FROM ONLINE GROUPS TO THE KITCHEN TABLE

AN EXPLORATION OF MIS/DISINFORMATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND

NYCI National Youth Council of Ireland



The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. We use our collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

www.youth.ie

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Foreword

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) has over 60 member organisations who all work with young people in different places and spaces; offline and online. Increasingly, our members have been raising concerns around young people's experiences with misinformation and disinformation. While research exists on mis and disinformation and the general population in Ireland, much less is known about the unique experiences of young people.

This topic is significant and has implications for both national policy and on the ground practice. For example, youth workers need to know the trends around mis and disinformation to be able to respond accurately within their youth work setting. Similarly, government officials and relevant agencies need to have a better understanding of young people's experiences, in order to have effective policy and legislative responses.

It is within this context that this piece of research has been conducted, manifesting as a joint project between NYCI's Policy and Advocacy team, and Equality and Intercultural Programme. Due to the scale and breadth of the topic, this research is a 'first step', or scoping, into the world of mis and disinformation and young people. While it has many findings in its own right, this research makes several recommendations of further topics and questions to be explored in future research.

The report is set out as follows: An Executive Summary outlines Key findings, succeeded by an exploration of the youth work context and relevance as set out by Maurice Devlin in section one. Following this, Eileen Culloty from the European Digital Media Observatory reflects on the broader context and role of this research. Finally, the full research report, conducted by NYCI with researcher Dr. Shane Murphy, includes key findings and areas for further exploration.

We hope that this report provides a useful framing and evidence base for all those working towards an Ireland that protects young people from the harms of mis and disinformation. A special thanks to the Irish Youth Foundation, who funded this research.



Executive Summary

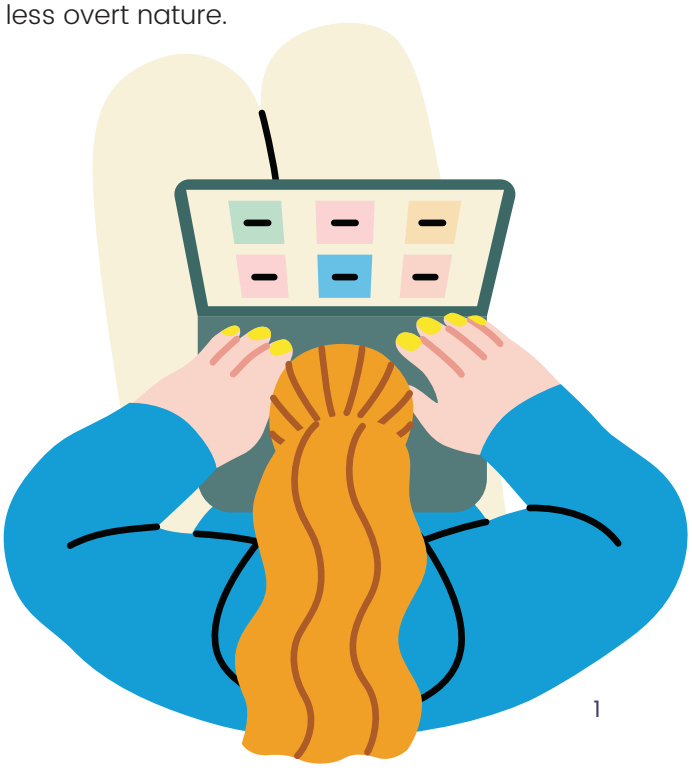
Motivated by growing concern around the topics of mis and disinformation, this research aims to provide a 'first step' or scoping exercise into understanding false information, and where young people are seeing it, within an Irish context.

An initial literature review frames what is already known about mis and disinformation, young people, and the Irish context more broadly, and identifies areas for further exploration. During this process, it became clear that there is insufficient evidence around types of mis and disinformation young people are seeing in Ireland, young people's relationship is with these types of content, and where this content is being encountered. This evidence gap formed the basis for this research.

Using a qualitative methodology, focus groups were conducted in open-ended conversation style with young people recruited through youth work settings. Findings were grouped based on topic, and areas of further research were identified. Although the sample size was small, and therefore not representative of the broader Irish youth population, findings outlined a clear picture of concern and basis for further research.

These initial focus groups affirmed that the range of mis and disinformation that young people are encountering is broad. Topics covered within the focus groups included Society and Identity (such as racist, anti-migrant, anti-trans and trad wife content), Health and Beauty (such as weight loss and skin care content) and Masculinity and Hustle Culture.

Participants were generally able to identify disinformation relating to migration and anti-trans themes, sharing numerous examples of harmful narratives. While these examples, along with topics such as AI and online scams, may have been the first to come to mind when discussing misinformation and disinformation, it was clear that participants more commonly encountered false or incomplete information in less overtly political forms, across a range of content that can broadly be grouped together by the term "self-help". This content is designed to educate and motivate audiences on a range of topics including health, fitness, nutrition, beauty, finances, etc. An important finding from this research is that participants found it harder to identify misinformation and disinformation within these themes, given its less overt nature.



The research also reveals the various sources and environments through which young people in Ireland may encounter misinformation and disinformation. Participants did not in the main report seeing this type of content through large online accounts; rather they reported seeing them amplified through smaller accounts and small pages/groups. Comments sections were also flagged as a place of significant mis and disinformation. Finally, some participants identified family members as key sources of offline mis and disinformation, arguing that media literacy and other interventions should not focus solely on young people themselves.

By examining the themes and topics that unfolded from the focus groups in the context of the literature review, a clearer picture of the Irish landscape of misinformation and disinformation among young people emerged. However, as noted above, this research relied on small focus groups and thus findings should be explored within further studies. This report concludes by offering several areas and specific questions for further study, across topics such as:

- Further identifying specific narratives, threats and vulnerabilities that young people encounter
- Moving beyond platforms, to specific features and spaces where young people see mis and disinformation
- Better understanding and tackling false information encountered offline

As various stakeholders continue to grapple with the topic and threat of false information, further research is urgently needed to ensure an evidence base to underpin interventions for young people within an Irish context.



Misinformation and disinformation: a youth work perspective

Maurice Devlin

Youth work has never *not* been about information. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the earliest youth workers espoused the idea (going back at least as far as Socrates) that 'knowledge is virtue' and by extension 'ignorance is vice', and they acted accordingly. As well as providing a range of activities to promote 'healthy recreation', the earliest Dublin youth clubs, according to archival reports of the St Vincent de Paul Society, included 'special reading rooms with books, papers etc' and provided 'lectures with lantern illustrations' (early projectors) on various topics.

They offered classes in First Aid and supported young people in identifying employment opportunities and securing work (the first ever report of St Joseph's Youth Club in Waterford in 1923 refers to the establishment of its own 'employment bureau' in response not only to the needs of young people but to approaches from employers). In the sense that information concerns not just facts but knowledge more broadly, it was an absolutely central driver of youth work practice from the outset, even if the view of what young people should 'know' was sometimes narrow or ideologically biased, and skewed by traditional ideas about class, gender, ethnicity and other factors. And in the sense that to 'inform' means not just to pass on data, facts or insights but to inspire or 'imbue', helping to shape the very character of someone or something (as in the phrase 'informed by a sense of social justice') then youth workers have always been, and continue to be (among other things) information workers.

But of course, the information world we live in today is unrecognisably different from the one in which youth work first emerged. It is not just that the volume and variety of information surrounding us is so vast or that the ease and speed of creating and disseminating it is accelerating all the time; it is that the features just mentioned apply whether the information is valid and well intentioned

or deliberately false and misleading. To use an important distinction emphasised by Shane Murphy in this excellent report, misinformation (information that is inaccurate but inadvertently so) is widespread and is a significant social problem. Highly sophisticated *disinformation* (an intentional distortion of the facts) is a profound threat to young people and to all of society.

The sheer pace of technological development is potentially problematic. With earlier scientific innovation throughout history (certainly up to the late 20th century), the application to everyday life took place in such a way that most adults, even if they found the change disorientating and challenging, felt that they were 'keeping up' and could offer their support and guidance to children and young people based on their longer years of experience. In cultural terms, this was what the anthropologist Margaret Mead called a 'postfigurative' generational relationship: the younger learn from the older. In today's world such a straightforward process of socialisation is not possible. It is not simply that the historical pattern has been turned on its head, so that the old now learn from the young (what Mead called 'prefigurative' culture). There is certainly an element of truth in this, at least in some contexts and *comparatively* speaking. Young people are definitely more likely than older people to be 'early adopters' of new technologies, and therefore to be in a position, for instance, to show older family members how to operate or use a particular device or piece of software.

But this does not necessarily mean that young people are always better placed to understand the full complexity of available technologies, or to exercise discretion and judgement with regard to their use. This might be said of any technological innovation but is all the more true - fundamentally so - given the increasingly pervasive presence and influence of generative AI. In fact, feeling more comfortable with the 'operational' aspects of technology, whatever our age, might create a false sense of security with regard to its unseen characteristics, potentialities and risks, including the risk of ideologically-driven distortion or even perversion of facts, with the resultant danger of harm to self and/or others.

The following review and research presents highly interesting insights and questions, including with regard to this inter-generational dimension. On the one hand, a striking and important finding (which is said to be entirely absent from the literature reviewed) concerns the frequency with which young people encounter misinformation and disinformation not online but *offline*, in their everyday interactions with parents and others. 'Participants' confidence in their own ability to identify false information was often discussed

"But of course, the information world we live in today is unrecognisably different from the one in which youth work first emerged."

in contrast to older relatives, most commonly parents, who were believed to be significantly more susceptible.' The research makes it clear that this can create a burden for young people, based on their sense of responsibility for monitoring the online activities of both older and younger family members. However, the report also cites recent research identifying what is described as a 'significant gap between young people's self-reported ability to identify false information and their actual competence when tested'. Furthermore, our attention is drawn to the finding that 'much like misinformation and disinformation more broadly, self-assessed ability to identify AI generated imagery may not always align with actual ability'.

So it is not just a matter of the relative competence or otherwise of the different generations. In fact, research suggests that when it comes not to adoption and use but the absolutely vital area of technological creation and innovation, the key players tend to be neither particularly young nor particularly old; they tend to be adults at mid career stage or beyond. At the peak of global technological innovation today, the most powerful individuals, and certainly the few behemoths who have become household names, are in their early 40s to late 50s. They – and those who are closest to them, technologically, politically and economically - form a tiny global elite whose interests are distinct from – even inimical to - the interests of the overwhelming majority of people of all ages, classes, genders, cultures and ethnicities.

So, what should youth work and youth workers do? Despite – in fact because of - the context described above being one of unprecedented instability and indeed unpredictability, I suggest that the most reliable approach is to be guided by first principles. In the case of youth work, three important principles are captured by the definition in the relevant Irish legislation (Youth Work Act 2001; Education and Training Boards Act 2013): youth work is above all an educational and developmental process; young people participate in it voluntarily; and - reflecting the fact that youth work is an inherent part of a vibrant civil society - the primary providers are non-governmental organisations, supported by the state. I think we can identify how each of these principles might inform (note the word) a youth work response to the issues raised by this research report.



Firstly, the fact that young people's participation in youth work is *voluntary* (something I have often described as both youth work's greatest challenge and its greatest opportunity) means that all activities and initiatives, including those with a focus on information, must be designed and offered in a way that is as engaging and attractive, and indeed as enjoyable, as possible. A great deal of contemporary youth work practice uses new technologies to ensure that this is the case, and it is a logical further step in the cycle of critical social education and (self-) reflection for information technologies and processes *themselves* to be the subject as well as the means of learning.

