

Adolescence and mental health: from their representation in the media to the prevention of stigma in classrooms

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Abstract

The number of adolescents with mental health disorders and admissions to hospitals for this reason has increased significantly in recent years, placing Spain among the European countries with the highest number of diagnoses. Most of the research carried out so far has focused on the effects of the media discourse regarding the mental health of minors; however, there have been few studies on the representation in the media of the mental health of adolescents. This work examines, through an analysis of the existing literature, the image of adolescent mental health in audiovisual fiction, news media and social media. The analysis also studies the importance of the gender perspective in this representation and reflects on the need to work on media literacy, offering tools to address the prevention of stigma in the classroom.

Keywords

Adolescence, mental health, stigma, representation, media, social media, media literacy.

Resum

El nombre d'adolescents amb trastorns de salut mental i d'ingressos hospitalaris per aquesta causa ha incrementat significativament els darrers anys, i Espanya se situa entre els països europeus amb el nombre més elevat de diagnòstics. Gran part de la investigació realitzada fins ara s'ha centrat en els efectes del discurs dels mitjans de comunicació sobre la salut mental dels menors d'edat; no obstant això, són escassos els estudis sobre la representació del benestar mental dels adolescents en aquests mitjans. Aquest treball aprofundeix, mitjançant una anàlisi de la literatura existent, en la imatge de la salut mental adolescent en la ficció audiovisual, els mitjans informatius i les xarxes socials. L'anàlisi també aprofundeix en la importància de la perspectiva de gènere en aquesta representació, i reflexiona sobre la necessitat de treballar l'educació mediàtica, amb l'aportació d'eines per abordar la prevenció de l'estigma a les aules.

Paraules clau

Adolescència, salut mental, estigma, representació, mitjans de comunicació, xarxes socials, educació mediàtica.

Submitted: 08 November 2024 / Reviewed: 08 February 2025 / Accepted: 19 February 2025

How to cite:

Virós-Martín, C., Jiménez-Morales, M., Montaña-Blasco, M., Bretones Peregrina, E., Empain, J., Establés, M.J., Freire, A., Gómez-Puertas, L., Jordana Ovejero, O., Lopera-Mármol, M., Martin-Vicario, L., Mohammadi, L., Moyano Mangas, S., Parrilla Guix, R., Sánchez-Reina, J.R., Sanz-Marcos, P., & Solé-Blanch, J. (2025). Adolescence and mental health: from their representation in the media to the prevention of stigma in classrooms. *Quaderns del CAC*, 51, 5-16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.60940/qcac51id431937>

1. Introduction

One in seven adolescents suffers from a mental health disorder, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024). Depression, anxiety and eating disorders are some of the most common pathologies, tending to affect girls more than boys. Similarly, self-harming behaviour has increased significantly among adolescents, with suicide being the third-highest cause of death. According to Unicef (2022), the situation in Spain is especially worrying: the rate of diagnosed mental health problems among adolescents is 20.8%, a figure that contrasts starkly with 16.3% in the European Union and 13.2% globally, according to this same study.

Adolescence is a key stage of development in which many aspects of identity coalesce and shapes how adolescents deal with their feelings, relationships and social expectations. In the contemporary context, this is also a period in which the use of screens has a strong impact on daily life, altering how reality is perceived, experienced and constructed (Andrade, et al., 2021). Access to diverse media, content platforms and social media exerts a significant influence on young people's perception of themselves, becoming in turn sources of pressure, anxiety or misinformation on all kinds of issues, including those related to mental health.

Scientific research carried out to date has focused mainly on the study of social and environmental factors that negatively impact the mental health of adolescents, as well as the effects of the discourse of different media on their well-being. However, studies on the media representation of psychological disorders among this group are rather scarce, and the few that do exist only tend to focus on investigating specific media. This analysis becomes even more necessary when we consider that the media discourse and the content available on social media can have a stigmatising effect on mental health disorders (Ross et al., 2019).

Teachers in recent years, especially those in secondary education, have also repeatedly pointed out that there are not enough resources available to them to deal with an increase in mental health problems among students. They have also frequently highlighted how the media, and social media in particular, contribute to fuelling these problems and creating a stigma within the adolescent community. Nevertheless, the truth is that there are no preventive educational programmes that address these issues in the classroom.

