

What do they look for and what do they find?



A co-produced qualitative study on young people's experiences of searching for mental health information online

BACKGROUND

Many young people (YP) struggle with their mental health and may look online for information and support. To capitalise on their digital presence, we need to better understand how and where they seek information online and what they think of what they find.

METHOD

We recruited 24 YP (aged 13-18) for online interviews co-conducted by a research team member and a trained young researcher.

Participants were presented with a persona with depression symptoms and asked about sources of information/support they might seek, drawing from their own experiences.

'Think aloud' techniques were used while participants searched online and reviewed mental health resources (NHS, Young Minds). Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Analysis generated four themes:

1. The online help-seeking process, showcasing where YP look for information and why;
2. The mismatch between the information YP expected to find and the reality;
3. The strategies YP employed to determine a source's trust and credibility;
4. Individual differences that can influence help-seeking.



"It just depends if the person wants to learn or if they're coming specifically for like coping mechanisms or they have something in mind that they wanna gain from the resources." (Sophie, 17-18, nonbinary)

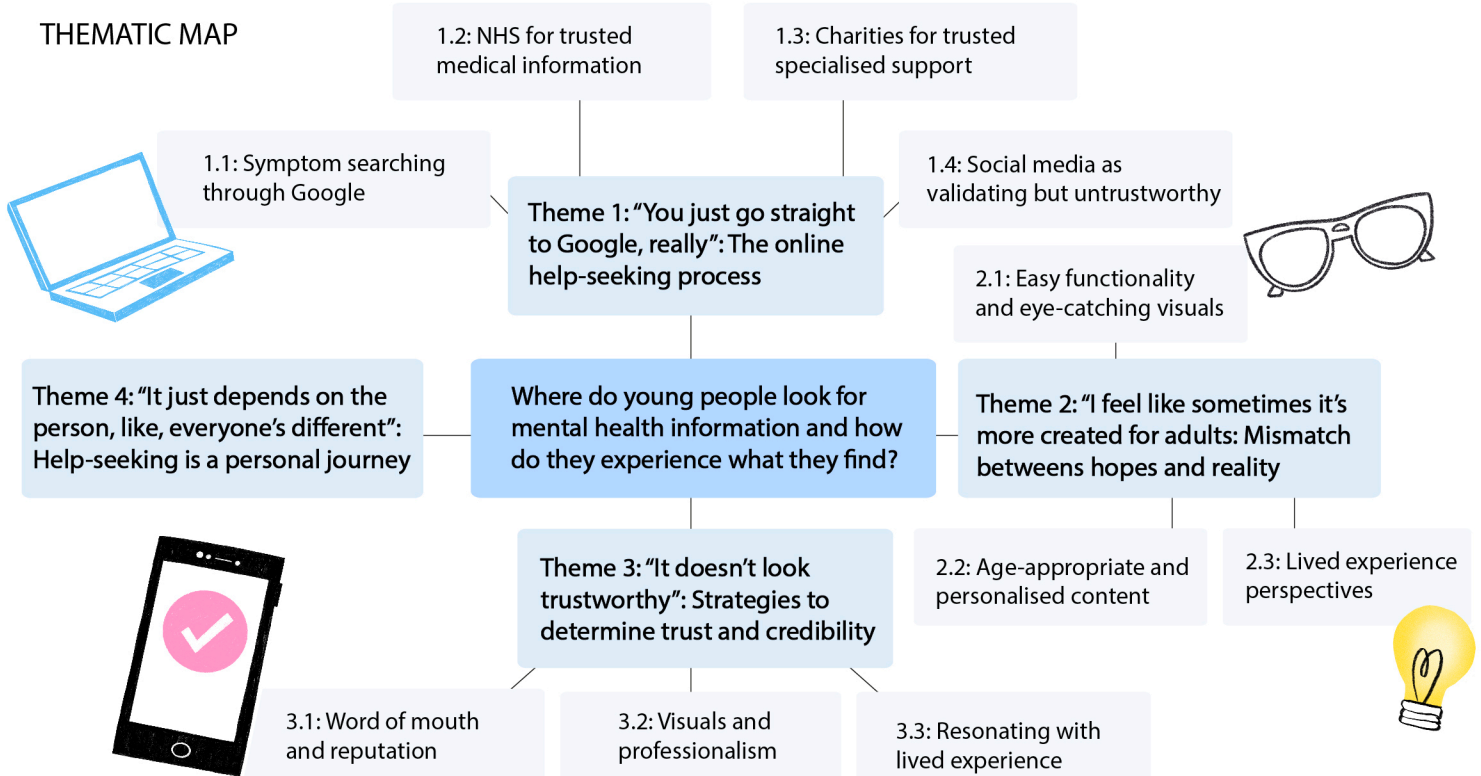
"It is Young Minds, so it is made for young people, whereas the NHS website isn't necessarily made just for young people." (Aco, 17-18, gender)



CONCLUSION

- Participants initiated their online search by Googling symptoms.
- They trusted NHS websites for basic medical information, while charities provided more detailed content.
- Despite scepticism, social media offered validation.
- Findings often disappointed, prompting credibility assessment based on source reputation, professionalism, and relevance.
- Online resources should prioritise visual appeal, user-friendliness, age-appropriate and personalised content, and peer insights.
- Codesign is imperative if we want to ensure high-quality, impactful research.

THEMATIC MAP



Co-produced guidelines for creating and sharing mental health information for young people online

What to share?

- Validation and normalisation of how they are feeling, including lived experience accounts.
- Reasons for why they may be feeling a certain way (e.g., possible triggers).
- Words/phrases and clear definitions that could help YP to talk to others about how they are feeling.
- Sources of support, including in person and online, and those that are available 24/7.
- Give different options and ideas of things that may help.
- Simple small steps that YP can take to feel better (but avoid difficult or overwhelming tasks).
- Clearly signposted information aimed at friends and family.

Where to share?

- On social media platforms which YP are currently using (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube).
- In the places YP already look (e.g., NHS websites and charities).
- Through organisations that YP trust and regularly come into contact with (e.g., schools, mental health services).
- Ensure websites are findable on Google, especially if YP search for symptoms like 'low mood'/'sad'/'tired'



"There's like a story as well. Like I've seen these quite a few times just to like see that you're not alone and you can get help for it [...] in my case it did help me feel like I was less alone and there was like a light at the end of the tunnel." (Alex, 17-18, woman/girl)

When I was at school we had assemblies from like Kooth and ChildLine and that sort of stuff, so like going somewhere like that could be like a good resource." (Luxseal, 17-18, woman/girl)



How to share? (Look and feel)

- Use plain language that is easy to understand but not patronising.
- Make it colourful, but not overwhelming.
- Write in smaller sections rather than large paragraphs and use bullet points.
- Include links to jump to specific sections rather than scrolling.
- Include pictures of YP and lived experience accounts (case studies) from YP.
- Say who produced the information, include logos and links to institutions.
- Ensure that it looks professional.
- Check readability of the website and accessibility for all.
- Use multimedia to share information in different formats (e.g., videos, podcasts).



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