

Social Media  
And Mental Health:  
What Young  
People Want

Snapshot from ReachOut's research:  
*Mind Over Media*  
*Supporting youth mental health in the digital age*

# Key findings



Young people use social media as much as Google to search for mental health information.



Young people want to be able to easily discern the credibility of mental health information they come across on digital platforms, including on social media.



Young people see online platforms as having an instrumental role in raising awareness of mental health challenges, through quality information and shared accounts of lived experience.



Young people want more safe and supportive spaces in which to share their mental health journey.



Young people want better tools for combating misinformation on digital platforms and excessive use of social media.

## Summary

Young people are highly engaged with online content and are increasingly turning to digital platforms such as social media for mental health information and support (Milton, 2023). Our findings provide insight into how these platforms can provide accurate, safe and relevant information to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

## About the study

This brief summarises the findings from ReachOut's report *Mind Over Media: Supporting youth mental health in the digital age*. The multiphase, mixed-methods study in which qualitative data from 22 young people informed the design of a national survey of 2056 young people aged 16–25, conducted in November 2023.



# Young people use social media as much as Google to search for mental health information

**73%**

of young people regularly use social media to search for mental health information, or have done so in the past.

**35%**

of young people with a probable serious mental illness search for mental health information on social media once a week or more.

**50%**

More than 50% of young people facing mental health challenges use social media as a substitute for professional support.

Overall, young people reported using social media and community platforms as much as they use Google to find mental health information. This was particularly true for people who lack access to, or do not want, professional help. In some cases, social media is being used as a substitute for professional care.

Young people were asked to identify their preferred platforms for searching for mental health information other than Google. The top 3 platforms were:



TikTok 31%

Youtube 26%

Instagram 15%



# What are they looking for?

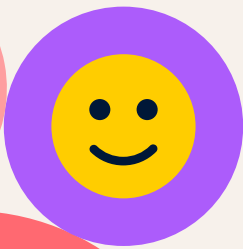
What are young people looking for when searching for mental health information online? The top 3 responses were:

- **practical advice about how to cope with challenges (72%)**
- **information that makes me feel like I'm going to be okay (71%)**
- **information about specific mental health conditions (69%).**

Encouragingly, this finding strongly aligns to the resources ReachOut produces for audiences on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok that aim to ensure young people have access to relevant, relatable and reliable information that supports their wellbeing and helps them to feel better.

In this study, we found that young people conceptualise mental health on social media as encompassing a broad range of content, from uplifting, light-hearted videos for immediate relief from negative feelings to more serious content with advice on specific mental health conditions. Young people identified 4 broad categories of content:

- **calming and uplifting content**
- **content promoting self-care**
- **content addressing broad life challenges and concerns**
- **content specifically about mental health and mental health conditions.**



*'... using Reddit and Instagram allowed me to understand that what I was struggling with was OCD and not just general anxiety. Once I sought help, I got put on medication + found ways to manage my OCD and now I am 10x better. I figured this out through looking up my symptoms on Google and Reddit + following a writer on Instagram who described very similar experiences and had OCD.'*

**Female, 19, Major city**



## What do young people think could make social media platforms safer as a resource for mental health information?

We asked young people open-ended questions about their experiences of using social media and community platforms for mental health information, and what they would like to see from platforms and content creators to better support their mental health and wellbeing. As avid users of social and community platforms, many young people acknowledge that ‘social media is a double-edged sword that can damage but also help [my] mental health’ (Male, 23, regional area). Thematic analysis of these responses revealed that young people are looking for: **tools for safety, better mental health content, and safe spaces and communities.**

*‘[I recommend] actually banning people who are clearly spreading misinformation or harmful beliefs. If I see something that is clearly false or likely to cause negative impacts on others (e.g. perpetuating stigma or hatred), I will report it, but none of my reports are ever actioned as there are not “sufficient grounds” to take action against the creator. It is clear that digital platforms are more worried about user engagement than user safety and wellbeing.’*

**Female, 21, Major city**

# Young people want tools for safety

While most social media platforms have some safeguards in place, this study uncovered an **opportunity for better in-built safety** mechanisms to support the wellbeing of young people. The safeguards young people suggested include the ability to filter one's own content, or some control over the 'algorithm', accountability from content creators, as well as platforms enabling easier recognition of credible mental health information. Young people also want to see better labelling, moderation and filtering of mental health content, particularly content that could be triggering for vulnerable young people. They argued that many platforms don't monitor content sufficiently or respond adequately to complaints.



Young people want to improve safety by means of:

Easier filtering or curation of content



User control over algorithms



Accountability from content creators



Easier recognition of credible mental health information



Better labelling, moderation and filtering of mental health content



Improved monitoring and responses to exposure to harmful content



While some participants felt that it is the job of the user to self-regulate, not the job of platforms to regulate the amount of time users spend online, other young people want platforms to introduce more mechanisms to help in 'making it less addictive' (Female, 22, major city).

*'Probably having the apps introduce reminders for people to take breaks from their phone. I know that some apps have this but hopefully it becomes a standard across all the apps.'*

**Female, 18, Major city**

# Young people want better mental health content

When asked, 'What would you like to see digital platforms (including social media) doing to support young people who look for mental health information online?', many open responses included 'education' or 'more awareness [of mental health]'. One young person said they would be happy to see famous online figures promoting mental health information: 'I want everyone to have education on mental health information ... You could do it by advertising it on YouTube or any other platforms' (Female, 22, rural area).