Secondly, it is self-evident that in today's world any holistic approach to young people's *education and development*, particularly if it is intended (as the Irish legislation says it is) to be 'complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training', should include a consideration of where and how they access information, as well of course as how they can have an impact on information creation and become information creators themselves. If we go back to the idea that information in its fullest sense means knowledge, then it is also very important that society as a whole can have access to what young people themselves know about how it works, based on their own experience.

And thirdly, *civil society* - not just its effective functioning but the very *conception* of it and the belief that it has a role to play - is threatened by some of the most recent developments in technology, including generative AI and the transparent, avowedly anti-democratic intentions and objectives of some of its prime movers, meaning that confronting and engaging with technological developments is an existential imperative for youth work as it is for other work concerned with human flourishing and positive social change.

There are other youth work principles, commonly identified over many years in policy and in both professional and research literature, that are relevant here. I will mention just three.

One is *youth-centredness*. Youth work, in the well-worn phrase, 'starts where young people are at', but always with the intention of facilitating and supporting them to move on to other places, spaces and experiences, depending on their own interests and aptitudes. This is in striking contrast to some of the sources and processes of information (including false information) described in this research. These clearly 'start where young people are at', or where they perceive young people to be at, in a highly prejudicial and narrowly stereotypical way, for example in terms of gender roles and expectations: beauty, skincare and weight loss (including 'Skinnytok') for young women; gym work, hustle culture and 'red pill' ideology for young men. But just as has been the case with more traditional 'youth-focused media' (music, films and TV) for many decades, the fact that the content is designed to appeal to young people's (perceived) interests and *predispositions* is the very reason that it can readily be used as a platform for discussion, debate and critical reflection in a youth work context. And just as applies in the case of more traditional sources, there is enormous potential for fun and 'craic' in such an examination and interrogation of media with young people.

"Particularly when it comes to engaging with highly advanced and rapidly evolving technologies, such a sense of safety may be as important for youth workers as for young people."

Another important principle is *collaboration*. While every young person should feel valued and 'at home' in a youth work setting, and while youth workers should be conscious of the needs and circumstances of each individual young person, a distinctive feature of youth work is its collaborative (or what in the wider European context is sometimes called *associative*) nature. The vast majority of youth work practice takes place in groups. There are suggestions in the following report of the ways in which the simple fact of being in a group discussion with other young people can enable and encourage expressions of experience and opinion, sometimes tentative and sometimes more assured, but always, provided that there is skilled facilitation, in a spirit of constructive exchange and in a context of feeling safe.

Particularly when it comes to engaging with highly advanced and rapidly evolving technologies, such a sense of safety may be as important for youth workers as for young people. Some years ago, my Maynooth University colleague Hilary Tierney and I co-authored a report (2010) for NYCI based on a study of the attitudes of young people and youth workers to development and global justice issues. One of our findings was that youth workers, despite their personal and professional values and convictions, were sometimes reluctant to bring up issues of development and global justice with young people, or to encourage discussion when it arose among young people themselves, because they felt they didn't have the requisite knowledge: they thought they had a 'lack of information' or feared 'passing on the wrong information'.

Such apprehensiveness on the part of youth workers might be even more pronounced when it comes to matters of 'hi-tech' developments and especially AI. This is entirely understandable, but I think it is important to overcome it. The collaborative ethos of youth work lends itself ideally to *mutual learning processes*, not just among young people but also among youth workers and, especially, between young people and youth workers. Such a collaborative approach is exactly what the current moment invites and indeed requires: it is a 'co-figurative'

approach to intergenerational relationships and to social life in general, in Margaret Mead's terminology. Moreover, based on this research's findings and building on the demonstrable strengths of youth work as a community-based practice, the 'co-figuring' of experiences with (and responses to) misinformation and disinformation should extend beyond youth workers and young people to include the significant others in young people's lives, including families and parents. Some youth work groups, projects and organisations are already doing this of course, but it needs to be adequately supported and resourced by policy-makers and funders.

Finally, there is the principle of *equality*, at the heart of youth work practice and writing for many years, explicitly espoused in Irish youth work policy in the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (2003) and in all the key policy statements since then, reflecting and supported by national equality legislation. (It is worth noting that the legislative framework was itself influenced among other things by the concerted actions and activism of civil society, including youth organisations.) The relevant research, including the range of literature reviewed by Shane Murphy as well as his own empirical findings, show that a great deal of false information, and in particular the most insidious forms of disinformation, are motivated by a wish to deride, demean, oppress and exclude some groups of people as opposed to others, in other words to promote inequality. This matters greatly to youth work, not least because very often the young people participating in its activities, programmes and services are members of the groups targeted by such 'information hate', and affected by the more concrete forms of hate-driven action that are fuelled by it.

But it is also relevant because all young people are negatively affected – and in significant ways imperilled – by false information. This creates the possibility for a sense of common cause and an agenda for collective responses. I have written previously (2013) that in addition to addressing the needs and circumstances of those young people who are most obviously and directly affected by inequality, youth work has 'the potential, even the responsibility, to raise awareness in society as a whole of the nature and impact of…inequalities and to involve young people themselves in working to challenge and change them'. This is not a novel insight. More than forty years ago (1984) the *Final Report of the National Youth Policy Committee* ('Costello Report') observed that:

> If youth work is to have any impact on the problems facing young people today, it must concern itself with social change. This implies that youth work has a key role in enabling young people to analyse society and in motivating and helping them to develop the skills and capacities to become involved in effecting change.

This is another expression of principle that has continued relevance for youth work, and it has particular resonance in the context of this report. At the same time as being an enduring principle it is intrinsically *dynamic*: it reminds us of the need for ongoing flexibility,

innovation and responsiveness to social, cultural and technological change. But more importantly it stresses the role of young people *themselves* in effecting change and shaping the society around them. There are many examples already of how youth workers, youth organisations and young people are attempting to do so specifically in response to misinformation and disinformation (including NYCI's own 'Navigating the Noise' resource and 'divisive narratives' training as well as many other initiatives in Ireland and at European and international levels). All of these efforts can be supported and strengthened by the collection of robust and up-to-date evidence such as is provided in this research commissioned by NYCI and will be further enhanced if the additional research questions identified are pursued, as I think they deserve to be.

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Reflection from European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) Ireland

Eileen Culloty

Disinformation is not a single problem with a single solution. It is a complex and evolving phenomenon that shapes how people understand the world around them, how they relate to others, and how they engage as citizens. This report makes an important contribution by bringing the perspectives of young people to the centre of that discussion.

Much of the current policy and media attention around disinformation focuses on its impact on democracy and elections. That emphasis is understandable as protecting democratic institutions is a vital public interest. Yet, as this report highlights, this focus risks overlooking the day-to-day information environment in which young people live. For many, the most influential content concerns health, fitness, beauty, celebrity culture, sport, and personal finance. These domains rarely make the headlines of policy papers, but they profoundly shape how young people perceive credibility, truth, and social norms. Understanding disinformation through these lenses is essential to building media literacy that connects with young people's actual experiences.

One of the most striking challenges is how little reliable, regular data exists about young people's media lives in Ireland. We do not have a clear picture of the platforms, creators, and content types young people engage with. We also lack insights into what different cohorts think about that content. Too often, public concern arises only after harmful trends have already taken hold. The case of Andrew Tate exemplifies this cycle. Young audiences encountered his content long before it became a topic of mainstream debate. When public panic finally came, it often failed to recognise the diversity of young people's responses and the volume of similar figures. Filling these data gaps is critical if Ireland is to move from reactive panic to informed support and policy.

Policy responses to disinformation have tended to focus on online platforms and the content they host: regulating algorithmic recommendation systems, removing financial incentives, and promoting individual media literacy. These are necessary, but not sufficient. Offline dimensions of disinformation receive far less attention. These include how disinformation shapes relationships within families, peer groups, and communities. Participants in this research describe the difficulty of engaging with relatives who repeat false claims or with younger siblings who encounter disturbing material online without guidance.

If media literacy is one of the imperfect but essential tools we have, it must extend beyond individual skill-building to include social competencies: the ability to have (and sometimes to end) difficult conversations about information and sources. Strengthening these social literacies is key to supporting the interpersonal resilience that digital regulation alone cannot provide.

Young adults are ideally positioned to act as mediators of media literacy within their families and communities, supporting younger siblings, older relatives, and peers. Peer-led initiatives are particularly powerful: young adults do not need to be told what to think, but they benefit from guidance on how to think critically, how to respond constructively, and how to engage responsibly. At the same time, they need institutions and regulators to fulfil their duties in maintaining a safe and transparent media environment.

However, while recognising that potential, we should be wary about assuming that young people are inherently "tech-savvy" or "digital natives". The research indicates that young adults, like the rest of us, may be guilty of



over-confidence in their abilities. Results also point to what media researchers call "third person effects": a tendency to assume that other people struggle with media but not us.

The National Youth Council of Ireland has a key role in ensuring that young people's perspectives and experiences inform this national and European policy agenda. The 18-24 age group is often labelled "hard to reach," yet it is also among the most digitally immersed and socially diverse. According to the 2024 EU Youth Survey, 42% of young Europeans aged 15–30 report using social media as their main source of political information. Broad surveys are important to understand overall trends, but the kind of in-depth qualitative research offered by this research also has a role to deepen understanding. We will need more of both kinds of research to support policy and practice in countering disinformation.

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EDMO Ireland

Research findings:

Misinformation, Disinformation and Young People in Ireland



Introduction

This scoping review will investigate the phenomena of misinformation and disinformation as they affect young people in Ireland today. The first part of this research will comprise a literature review to establish the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and provide a foundation for the study. In the absence of a significant body of literature that has specifically examined young Irish people's experiences with misinformation and disinformation, adjacent areas, such as misinformation in Ireland more broadly, and the experiences of young people outside of Ireland, will be examined.

This will be followed by a discussion of a series of focus groups which took place with young people (18 – 24 years old) from across Ireland between April and July 2025, in which participants were invited to share their experiences with misinformation and disinformation – their understanding of these concepts, the narratives they are seeing, where they are seeing them, and how it is impacting them and their peers. This report will conclude by bringing the results of the literature review and focus groups together, to highlight areas of particular concern, and identify areas which require further investigation. This will help lay the groundwork to begin strategizing about steps that can be taken to help young people become more resilient to the misinformation and disinformation they are being exposed to every day.

Before beginning, it is worth briefly defining misinformation and disinformation. The primary distinction between these two terms has to do with the intent of the sharer. Misinformation is false, incomplete, or decontextualized information shared by actors, who may not recognise the information they are sharing is inaccurate. This information can come from a wide variety of sources, including unreliable news sites, social media posts, AI hallucinations, etc. Actors who spread misinformation may not intend to deceive, and may even mean well. Nevertheless, this false information has the potential to cause real harm. An example of this is someone sharing a "miracle cure" for an illness they learned about online. Even if well-intentioned, such misinformation may lead someone to eschew real medical advice, or deter them from seeking help from medical professionals. Similarly, someone may repeat

"Disinformation is false information spread deliberately, either to deceive, or to flood the public arena with conflicting information, and undermine institutional trust."

inaccurate information about crime statistics with the intention to encourage others to stay vigilant and safe, but unknowingly spread harmful narratives which have been seeded to target specific groups. Information which was accurate at the time of being shared can also become misinformation as new data emerges. Ruokolainen et al. (2023) highlight examples from the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic where official information shared by trustworthy institutions became outdated as new information emerged. While official bodies were generally quick to update the public on new developments, they were not always as thorough when it came to removing outdated social media posts and press releases, some of which were more favourable to search engine and social media algorithms. Despite being correct at the time of publishing, subsequent contextual changes meant this information published through official channels became misinformation.