For this reason, and given that the media discourse exerts an enormous influence on society's perception of certain issues, this work analyses, through a review of the existing literature, the representation of adolescent mental health in traditional media and on social media. The proposal also addresses the importance of media literacy in schools to help combat the stigma in place within this group.

Considering that gender is a factor that affects the risk of suffering from mental health problems, and that the highest percentages in terms of diagnosis and hospital admissions in Spain (Soriano et al., 2024) relate to girls, we believe it is

appropriate to adopt a gender perspective when establishing our approach to the way that the media represents adolescent mental health. The article therefore begins by analysing how the fact of being a woman is, in itself, a significant variable in a potential deficit of mental well-being throughout life. In this regard, as we will see in the successive sections that make up the text, adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time in the socialisation process of a person and certain conditioning factors have a greater impact on adolescent girls.

The work uses this gender perspective to explore how cinema, and latterly television series, have been representing the mental health of minors. Despite the importance of audiovisual fiction as a shaper of the collective imagination and a source of dialogue around the object of study, we have considered it necessary to include a section that analyses how media treat information relating to adolescent mental health. As already stated, the lack of studies on this topic makes it necessary to carry out further research in this area. Finally, given the extensive use of social media by teenagers in the present day, the article analyses the discourse present on social platforms about mental health and its deficits among minors and the influencers that they follow. The analysis also examines the opportunities offered by social media for building communities and combating the stigma associated with mental health disorders, as well as the challenges that remain to be met.

The paper concludes with a section dedicated to reflecting on the need to promote critical thinking in classrooms through media literacy on mental health, as well as on the objectives and tools available for working to prevent stigma in schools.

2. Gender and mental health

As recent scientific literature shows, gender is one of the variables that influences the mental health of adolescents: girls are more likely to develop a mental health disorder than boys and more cases are diagnosed among them than among boys (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Stentiford et al., 2023). This logically leads to a higher rate of adolescent girls being admitted to hospitals for mental health problems, although in Spain the number of suicides is especially worrying: 73.4% of patient admissions due to suicidal behaviour in the last two decades were girls. Nevertheless, hospital mortality is higher among boys (Soriano et al., 2024a, 2024b).

In this regard, several risk and/or protective factors can trigger or reduce the appearance of disorders among minors which can also contribute to exacerbating gender-based differences. For example, Gajos et al. (2022) show in their research that greater exposure to traumatic events during childhood increases the risk of suffering from depressive symptoms in adolescence, particularly among girls. However, the same study indicates that after controlling for certain risk factors (such as having been a victim of bullying, delinquency in one's social circle or a lack of self-control) and protective factors (such as parental

attachment, collective efficacy or connection with the school environment), not only does this increase become less visible, but the risk of experiencing both depressive and anxious symptoms is also lowered.

Among the risk factors mentioned, it is worth noting the importance of bullying and especially cyberbullying, which has increased substantially in recent years. The study by Kim et al. (2018) analyses the impact of this phenomenon, with the authors concluding that cyberbullying can be a predictor of mental health problems among adolescents and that it can also have different effects depending on gender. Girls who are victims of cyberbullying show a greater propensity to develop emotional problems —such as depression or anxiety disorders— while boys are more likely to develop behavioural problems —such as conduct disorders or oppositional defiant disorder. The report by the Observatorio Nacional de Tecnología y Sociedad [National Observatory on Technology and Society] (2022) on digital gender violence in Spain concurs with this conclusion, showing that 42% of girls and young women who have suffered cyberbullying go on to develop emotional stress, low self-esteem or loss of confidence. These figures are also aligned with the hospital admission records in Spain by Soriano et al. (2024a), which show that internalising disorders (such as anxiety, depression, suicidal behaviour or eating disorders) are more common among girls, while externalising disorders (such as ADHD, schizophrenia or autism spectrum disorders) are more common among boys.