When it comes to the type of educational content young people are hoping to find, they have high regard for knowledge shared by those with lived experience of mental health challenges. Younger participants aged 16–18 years, in particular, expressed a preference for relatable content from people with experience of their own mental health challenges.

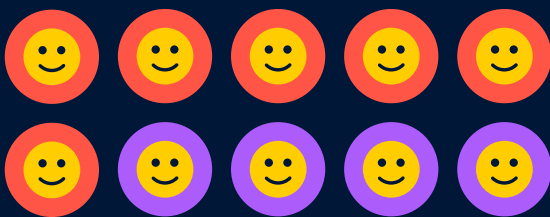
Young people told us they fact-check mental health information on social media, and 53 per cent told us they check the credentials of content creators. Others (58%) take a 'grain of salt' approach to any mental health content they find on social media. Despite this healthy level of scepticism, many also wanted ways to be able more easily to **identify credible sources** of mental health information. They suggested that this could be via links to reliable sources given within the content, or by providing ways to check the credentials of the creators of content about mental health and argued for the need for 'more information about how to access services' (Female, 21). Our participants felt that younger users with less experience of navigating misinformation online especially needed this additional support.

*'Google has been pretty accurate for me in terms of finding out information, but TikTok is more personal, and I sometimes find myself relating personally to another person's experience.'*

**Female, 18, Major city**

**6 in 10**

young people fact check mental health information they find on social media

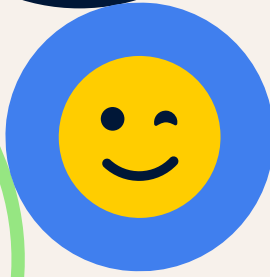


*'Have verified checks for medical professionals so young people can access science-based evidence and research.'*

**Female, 22, Major city**

*'Give crisis numbers immediately in an alert when there is harming content. Not all content of mental health should be accessible to young people because we are young! Not everything out there should be able to be consumed by people who do not realise the full implications of their actions and also are too easily influenced.'*

**Female, 17, Major city**



## Young people want safe spaces and communities

**65%** of participants agreed, or strongly agreed, that they use **social media for 'connection** with other people who have experienced the same thing as me'.

Our findings indicate that young people are already finding support through social media and community platforms. They do this by connecting with groups of people with similar experiences to themselves, and viewing content by and following creators whom they see as relatable.

*'YouTube, reddit and discord have a community that is sometimes very helpful and kind. It's always a risk but most of the time worth it in my experience.'*

**Male, 19, Regional area**

However, young people identified significant social challenges, with 38% reporting that they were extremely or very concerned about bullies, trolls and haters when using social media as a mental health resource. Young people told us they want to see better, more supportive spaces where they can talk about mental health and wellbeing in a safe and secure environment. As one young person put it, 'Provide more safe places for people to express their mental health concerns' (Male, 21, regional area).





## Conclusions

Content consumption on social media platforms for mental health and wellbeing support is a balancing act on many levels: judging what is helpful or harmful, or when time spent online has become excessive, and deciding whether connection with others online outweighs the risks of exposing oneself to potentially harmful interactions (Choroszewicz, 2024). Young people in this study demonstrated **'awareness of the risks'** of the online world and the ability to make good choices online. However, they want **support** to make navigation of these fine lines easier, and specific mechanisms across social and community platforms to improve access to mental health information and support. Young people have specific views and nuanced criteria for choosing content to engage with.

When content doesn't resonate or seem credible, users adopt a 'grain of salt' approach and often scroll on, with the result that they lose the opportunity to learn more about mental health. Young people are **calling for the improvement** of functionality and content across digital platforms, which is important to enable empowered and safe engagement with mental health information online (Choroszewicz, 2024). In light of these findings, it is clear that government and social media platforms have an opportunity to support credible mental health organisations to increase their presence and service delivery on social media channels, and in doing so to build a supportive and sustainable digital environment for young people now and into the future.





## How ReachOut can help

ReachOut is a leading online mental health service supporting young people during tough times. We help young people feel better about today and the future, no matter what challenge they're facing. ReachOut provides a safe online place where young people can openly express themselves, explore what's happening in their lives, connect with people who understand their situation, and find the resources to help them manage their challenges now and in the future. Young people can access ReachOut's website, a safe online place where they can openly express themselves, explore what's happening in their lives, connect with people who understand their situation, and find the resources to help them manage their challenges now and in the future. ReachOut has been designed specifically for – and with – young people. Resources are available on topics such as cyberbullying, body image and managing a young person's technology use, including A Parent's Guide to Instagram.

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ReachOut Australia would like to thank the 2056 young people who participated in this research.

## References

Choroszewicz, M. (2024). 'Addressing youths' digital agency with internet technologies: Discourses and practices that produce inequalities', *Journal of Youth Studies*, pp. 1–18. doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2343698

Milton, A., et al. (2023). 'I see me here.' Mental Health Content, Community and Algorithmic Curation on TikTok. Proceedings of the 2023 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. Article 480. Hamburg, Germany.

## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present. We recognise connection to Country as integral to health and wellbeing.