Disinformation is false information spread deliberately, either to deceive, or to flood the public arena with conflicting information, and undermine institutional trust. It also applies to any online scams which deliberately make fake claims or use false information to influence audiences to behave in ways they otherwise would not. Much of the discourse surrounding false narratives circulating online in recent years has focused on disinformation – fake news, bot accounts, foreign influence campaigns, etc. This focus is perhaps unsurprising, given the obvious threat disinformation poses to electoral processes and democratic institutions, and the fact that political disinformation exists within a pre-existing scaffold of laws, actors, and regulatory bodies. The time-bound nature of political campaigns, accessibility of political content, and the ability to measure impact through polling and election results, also makes political disinformation particular attractive to researchers.

However, this focus on false information in a political context means that it can be difficult to identify when it comes in other forms. Anyone who has spent any time on social media will likely have been exposed to content in which sensitive topics which fall under the broad banner of "self-help" (e.g. mental health, weight loss, financial advice, etc.) are discussed or promoted by non-professionals, and thus not treated with the nuance or appropriate context necessary for minimizing harm. These areas are all equally primed to be vectors for misinformation

and disinformation but are significantly less researched, likely because the impact is more difficult to discern. Nevertheless the potential for the narratives that surround these topics to cause harm is still very much present.

It is also important to make explicit the fact that hate speech is a form of disinformation. Hate speech relies on attributing intrinsic negative qualities to specific groups (often vulnerable groups) united by characteristics such as race, gender, sexuality, religion etc. The reliance on false or misleading claims, dehumanisation, and malicious, selective framing of how targeted groups are discussed, all serve to distort reality and obscure the truth for the purpose of causing harm. Thus, hate speech cannot meaningfully be disentangled from disinformation. A number of researchers have also highlighted the synergistic relationship between the two phenomena. Wardle (2024) highlights the intersection between hate speech and disinformation, noting the above-mentioned similarities, and identifying how they both serve to amplify negative societal impact, and are deployed opportunistically in high risk contexts (e.g. in the run up to elections). As well as this, both hate speech and disinformation thrive in environments where verifiable information from trusted sources, and institutional trust more broadly, are low (e.g. in the immediate aftermath of a violent attack). Hameleers et al. (2022) highlight further overlap, noting that disinformation campaigns frequently utilize hate speech as a means to cater to specific fringe or extreme audiences, and to evoke emotional responses to help their messages spread to a wider base without the need for traditional channels.

Finally, it is also worth noting that false information does not need to be convincing or persuasive to be effective, or to have an impact. It simply needs to create some degree of doubt. Those who create and distribute disinformation generally benefit from an information ecosystem where the veracity of any claim, whether genuine or not, can be called into question, and no piece of online content is above suspicion. The impact this has on institutional trust and social cohesion will always benefit those who present themselves as an opposition to the status quo. The more uncertainty and distrust they are able to create, the easier it is for false information to thrive.



Literature Review

To date, only a handful of studies have specifically looked at Irish young people's experiences with misinformation and disinformation. This literature review will begin by examining this research, before moving onto literature investigating the Irish false information ecosystem more broadly, and ending with a discussion of international literature specifically focusing on the impact of misinformation and disinformation on young people outside of Ireland.

The review will conclude with a brief discussion of notable gaps in the literature that merit further investigation. In order to ensure the information is up to date and relevant, this review focuses on research published after 2020, as the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown measures have had a significant impact on the landscape of Irelands false information ecosystem (as will be discussed shortly). This review will also prioritize research relevant to young people's understandings, experiences, attitudes as they relate to misinformation and disinformation, over the body of literature debating how best to regulate against these phenomena, which although certainly important when discussing the Irish context, falls outside of the scope of this research.



Irish Young People's Experiences with False Information

Noting that earlier studies had largely focused on the experiences of adults, Esfandiari et al. (2025) investigate Irish young people, between the ages of 11 and 15 experiences with false information online. The authors employ a mixed-methods approach combining focus groups and questionnaires targeting young people in secondary school. The reports finds that that 60% of young people received their first smartphone between the ages of 10 and

13, and that most use their phones several times a day, highlighting the importance of early interventions to help young people build resilience to false information circulating online. Participants demonstrated a good understanding of the basics of online safety (creating strong passwords, maintain privacy, etc.), and were generally comfortable with the concept of misinformation (describing it as incorrect, false, or untrue content, which may be shared unintentionally or unknowingly), and disinformation (deliberate attempts persuade audiences). When asked to explain what they understood disinformation to be, participants provided several examples, including distortions of news and current events and technology enabled fakes (AI generated images, deepfakes, photoshops, etc.). The topic of disinformation also prompted discussions about unverified rumours about public figures, identity fraud, phishing scams, and click-bait content promoting viral "hacks", demonstrating an awareness of disinformation that goes beyond the political sphere.

Notably, this research is among the first to measure young people in Ireland's familiarity with AI tools. Participants had some understanding of its broad functions and capabilities (e.g. problem solving, content generation), and were able to identify some practical use cases, including autocorrect, facial recognition, and recommendation algorithms. Most participants recognised that they regularly engaged with AI technology in some shape or form, whether through virtual assistants and chatbots, or generative AI tools. Despite their familiarity with AI technology, a number of participants reported not feeling confident in their ability to identify AI generated content. There also seemed to be some awareness of the potential harms of AI, with participants highlighting its propensity to hallucinate false or inaccurate information, or a larger societal impact of making people "lazier" (e.g. doing student's homework for them).

In November 2024, European Movement Ireland published a report titled 'The Disinformation Landscape: Youth in Ireland and the EU'. This research combines interviews with youth workers, with a discourse analysis of disinformation narratives collected from youth networks on X, Facebook, Reddit and TikTok. The report highlights the role "Active Clubs" play in promoting harmful disinformation online, particularly when it comes to reaching young men. Active Clubs are transnational phenomena, comprising loosely organized collectives that combine hyper-masculinity, combat sports, and "clean living", with anti-migrant narratives. An emphasis is put on the importance of maintaining physical health and developing street fighting capabilities in preparation for a coming "race war". The report identifies an Irish chapter known as Comhaltas na nGaedheal, which has a presence on X, Substack and Telegram, which has been present at anti-migrant demonstrations in Finglas, Coolock, and Athlone. Upon analysis of their online presence, the report identifies a number of recurring themes. Irish culture, language, and music, are decontextualised and embraced as a safeguard against multiculturalism. Similarly, a revisionist understanding of Irish history is employed, wherein quotes are taken out of context in order to portray figures like James Connolly and Bobby Sands as ardent nativists. An obsession with regular training in gyms and abstention from alcohol and processed foods is also present, not in the context of promoting a healthy lifestyle, but as a means for improving one's combat abilities. Parallels are drawn to the output of figures like Andrew Tate, who promotes male supremacy

through an appeal to "natural" hierarchies (e.g. men being natural fighters and leaders, while women are natural carers and home-makers). LGBTQ+ communities are also explicitly rejected within these networks, and described as a reflection of the "evils" of contemporary society.

The report also discusses the presence of Active Clubs in France and Germany, and examines how each of these countries has attempted to deal with the impact of false information on young people. Germany's approach relies heavily on policing and surveillance, encouraging young people to report incidents of hate speech and disinformation they view online, while France's approach focuses more on education, coming in the form of school-based media literacy initiatives, consolidated by civil society initiatives, events and workshops. Ireland's approach is more community focused, with the report highlighting the work done at a local level, particularly in communities that may be more vulnerable to anti-migrant narratives. The report identifies a number of national campaigns including Media Literacy Ireland's Be Media Smart campaign, and the capacity building for youth workers The National Youth Council of Ireland have achieved through their Transforming Hate workshops. The ability for local communities to combat disinformation is further highlighted in calls for EU funding to support local journalism, and to support sporting bodies and gym chains to act as points of intervention for recruitment and indoctrination of young men into extremist ideologies.

Focusing on Irish young people's experiences with the internet more broadly, 'Left to Their Own Devices: The virtually unprotected lives of kids in Ireland' is a report published by CyberSafeKids in 2024. Drawing from an online survey of over 7000 primary school pupils between the ages of 8 – 14 year olds, the report maps the online habits of children and younger teens, measuring the extent to which they were being exposed to harmful or misleading content. The report concluded that 25% of primary aged children had been upset by something they had encountered on the internet. These negative experiences often related to scams or misleading claims, and were most commonly encountered on Youtube (37%), TikTok (30%), and Roblox (23%). The report acknowledges recent discussions around banning smartphones for young children but dismisses these as "misleading", instead highlighting the importance of educating children, and helping them to build resilience to harmful and false information. They identify that such interventions will require buy-in from stakeholders across society including parents, teachers, policy-makers and the tech-industry. The report concludes with calls for mandatory age verification on social media, increasing the amount of media literacy provided in schools, and promoting national awareness campaigns targeting parents, encouraging them to be more vigilant of their children's online habits.

While the previous examples provide an overview or Irish youths day to day encounters with false and misleading content, the 2025 Digital News Report Ireland provides insights into their attitudes towards social media, news media, and false information more broadly. Notably, the report finds that Irish young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age, are the cohort least concerned with whether or not the content with which they were engaging was "real" or "true", with 18% saying they are not concerned, and a further 21% reporting indifference. The report also finds that the platforms seen to be the

"The report finds that Irish young people between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age, are the cohort least concerned with whether or not the content with which they were engaging was "real" or "true"."

greatest threat when it came to spreading false or misleading information are X (54%) closely followed by Facebook (53%) and TikTok (53%). Instagram is at 37% while YouTube is at 30%. More closed platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram were generally seen to be safer, both of which were at 20%. The 2025 report also covered attitudes regarding AI as it relates to trust and disinformation. Here there were significant discrepancies depending on age, with 31% of under 35's reporting being "somewhat" or "very" comfortable with the idea of their news being primarily AI generated (with some human oversight) compared to just 15% of those over 35. Nevertheless, there still appears to be a healthy skepticism of using AI as a news source, with only 5% of respondents saying they use it for news, and 45% saying it would make news less trustworthy, 40% saying less accurate, and 37% saying less transparent. The report notes that a BBC report published in February 2025 found that 51% of news summaries generated by AI contained "significant inaccuracies" (Rhaman-Jones 2025).

Ireland's False Information Ecosystem

Moving away from youth specific research and examining misinformation and disinformation in an Irish context more broadly, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue's Uisce Faoi Thalamh series represents one of the first attempts to map the false information ecosystem in Ireland, identifying emerging themes and narratives, the various actors involved, and the channels through which they spread and reach new audiences. The series was written in response to the misinformation and disinformation which circulated during Covid-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to the figures who built followings opposing mask mandates, vaccinations, and other lockdown measures, and how they subsequently adapted their messaging to new topics, and continued to grow their audiences. The analysis draws from a dataset comprising over 13 million posts from 12 online platforms collected between 2020 and 2023.