Finally, it is worth studying how gender can influence the stigmatisation that adolescents inflict upon other young people who suffer from mental disorders. Recently, Pfeiffer and In-Albon (2023) analysed gender differences in this regard and found that boys display a greater tendency to stigmatise than girls, showing lower levels of compassion towards affected boys and girls alike, and a more acute shaming for and minimisation of the symptoms of mental disorders, against girls in particular. These factors, together with the others presented in this section, form the basis for focusing the analysis of media representation of mental health and proposed classroom interventions in terms of digital literacy proposed by this work. Both will therefore be undertaken by adopting gender-sensitive approaches, paying special attention to the vulnerability of adolescent girls and the predominance of stigmatising behaviour among boys.

3. The media, mental health and stigmatisation

a) Fiction films and series

The representation of mental disorders has been a constant in cinema since its earliest days, manifesting itself in movements such as German expressionism and surrealism, and such landmark films as *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) or *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975). The topic became increasingly common in the late 1980s with works such as *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988) and in the early 1990s with cult

films such as *Kids* (Clark, 1995) or *Girl, Interrupted* (Mangold, 1999). The representation of mental disorders reached its apex around 2000, with films such as *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001) or *Spider* (Cronenberg, 2002), which continue to be highly regarded cult films. The subject is still significant today, as we can see in films of different types and genres such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 2012), *To The Bone* (Noxon, 2017), *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022), *Inside Out 2* (Mann, 2024), etc.

As regards television, the subject of mental disorders was quickly adopted in Spain in series aimed at young audiences such as *Física o Química* (Baltanás and Mercero, 2008-2011) and in international productions that had a great impact, such as *Skins* (Elsley et al., 2007-2013). There are stigmatising narratives still being produced today that focus on classic stereotypes such as those associated with violent and unpredictable behaviour and the figure of the mentally ill person as someone who is incapacitated, or that include terrifying hospital settings, and medication as the primary, if not the only, form of treatment, showing the effects of pharmacological triangulation (Harper, 2009), that is, stability, crisis and recovery through medication. Fortunately, in the context of the so-called third golden age of television, especially in English-speaking countries, and due to social awareness of the prevalence of mental disorders in both younger and older audiences, the preferred audience for audiovisual platforms - there has been an attempt to try to break with many of these stereotypes in television series that explain the experiences of the mentally ill in all their complexity, even presenting them as role models.

The collective imagination regarding mental disorders in series has been enriched by using the characters in leading roles and specifically focusing on the exploration of their voice through narrative resources in line with the literary genre of confession: diaries or intimate writings and testimonial recordings such as *Ni una más* (Lorenzo and Sáez Carral, 2024), or the narrator's voice in *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2017-2021), in *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019-present), in *Ginny & Georgia* (Fisher et al., 2021-present) and so on. There are other examples of note that feature both the narrative voice of the main character and the narrative voice of a family member, as is the case in *Everything Now* (Harries et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the representation of these characters' environments and their interpersonal relationships has been expanded, which ends up not only normalising therapies and mental health facilities but also showing the importance of those other roles that make up the character's social environment. This also makes it possible for the narrative to question the role of family or friends, not only in the diagnoses, but also when there is no diagnosis, despite the identification of symptoms and their evolution and treatment, e.g. *Heartstopper* (Walters et al., 2022-present). Similarly, this representation allows us to reconsider stereotypes regarding the character's capacities, depending on whether they are focused on educational or work environments.

Faced with this wave of possibilities, the tension between the televisual rationale and the potential of these narratives to serve as edutainment continues to generate a biased representation of mental disorders that merits study. For example, there is a tendency to make depression and its associated disorders invisible, thereby supporting the neoliberal discourse that blames patients rather than society or makes them responsible for their care. Nor are the possible socio-economic and cultural causes or aggravating factors explored, and there is a need for greater diversity in representation and an intersectional approach (Lopera-Mármol et al., 2023).

Therefore, an adequate critical treatment of transmedia literacy (Scolari et al., 2018) for young people is necessary, paying special attention to an analysis of the ideology, stereotypes and values latent in audiovisual productions for young audiences. The admiration that certain fictional characters arouse among young people and the normalisation of some of their behaviours open avenues for introspective reflection that can facilitate the dialogue about mental health among this group (Gómez-Puertas et al., 2023). Scientific work in this field is therefore relevant because it not only creates a debate about the ramifications of these representations on viewers' perceptions and the associated stigma, but it also has a significant impact on people suffering from mental disorders since these representations can influence their own social acceptance and self-image.

b) News media

The agenda-setting theory postulates that the media agenda—shown by the emphasis on which the media cover each topic—determines which topics citizens and the political class perceive to be important (McCombs, 1977). According to the framing theory, the media coverage of each topic—consisting of its focus on certain aspects and concealment of others—determines how the public perceives it (Entman, 1993; Igartua et al., 2005).

