

Inclusive content, peer support, media information literacy can combat health misinformation spread on social media

December 11 2023



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Social media has become one of the main sources of information for youth, a population that on average engages with platforms such as

TikTok and Instagram for nearly [five hours](#) per day.

Growing research suggests that [social media use](#) can promote adolescent health by providing a sense of community, [social support](#), and [culturally relevant](#) information, but the proliferation of health misinformation that is also present on these sites threatens to hinder these benefits.

Given social media's significant role in adolescents' lives and vast potential as a positive health resource, restricting adolescents from using these platforms is not necessarily the solution to prevent them from being exposed to the harmful misinformation on these sites, according to a new commentary by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researchers.

[Published in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics*](#), the commentary argues that, "under proper guardrails and with informed support, social media has enormous potential to facilitate positive connections and enhance, rather than undermine, mental well-being."

Reaping the benefits of social media requires [collective action](#) from [health experts](#), educators, parents/caregivers, policymakers, and [social media companies](#), write Monica Wang, associate professor of community health sciences at BUSPH, and Katherine Togher, a registered dietitian and graduate of BUSPH.

"We all have a part to play in how we consume and share information, whether big or small," says Wang, lead and corresponding author, about the commentary. "Harnessing social media as a tool that can empower us, rather than one that misleads us, can help us nurture the health of our society online and offline."

Wang and Togher outline recommendations on how various groups can navigate social media misinformation to promote adolescent health,

starting with improving adolescents' media information literacy skills. They recommend schools teach students how to identify [inaccurate information](#) with fact-checking tools and help them understand how algorithmic biases determine the content viewers see on their social media feeds.

"Social media algorithms tailor content shown based on users' past interactions," Wang explains. "If a user primarily interacts with content that aligns with their existing beliefs or preferences, the algorithm will prioritize showing similar content moving forward. This algorithmic bias can inadvertently limit exposure to comprehensive information and reinforce and perpetuate skewed or inaccurate content."

Parents and caregivers can play a critical role in ensuring that their children have positive, healthy experiences on social media by engaging in nonjudgmental conversations with them about how to take proactive health-protective measures while using these platforms, such as implementing privacy controls and balancing online engagement with offline activities.

The authors also address the adverse mental health effects that often stem from the saturation of flawless, photoshopped images or unsafe eating/dieting advice on social media—both of which can create unrealistic beauty standards and drive youth to adopt restrictive dieting, excessive exercising, or other harmful behaviors.

They recommend businesses, health educators, social organizations, and other social media users develop diverse, inclusive content that supports positive connections and mental well-being.

"Promoting inclusivity and celebrating diversity on social media and within our community allows youth to flourish in a positive environment that promotes mental well-being," says Togher.

"Social media is a primary source of information for youth. Having skills and strategies to discern misinformation from fact is critical. Misleading nutrition claims, false health advice, and heavily filtered images have been shown to pose serious risks of developing disordered eating behaviors and poor mental health."

On a broader level, the commentary urges health experts, researchers, educators, and parents to advocate for new policies that regulate misleading or harmful information on social media.

"Left unaddressed, the prevalence of health misinformation on [social media](#) poses significant challenges for [adolescent health](#) and health equity," Wang and Togher write. By embracing the above recommendations, "we can empower adolescents and support their overall health online and offline."

More information: Monica L. Wang et al, Health Misinformation on Social Media and Adolescent Health, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.5282](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.5282)

Provided by Boston University

Citation: Inclusive content, peer support, media information literacy can combat health misinformation spread on social media (2023, December 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-inclusive-content-peer-media-literacy.html>

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