Peers, influencers, and gender differences: understanding adolescent perception and engagement with mental health content on social media

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Post-COVID-19, social media has become an important source of health information for adolescents. This study uses a quantitative cross-sectional design (N = 1,043 Spanish adolescents) to examine how youth evaluate mental health content shared by influencers and peers. Results indicate that adolescents adopt a neutral stance toward such narratives while exhibiting low behavioral engagement, reporting a reluctance to follow advice or share content. Credibility ratings across platforms are relatively low, with WhatsApp and YouTube perceived as more reliable than TikTok or Snapchat. Teenagers also identify a notable presence of stigma in mental health content online, with girls showing higher sensitivity to stigmatizing messages than boys. Meanwhile, boys attribute higher credibility to platforms like YouTube and Twitch. These findings suggest that adolescents approach mental health content on social media with a degree of caution, highlighting the importance of promoting critical digital health literacy and responsible communication about mental health online.

Keywords: Social Media; Mental health; Adolescents; Peers, Influencers; Stigma.