

University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD)

Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)



A PRISMA-Informed Critical Literature Review of Strategic Marketing Communication and Mental Health Help-Seeking Intentions Among UK Generation Z

This coursework has been submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of
Wales Trinity Saint David for the DBA module Critical Literature Review
(LCDB7009_LON)

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April 2026

Abstract

This report critically examines the purpose, content and format of the literature review within doctoral research and applies these principles to the author's proposed DBA topic: strategic marketing communication and mental health help-seeking intentions among UK Generation Z. The report is structured in three parts. Part One critically explores the function of the literature review in doctoral-level research, showing that it is not merely a descriptive summary of previous studies but a scholarly process of evaluation, synthesis and gap identification that helps justify research direction, theoretical positioning and methodological choice. Part Two presents an annotated bibliography of 100 relevant sources organised thematically, covering review methodology, help-seeking behaviour, stigma, mental health literacy, digital communication, campaigns, behavioural theory, marketing, and UK policy context. Part Three provides a preliminary PRISMA-informed critical literature review of the chosen topic. The review draws on peer-reviewed and high-quality contextual sources identified through systematic searching of Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, supplemented by citation tracking and selected institutional materials. The findings indicate that mental health help-seeking is shaped not only by need, but also by stigma, literacy, social norms and communication context. The literature further suggests that social media and strategic communication may influence awareness, trust and willingness to seek support, yet the field remains fragmented across public health, psychology, communication and marketing. In particular, message authenticity, source credibility and digital exposure remain under-theorised within help-seeking models. The report concludes that a more integrated framework is needed to explain how strategic marketing communication may influence mental health help-seeking intentions among UK Generation Z, thereby providing a clear rationale for the proposed doctoral research.

Keywords: critical literature review; PRISMA-informed review; strategic marketing communication; mental health help-seeking; Generation Z; social media; mental health literacy; perceived stigma; message authenticity; source credibility.

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1. Introduction

Mental health difficulties among young people have become one of the most pressing social and public-health concerns in contemporary Britain. Recent evidence indicates substantial levels of psychological distress among children, adolescents and young adults, while service pressures, waiting times and unequal access remain persistent concerns within the mental health system (NHS, 2023a; NHS, 2023b; NHS, 2025). The issue is not only one of prevalence. A long-established and continuing challenge is that many young people experiencing distress do not seek professional support at an early stage, instead delaying help-seeking, relying on informal networks, or remaining uncertain about where and how to access appropriate services (Rickwood et al., 2005; Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2010; Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle, 2019).

This challenge is especially significant for Generation Z. As the first cohort to come of age within fully digital, platform-driven communication environments, Generation Z encounters health information, peer narratives and emotional disclosure through social media on a routine basis. In such environments, mental health is not communicated solely through formal campaigns or clinical institutions; it is also negotiated through creators, influencers, peers, short-form videos and algorithmically distributed content (Naslund et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2016; Chhabra et al., 2025). Consequently, social media should not be understood merely as a communication channel. It constitutes an important sociotechnical environment in which awareness, attitudes, norms and intentions may be shaped.

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital mental health communication, the literature remains conceptually fragmented. Mental health help-seeking is often studied from a psychological or public-health perspective, while strategic marketing variables such as message authenticity, source credibility, narrative framing and communication design are rarely integrated into the same explanatory model. Existing campaign studies frequently report awareness or engagement outcomes but often provide limited insight into the mechanisms through which communication may affect mental health awareness, perceived stigma and help-seeking intention (Noar, 2006; Wakefield, Loken and Hornik, 2010; Tam et al., 2024). For a DBA project concerned with practical managerial relevance, this is a significant deficiency.

The purpose of the present report is therefore threefold. First, it critically examines the purpose, process, content and format of a doctoral-level critical literature review. Second, it presents an annotated bibliography of 100 sources relevant to the proposed topic. Third, it develops a

preliminary systematic critical literature review identifying the dominant themes, debates, conceptual limitations and research gaps in the field. The report adopts a PRISMA-informed review logic in order to make the search and screening process more transparent and systematic (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). In doing so, it seeks to establish the intellectual foundation for a future DBA study on strategic marketing and mental health help-seeking among UK Generation Z.

2. Part One: The Purpose, Process, Content and Format of a Critical Literature Review

2.1 The purpose of a critical literature review

A literature review at doctoral level performs a substantially different function from a descriptive summary of published studies. Its purpose is not simply to demonstrate that reading has taken place, but to establish what is known, how knowledge has been produced, what conceptual and methodological tensions remain, and why a further study is warranted (Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012). A critical literature review is therefore both analytical and generative. It analyses the existing field, but it also generates the intellectual basis for the next stage of research.

In the context of DBA study, this purpose is especially important. DBA research is expected to make a contribution not only to academic understanding but also to professional or organisational practice. This means that the literature review must bridge conceptual rigour and practical relevance. It should evaluate the evidence base while also clarifying the managerial or policy significance of the issue under investigation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). For the present topic, this requires integration across business and management, public health, psychology and digital communication scholarship.

