

Social media

as

a

mental

health



resource:

Exploring

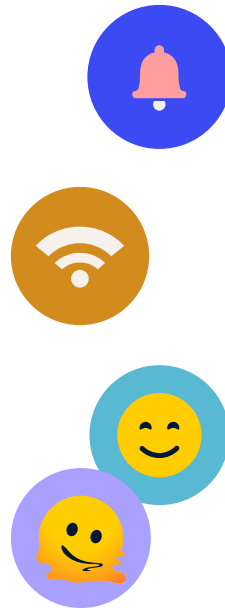
the benefits

and risks

Snapshot from ReachOut's research:
*Harnessing the feed: social media for
mental health information and support*

Key findings

- Young people use TikTok, YouTube and Instagram as much as Google to search for mental health information.
- Nearly **3 in 5** young people in this study said that viewing mental health content on social media platforms has increased their awareness of mental health issues.
- **40%** of survey participants have sought professional help after viewing mental health content online.
- Young people are **highly aware** of the potential for misinformation, platform addictiveness, cyberbullying and data privacy in using social media platforms as a mental health resource.



Summary

Use of social media platforms among young people has proliferated in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2020). These platforms have become a primary source of information about mental health for young people, who report preferring to obtain information anonymously online than to have face-to-face contact with a mental health professional (Milton, 2023).

ReachOut conducted a study to better understand the role that social media (e.g. TikTok, Instagram, etc.) and community platforms (e.g. Reddit, Discord, etc.) can play in providing mental health information and support to young people. The results highlight that social media platforms are important in helping to increase awareness and understanding of mental health and in directing young people towards professional help when needed. Young people also demonstrate a keen awareness of the potential for harmful information or misinformation, and varying levels of skill in verifying the trustworthiness of mental health information they come across.

About the study

These findings are a snapshot from ReachOut's report *Harnessing the feed: social media for mental health information and support*. 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, was conducted in November 2023.



Social media platforms rival Google in youth searches for mental health information

73%

of young people use (or have used) social media regularly to search for mental health information.



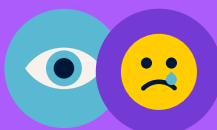
>50%

of young people experiencing mental health challenges use these platforms as a substitute for professional support.



35%

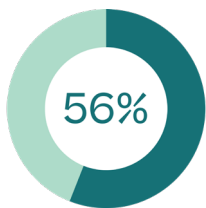
of participants with a probable serious mental illness search for mental health information on social media once a week or more.



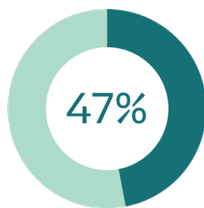
Young people are using social media platforms as a key source of mental health information, with TikTok (**31%**), YouTube (**26%**) and Instagram (**15%**) being the top 3 preferred platforms for this purpose. Young people reported that they use these platforms to search for mental health information as much as they use Google. Only **1 in 4** report that they have never searched for mental health information on social media and community platforms.

Our findings reveal that social media platforms play an important role as an information source for young people who don't have access to, or don't want, professional help, with more than **50%** of participants reporting that they use social media as a resource in those situations. This is particularly the case for young people with a probable serious mental illness, **35%** of whom said they search for mental health information on social media once a week or more, compared to **14%** of those who don't have a probable serious mental illness.

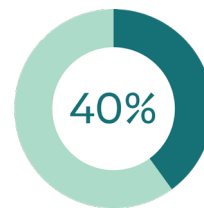
Viewing mental health content on social media platforms increases mental health awareness



of young people said that mental health content on social media increased their mental health awareness.



have used these platforms as a way to find out how to get professional support.



have sought professional help after viewing mental health content online.

While a great deal of attention has focused on the negative impact of social media use on youth mental health, participants in this study described obtaining a number of benefits from viewing mental health information on social media. Thematic analysis of qualitative data identified four key benefits: normalising mental illness; accessibility; social support and connection and viewing uplifting content.

Young people described how viewing information about mental health on social media platforms had increased their awareness of mental health and served to reduce stigma. It was also an easy and accessible way to find information and social support. As one participant put it: *'If you are smart with social media it's easy to find other people who share the same experiences as you'* (Male, 17, major city).

The ability social media gave them to learn about the lived experience of others reassured young people and gave them a sense of being less alone in their experiences, as well as helping them to realise that *'seeking help is okay'* (Male, 18, major city).