In this sense, several studies have analysed the media coverage focused on specific topics related to mental health; for example, eating disorders (Guzmán-Do-Nascimento and Rodríguez-Díaz, 2017), suicides (Blanco-Castilla and Cano Galindo, 2019) or mental health during the COVID-19 confinement period (Sanjuán Pérez et al., 2022). However, it should be noted that studies that analyse the general coverage of mental disorders are scarce.

Muñoz et al. (2011), for example, studied traditional Spanish media's coverage of mental disorders, revealing that this represented only 5% of the sample, even though the language and terms related to mental health were widespread. More recently, Carrasco et al. (2023) analysed media coverage of mental health disorders among adolescents during the pandemic and noted that the news items studied focused on general mental health problems and, in particular, on suicide (45.5% and 33.6% of the sample, respectively).

Regardless of the cultural context, the media tend to represent mental disorders in the general population in a stigmatising way

(Antebi and Whitley, 2022; Aragonès et al., 2014; Carrasco et al., 2023; Corrigan et al., 2013). This stigmatisation can be explicit, as occurs through the association of mental disorders with the commission of crimes (Corrigan et al., 2013), or implicit, using the images, language or stereotypes associated with complex disorders as metaphors to refer to irrational fear (psychosis) or incoherence (schizophrenia) (Aragonès et al., 2014).

Studies of representations in the news media in Spain (Aragonès et al., 2014) and other Spanish-speaking countries (Grandón et al., 2022) concur that news in Spanish tends to use language rich in metaphors and other linguistic resources that is less stigmatising than that of news items in English. However, the comparison between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking media should be viewed with caution, since according to Wang (2017), the codes and variables of the comparative analyses are normally generated from English.

In this context, Carrasco et al. (2023) observe that the news media in Spain tend to use more positive language and framing in recent mental health news stories compared to the results of previous studies (e.g. Aragonès et al., 2014). Even so, it should be noted that the focus on recovery (from mental illness) is more prominent in English-speaking media than in the coverage in Spain (Carrasco et al., 2023) and that news items that focus on recovery reduce stigmatisation. In this regard, Corrigan et al. (2013) use an experiment to show that readers exposed to a news story with a negative framing tend to favour coercive measures against people with mental health problems, in contrast with the opinions of others exposed to a news story with a recovery-based framing.

The representation and coverage of these disorders are also affected by other variables, such as the type of disorder or gender. On the one hand, Antebi and Whitley (2022) point out that the tone of coverage in British media differs according to the type of disorder. Disorders that are seen as widespread (depression and anxiety) are represented more positively. Disorders that are considered serious (schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) tend to be represented as dangerous, unpredictable and with a lower probability of recovery. In contrast, Whitley et al. (2015) note that Canadian media tends to portray women with mental disorders as victims, while men with the same disorders are shown as aggressors. These variables also influence the positive or negative representation of the adolescent population, both in English-speaking countries and in the Spanish press. In Spain (Carrasco et al., 2023), for example, news stories that associate disorders with violence are usually focused on men with psychotic or behavioural problems.

Despite this, media coverage of mental disorders in adults and adolescents differs on some points. According to Slopen et al. (2007), adults with mental disorders tend to appear in general news stories, while minors are often included in featured articles. Furthermore, the coverage tends to portray adolescents with mental disorders as victims, which fosters a paternalistic view that undermines their autonomy (Carrasco et al., 2023). This can be linked back to the observation made by

Sloven et al. (2007), which found that statements by health professionals are the most prominent feature of news stories about adolescents, an aspect that may contribute to reducing stigmatisation.