The findings are spread across three reports, the first of which looks at the platforms through which false information in Ireland

spreads. X is overwhelmingly found to be the platform where most activity within this ecosystem occurred. All actors studied as part of this research were found to have active X accounts and for eight of the nine topics studied, X was the platform where engagement was highest. Despite a surge in the use of groups and pages early in the pandemic, Facebook's role within the false information ecosystem was found to be waning. Instagram's role was described as "Small but concerning", with a number of smaller accounts reported to be playing outsized roles in disinformation relating to migrants, LGBTQ+ communities and holocaust denial. Despite a comparatively small user base, Telegram is described as a "significant hub", playing an important role in organisation and discussion. The platform is also noted for the active presence of figures like Tommy Robinson and Russian State Media. Finally, TikTok is described as a platform where these actors are struggling to break through, as accounts were regularly suspended for violating terms of service. Despite this, content containing false information shared by the actors they were tracking would occasionally surpass one million views, demonstrating the reach such content can have, even with active moderation.



While the first report focused on the specific platforms through which misinformation narratives reached their audiences, the second report focused on the themes and narratives themselves. Covid-19 is described as a catalyst that primed audiences to view the world through a more conspiratorial lens, long after lockdown measures were lifted. The void left by the absence of Covid-19 conspiracies was quickly filled with conspiracies regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, before being surpassed by narratives about migrants and the LGBTQ+ communities, which still represent a significant portion of the content in the Irish disinformation ecosystem today. The report also highlights the impact these narratives are having, mobilising people onto the streets to hold demonstrations outside refugee accommodation, libraries, and politician's homes, and committing acts of violence and arson.

Covid-19's role as a catalyst for conspiracy theorists is also identified by Culloty (2023), who describes how anti-establishment actors and conspiratorial figures initially built audiences opposing lockdown measures and challenging mainstream narratives, and how they opportunistically used ongoing crises to mobilise both online and offline. Particular attention is drawn to right-wing figures who took advantage of ongoing crises relating to housing, rent and homelessness figures,

discussed in the context of asylum seeker accommodation and refugee numbers, to advance their nativist cause. Culloty (2023) also identifies an increase in hostility towards LGBTQ+ community, and in particular the trans community, manifesting in the form of grooming allegations. The targeting of former minister for Children and Equality Roderic O'Gorman is provided as an emblematic case of Irish actors peddling homophobic disinformation. An increase in false information regarding health and wellness is also noted. This is largely observed in the form of "alternative health" products, as well as disinformation relating to the Covid-19 Vaccine, much of which originated from non-Irish sources.

Impact of Disinformation - Comparative International Insights

Looking beyond Ireland, Selnes (2024) draws from 18 focus groups and six interviews with 91 Norwegian adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 to investigate their experiences with fake news, and how they respond when they encounter information they believe to be false online. The most popular tactic was to simply ignore it and continue scrolling. Although a passive response, Selnes (2024) stresses that ignoring and scrolling past is not motivated by laziness, ambivalence or apathy. It is described as a rational response, which prevents young people from amplifying fake news, while avoiding the psychological stresses of battling against an unending deluge of false information. As far as participants were concerned, ignoring fake news did not mean that they were allowing fake news to continue to spread, but rather, that it stopped with them. A case is thus made for legitimising ignoring as a deliberate strategy within youth-targeted media literacy programmes, moving away from a heavy emphasis on active debunking which can breed "news fatigue" and create feelings of guilt within those who choose to disengage.

A preference among the young people for passive responses to false information, eschewing active responses such as flagging, reporting, blocking, etc., is also identified by Kops et al. (2025). In their scoping review of young people and false information, the researchers examine 151 studies conducted between 2015 and 2024 to identify notable patterns, and gaps in the research. Their findings include numerous examples of recorded impacts of fake news on young people, such as instilling feelings of confusion and fear, causing disengagement, and lessening political participation. Similar conclusions are reached by Mrah and Tizaoui (2018) in their research examining Moroccan teenagers attitudes to fake news, which identifies significant numbers who reported feeling overwhelmed and fatigued by "information overload". In their meta-analysis, Kops et al. (2025) also identify a significant gap between young people's self-reported ability to identify false information, and their actual competence when tested. De Vincente-Dominguez et al. (2021) similarly report that despite young Spaniards generally reporting a high level of confidence in their ability to spot fake news and false information, very few are able to articulate how exactly they do this, or what their process of verification is. While it may indeed be true that many young people "know it when they see it" a lack of rubric, framework or systematic process, means that there is no way for them to account for false information which they do not instinctively identify. As these examples will go undetected, self-reporting about ability to identify false information should be treated with caution.

Gaps in the Literature

While this review has highlighted some of the important research that has been produced about the Irish false information ecosystem and young people's experiences with false information more broadly, it has also highlighted several important gaps in the existing literature. The following section outlines these gaps and points to areas where further research is needed, and explains why this data is important.

Demographic Variations - Misinformation and disinformation are not homogenous phenomena. The kinds of false information to which a young adult will be exposed is likely to be significantly different to the kinds of narratives an older individual will see. This review has made apparent not just the lack of research looking specifically at the experience of Irish youths, but the lack of research looking at how misinformation and disinformation are experienced across a range of demographics, including age, gender, social class, geographic location, and how the experience differs for members of migrant, LGBTQ+ or Traveller communities. It is a mistake to treat young people as a homogenous group. False information and harmful narratives will impact these groups differently. Research which takes this into consideration will be of benefit to those wishing to design more targeted supports, interventions and counter-measures.

Platform features - Existing researching looking at the platforms through which false information spread in an Irish context, have largely focused on which platforms present the greatest risk. While this is important information, ending analysis at the platform level can miss the role that specific features play in shaping how false information is encountered and spread. As short-form video, livestreaming, stories, and generative AI features now operate across multiple platforms, a platform specific approach may obscure the factors that make certain content more resonant, sharable, or difficult to challenge. This limits our ability to design interventions that target the actual pathways of exposure rather than

Focus on Impact - While the reviewed literature in the Irish context highlighted a number of important findings relating to young people's experiences with, understandings of, and attitudes towards misinformation and disinformation, the impact false information is having on young people was something which largely came up incidentally. While expanding our scope to comparative international examples revealed impacts such as feelings of being overwhelmed and fatigued, and disengaging as a result, it cannot be taken for granted that the identified impacts will map onto the Irish context cleanly. A clear understanding of the impacts of misinformation and disinformation is essential for informing the development of effective interventions, policies, and supports to protect vulnerable groups and democratic processes. Research demonstrating impacts will also be beneficial in highlighting the urgency with which this problem needs to be addressed.

Qualitative Insights - Relatedly, much of the reviewed literature focusing on young people and false information is quantitative, often relying on large scale survey data. While this research has been invaluable in helping us to understand the scale of the threat of false information, and how these narratives find their way to young people, they are limited in how much they can tell us about and the impact it is having on how they live their

day to day lives. More in-depth qualitative research, such as interviews or focus groups can give us a better idea of why certain narratives are resonating more with young people, how they respond to different kinds of misinformation, and how their experiences have changed over time. Such qualitative approaches also provide opportunities for emergent data which may not even have been considered going into the research, something that is particularly relevant when researching false information, which as previously noted, is experienced in radically different ways by different demographic groups.

False information encountered offline - Throughout the existing literature, misinformation and disinformation are largely treated as online phenomena, leaving offline exposure under-examined. This is a problem because young people may be repeatedly confronted with false or misleading claims in settings where they cannot simply disengage, and where the relational stakes are higher. Without accounting for these dynamics, research risks underestimating both exposure and harm, and overlooking the coping strategies young people use to navigate these interactions.

Emerging Threats from AI Generated Content - Finally, discussions on the potential threat of AI generated content as it relates to the spread of misinformation and disinformation were largely absent from much of this research. This is not unexpected – while these technologies emerge and evolve rapidly, research tends to move much more slowly. This is evidenced by that fact that many of the studies discussed in this review focused heavily on misinformation and disinformation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, narratives which are circulating far less frequently today. In the case of generative AI however, this is something that is already having a tremendous influence on the shape false information ecosystems, changing the scale at which disinformation is being produced and disseminated, while creating doubt around the veracity of audio and visual media across the web. This is something that will need to be a part of all misinformation and disinformation research going forward.

"Throughout the existing literature, misinformation and disinformation are largely treated as online phenomena, leaving offline exposure under-examined."

Focus Groups

As noted in the literature review, research to date has been largely quantitative and descriptive, often with a focus on specific topics of false information, and the networks through which they find their audience. Focus groups were identified as the optimal methodology for addressing the identified gaps in the literature, for their ability to afford a space for young people to provide nuanced articulations of the impact misinformation and disinformation are having on their everyday lives.

This qualitative approach allows us to explore in greater depth why certain narratives resonate, what impacts they have, and how these experiences differ across demographics. Focus groups also allow for emergent findings to be identified and pursued immediately, something which is of tremendous benefit to exploratory research.

Between April and July 2025, six focus groups were conducted with 32 participants aged between 18 and 24 from across Ireland. Focus groups ranged from three to nine participants, and generally lasted between 60 and 80 minutes. Four of the six focus groups took place in person, while two were conducted online via Zoom. Research participants were members of established youth groups attached to youth work organisations. The groups were recruited through the National Youth Council's Equality and Intercultural Programme who compiled a list of youth groups that represented a demographic mix of majority and minority identities. NYCI programme staff contacted the relevant youth workers who in turn proposed participation in the research to the youth group. Once all were in agreement, youth workers were connected with the researcher, and focus groups were scheduled.

The focus groups specifically sought to capture the experiences of young people in Ireland, but were otherwise organised in order to capture a diverse range of experiences across demographic variables such as gender and geographic location. Members of migrant, LGBTQ+, and Traveller communities were all also represented. Despite efforts to keep these groups as representative as possible there is of course an inevitable bias in that only the perspectives and experiences of those happy to volunteer their time to participate are captured in the study. It is also important to note that the young people who participated in this research were recruited

from funded and resourced youth services and so represent a cohort of young people who have benefited from youth work and have access to supportive offline informal educational spaces. To mitigate these factors somewhat, participants were invited to comment on how representative they felt their experiences to be, and whether they believed peers or family members shared their perspective on topics being discussed.

This discussion will begin by looking at some of the most common examples of false information provided by participants (anti-migrant content, anti-trans content, scams and AI generated content), which generally related to society and identity. The remainder of this chapter will unpack a number of topics which can be grouped under the category of "self-help" content, divided into two broad thematic areas – 'Health and Beauty', and 'Masculinty and Hustle Culture'. Despite its prevalence online, and the frequency with which young people are exposed to such content, focus group participants were less quick to identify false information which came in the form of self-help content as harmful. However, when reminded that partial or incomplete information, or information lacking necessary context were all examples of misinformation, participants were generally able to provide numerous examples, and identify specific harms.

Society and Identity

Anti-Migrant content

The structure of these focus groups was kept very loose. Once key terms had been established, focus groups sessions generally began with an invitation to participants to share any examples of misinformation or disinformation that came to mind. All six groups responded to this prompt with examples of false information which targeted immigrants. Specific narratives shared included stories about immigrants taking Irish jobs, living in 5 star hotels, trying to kidnap children, and sexually assaulting women and girls. Lack of context and untrustworthy sources were offered as reason to be skeptical of such stories. Participants suggested that those who pushed these narratives were taking advantage of a lack of information surrounding emerging stories to create fear and mistrust towards migrants, in some cases rushing to blame migrants before any official information about these incidents had been made public. One group also identified a double standard in how crimes committed migrants were reported by some, compared to crimes committed by Irish natives, which may not be reported on at all.

