

**“It’s In My Phone, It’s In My Head”:  
Problematic Mental Health Representation on Social Media,  
and How It Affects Adolescents**

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## **Abstract**

Misinformation misshapes the world in all sorts of ways. One of the less-prominent, yet still significant impacts of information lacking proper credentials is the often problematic and inaccurate depiction of mental health on social media, which negatively affects adolescents' mental health and cognitive development. Misinformation online unfortunately has no concrete solution as of now, but steps are being made to mitigate its consequences through improving parent-child communication through shared algorithms.

*Keywords:* social media, misinformation, body dysmorphia, mental illness, communication, beauty standards, misrepresentation

## **Introduction**

In Olivia Rodrigo's Grammy-winning album *GUTS*, track eleven is titled "pretty isn't pretty." Within the moody pop-rock track, Rodrigo pens the line "it's in my phone, it's in my head," referencing how her self-perception and confidence are altered by the fabricated standards set by social media, especially in terms of her looks, where she feels that "pretty isn't pretty enough." This misrepresentation of the female body, as I shall argue, is in some ways similar to the extreme political views and hate speech that fall under the umbrella of misinformation. Misinformation runs rampant in modern society, clouding the minds of adolescents, parasitically infecting livelihoods, and warping perceptions of reality until it is virtually unrecognizable. This essay strives to unravel the fabricated reality that misinformation has painstakingly built atop adolescents in this digital day and age, bringing to light the distorted depictions of mental health throughout social media and how they encourage unhealthy behaviors with long-term repercussions.

### **The Cognitive Effects of Misinformation on Adolescents**

Adolescents in this current digital generation have a higher exposure to content on social media, as well as a higher risk of consuming misinformation. In the article "Teens Are 'Digital Natives', But More Susceptible to Online Conspiracies than Adults," journalist Arianna Prothero (2023) cites the daunting figure of 6 in 10 teens agreeing with at least four conspiracy theories in a survey, compared to the 49 percent of adults. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to fake news due to several cognitive factors such as intuitive reasoning and belief bias, which are further reinforced by social factors such as identity-protective cognition and echo chambers.

Affective factors, including emotions like anger, curiosity, or anxiety, are often at play when falling for misinformation online (Ecker *et al.*, 2022).

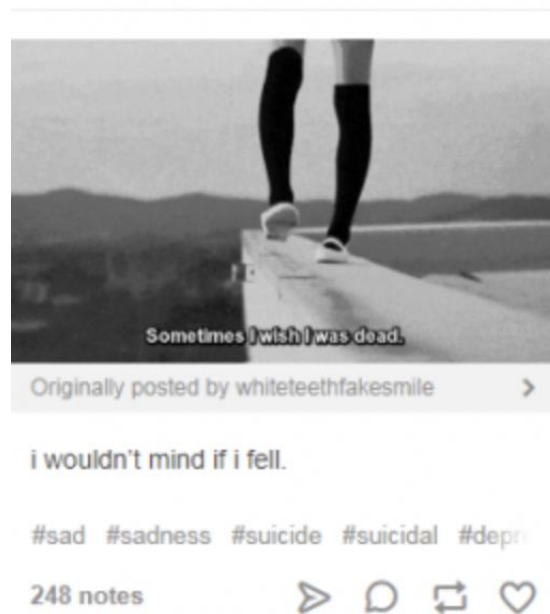
Psychological research has proven that adolescents are prone to the influence of online misinformation due to their desire for social rewards and validation. According to Zara Abrams (2022), the brain's reward centers (ventral striatum and ventral pallidum) become hyperactive to social rewards during developmental stages, making young people especially vulnerable to the permanent and public nature of social media interactions. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, which drive interactions largely through likes and shares, have become infamous breeding grounds for misinformation. Whereas truth is traded for popularity, usage of these platforms provide a direct link to issues like anxiety, depression, and self-loathing. Consequently, health authorities have become increasingly concerned about the potential harms of social media use on young people's mental health, calling for tech companies to prioritize the well-being of their youth users.

Over recent years, the increase in screen time has been a point of concern for the well-being of adolescents. From 2015 to 2021, the average screen time for teens rose by two hours, leading to 8 hours and 39 minutes a day (GilPress, 2024). This increase could suggest a potential correlation with the worsening mental health crises among teenagers. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of adolescents per 100,000 who experienced a major depressive episode skyrocketed by 150%, while clinically diagnosed depression increased by approximately 7% each year on average from 2016 to 2022 (Terry, 2024). These statistics further reiterate how adolescents should be given more attention and caution when proceeding with social media. Dr. Jared Ng's

study on the “comparison trap” and cyberbullying, which arise from problematic perceptions of the self and others, further reinforces this concern (Ng, 2024).