Similarly, the results presented by Carrasco et al. (2023) suggest that gender roles also influence the decision about who can speak in the media about adolescent mental health. There are more statements from male patients than female patients, but when the statements are made by family members, they are mostly from women. Regardless of who is speaking, positive and destigmatising statements predominate (negative statements account for less than 4% of the sample). News coverage in Spain, however, does not usually include statements from adolescents, which means that there are hardly any studies on their testimonies in news coverage of mental health. In short, not only are adolescents portrayed as victims when their mental health is discussed, but their coverage in the media does not give them a voice, and this can contribute to stigmatising these disorders among their peers.

c) Social media

The consolidation of technological advances has created a digital scenario characterised by a significant increase in the number of platforms, content and devices with multiple screens, which has led to a real change in habits and how young people relate to each other. This change became particularly accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic when there was a marked increase in social media use among teenagers. Besides, certain uses of these platforms became associated with higher levels of mental health problems in general and, as regards gender, had a stronger effect on girls, who suffered more negative experiences online (Marciano et al., 2022).

One of the most notable elements when it comes to consuming and accessing online content is the figure of the so-called influencers. Undoubtedly, these creators, who enjoy enormous popularity among young people, discursively exploit communicative boundaries, oscillating between expert and colloquial knowledge to shape their followers' perceptions and behaviours (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023). Their power to bestow legitimacy means that they have established themselves as one of the priority marketing strategies among major brands in all types of sectors.

As a result, the amount of time during which adolescents are exposed to the power wielded by these influencers is high, even having a significant impact on their mental health (Engel et al., 2024). Through TikTok, for example, one of the most popular platforms among Generation Alpha (Tirendi and Gargiulo, 2024), these influencers idealise their experiences and their daily lives, creating a deep bond of identity that connects with adolescents and influences their interests and opinions. As a result, they have become vital sources of information for an audience that trusts them despite their providing information that is potentially not verified by experts (De Regt et al., 2020).

However, young people do not only use social media to

consume content by influencers, rather they mainly use it to communicate with their peers (Euajarusphan, 2021). Given the different uses they make of these platforms and the central role they have in their daily lives, we can say that the interactions that adolescents carry out with the digital media environment in general can lead them to prioritise and uncritically assume the language, aesthetics, discourses and ways of life that are shown there, especially if one takes into account that adolescence is the stage in which critical thinking skills are largely developed and that Spanish adolescents, in particular, show very low levels of these skills compared to the European average (Feijoo et al., 2023).

The scientific research carried out so far has focused mainly on the effects that social media have on minors. Haidt (2024) has carried out an exhaustive analysis in this area on the increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health issues in younger generations, particularly those born after 1995 (Generation Z). The author argues that the widespread use of social media, particularly since the proliferation of smartphones and constant access to the internet, is one of the main factors behind this deterioration in the mental health of young people. However, the results of this research contrast with other studies that show that there is no causal relationship between the use of social media and mental health disorders in adolescents and that there are other factors that have greater weight as predictors of this type of condition, such as lack of family support (Panayiotou et al., 2023).

In this context, the analysis of mental health discourse on social media has been relegated to the background. Even so, the phenomenon deserves special attention, especially after the confinement due to COVID-19, since it was then that many Spanish influencers began to describe on social media the impact that this situation was having on their mood, which quickly led to direct allusions to certain mental health disorders (Mateus and Núñez-Alberca, 2022). Through imitation, the followers of these influencers, who were mostly teenagers, began, in turn, to act as content creators and share their moods and clinical diagnoses on social media, etc. This was how first-person discourse on mental health first acquired a presence on social media, which was unheard-of until then but was undoubtedly beneficial by normalising dialogue around the mental well-being of minors and ultimately contributing to ending the existing stigma among this population (Monzonís Redondo, 2021).

In this autonomous discourse, mental health disorders are mostly represented as circumstances that young people struggle with in their daily lives. The language used is natural and combined with expressions typical of the protagonists' everyday lives, even using humour sometimes (Lau et al., 2025). The content of these videos ranges from the symptoms of various disorders such as anxiety, depression or eating disorders (Basch et al., 2022; Samuel et al., 2024), to other factors that can be linked to mental health such as interpersonal relationships or social isolation (Lau et al., 2025). It is girls, in particular, who disseminate most of this content (Samuel et al., 2024).