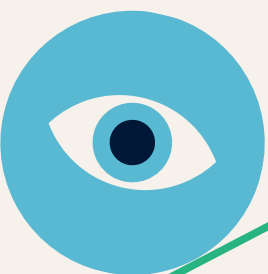
'I feel like I'm more informed about mental health from hearing other people's experiences with it and it's become more normalised and a less taboo thing for me.' (Female, 22, major city)

'Being able to read about or watch people in my situation sometimes reassures me. Being able to gain more information about how I'm feeling just enables me to be calmer.' (Male, 21, rural area)

Young people also appreciated when others posted uplifting content related to mental health. As one study participant described it:

'I often get friends who repost positive mental health messages like "be kind, people are hurting from things they don't talk about, if you woke up today, you're doing great" etc. and I find that genuinely makes me happier and I reshare it hoping to have the same impact on someone else or just enough of an impact that it stops them from spiralling and doing something irreversible.' (Female, 18, major city)

Participants acknowledged, however, that sometimes the information provided on social media platforms could only be of short-term help: *'Often the fix is more temporary than it is practical/long lasting. Having access to strategies from mental health professionals would be better.'* (Male, 18, regional area)



Young people are highly aware of the potential for platform addictiveness and misinformation

63% of study participants have encountered misleading or potentially harmful mental health content.

Young people were very or extremely concerned about:

43% Platform addictiveness

41% Privacy

41% Data security

38% Bullies, trolls and haters

38% Misinformation

38% Potentially harmful information on social media

Young people demonstrate a high level of awareness of and ability to identify potential misinformation in mental health content on social media platforms, with 63 per cent of young people reporting they had encountered misinformation in the past. Around 2 in 5 participants indicated that they were very or extremely concerned about platform addictiveness, privacy, data security, and potentially harmful information or misinformation on social media.

In open-ended questions, many young people displayed a clear ability to make judgements about the quality of mental health information they came across. They noted that some content encouraged erroneous self-diagnosis and that:

'There are a lot of armchair psychologists out there that are talking absolute nonsense and cannot be trusted' (Male, 22, regional area).

Young people acknowledged that while the majority of content creators might be well-intentioned, information about self-harm or eating disorders, or content that glorifies suicide and depression, could be harmful if platform algorithms direct them into the feed of vulnerable young people. They reported that the social comparison and competition that occurs on social media could also be harmful.

'The algorithms will push stuff that is very dangerous to mental health very quickly and the user is responsible for disengaging with that content. Particularly content relating to eating disorders is especially harmful as the content can be used as comparison and competition.' (Female, 17, major city)

Young people also noted that negative content could cause people's moods to spiral: *'Sometimes there is a chance of going into unhelpful rabbit holes that worsen mood'*(Female, 19, major city). Social communities could also form 'echo chambers', where unhelpful ideas were reinforced by others: *'They often allow for echo chambers to form where people's ideas are not challenged – and thus mentally unhealthy people may have their maladaptive ideas reinforced.'*(Female, 21, major city).

Despite many young people feeling equipped to discriminate between helpful and harmful information, this research demonstrated that younger users had less well-developed strategies. Participants in the **16–18** year age group were less likely to fact-check potentially harmful information than older participants (**aged 22+**), and preferred content from people with real-life experience over content from mental health organisations.



What do young people believe can be done?

Young people told us about the things they believe could help to minimise the potential harm and to capitalise on the value of social media as a mental health resource. They described the need for individual users to **take responsibility** for managing their time spent online and for thinking carefully about the creators they follow. Young people believe that content creators, too, should take responsibility for making sure the content they post is accurate and safe. However, participants also argued that there was a need for greater **education** so that young people could better understand how to stay safe online, as well as for the development of better tools to reduce addiction, and to block, filter and moderate harmful content. They further called upon platforms to improve safety features and to be more active **in removing misinformation**, and for there to be greater **access to more credible, appealing and relatable mental health content** from mental health organisations that draws upon the **lived experience** of young people. More information about what young people want from social media platforms can be found [here](#).

Conclusions

While young people acknowledge the potential for misinformation and the perpetuation of harmful ideas, they also told us there are real, often immediate benefits from using social media platforms as a resource for mental health information. Participants displayed a high level of awareness of the potential harms and had clear ideas about what could help young people to discriminate between helpful and harmful content. These findings highlight the importance of working together with young people to develop solutions to the potential harms of social media, and of including them in the conversation more broadly, recognising the agency and initiative they display in negotiating their online worlds. Opportunities exist for mental health professionals and service providers to leverage the potential benefits these platforms can offer in increasing mental health awareness, while supporting young people to advocate for greater regulation of content on social media.





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. 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.



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.

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References

- 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.
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