting substantial barriers [15].

The digital era has also seen an exponential rise in social media usage, with profound implications for mental health. Research suggests that while social media platforms can serve as valuable support networks for individuals with mental health conditions, excessive usage is associated with increased anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances [32]. The paradox of social media is that it can both enhance and deteriorate psychological well-being, depending on individual usage patterns and the quality of online interactions [8].

Artificial intelligence has revolutionized mental health diagnostics and treatment planning. Machine learning algorithms have demonstrated remarkable accuracy in identifying psychiatric conditions based on behavioral and linguistic patterns [50]. Digital phenotyping, which involves the passive collection of behavioral data from smartphones and wearables, has enabled researchers to detect early warning signs of psychiatric disorders [31]. However, concerns regarding data privacy, ethical considerations, and the potential biases embedded in AI models remain unresolved [55].

Despite these advancements, the post-digital era has introduced challenges related to information overload and the potential for digital addiction. The continuous exposure to distressing news, cyberbullying, and unrealistic social comparisons has contributed to heightened levels of stress, particularly among adolescents [41]. Furthermore, the widespread availability of mental health-related information on the internet has led to an increase in self-diagnosis and misinformation, underscoring the need for digital literacy initiatives [44].

Moving forward, a balanced approach is required to harness the benefits of digital technologies while mitigating their drawbacks. Future research should focus on integrating digital mental health interventions with traditional therapeutic approaches to ensure a holistic treatment paradigm [13]. Policymakers and mental health professionals must collaborate to establish regulatory frameworks that safeguard patient data and ensure ethical AI deployment in psychiatric care [54].

Ultimately, the success of digital mental health interventions will depend on their ability to complement, rather than replace, human-centered psychiatric care. As society continues to navigate the complexities of the digital age, maintaining a patient-centric approach that prioritizes accessibility, ethical considerations, and clinical effectiveness will be essential for the future of mental health care.

10. Limitations

Despite the advancements brought by digitalization, several limitations persist in the study and application of digital mental health tools. First, the over-reliance on technology in psychiatric care raises concerns regarding accessibility. Digital mental health interventions assume a certain level of technological literacy and access to digital devices, which may not be available to all populations, particularly those in low-income or rural areas. The digital divide remains a critical barrier to equitable mental health care, as individuals with limited internet access or digital proficiency may be excluded from benefiting from telepsychiatry and mobile health applications.

Another major limitation is the ethical and privacy concerns surrounding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital phenotyping in mental health assessments. The collection and analysis of behavioral data from smartphones and wearables pose significant risks related to data security and consent. There is also a growing concern about algorithmic biases in AI-driven psychiatric diagnostics, as training data may not adequately represent diverse populations, leading to potential disparities in diagnosis and treatment recommendations.

Additionally, the long-term efficacy of digital mental health interventions remains uncertain. While numerous studies have demonstrated the short-term benefits of teletherapy and AI-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), there is limited research on their sustained effectiveness over extended periods. Digital mental health tools may also lack the human empathy and nuanced understanding that are crucial components of traditional therapeutic relationships. Patients engaging with AI-based mental health interventions may experience lower satisfaction and reduced adherence compared to traditional face-to-face therapy.

A further limitation is the potential for digital mental health applications to contribute to self-diagnosis and misinformation. The widespread availability of mental health-related content on social media platforms has led to an increase in individuals self-diagnosing psychiatric conditions without professional consultation. While greater awareness of mental health issues is beneficial, the risk of misinterpretation and the promotion of unverified treatment strategies present significant challenges. Moreover, social media algorithms that prioritize engagement may inadvertently promote distressing content, exacerbating symptoms of anxiety and depression in vulnerable individuals.

Lastly, digitalization has introduced novel stressors that impact mental health, such as cyberbullying, social media addiction, and information overload. The transition to a digitally mediated social landscape has altered interpersonal

dynamics, contributing to increased rates of loneliness and social comparison. The psychological impact of constant connectivity and the pressure to curate an idealized online presence can significantly affect self-esteem and mental well-being. Future research must address these emerging challenges to ensure that digital mental health interventions are implemented in a way that maximizes benefits while minimizing risks.

By acknowledging these limitations, researchers and clinicians can work toward developing more inclusive, ethical, and effective digital mental health solutions. Bridging the digital divide, enhancing regulatory frameworks for data privacy, and integrating digital tools with traditional therapeutic approaches will be essential steps in optimizing mental health care in the digital age.

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