It should also be noted that the image that users affected by a mental health problem present on the networks is not that of incapacitated persons, but the narrative they always use is that of someone who at a given moment and, due to specific circumstances, experiences emotional distress that drives them to share their situation on social media, primarily in search of understanding and support from others (Kysnes et al., 2022). In that sense, a large part of the mental health content present on networks mentions the essential role of psychological treatment and coping strategies (Basch et al., 2022; Lau et al., 2025). It is not surprising, therefore, that this content is also shared afterwards, at a time when users have experienced an improvement, especially with the desire that their experience can help other people who are going through the same thing.

As suggested by Sánchez-Reina et al. (2021) and Theophilou et al. (2023), in general, the structure of the content that is shared on social media not only seeks to attract attention but also to appeal to the emotions and aspirations of other users, creating a direct connection between the sender and the receiver of that message, bearing in mind especially that the topic in question has personal implications for both. Therefore, although some authors highlight the risk entailed in expressing a personal perspective when addressing mental health, especially at certain ages (Zsila and Reyes, 2023), studies such as that of Popat and Tarrant (2023) point out that, despite the risks inherent in social media, they can also play a crucial role in providing support, education and early mental health interventions to adolescents who would otherwise not have access to these resources (Yakobus et al., 2023).

In this regard, social media can act as accessible spaces for disseminating educational content on mental health, as they allow organisations, professionals and experts to share information on topics including anxiety, depression and coping mechanisms. Adolescents can use platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to gain quick access to reliable information, which is especially beneficial in areas where traditional mental health services are limited (Naslund et al., 2020). Furthermore, these networks can promote awareness campaigns that help normalise discussions about mental health, thereby reducing the stigma that often deters young people from seeking professional help (Latha et al., 2020).

Likewise, social media can provide spaces where adolescents find emotional support and connect with others facing similar problems, which helps to reduce feelings of isolation and builds a sense of community. Platforms like Reddit and Facebook, for example, facilitate the creation of mental health support communities, allowing users to express their emotions and share advice. These communities can also encourage early interventions, as young people receive support and suggestions for seeking professional help (Pretorius et al., 2019).

Finally, social media can also be used to carry out digital interventions that help to identify adolescents at risk through algorithms that detect warning signs, such as posts that express ideas about hopelessness or self-harm, and

to provide them with support resources (Leiva and Freire, 2017; Ramirez-Cifuentes et al., 2018; Ramirez-Cifuentes et al., 2020). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram also offer mechanisms for reporting alarming content related to mental health, triggering automated responses with information about helplines and emergency services. Some applications provide online therapy and psychological support, offering a private and accessible alternative for those who prefer to avoid in-person consultations. Thus, when well-designed, these digital interventions can be as effective as traditional forms of therapy (Aschbrenner et al., 2019).

However, despite the possibilities that these platforms offer, the reality is that the lack of control over the content which minors can access remains a problem. For example, in the case of support communities, various studies have highlighted the importance of being able to moderate these spaces, especially to prevent the spread of misinformation or harmful content related to mental health (Saha et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). Along the same lines, Robinson et al. (2019) suggest that discourse on social media can contribute to stigmatising certain mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, or trivialising others, as occurs with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Ultimately, while it is true that society seems to be more open to talking about mental health thanks to social media, there are still doubts about what the predominant discourse among minors is and what consequences it could have in the future.

4. Digital education in mental health

This social reality underlines the importance of integrating mental health education into digital and audiovisual literacy programmes in school. It is therefore crucial that education should play an active role in shaping adolescents' relationship with the digital environment, providing them with tools that allow them to relate healthily way to the technologies and platforms that they interact with. This means not only encouraging them towards a responsible and balanced use of technology, the internet and social media but also teaching them how to identify harmful content or misinformation about mental health.

As technology advances, it is becoming clear that the challenges young people face in the digital realm are increasingly complex. Constant exposure to idealised images, the pressure to maintain an active online presence, and the possibility of being subjected to criticism or harassment can have significant consequences for their well-being. Offering a complete education that includes mental health as well as digital and audiovisual literacy is one way of enabling adolescents to become critical consumers of information so that they can learn to deal with the polarised feelings that are broadcast on the internet and social media in displays of lifestyles and messages charged with emotions and personal opinions. This combination of digital literacy and mental health education would enable the creation of a more thoughtful digital culture in which adolescents can develop

greater autonomy about the messages they receive, promoting a more balanced interaction with the platforms and reducing the risk of falling into harmful dynamics.

