

Young People, Mental Health, and Social Media Misinformation: Online Safety and Beyond

Executive summary

Young people are increasingly turning to social media for mental health advice, but much of this content is unregulated and misleading. Our research shows that misinformation from influencers is a key problem in three areas:

- (1) There is no standard verification for content creators who post mental health information.
- (2) Inaccurate advice is given about the use of supplements as an alternative to professional health support.
- (3) Communication about mental health symptoms is often confusing, using vague language and sensationalist claims.

Current educational approaches are not enough to tackle this problem.

- ‘Media literacy’ is separated from ‘Health and wellbeing’ in the PSHE curriculum.
- Teachers feel ill-equipped to tackle the fast-changing forms of misinformation online.
- Pupils want educational resources that go beyond online safety and equip them to evaluate health communication more effectively.

Peer and family support for mental health is highly variable where persistent stigma about mental health based on gender, race, ethnicity and

neurodiversity further hinders young people’s help-seeking behaviour.

The risks of engaging with misleading social media content about mental health include

- Worse mental health and wellbeing
- Self-diagnosis and social isolation
- Disconnecting from professional services

The findings come from qualitative data collected in a representative cohort of young people (age 16-18) including 75 pupils from 13 schools and colleges across England. The [*Influencer Stories of Mental Health and Young People*](#) research project was funded by the Economic and Research Council (ES/Y001966/1)

Policy recommendations

- Introduce new regulation that requires companies to verify the credentials of health professionals across all social media platforms.
- Evidence-based approaches to teaching media and mental health literacy should be integrated into the PSHE curriculum.
- Tackling misinformation about mental health must be linked to wider holistic approaches that cut across school, home and community contexts.
- Young people’s perspectives should be included within decision-making processes, wherever possible.