

# Promising public health interventions to address the effects of social media use on mental health - spotlight on social media literacy interventions<sup>1</sup>

## Background and context

The impact of social media use on mental health is complex. Social media has been shown to have both positive and negative effects, however there is growing concern and urgent need for action to counter the most substantial negative effects of social media.

To improve this understanding, Beyond Blue commissioned BehaviourWorks at Monash University to undertake a rapid evidence review to identify public health approaches that could help address social media's negative effects while fostering its positive effects, such as providing information, education and a platform for social and emotional support. This included relevant academic literature and select grey literature published since 2020.

Key findings included the important role of social media literacy interventions, and the need for social media companies to take seriously the principles of safety by design.<sup>2</sup> There are clear opportunities for policymakers, researchers and advocacy organisations to advance this agenda.

Beyond Blue has produced two briefing notes from this rapid review, focused on:

- the role of social media companies in mitigating mental health harms from their platforms
- opportunities to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes through social media literacy interventions.

## Findings spotlight – social media literacy interventions

Social media literacy is focused on the development of different abilities that range from the technical to the social-emotional.<sup>3</sup> Recently developed social media literacy frameworks are based on the concept that social media literacy can not only minimise harms associated with social media use, but maximise positive opportunities.<sup>4</sup> The rapid review found that social media literacy interventions



that focus on improving user knowledge of how to engage safely and meaningfully online can reduce problematic social media use,<sup>5</sup> and this is associated with better mental health outcomes.

### ***Governments should continue to invest in high-quality, evidence-based social media literacy resources***

Australian governments should continue to **invest in high-quality resources for building the digital capabilities of children.** Evidence highlights the importance of young people taking an active role in the process of designing digital literacy and safety education materials for which they are the intended users.<sup>6</sup> There is a key role for the eSafety Youth Council established by the eSafety Commissioner in the public conversation on useful social media literacy approaches, alongside broader strategies to mitigate harm and promote the positive benefits of social media for young people.

The eSafety Commissioner has produced a suite of classroom resources that can be filtered by classroom level and topic, and covers issues such as data security, disinformation, cyber-bullying, privacy, and online boundaries and consent.<sup>7</sup> These resources can be self-directed or led by the educator, and they provide an evidence-based platform to discuss concerns relevant to young people.

### ***Social media literacy interventions tailored to need***

The rapid review included promising evidence on interventions focused on promoting healthier engagement with social media, rather than encouraging ‘abstinence.’ The authors suggest a tailored approach dependent on how an individual engages with social media:

For example, some interventions focus on the ‘unrealistic nature of social media’, while others may focus on increasing the individual’s understanding of social media advertising, or how platforms are specifically designed to maintain user engagement and increase profit for social media companies. Social media literacy programs that focus on these aspects have been **effective in improving body image and overall wellbeing, especially for girls.**<sup>8,9</sup>



For population level social media literacy interventions, we suggest it is beneficial to maintain a focus on material that covers **how social media platforms are deliberately designed to maximise users’ attention,**<sup>10</sup> rather than just placing the onus on individuals to change their behaviour.

Promising social media literacy interventions identified in the literature included the following elements:

- **Increasing user awareness of the influential nature of social media**, particularly Highly Visual Social Networking Sites (HVSNs) such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, and the potential negative impact on mental health outcomes. This includes strategies to manage associated pressures.<sup>11</sup>
- Reducing body dissatisfaction from online appearance comparisons and unrealistic ideals.<sup>12</sup> This approach focuses on **positive engagement with social media** through exposure to body positive content and practicing self-compassion.<sup>13</sup>
- Psychoeducation, **whereby young people are supported to critically engage with social media content** to better understand mental health challenges that are related to their social media use.<sup>14</sup>

More tailored individual interventions can focus on education about passive and active use of social media, addressing the dangers of scrolling through harmful content (e.g. idealised, highly visual content) and how targeted use (e.g., viewing the content of close friends and reminiscing on positive past content) may be more beneficial.<sup>15</sup>

### *Social media as a platform to promote mental health*

Social media also plays an important role in promoting good mental health, including through delivery of mental health information. Web and smartphone-based mental health psychotherapy interventions for conditions like depression and anxiety- some of which were delivered by social media - were found to be as effective as face-to-face for children and young people.<sup>16</sup>

The review included promising evidence on the role of single-session interventions (SSI) delivered through social media platforms for treating anxiety and depression. It is therefore critical that policymakers consider the benefit of social media as a scalable and accessible<sup>17</sup> way to deliver mental health interventions to young people when changing or limiting access to these platforms.