Digital education on mental health in classrooms should focus on three main objectives. Firstly, on raising awareness: it is important for minors to be aware of the influence that digital media can have on their emotions and self-perception. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders or self-harm can be amplified by content that idealises harmful behaviour or normalises misinformation. These issues need to be addressed from an educational perspective, providing young people with the tools necessary to recognise, prevent and respond to these problems.

The second objective is digital literacy, a process in which pupils develop a critical view of digital environments by engaging in studies of visual culture. This perspective means teaching adolescents to consume content thoughtfully, and accepting that not everything published on social media is true or beneficial to their mental health. This includes developing skills to recognise authoritative sources on mental health, to identify discourses that encourage trivialisation, discrimination or stigma, and to understand the consequences of engaging with this content without maintaining a suitable distance or taking the appropriate precautions.

The third objective aims to develop a balanced, critical and conscious interaction with the different platforms and social media. This can be done by promoting more appropriate and responsible uses (time management, appropriate selection of accounts and content to follow, civic and constructive participation, critical attitude towards the information and messages received, etc.). Classrooms can also be a space in which to discuss the effects of social media's constant representation of ideals of instant, impulsive happiness, as well as to teach adolescents about helpful strategies to maintain a balance between their time spent online —and the lack of self-control and cognitive overload that this entails— and the search for unconnected spaces, inside and outside of schools, where they can meet others and establish meaningful relationships outside the virtual world (Ubieto, 2023).

Several organisations have already begun to develop programmes to promote mental health in the educational field (Unicef Spain, 2021). The development of digital competence has become a key aspect of these programmes, which each centre promotes through digitalisation plans integrated into its educational projects. Likewise, tutoring and educational guidance spaces play a fundamental role in addressing the impact of the digital environment on the well-being of adolescents. The goal is to promote skills that allow them not only to use technology responsibly but also to understand and manage the psychological effects that can arise from constant exposure to social media and digital content in general.

One of the main focuses of these programmes is to teach adolescents to identify the risks associated with constant connectivity and the excessive use of social platforms (such

as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube), which can lead to a certain dependence on external validation and feedback, or to the phenomenon of over-identification and constant comparison with others. These educational plans also seek to encourage the critical use of platforms to learn to identify reliable information, especially on issues related to mental health. Access to unregulated information about psychological disorders or inappropriate ways of coping with emotional distress can lead to confusion, promote stigma or even aggravate existing mental health problems. For this reason, it is also essential to adopt a gender perspective when implementing these programmes, especially considering the greater vulnerability of adolescent girls when it comes to suffering from mental health disorders or using social media, as well as the higher level of stigma found among boys.

Another key aspect of these programmes is the promotion of digital self-care, which includes students' ability to recognise when they need to disconnect and to set healthy boundaries on the time they spend online. This type of self-care is essential to prevent the emotional exhaustion that can arise from continuous exposure to online life, as well as to promote the construction of an identity that does not depend exclusively on the feedback obtained from networks, their idealised representations or the permanent comparison with others.

Finally, schools must adopt a preventive approach, teaching adolescents to recognise the signs of psychological distress in themselves and their peers. This approach not only promotes self-care but also fosters a mutually supportive environment for those who may be experiencing mental health challenges in the digital context. Some programmes also address cyberbullying, helping students to identify abusive situations and to act responsibly, whether they are victims or witnesses.

5. Conclusions

Most studies on the relationship between adolescents' mental health and the media to date have focused on analysing the effects of the media as a socio-environmental factor that could have an impact on the emergence and consolidation of these types of disorders. Nevertheless, the media and digital discourse has also focused its attention, especially in recent years, on minors and their mental health problems, creating audiovisual fiction narratives, news and content on social media around this topic. For this reason, and given the scant academic research in this area, this work has focused on enhancing the representation of adolescent mental health in this transmedia discourse by analysing of the existing literature. The conclusion is that there are a series of challenges and opportunities concerning the image of young people's mental health in the media and social media, and some recommendations about the need to encourage critical thinking in classrooms to prevent and eradicate the existing stigma.