Despite this clear understanding of many of the anti-immigrant narratives being spread, and in some cases an understanding of



the motivations for sharing, focus group participants generally had difficulty naming specific accounts who they identified as responsible, or through whom these narratives had reached them. There were however, a small number of exceptions. Conor McGregor came up in every focus group, although participants were more commonly aware of his anti-immigrant stances through negative coverage it had received, as opposed to being exposed to his content directly. His comments shared on the night of the Dublin riot in November 2023 were known to most participants, but participants varied in their familiarity with his subsequent anti-immigration messaging. One group were completely unaware of his presidential campaign, while another group were convinced that he would win if he could get on the ballot. In another group, it was suggested that a lot of his campaigning seemed to be directed towards a US audience. Participants from this same group observed that he was trying to portray himself as a victim of a conspiracy to keep him out of politics, even though the rules for getting on the ballot for a presidential election had not been changed, and he had not shown any previous interest in running for other elected offices, where ballot access is easier to secure.

As well as being exposed to Conor McGregor's output via accounts who were covering it critically, many groups reported seeing content shared by smaller accounts repeating his ideas. One group referred to these accounts as "Conor McGregor Wannabes". These were described as local people, some of whom were known to participants offline, who as well as sharing Conor McGregor talking points, would weigh in on emerging stories with unverified rumours – "Local lads going on rants about immigrants and Traveller, talking about being "invaded" and taking back their town". These were not big accounts, and were in some cases described as having "no followers". Participants joked about having more followers than some of these accounts and questioned

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who they were making this content for. Nevertheless, this kind of content appeared to more regularly find its way to focus group participants than the content produced by the actual Conor McGregor. Participants explained that neither they nor their friends followed these accounts, and suggested they were being shown them as a result of recommendation algorithms.

Another figure identified by more than one group was a local County Councillor. Participants in one group explained that his content was so over the top and unprofessional, it would frequently be shared on Facebook and throughout WhatsApp groups, where it would be ridiculed. This is the only context in which they had encountered his posts. When asked if other people their ages were seeing this content, the group insisted that everyone their age knew about his online presence, but that nobody takes it seriously. This Councillor, along with another unsuccessful candidate who ran in the local elections but whose name participants could not recall, were identified as figures who would frequently weigh in on emerging stories with an anti-migrant framing, either through their own social media posts, or by hi-jacking comments sections.

Finally, the Instagram and Facebook account This Is Dublin, was named in two focus groups as a significant driver of false information regarding immigrants. This is Dublin is a popular account with over 133 thousand followers on Instagram and 128 thousand on Facebook, which purports to show "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly", side of Dublin. The account regularly uploads short form video content filmed in Dublin, ranging from videos of dogs and notable characters, to incidents such as car crashes and street fights (these latter categories appearing to comprise a higher percentage of the accounts output more recently). Some participants explained that they had previously followed and enjoyed This Is Dublin but felt the account had increasingly shifted towards content which they perceived as framing migration, and people who migrated to Ireland, in consistently negative ways.

This pivot appears to have benefitted the account in terms of follower count, as well as affording new opportunities to collaborate with figures like Conor McGregor. Participants also noted that they could see many people they knew were still following This Is Dublin, and speculated that they might not view this content as racist or inaccurate.

One focus group explained that the account operates as an aggregator account for anti-migrant rumours and videos circulating in private social media groups, and lesser known Facebook pages. They believed that contextual information accompanying these reposted videos on the This Is Dublin account was frequently drawn from comments or unverified claims circulating alongside the original upload. This included unverified claims by others claiming to have been there, or to know what actually happened. As a result, participants felt that information which initially appeared as speculative rumours or "unconfirmed reports", on fringe accounts or groups, acquired greater credibility once reposted by This is Dublin, a much larger public account with. And the rumours became part of the story once it reached his followers. One focus group believed that this account prioritised speed of posting over verification and accuracy when reporting emerging incidents. Participants also suggested that they perceived anti-migrant framing by the account generated far higher engagement among the account's audience.

Similar to the "Conor McGregor Wannabes", it was explained that there are now a number of accounts trying to mirror this is Dublin's model and emulate its success. Although participants were unable to name any specific examples, the existence of multiple unaccountable channels within this ecosystem, uncritically promoting any rumors or anonymous comments they come across, appears to be an incredibly common way in which false information and anti-migrant narratives reaches young people.

Moving away from specific accounts, another vector through which false information regarding migrants regularly found its way to focus group participants was through small pages and groups catering to local communities. These examples included Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups targeted towards specific communities, where information would be shared about local issues, upcoming events, classified advertising, missing pets etc., as well as sharing memes and in-jokes specifically for locals. Notably, participants described these as groups where people of all ages would interact, a notable difference to the closed communications focus group participants more commonly engaged in. Two separate focus groups described these online spaces becoming increasingly "paranoid" in recent years, and becoming "breeding groups" for disinformation as a result. According to one participant, this more paranoid style of posting could be traced back to Covid-19 lockdowns, when they noticed these groups becoming more concerned about the dangers of 5G and chemtrails. Regardless of the ostensible purpose of the group being discussed, it was reported that members (sometimes specifically "older members") would share content highlighting concerns about safety, for example, asking if other group members in the area had heard gunshots or sharing pictures taken from ring doorbell cameras showing a person outside their house, either asking if anyone else in the group recognised the figure, or warning other members to stay vigilant.

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Focus group participants explained that these small community-focused groups had become places where members would update one another about stories of people perceived as foreign in the area harassing women or attempting to abduct children, occasionally shared alongside photos of the supposed perpetrators. One participant, reported seeing a video of foreign men gathering outside a newsagent being shared in the group, accompanied by a warning to other members that they "might" do something. The potential for threat went unquestioned in the comments section.

Another group discussed a video they had all seen shared in one such group, in which a Black man hit a white child on a bus. While agreeing that the man was in the wrong, the group noted that it was unclear where the video originated, and were skeptical as to whether this even took place in Ireland.

Comment sections were identified as another space in which focus group participants were regularly being exposed to false information about migrants. This occurred even in cases where the initial post made no reference to foreigners or immigrants. Examples were given of posts shared in a local Facebook groups complaining about increases in litter, loud music being played, or the behavior of groups of young children in the community, which would regularly be hi-jacked by commenters suggesting that these were all a consequence of increasing numbers of immigrants in the community.

Regarding racism more broadly, two focus groups independently suggested that racist content was becoming increasingly common and normalized. One participant explained that "If a Black person shares a video on TikTok, the comments will all be people making fun of them for being black, and these comments will get upvotes". Another participant agreed, explaining that they get "a lot more racism than you would think" in the comments sections of content they upload. Participants suggested this was particularly common among younger cohorts, often shared in the form of irreverent, edgy humor. Despite being intended as a joke, this content relied on many of the same tropes and narratives present in other racist content. However, joke status offered a veneer of plausible deniability to the creator, who if called out, could claim they were not being serious, or that those who were offended simply did not understand the joke.

Anti-Trans content



Anti-trans narratives were another example of harmful false information which focus group participants were quick to highlight. The most prominent narrative discussed was the equation of being transgender with mental illness. Some participants reported seeing this perspective promoted from a position of faux-concern, with suggestions that transgender people needed help, and that anyone who was helping them to transition or affirming their gender was in fact doing them a disservice. Participants from multiple groups also reported seeing content suggesting that anyone who identified as being transgender had undiagnosed autism. Other prominent narratives were that cisgender men were identifying as trans-women to access to

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"Focus group participants recognised the impact this could have, suggesting it's likely having a chilling effect, by stopping trans people from sharing content."

women's bathrooms and compete in women's sports. One group observed that a lot of this content seems to be massively playing up how many people are actually trans, how many of them are competing in sports, and how many incidents had occurred of trans-people committing sexual assault in public bathrooms. One participant observed that these anti-trans narratives were often grounded in hypothetical incidents, with very few actual examples to draw from.

Once again, most participants had initially encountered this anti-trans content in the context of people responding critically, and there was generally not a great sense of who was spreading these narratives initially. Some participants were aware of figures like JK Rowling's prominent role in the anti-trans movement, but had never seen her comments in their original context. Another group believed that much of the anti-trans content they encountered came from American influencers, but could not name specific accounts.

Participants again observed that many of these narratives were present in the comment sections of content shared by a trans people. These comments contained deliberate misgendering, accusations of mental illness, and in some cases, accusations of pedophilia. Focus group participants recognised the impact this could have, suggesting it's likely having a chilling effect, by stopping trans people from sharing content. One participant described these narratives as an attempt to silence all trans people, and prevent them from participating in society, explaining "they're trying to take the tongue out of their mouth".

Participants identified a strategy whereby those trying to discredit trans people would exaggerate or fabricate a discrete incident in order discredit the entire population. In one group, the example was given of a content creator familiar to participants who appeared to identify as transgender in bad faith, so that their unacceptable behavior could be used against all trans people. The content described ranged from calling the police whenever they were misgendered, to explicitly saying they transitioned to get closer to women, in order to sexually harass them. Despite repeatedly having their social media accounts removed, this individual would continually resurface under new user names. Participants reported regularly seeing this person used in arguments against expanding the rights of transgender people. Although focus group participants were able to see the cynical motivations behind such content, they were less certain their peers were coming to the same conclusions.

Scams



Most groups spoke out length about various scams they were aware of, or had fallen victim to at some point in their lives. Participants spoke candidly about competitions they had entered which had turned out not to be real, items they had purchased online that were of much lower quality than advertised, people they had spoken to online who turned out not to be who they claimed, or times they or friends had had online accounts hacked or stolen. In many cases, the stories shared had happened some time ago, and were generally described as formative learning experiences.

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Many of these scams included a financial incentive. Some female participants shared that they received private messages from anonymous accounts "all the time" offering to pay for photos or videos, or asking if they are looking for a "sugar daddy". These were described as messages that everyone their age receives, but that no one would ever consider responding to. Participants also spoke about receiving messages from people, in some cases who were known to them, but with whom they were not necessarily close, asking for money and promising they could double any investment in a small time-frame. These were not people who had had their accounts hacked, but rather people who were confident they could make a profit investing in cryptocurrencies, if they could put together enough money to invest in the first place. While some participants knew people who had made money through cryptocurrencies, or had themselves invested in cryptocurrencies at some point, they were generally skeptical of such messages.

AI



Another area which focus group participants were eager to discuss was the proliferation of AI generated content online. Discussions were often lighthearted, with participants sharing examples of the most over-the top or bizarre examples they had encountered, as well as examples of friends, family or indeed themselves, being fooled. In these examples, it was most commonly parents who failed to identify videos as AI generated, and shared them unknowingly. While the majority of examples were banal, some were slightly more political, such as one participant explaining that their Dad had shown them a video suggesting Donald Trump and Elon Musk were in a secret relationship, which he had believed to be real. Other examples were more troubling. Some participants were aware of AI generated nude images of people they knew being shared. These images had been generated and distributed without the knowledge or consent of the subject. One group described

an incident in which an individual who was known to them had to ask friends to share the original clothed image, in order to "debunk" an AI generated nude image of her likeness which had spread quickly. This correction however, did not spread as far or as quickly as the fake. AI generated nude images of female celebrities were also frequently encountered. Participants also discussed videos where celebrities were made to appear to say things they had not said. In many examples, these were advertisements or endorsements, such as one example of footballer Bruno Fernandes enthusiastically endorsing a relatively unknown rapper, or a video of Joe Rogan appearing to endorse a mobile phone game. In other examples, videos were generated to cause deliberate reputational damage, for example, by making online content creators appear to use slurs, or make transphobic comments.