- <sup>1</sup> The research question for the rapid review was What are promising public health interventions to address the effects of social media use on the mental health and wellbeing of the community?
- <sup>2</sup> Safety by Design is described by the Australian E-Safety Commissioner as ‘the ways technology companies can minimise online threats by anticipating, detecting and eliminating online harms before they occur. It encourages technology companies to alter their design ethos from ‘moving fast and breaking things’ or ‘profit at all costs’ to ‘moving thoughtfully’, investing in risk mitigation at the front end and embedding user protections from the get-go.’ For an explanation of Safety by Design principles, see <https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/safety-by-design#safety-by-design-principles>
- <sup>3</sup> Polanco-Levicán K, Salvo-Garrido S. Understanding Social Media Literacy: A Systematic Review of the Concept and Its Competences. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2022; 19(14):8807
- <sup>4</sup> Schreurs, L., & Vandenbosch, L. (2020). Introducing the Social Media Literacy (SMILE) model with the case of the positivity bias on social media. *Journal of Children and Media*, 15(3), 320–337; Cho, H., Cannon, J., Lopez, R., & Li, W. (2024). Social media literacy: A conceptual framework. *New Media & Society*, 26(2), 941-960.
- <sup>5</sup> There isn’t consensus about the definition of problematic social media use, however, the field is moving towards a definition that includes addiction-like symptoms (Shannon, H., Bush, K., Villeneuve, P. J., Hellems, K. G., & Guimond, S. (2022). Problematic Social Media Use in Adolescents and Young Adults: Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JMIR mental health*, 9(4).
- <sup>6</sup> Graham, Y., Spencer, A. E., Velez, G. E., & Herbell, K. (2024). Engaging Youth Voice and Family Partnerships to Improve Children’s Mental Health Outcomes. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 33(3), 343–354.
- <sup>7</sup> eSafety Commissioner, Australian Government ‘Classroom Resources’ available from <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/classroom-resources> last accessed 3 September 2024
- <sup>8</sup> Kellner, P., Tsering D., Ngo, C., Delafosse V., Promising public health approaches to address the effects of social media use on the mental health and wellbeing of the community: A review of reviews and grey literature scan, BehaviourWorks Australia, Monash University, prepared for Beyond Blue, August 2024
- <sup>9</sup> Burnell, K., Fox, K. A., Maheux, A. J., & Prinstein, M. J. (2024). Social Media Use and Mental Health: A Review of the Experimental Literature and Implications for Clinicians. *Current Treatment Options in Psychiatry*, 11(1), 1–16.
- <sup>10</sup> Herriman, Zoe & Taylor, Amanda & Roberts, Rachel. (2023). Interventions to Reduce the Negative Impact of Online Highly Visual Social Networking Site Use on Mental Health Outcomes: A Scoping Review. *Psychology of Popular Media*. 13; also Burnell, et al, 2024
- <sup>11</sup> Herriman, Z. et al (2023)
- <sup>12</sup> Herriman, Z. et al (2023)
- <sup>13</sup> Burnell, K. et al (2024)
- <sup>14</sup> Burnell K. et al (2024)
- <sup>15</sup> Jungselius B, Weilenmann A. Keeping memories alive: a decennial study of social media reminiscing, memories, and nostalgia. *Social Media + Society*. 2023;9(4):1–15; Burnell, K., et al (2024)
- <sup>16</sup> Liverpool, S., Mota, C. P., Sales, C. M., Čuš, A., Carletto, S., Hancheva, C., Sousa, S., Cerón, S. C., Moreno-Peral, P., & Pietrabissa, G. (2020). Engaging children and young people in digital mental health interventions: Systematic review of modes of delivery, facilitators, and barriers. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(6)
- <sup>17</sup> Ghosh, A., McDanal, R., & Schleider, J. L. (2023). Digital Single-Session Interventions for Child and Adolescent Mental Health: Evidence and Potential for Dissemination Across Low- and Middle-Income Countries. *Advances in Psychiatry and Behavioral Health*, 3(1), 129–138.