1. The number of adolescent girls diagnosed with mental health disorders far exceeds that of boys. Since the scientific literature is conclusive regarding the fact that simply being a woman is a risk factor for the development of mental illnesses, it is essential to take the gender perspective into account when studying media representations of the mental health of minors.
2. The image of mental health in audiovisual fiction has been a constant for many years. Although film and television productions are currently trying to move away from many of the stereotypes that present these patients as violent, unpredictable or incapacitated, the truth is that prejudiced views of mental health are still overrepresented and should be studied, taking diversity and the intersectional approach into account, and the socio-economic and cultural factors that are involved in the absence of psychological well-being during adolescence.
3. The media tends to portray mental disorders generically, at most focusing heavily on suicide. Media discourse presents adolescents as victims and very rarely does so in the first person. Instead, it usually features health professionals or family members who speak about the mental health of minors. The protocol developed by the Catalan Audiovisual Council and the Ministry of Health of the Generalitat de Catalunya [Government of Catalonia] (2015) about reporting eating disorders recommended that the testimony of the patients themselves or of people who have recovered from the disease must be included, taking questions of data protection and parental consent into account, in order to avoid the media contributing to paternalism and, therefore, to the stigmatisation of these diseases.
4. In recent years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many influencers popularised the creation of content in which they share their mental health problems with their followers, mostly teenagers. Imitating this, thousands of users of these platforms also started to create content in which they speak openly about their well-being. While this trend represents an opportunity to help reduce the stigma surrounding these disorders among minors, there is a danger of trivialising them and downplaying their importance. In this context, it is essential to see digital education on mental health as a challenge for the coming years, both as a way of encouraging adolescents to adopt a critically rigorous outlook that would allow them to deal with content that is far from credible, but also to generate content and consider the impact that their comments can have.
5. Although digital mental health education in classrooms has enormous potential, it also faces numerous challenges. The speed at which technologies and digital platforms evolve often makes it difficult for the education system to adapt at the same speed. Teenagers are constantly exposed to new trends, influencers and discourses that are more than likely to evade the control of educational institutions. This means that materials and teaching strategies must be constantly revised to ensure that content is up-to-date and relevant.
6. It is also important for education centres to have resources for teacher training. Teachers do not always have specialised training in mental health. However, they must be able to identify and manage situations that affect their students' health in digital environments. Training activities aimed at teachers could include identifying digital warning signs, providing emotional support, and establishing guidelines for action in cases of cyberbullying or other mental health problems.
7. Integrating digital mental health education in classrooms offers an opportunity to support adolescents in their emotional and cognitive development in the digital environment. The aim is to encourage critical thinking, to enable young people to analyse and better understand the content they consume and share, as well as to set limits on their use of technology and access to content that may be harmful.
8. Education centres should establish spaces for collaborating with families to ensure that young people receive coherent mental health education at school and home. This would include providing resources and training on how to manage children's digital habits and encourage healthy social media use. Ultimately, the importance of digital education lies in the fact that it is not limited to the classroom, which is just one of the environments in which adolescents should acquire these skills.

Notes

1. **Funding and support.** This study was carried out within the framework of the National R&D&i Project "Adolescent recipients and creators of mental health content on social media. Discourse, advocacy and digital literacy on psychological disorders and their stigma. (SMARS)", (ref. PID2022-141454OB-I00), funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities of Spain (2023-2026).

2. Authors' contributions. Clara Virós-Martín, Mònika Jiménez-Morales and Mireia Montaña-Blasco were responsible for writing the introduction, conclusions and summary of the work, as well as writing, editing and approving the final version of the text. Mònika Jiménez-Morales and Mireia Montaña-Blasco were also the principal researchers on the competitive project in which this work is framed. Olga Jordana Ovejero was responsible for writing the section on gender and mental health. The section on media, mental health and stigma was written by the following authors: María-José Establés, Lorena Gómez-Puertas and Marta Lopera-Mármol wrote the section on fiction films and series; Lara Martín-Vicario and Ricard Parrilla Guix wrote the section on news media; Ana Freire, Leila Mohammadi, J. Roberto Sánchez-Reina and Paloma Sanz-Marcos wrote the section on social media. Eva Bretones Peregrina, Joanna Empain, Segundo Moyano Mangas and Jordi Solé-Blanch were responsible for creating the section on digital education in mental health.

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