### **The Romanticization of Mental Illness as an Overlooked Facet of Misinformation**

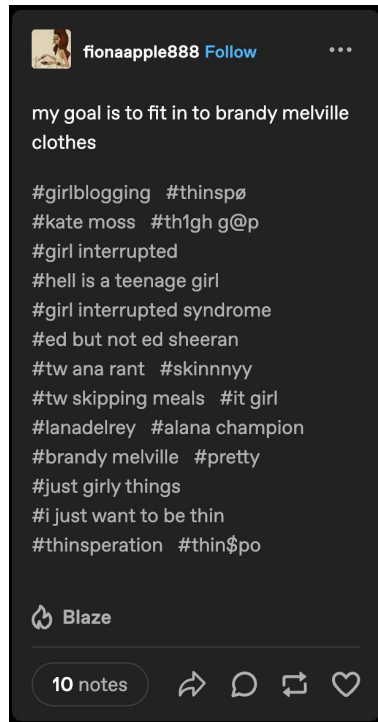
On social media, the harrowing reality of mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and dissociative identity disorder (DID), along with instances like panic attacks, has been distorted over the past decade. Driven by the pursuit of social validation, adolescent content creators tend to romanticize mental illness by emphasizing its intangibility and mystique, even when a fraction of them are not genuinely challenged by these conditions. For instance, this post below represents the “aesthetic” notions of suicide culture, portraying someone teetering at the edge of a building, which has generated 248 interactions.



This, unfortunately, is only one out of many posts shared across multiple platforms that render serious mental health issues into something “beautiful.” This phenomenon echoes the

romanticization of tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, where it was often seen as a “delicate, desirable beauty” (Black, 2022). However, the mystique and glamor of tuberculosis quickly faded after medical discoveries led to its cure, while the epidemic of mental illness remained largely untreated in a physical sense. This has led adolescents to misdiagnose themselves without a true understanding of their labels and the dehumanizing nature of the clinical process of diagnosis and treatment. Furthermore, the appropriation of mental illness may create a dissonance between those who have truly been diagnosed, and invalidate their difficulties and how it impacts aspects of their daily lives.

The romanticization of mental illness not only encourages more adolescents to represent their inner states with excessive melancholy but also fosters a culture that normalizes self-harm at the physical level, most notably through the popularization of anorexia. The hashtag #brandy melville, referring to the fast fashion clothing chain Brandy Melville, has greatly fueled Western cultures of eating disorders by popularizing the idea of the ideal “Brandy girl.” As Anjali Krishna, a high school staff writer for Coppell Student Media, affirms, the freedom, happiness, and capability of a young girl, as portrayed by social media posts perpetuating “Brandy girl” ideals, are viable “only if you’re skinny” (Krishna, 2020). This desirable yet nearly unattainable vision for teenage girls fuels the danger of anorexia, as illustrated by this post originally posted on Tumblr:



This image contains numerous hashtags that encourage anorexia cultures such as #thinsperation and #tw ana rant and #brandy melville, directly relating Brandy Melville to anorexia and the motivation to become thin. This completely misconstrues the idea of beauty that social media has managed to twist, spreading misinformation that harms teenage girls' mindsets and physical health by promoting unhealthy practices like meal skipping and anorexia. Such exposure to unrealistic body images can lead to increased disordered eating and body dissatisfaction (Walker et al., 2018).

### **Potential Mitigations for Misinformation**

Unfortunately, misinformation on social media lacks a concrete solution. Research by David Rand and colleagues at (MIT Sloan Office of Communications, 2021) found that people often share misinformation not because they want to, but because social media contexts distract them from thinking critically about the accuracy of content. However, Rand suggests that social

media platforms can implement accuracy-focused prompts to reduce the spread of misinformation online. One instance of how beauty-standard-related misinformation was mitigated is the impact of the award-winning film *Barbie*, which inspired the “Barbie Girl Summer” campaign in 2023. In particular, the two distinctive monologues given by Sasha (portrayed by Ariana Greenblatt) and Gloria (portrayed by America Ferrera) provoked prominent social media phenomena. Much like the “Brandy girl” trend, Barbie worsened women’s self-esteem over the years. While the monologue can be interpreted as an apology from a company that has spread these detrimental ideals, the “Barbie Girl Summer” campaign that trended on 2023’s social media created a global wave of self-empowerment and appreciation, slowly addressing the generational wrongs through each repost with the hashtag #barbiecore instead of #thinspo.

Another way to mitigate this problem is to improve parent-children communications through shared algorithms on the internet. For example, Gloria’s monologue from *Barbie* brings to light the harsh truths and contradictions of womanhood by stating that it is “literally impossible to be a woman.” This statement raises awareness to the difficulties and struggles of having to appear perfect at all times, setting an unrealistic baseline standard. This monologue contending the impossibility of one-size-fit-all beauty standard emotionally resonated with a multi-generation audience, who, across the internet, were able to connect through Gloria and Sasha’s monologues. Though “Barbie Girl Summer” is too recent of a trend to fully access its psychological impacts, it is certain that the underappreciated nature and insecurities of teenage girls on social media were mitigated through the hashtag and building the foundations of solidarity.

The shadow that misinformation casts looms over the psyche of adolescents, creating a domino effect that warps the reality of the world they live in. It distorts how they perceive themselves, leading towards a tendency of substantial self-loathing and demoralizing views of the world around them. In particular, the fabricated beauty standards and the appropriated depictions of mental illness contribute to the world's biggest epidemic of the youth. While "digital natives" are still going to navigate their way through the endless slew of misinformation, social media platforms should look to promote more positive content in their algorithms to mitigate this issue. Misinformation online will be a continued struggle that may persist for generations to come, but the alleviation of the damage done is something that we should all be working towards.

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