Most participants were not concerned about being tricked by AI generated images or videos. Some shared specific "tells" they look for when assessing whether an image is AI generated e.g. looking for features AI has historically had difficulty replicating, such as hands (although this is something that recent AI models have improved on). Others say they can just tell. However, much like misinformation and disinformation more broadly, self-assessed ability to identify AI generated imagery may not always align with actual ability. Notable AI generated images (e.g. an image of Pope Francis wearing Balenciaga) were discussed in focus groups, with many participants acknowledging that although being familiar with the images, they had not identified these as AI generated. Participants were generally less confident in their ability to identify AI generated text, with some claiming they had never encountered it. Although not impossible, given the prevalence of AI generated text online, it is more likely that they had encountered it, but not identified it as such. Again, some were aware of markers from earlier iterations of ChatGPT such as the liberal use of M-dashes, or specific phrasings.

In one group, participants passed around their phones to show examples of AI generated videos that they had been fooled by, and discussed the experience of realizing you've been tricked. There was a consensus that it always embarrassing to admit something like this, but they also explained that once you've experienced it a few times, you try to be a little bit more critical of the images and videos you come across – particularly if you intend to share them. Although they had no clear indicators they looked out for, participants generally felt that exposure to such content had helped them develop a better innate ability to distinguish real from artificially generated content over time. This was contrasted with their experience confronting parents about AI generated content that had been shared with them. Parents were described as being more resistant to accepting that the content they had shared was false, or admitting that they had been fooled. Multiple participants had stories of parents who refused to acknowledge that a video they had shared was AI generated, and had become very defensive when confronted.

Health and Beauty

Mental Health



While the prevalence of content discussing and destigmatising mental health online was generally viewed as a positive, participants also recognised this as an area where they regularly encountered examples of misinformation. This was often as a result of mental health content being shared by content creators and influencers

who lack the necessary expertise to treat these topics with sufficient care. Examples included content that ostensibly diagnoses mental health conditions being shared by non-professionals – e.g. short form video content with titles like "Five Signs You're Bipolar" or "Eight Signs You're Dealing with a Covert Narcissist". Depression, ADHD and autism were flagged as the most common conditions diagnosed in such content. Some participants said they knew people who had self-diagnosed based on this content. Some also reported incidents they were aware of, in which people had diagnosed friends and family.

Participants in one group recognised that getting a diagnosis is a long process, and so it was unsurprising to them that people would want to engage with this content - "It's difficult to get a diagnosis, but anyone can watch a 30 second video titled "5 Signs You Have ADHD" and self-diagnose". At the same time, they understood that these influencers were not being careful with their language, often gesturing towards incredibly broad symptoms as concrete evidence of an underlying condition. One participant from this same group suggested that every day feelings and emotions were becoming increasingly pathologised – "everybody feels fatigued or tired at times. Everyone feels stressed. Everyone has days when they'd prefer to stay at home rather than see friends – This doesn't mean they're autistic, or manic depressive". This group also drew a connection between this kind of content, and an increasing tendency on social media for people to misuse the language of therapy and mental health. They felt this blurred the lines between people living with genuine conditions who have specific needs, and people who are temporarily fatigued or overwhelmed.

Participants in another group explained that this kind of diagnostic content often came in the form of ads on Youtube and TikTok that encouraged people to click through to take a test. Some participants reported engaging with these ads, only to find they needed to create an account or pay money before they could access test "results". In some cases, these diagnostic advertisements took the form of an optical illusion or Rorschach test, asking people what they saw or how an image made them feel, before inviting them to take a test. Another group reported seeing content that combined this kind of medical misinformation with new age mysticism and astrology, combining mental health conditions and terminology, with vague spiritual concepts like energy and aura. One participant reported content from a popular influencer who claimed to be able to diagnose people based on their facial features and bone structure, a description which sounds worryingly close to the debunked pseudoscience of phrenology.

Nutrition



Lack of expertise and context was similarly identified as a driver of misinformation in content that approached the topic of health and wellness via nutrition. This age group reported being shown a lot of advertisements and sponsored content promoting health drinks, smoothies, protein powders, weight loss supplements etc., that made "too-good-to-be-true" claims, or used obviously edited before and after pictures. Participants were quick to describe the prevalence of hyperbolic, clickbait headlines in the content they were seeing – e.g. claiming certain foods will give you cancer, or talking about why you needed to be eating more carbohydrates, protein, fibre, etc. Participant felt that although there

was often some scientific evidence to back up much of the information being promoted in this space, there was a tendency to flatten out nuance in order to drive traffic. It was also noted that many of the influencers making this content were producing sponsored content promoting supplements, protein powders, meal plans, etc, but that this is not always clear.

Weight Loss



Focus group participants were able to name numerous extreme diets, fads and weight loss hacks they had encountered online that ranged from inaccurate to genuinely harmful. These included a wide range of "cleanses", water diets, all-meat diets, prolonged fasting, skinny teas etc., as well as inaccurate advice about "targeted weight loss" or specific exercises or diets to address "issues" that were more related to bone structure than fitness or weight (e.g. Hip Dips and Thigh Gaps).

Young women who participated in focus groups were generally familiar Skinnytok – A corner of TikTok that centres being skinny as being of upmost importance for both physical and mental health. In many way similar to the pro-anorexia communities that gained popularity in the 00's, examples of content include influencers doing "What I eat in a day" videos, where they deliberately eat significantly fewer calories than recommended, or videos that explain how to eat a set amount of calories in a day (again, usually far below what would be considered healthy). However, unlike the pro-anorexia content, this is presented as aspirational lifestyle content in which being skinny is equated to being healthy, affording creators a certain amount of plausible deniability. Participants specifically named Liv Schmidt as "The Queen of Skinnytok". As well as providing information on weight loss, promoting walking, and advocating for smaller portion sizes, Schmidt presents an idealised version of life as a skinny person – highly stylized and footage of incredibly glamorous lives in cities like New York or London, with regular holidays, no 9 to 5 jobs, and an implicit suggestion that this is a consequence of being skinny (and not the fact that she is a successful influencer).

The language of body-positivity is regularly invoked in this content, e.g., talking about being confident in your body, describing being skinny as "self-love" or a "personal power", etc. While some participants recognised the unusual combination of this language being used by conventionally attractive models and influencers to promote unhealthy attitudes towards food and self-image as cynical or "gross", not all participants connected this content to misinformation. In one group, it was explained that Skinnytok is "mainly about going to the gym - nothing about what you're writing". Similarly, although participants were aware of pro-anorexia content and influencers, they did not always initially view Skinnytok as a continuation of this kind of content, due to its positive framing.

Another common thread throughout a number of groups was the prevalence of content promoting the drug Ozempic. Participants reported videos being shared of people sharing their daily Ozempic injections and tracking their "Ozempic journeys", while updating their followers on their progress. In some cases, the people filming and sharing these videos were peers of focus group participants. This content was described as being aesthetically closer to the content produced by beauty influencers, than a video sharing medical advice. Some of these videos

were instructional, showing people how to inject Ozempic, or how to get it in the first place. One group explained that Ozempic could quite easily be sourced from closed Whatsapp groups where drugs and stolen goods (shoes, perfumes, clothes, consumer electronics and other pharmaceuticals, etc.) were being sold. Participants said they had been part of these kinds of groups throughout their teen years, but that the presence of Ozempic was relatively new. Demand appeared to be quite high, with some participants aware of multiple groups where people were taking pre-orders that required advanced down-payments. Another group said that although they were not in any groups where people were selling Ozempic, they frequently encountered sponsored content and advertisements promoting a supplement described as "Natures Ozempic". Although no participants could explain what this label was referring to, it appears to be a popular term used to describe Bereberine. Participants also regularly mentioned being advertised supplements designed to help them lose water weight, although again, could not name specifics.

Beauty and Skincare



Focus group participants generally had an easier time recognising beauty hacks as a source of false information, identifying clickbait titles and hyperbolic claims as elements which gave them cause for skepticism. Numerous examples were shared, many of which focused on supposedly effective "treatments" which could be made from ingredients found in peoples fridges. Again, some of these were benign, and perhaps had some cosmetic benefits – e.g. avocado face masks, or putting egg whites on your eyebrows. Others more clearly had the potential for harm, such as using apple cider vinegar as a cleanser, or using household products to whiten eyes.

This topic often led to discussions of over the top beauty regimes, and in particular, the "Morning Shed" trend, where content creators film themselves removing all the serums, creams, masks and tape they had applied before going to sleep the previous night. Some participants with a decent knowledge of skincare explained that creators who shared these videos were often unfamiliar



with how the products actually worked, and were dispensing information that had the potential to damage skin barriers, or cause burns. Creators would promote combinations of serums, cleansers, moisturisers, masks, peels etc., assuming the benefits to be cumulative. Lack of knowledge regarding how these products worked meant that there was frequently no acknowledgement of the chemical reactions that takes place when acids interact. Certain active ingredients which should not be combined, and which are not always suitable for all skin types, were frequently promoted and used together. Participants also noted that other important information – such as the ability for these ingredients to leave skin more vulnerable to UV damage were often ignored completely. Again, in many cases, this was sponsored content, in which the creator was being financially compensated to promote specific products. Participants also raised concerns about the age of content creators and questioned who the intended audience was. One focus group participant reported seeing a 14 year old promote tretinoin, a powerful retinoid used to treat deep wrinkles. Beyond the potential dangers these products could pose if not used correctly, participants worried about the impact this content was having on young people's self-image or their attitudes towards aging.

Tradwives



Tradwife content promotes domestic femininity encouraging women to become stay at home moms, and in many cases shaming women who pursue careers through highly stylized content, often employing a 1950's aesthetic. Content is frequently Christian and pro-natalist. Content creators present life as a mother, and more specifically a stay at home mother, as a frictionless idyllic existence. Discussions of the realities of being a parent are often eschewed in favour of a focus on aesthetics - makeup, hair, dresses etc. Depending on the creator, this content can slip into more anti-feminist rhetoric, centring the wife's duty to serve her husband, and the satisfaction she derives from this "stress-free" experience.

Focus group participants were generally unfamiliar with the term tradwife, but recognised this kind of content when described, and could name specific content creators. Although unfamiliar with the specific history or ideological underpinnings of this content, it was generally recognised as being anti-feminist or misogynistic. However, some who recognised this still enjoyed or appreciated the content for its aesthetics, production quality, and aspirational element, with participants saying they were jealous of the creators cooking abilities or their clean, well-stocked kitchens.

There was occasionally disagreement within the groups as to whether tradwife content was harmful. Interestingly, participants in one group did not immediately recognise this content as being as deceptive or harmful as the creators did not talk about other people, instead just focusing on themselves. Others suggested it was intended as satire. One content creator, Nara Smith, was frequently given as an example that was so heightened it was assumed to be comedic. Others pushed back, saying that although she was leaning into the joke and performing an over-the-top version of domestic femininity, there was still a sincere message behind it, again, drawing attention to the ability of irony to mask or sanitise potentially harmful or ideologically loaded content, and potentially act as a gateway into more extreme version of this content.

Masculinity and "Hustle Culture"

Masculinity Influencers

The remaining themes and topics that will be discussed in this section, all come under the umbrella of masculinity influencers, a broad category comprising several distinct kinds of influencers, in which helpful and harmful advice often co-exist. However, unlike the previous self-help categories in which the harm largely came from a lack of expertise and insufficient context (with some exceptions), here the harms are largely the result of the ideological undergirding. In this case, these spaces are frequently informed by The Red Pill, an anti-feminist ideology which venerates stoicism and individualism, while promoting an idea that society has become feminized and that men have been disenfranchised as a result. As a result, much of the advice given in these spaces is impractical, and has the potential to cause harm. Most participants were unfamiliar with the term "red pill", they were familiar with many of the related concepts and applied examples, demonstrating the extent to which this ideology has found its way into mainstream culture. Perhaps because of this normalization, some participants were resistant to the idea that this content could be considered disinformation. When discussing masculinity influencers, particularly those who produced aspirational content that purported to offer advice on generating wealth, some focus group participants pushed back against the idea that these videos contained false or harmful information. One young male participant defended this content, saying it wasn't misinformation because "it's true though", "They're not lying though", and "it works". Another participant was resistant to the idea that this information was harmful, explaining that "they just want to help".



Life Coaches

The harmful false information within this category comes in many forms. In a direct sense, influencers can exemplify explicit disinformation by presenting themselves as being far wealthier than they are, in order to bolster their credentials as they give career or financial advice, or sell courses, apps, access to private groups, etc. These content creators vaguely allude to the idea that their vast fortune comes from their work as motivational speakers, life coaches, etc. However, in most cases little to no evidence of this work exists online. Most are earning a much more modest living through sponsorship deals, and creator programs on their social media platforms, which they have been able to monetise by building sizable audiences. These same influencers will evangelize that anyone can succeed if they follow their advice, and that whether or not someone succeeds depends entirely on the mindset of the individual. In some cases, this idea is pushed so aggressively that audiences will be shamed for not being wealthy, or for working nine to five or part time jobs. Notably, these videos rarely contain practical steps or actions audiences can take, beyond purchasing some form of "life coaching" or "courses" from the influencer.

Focus group participants could think of numerous examples of these kinds of influencers, but were sometimes surprised to learn that the wealth and conspicuous consumption they demonstrated was a façade, despite generally being unable to articulate how these influencers had accrued such vast wealth. These discussions were often grounded in the example of Ashton Hall, an influencer who had recently gone viral for showing an excessive morning routine which involved waking up at 3am, washing his face in ice-water, and rubbing a banana peel on his face. As well as generating a large volume of parodies, this video spawned a huge number of imitators, hoping to emulate Hall's success. Despite generally being familiar with the video, there was often disagreement within the groups as to whether this video was intended as satire or not, ambiguity which made this content creator, and others like him, more difficult to critique.

Hustle Culture and Finance Bros



Two participants explained that they had heard of the Red Pill through Andrew Tate. Despite both explaining they were not fans of Tate, they had nevertheless come across his content online, and had seen him refer to the Red Pill and The Matrix, as a way of talking about being "trapped" in a 9 to 5 job. These participants weren't able to elaborate any further, but said they knew people (in real life and online) who watched this content, and regularly said things like "Quit your job, exit the matrix" and described people who worked jobs as "slaves".

Related to this group were investment influencers, who evangelized about the importance of creating side-hustles and passive-income, often through investments in the property market and cryptocurrencies. Most groups were familiar with accounts that presented themselves as financial gurus, who for a small fee would share their secrets for investing in cryptocurrencies, either via one to one coaching, a short course (usually videos or PDFs), or access to an exclusive Discord server where such topics were discussed. Although unable to name specific influencers in this space, participants in one group spoke about creators who attempted to attack the viewer's self-esteem through "negging", a form of verbal manipulation in which a person's confidence is deliberately undermined, in order to make them seek the manipulators approval. Examples were given of influencers who claimed to earn 40,000 euro a week mocking people who don't make that in a year or explicitly telling audiences that their future children will be embarrassed by them if they work a 9 to 5. One group explained that this kind of messaging is likely very effective on people of their own age, who may not have immediately identified a career they wish to pursue. Another group said Gen-Z were "obsessed" with "hustle, games and getting rich quick" because they could not see any alternatives.

Gym Bros



Young men also reported receiving a lot of fitness content about men's bodies, promoting workouts and supplements, explaining that it's aggressively marketed towards them. Again, there was some difficulty in discussing this area within the framework of misinformation and disinformation as there are plenty of content creators who are careful, measured and well researched in the advice they give. One participant explained that it can be difficult engaging with this content because there is often very good, pragmatic advice about

"Young men also reported receiving a lot of fitness content about men's bodies, promoting workouts and supplements, explaining that it's aggressively marketed towards them. "

specific workouts, or building muscle, but its intertwined with much more questionable advice. He explained that it can be difficult to identify where the line is because it will all be presented as scientific, but sometimes he will recognise that the content is veering towards the "extreme" and hyperbolic, or even dishonest. An example was shared of a figure who claimed to be natural, but whose build had raised suspicions they were taking anabolic steroids (something which is incredibly common in this kind of content). However, responses within the group were mixed, with some participants saying it was okay, as it was aspirational, or would motivate them to train harder. This participant said they specifically wanted this content to be over the top, aggressive and even derogatory because even if harmful, he found this motivating, and it helped him to stay disciplined.

Participants also described fitness influencers selling similar "access to programs" as the life coaches and finance bros. One participant who said he consumed a lot of workout content and regularly went to the gym noted that there is obviously a lot of free information available online, and that a lot of it is likely just as good as whatever is in these programs. Because of this, it was speculated that this content is specifically targeting young people who are unhappy in their lives, and want to make a change, but don't know where to start, and that once people started learning the basics, they would be more resistant to such scams.

Another participant observed that nutrition misinformation was particularly prominent in gym content, where videos would regularly tell people they needed to eat a specific amount of protein each day – regardless of what their goals were, what their body type was, how much exercise they were doing. This quick flattened content is much easier to produce, and can be consumed by a much broader audience, making it ideal for short form video content, but is obviously not applicable to everyone.

Findings

Identifying Misinformation and Disinformation

Participants were generally able to identify disinformation relating to migration and anti-trans themes, sharing numerous examples of harmful narratives. These were areas where participants spoke at length, not just about the narratives themselves, but the people who spread them and their potential motivations. The majority of discussions within this category were clear examples of disinformation, where false information was being deliberately shared with the intention to deceive, in order to discredit specific groups.

However, this somewhat direct, often politically motivated disinformation was in many cases not encountered directly. Participants were often made aware of it via content that was specifically critiquing, refuting and debunking its central claims.

While these examples, along with topics such as AI and online scams, may have been the first to come to mind when discussing misinformation and disinformation, it was clear that participants more commonly encountered these phenomena in less overtly political forms, across a range of content



that can broadly be grouped together by the term "self-help". This content is designed to educate and motivate audiences on a range of topics including health, fitness, nutrition, beauty, finances, etc. Rather than deliberate attempts to deceive, the false information encountered in these spaces more commonly took the form of 'incomplete information' – a kind of misinformation, often spread by people who lacked sufficient expertise or failed to provide sufficient context (although deliberate attempts to deceive and political agendas were still very much present in some examples). Because of this, participants were not always as quick to identify this content as a vector for false and potentially harmful information. However, despite not initially registering as being relevant to this research, once this form of false information was explained, participants were able to provide numerous examples.

One notable difficulty in discussing the potential for harm from this content was the range of content creators within this space, many of whom are qualified experts in the topics they discuss, or at very least produce well researched and balanced content. However, given the limited ability to include important context and nuance – particularly in short form video content – their output becomes almost indistinguishable to the content being produced by non-experts who are far-less careful in the language they use and the information they share. Some participants pushed back against the idea that this content represented examples of harmful false information, on the basis that content creators in this area generally meant well, and were trying to help.

Ability to identify harmful false information was similarly complicated by content creators whose output was ambiguous in terms of intent, and could potentially be read as satire. Such content traffics in the same narratives and talking points as it's more sincere counterparts, but the framing of a comedic character or sketch affords a layer of plausible deniability that allows the more ideologically extreme elements of this content to reach more receptive audiences who read it at face value. At the same time it is more difficult to critique, as those who object or raise concerns can be dismissed as simply not getting the joke.

These findings suggest that younger people may be far more comfortable identifying disinformation, where there is a deliberate attempt to deceive, and often an identifiable political agenda, than misinformation, which is often spread unknowingly by people who mean well. Despite being significantly more prominent in many participants day to day lives the false information here was less explicit and so harder to detect. Potential harms and impacts were also more difficult to identify. While participants could easily point to how the false narratives being spread about immigrant and transgender communities could jeopardise their safety, or have a chilling effect on their ability to engage with civil society, the positive language and aspirational framing of many of the themes discussed within the context of self-help content (e.g. skinnytok, finance bros, beauty hacks, etc.) meant that some participants took a little longer to identify potential negative impacts, or the ability for such content to induce feelings of anxiety and shame. Similarly, discussions of the potential consequences of taking unregulated supplements, self-diagnosing mental health issues, and combining skincare products that should not be combined generally only arose after lengthy discussions.

Sources of Disinformation

Despite being familiar with many common themes and topics of false information, particularly those relating to immigrants and the trans community, participants were not always certain where they had heard them. While discussions of misinformation and disinformation often focus on well-known individuals and big accounts, this content rarely seemed to reach focus group participants directly. Although specific figures were discussed at times, participant's were more commonly exposed to their output via critics, or much smaller, lesser-known accounts repeating their talking points. To the extent that recommendation algorithms were discussed throughout the focus groups, it tended to be in relation to these smaller accounts being shown to participants unprompted. These accounts were not followed by participants or their friends, but in some cases appeared to be producing content within a close geographical proximity.

With regards to specific online spaces, a significant driver of false information (particularly false information relating to immigrants) seemed to be small pages and groups catering to local communities. Regardless of the ostensible purpose of these group, participants spoke about how these communities were becoming more paranoid, and that older members were becoming more comfortable using them to spread anti-immigrant narratives. One group suggested older people were more vulnerable to believing this kind of misinformation, speculating they are less likely to interact with people outside of their immediate family and social circles than younger people, and are perhaps less likely to travel into city centers and other areas that are supposedly full of violent migrants. It was suggested that without firsthand experiences to refute the disinformation they encounter online, they have less reason to be skeptical of these claims.

As well as these closed groups, comment sections were also identified as a space in which young people were often exposed to false and harmful narratives, with participants sharing numerous examples they had observed, as well as examples in which they themselves had been targeted and subjected to abuse in the replies to content they had shared. Comment sections were described as getting "hi-jacked" by people trying to spread anti-immigrant and anti-trans narratives.

Although it is possible that much of the misinformation and disinformation encountered in these spaces originates from larger accounts on open, public platforms, this does not appear to be how young people are most commonly exposed to it. While a straightforward top-down model of disinformation would certainly be easier to address through content moderation and regulation, the reality is more complex. Small accounts, closed groups, and comment sections are significantly better placed to evade the moderation policies in place on most platforms today.

Family Members

Despite being largely absent from the existing literature, exposure to false information via real-life interactions with family members was incredibly prevalent throughout the focus groups. Participants' confidence in their own ability to identify false information was often discussed in contrast to older relatives, most commonly parents, who were believed to be significantly more susceptible. Inevitably these discussions gave rise to many examples of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and

parents of friends sharing misinformation or being scammed. AI generated images and videos in particular seemed to be a recent driver for this phenomenon, with many participants sharing stories of older relatives uncritically accepting as true, things that were described as being "literally impossible" (examples given included a cat singing and dancing, a man being attacked by a shark in his garden, a man turning into a dog, etc.). However, more serious and consequential narratives were also being spread by family, including misinformation and disinformation that was anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQ+, and otherwise conspiratorial.

As well as being incredibly prevalent, discussions also revealed it to be particularly impactful, as it was more difficult to ignore than disinformation and misinformation encountered online. It was also described as being more difficult to respond to, as it had the potential to damage relationships. One participant recalled arguing with their Dad who believed that refugees were being given automatic Irish Citizenship. Another argued with her aunt about a story of an immigrant kidnapping a child from the backseat of a car outside a school. When it was pointed out that was not being reported anywhere else, the conversation quickly devolved into a debate over the trustworthiness of mainstream media. In one group, two participants said they had heard from family members that Irish schools are teaching children to be ashamed of their culture. Some participants described experiences where they had attempted to correct family, but these attempts were largely ineffective. One participant explained "It's just your word against there's", and described the near impossibility of trying to prove something did not happen. While the literature identifies simply ignoring false information as a legitimate response for young people online, this is much harder to do in real life. This was evidenced by one participant who said their approach was to explain that they didn't want to talk about it, but that their family members "would never just let it go". Some participants noted this kind of false information was dangerous, because they were more inclined to believe family. Others reported that they had grown to be quite skeptical of any information shared by specific family members, who they knew to be prone to spreading misinformation and disinformation.

"As well as being incredibly prevalent, discussions also revealed it to be particularly impactful, as it was more difficult to ignore than disinformation and misinformation encountered online."

Although focus group participants were generally happy to volunteer examples of times they had believed false information, a common theme throughout the focus groups was that older people needed media literacy interventions more than younger people. Some participants noted the irony of growing up, being warned by their parents that not everything they see online is real, only to find themselves in constant debates with parents about things that were being shared online. This lack of awareness on the part of parents was in some cases becoming a burden on participants, who increasingly felt it was their responsibility to monitor not only their parent's online activities, but also younger siblings browsing habits and screen time. Participants shared stories about younger siblings being given internet access at very young ages, and being left unsupervised on phones and tablets for prolonged periods of time. One participant told a story of how she had had to intervene to stop her 8 year old brother from creating a Snapchat account and going on TikTok, and almost had a falling out with her mother, who didn't understand her concerns and felt she was being too harsh. She explained she now feels pressure "to be up to date on everything" to ensure her little brother is safe online, and is feeling overwhelmed as a result. Another theme identified across focus groups, was the idea that the internet today is more harmful to young people than the internet participants grew up with, with the proliferation of AI generated content and "Brain Rot" content being given as illustrative examples. Concerns from participants about the impact prolonged engagement with such content was having on children and teenagers social lives and attention spans were also raised.

This finding has clear implications with regards to interventions targeting misinformation and disinformation. While it is often acknowledged that media literacy initiatives will require buy in from stakeholders across society, from politicians and tech-companies to teachers and parents, it cannot be taken for granted that parents will be equipped to effectively discuss these topics with their children, as many parents appear to be just as vulnerable to false information, as the children they are expected to help.



AI

Finally, participants were well aware of the prevalence of AI generated content, and how such content related to the topics of misinformation and disinformation. As freely accessible AI tools for generating text, images, audio and videos content have become widely available, and are being adopted more users every day, the barriers for creating false, harmful and deliberately misleading content have been significantly lowered, flooding an already contentious information ecosystem with inaccuracies and deceptions. While image manipulation has long been an approach embraced by those engaged in disinformation campaigns, the proliferation of AI bot accounts, fake news sites, and manipulated videos and images of public figures shows how insufficient existing guardrails and regulations have become. The increased scale and lowered timeframe for production mean that this content can be produced much faster than officially sanctioned or volunteer fact-checkers can review and debunk.

Despite an awareness of this issue, many participants were quite candid in sharing examples of AI generated content they had believed to be real. Even some who were confident in their ability to distinguish genuine content from artificially generated content, suggested that the technology was developing so quickly they were not sure this would always be the case. A handful of participants across several groups were also able to recognise that the potential harms went beyond just being fooled by a specific piece of media, to the larger social issue of undermining people's ability to trust any piece of media encountered online, whether genuine or not.

Since these focus groups took place, there has been a worrying increase in anecdotal reports of the psychological impact large language models and AI Chatbot's are having, particularly on socially isolated people, or those susceptible to certain mental health conditions. As these new technologies continue to be proposed as solutions to society's loneliness epidemic, and insufficient mental health supports (social ills which increasingly appear to be impacting young people more acutely), it will be important that research on the impacts of AI continues, so that more effective interventions and regulations can be implemented, and that an assumption that generative AI and large language models will act as a panacea for society's ills can be critiqued and resisted

Conclusion and Further Research

Conclusion and Further Research

This research offers several new insights into how young people in Ireland experience misinformation and disinformation, and highlights the value of centring young people's voices in efforts to address false information. However, the relatively small sample size means the findings may not be representative of the wider population, despite efforts to include diverse perspectives. They should therefore be treated as a "jumping off" point from which further research questions can be developed, ideally through studies that replicate and extend these findings with larger, more representative samples which include the perspectives of those under 18. Such research will benefit greatly from continued engagement with young people, who throughout this research demonstrated a clear interest in the topic and an eagerness to contribute. The first-hand insights they bring are assets that should be utilised across future research, intervention design, and implementation.

This report will conclude by highlighting important areas which require further research, and recommending research questions to address these gaps.

Identifying specific narratives, threats and vulnerabilities

As discussed in the literature review, a significant amount of the research examining the phenomenon within the context of Irish youth, focused on broad familiarity and experiences, without looking at the specific narratives to which they were being exposed. Surveys were used to ask young people how they understood terms like misinformation and disinformation (Esfandiari et al. 2025) or how concerned they were about whether the news they were engaging with was true or real (Lloyd et al. 2025). Even when asked for examples of the false information they saw online, answers tended to be general – e.g. unverified rumours about public figures, identity fraud, phishing scams, and click-bait headlines – without offering any discrete examples of the false narratives they were seeing. The literature looking at the false information ecosystem in Ireland (without focusing specifically on young people) was more granular, identifying Immigration, LGBTQ+ communities, and Covid-19 as the most prevalent topics being discussed (Culloty 2023; Gallagher et al. 2023a), predominantly on platforms like X and Instagram, with Facebook described as having a waning influence, and TikTok, at

the time, seen as a platform where actors peddling disinformation were struggling to gain a foothold (Gallagher et al. 2023).

Once focus groups began, a different picture emerged. Although immigration and the LGBTQ+ community were consistently the first areas brought up when participants were asked to volunteer false narratives they had seen circulating online, it became clear that the vast majority of the false information to which young people were being exposed was not overtly political disinformation, but rather banal, everyday misinformation. This often came in the form of self-help advice produced by individuals who were not trying to deceive their audiences. Participants had a more difficult time identifying such content as misinformation and recognising its potential to cause harm.

By engaging directly with young people, and providing them with opportunities to describe their experiences in their own words, the scale and nuance of this issue has been made clear. While the research successfully identified a number of thematic areas where this kind of false information was particularly prevalent (mental health, nutrition, weight loss, skincare, masculinity, etc.), and highlighted examples of specific harmful narratives, further research is required to more comprehensively map the various narratives and potential harms. Future research should also reflect the fact that different groups will be exposed to different narratives, and will be impacted in different ways. In recognising that false information does not exist in isolation, but as part of a larger ecosystem, researchers should also remain vigilant to the possibility of these self-help misinformation narratives acting as a gateway to more overtly political disinformation (as briefly touched on when discussing tradwives and masculinity influencers). Addressing these areas will allow us to identify the most urgent threats and vulnerabilities, and help us to understand the initial steps which need to be taken to help young people build resilience and prevent such content from influencing their beliefs, emotions, and behaviour.

"By engaging directly with young people, and providing them with opportunities to describe their experiences in their own words, the scale and nuance of this issue has been made clear."

"One of the most important findings from this research is one which was completely absent from the existing literature - the impact of misinformation and disinformation encountered offline, in interactions with parents and other relatives. "

Potential research questions which could help establish this baseline understanding, and highlight potential threats include:

1. What specific everyday misinformation narratives are Irish young people most frequently exposed to, and how do these cluster into recognisable "genres"?

2. Which groups are most vulnerable to which narratives (by age, gender, socioeconomic background, neurodiversity, membership of migrant, Traveller, or LGBTQ+ communities, etc.)?

3. How does everyday "self-help" misinformation connect to more overtly political narratives?

Moving beyond platforms, to specific features and spaces

Research examining false information within Ireland's false information ecosystem has generally remained at the platform level (Gallagher et al. 2023; CyberSafeKids, 2024; European Movement Ireland, 2025; Lloyd et al. 2025), most consistently identifying X as the platform posing the greatest threat. However, this level of analysis does not capture the different features available to users on each platform, or variation in how platforms are used across demographics.

Given the variety of features available, it is important to understand not just the platforms on which young people are encountering false information, but the specific features within these platforms which are being used to share it. Vertical short-form video content has been integrated into platforms like Instagram and YouTube in the form of Reels and Shorts, and is being aggressively promoted to users. This has allowed content that might otherwise have remained on TikTok to spread more easily to other platforms and reach new audiences. Similarly, the ability to "Go Live" via livestream is available on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, while "Stories"

that disappear after a set amount of time are now available on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and LinkedIn. At the same time, most major platforms are increasingly integrating AI-driven tools into their products, in the form of chatbots, and generative AI features, which as previously discussed, can significantly lower the bar when it comes to producing and distributing false information and misleading content at scale.

In the focus groups, even more complex dynamics emerged. While the role of certain large accounts and specific platforms have received much attention for the part they play in Ireland's false information ecosystem, participants reported that most of the false information they encountered did not come from large accounts or in the form of discrete posts. Instead, comment sections, livestreams, and TikTok duets were frequently mentioned, alongside smaller accounts and messages shared within private and semi-private groups. These features and spaces are not discussed in existing literature, and are significantly harder to monitor, making them particularly effective vectors through which false information can spread.

These findings highlight why it is crucial that we understand not just the platforms which are being used to spread false information, but specifically how these platforms are being used. This information will allow us to focus responses towards the kinds of features and spaces where false information actually spreads, and to highlight the shortcomings of existing platform moderation policies and practices when it comes to policing them.

Potential research questions which could contribute to our understanding of these dynamics include:

1. Through which platform features are young people in Ireland most likely to encounter false information, and how do patterns of exposure to false information differ by demographics and by platform-use practices?

2. How do young people in Ireland identify and respond to AI-generated false information across different formats?

3. What differences exist between the false information which is spread via large accounts, and that which spreads through smaller accounts, private groups, comment sections, etc.?

False information encountered offline

Finally, one of the most important findings from this research is one which was completely absent from the existing literature - the impact of misinformation and disinformation encountered offline, in interactions with parents and other relatives. The examined research consistently discusses false information as a phenomenon that is encountered and spread online. Unfortunately, the recommended responses to these phenomena, such as ignoring or "scrolling past" (Selnes 2024; Kops et al., 2025) are of no benefit to young people in this context.

Focus group participants reported these experiences to be particularly stressful and difficult to navigate, and were able to give numerous examples of the toll this was taking on their mental health, as well as their relationships with family members. This is something that will need to be considered in all research looking into this area going forward. There are clearly a number of young people who will benefit massively from

guidance on how to navigate these kinds of difficult situations.

Answering the following questions will help to ensure that these supports are effective and sufficient.

1. How do young people in Ireland experience and interpret misinformation and disinformation encountered offline, in conversations with parents, grandparents, and other relatives?
2. How do young people navigate misinformed views expressed by relatives, and what emotional and relational costs are associated with these strategies?
3. In what other offline contexts, beyond the family, do young people report being in positions where they are forced to engage with people who promote false information?

"Participants reported these experiences to be particularly stressful and difficult to navigate, and were able to give numerous examples of the toll this was taking on their mental health, as well as their relationships with family members."

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