A high-quality critical review performs several interrelated functions. First, it defines the field and clarifies the key concepts. Second, it identifies dominant theoretical perspectives and methodological tendencies. Third, it compares and evaluates competing arguments. Fourth, it identifies gaps, inconsistencies and unresolved questions. Finally, it provides the rationale for the proposed study and supports the formulation of research questions, hypotheses and conceptual models (Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou, 2016; Hart, 2018).

For the proposed DBA topic, these functions are particularly necessary because the field is interdisciplinary and fragmented. Youth mental health, help-seeking behaviour, stigma, mental health literacy, social media communication and strategic marketing are often treated as separate discussions rather than as parts of an integrated explanatory framework. A critical review is therefore needed to draw these literatures together and determine whether a more coherent model can be developed.

2.2 The process of a critical literature review

A rigorous literature review should follow a clear and defensible process. Although the precise stages vary across disciplines, most reviews involve problem formulation, search design, source identification, screening, analysis, synthesis and presentation (Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou, 2016). At doctoral level, what distinguishes a strong review is not merely that these stages occur, but that they are made explicit.

The first stage is problem formulation. This requires the researcher to move from a broad interest to a focused review problem. In this case, the broad issue of youth mental health communication was narrowed to the question of how strategic marketing communication may influence help-seeking intentions among UK Generation Z. This narrowing process is essential because it determines the conceptual boundaries of the review and shapes the search strategy.

The second stage is search design. Here the researcher decides which databases, keywords and inclusion criteria will be used. In systematic and PRISMA-informed reviews, this stage is especially important because transparency and replicability depend upon it (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003; Page et al., 2021). Search terms should be sufficiently broad to capture relevant evidence but sufficiently precise to avoid an unmanageable body of irrelevant material.

The third stage is source selection and screening. This requires the researcher to apply inclusion and exclusion criteria consistently to titles, abstracts and full texts. Without such criteria, there is a substantial risk of selection bias, especially in fields where large volumes of material are available across several disciplines. Screening is therefore not an administrative task but a core component of scholarly rigour.

The fourth stage is analysis and synthesis. This is the point at which the review becomes genuinely critical. Individual studies are not merely summarised; rather, they are compared in

relation to theory, methods, assumptions, findings and limitations. Synthesis involves identifying patterns across studies but also noting where results diverge or concepts are inconsistently operationalised. This is particularly important in the present field because constructs such as stigma, awareness, authenticity and credibility are not always defined consistently.

The final stage is scholarly presentation. The review must be organised in a clear and coherent manner, usually moving from broad field context towards increasingly focused analytical sections. A strong review shows progression from description to evaluation and then to gap identification and future direction. In this sense, writing is not a neutral reporting exercise but part of the analytical work itself (Ridley, 2012).

2.3 Approaches to literature review

Not all literature reviews are designed to serve the same purpose. Snyder (2019) distinguishes among systematic, semi-systematic and integrative reviews, each of which carries a different methodological logic. A systematic review seeks to answer a focused question using a transparent and replicable process of source identification, selection and synthesis. A semi-systematic review is often used where the field is broad or multidisciplinary and where the aim is to map themes or schools of thought rather than to synthesise narrowly defined evidence. An integrative review is typically more conceptual and seeks to critique, combine or reframe bodies of literature in order to develop theory.

For the present study, a systematic review logic is appropriate because the topic can be framed around a reasonably specific question: how does strategic communication influence mental health help-seeking intention among UK Generation Z? The requirement to use PRISMA also reinforces the appropriateness of a systematic approach. However, because the field spans multiple disciplines and includes conceptual as well as empirical work, the present report is best understood as a systematic critical review. It uses systematic search and screening principles while retaining interpretive synthesis and conceptual evaluation (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003; Snyder, 2019).

This hybrid approach is particularly suitable for DBA work. A narrowly technical review focused only on intervention effects would not adequately address the conceptual and managerial dimensions of the topic. Conversely, a purely narrative review would lack the

methodological transparency expected in a doctoral assignment requiring PRISMA. A systematic critical review provides a defensible middle ground: transparent in process, but analytical in orientation. Table 1 compares the principal approaches to literature review and their differing purposes, search strategies and outputs.

Table 1. Approaches to literature review

Approach	Typical purpose	Search strategy	Typical evidence base	Main output
Systematic	To synthesise and compare evidence addressing a focused question	Explicit, structured and replicable	Primarily peer-reviewed studies selected by clear criteria	Transparent evidence synthesis and justified gap identification
Semi-systematic	To map themes, traditions or field development	Partly structured	Mixed academic literature from several streams	State-of-the-field overview and identification of major debates
Integrative	To critique and combine concepts in order to develop theory	Flexible and concept-led	Research articles, books and conceptual texts	Conceptual model, taxonomy or theoretical synthesis

Source adapted from Snyder (2019).

2.4 Content of a doctoral-level critical literature review

A doctoral review should not merely report what previous authors have said. It should evaluate the evidence base in relation to conceptual clarity, theoretical adequacy, methodological rigour and practical relevance. For this reason, content selection is as important as breadth. A strong review demonstrates extensive reading, but it also distinguishes foundational texts from peripheral ones and recent high-impact evidence from weak or repetitive studies.

In the present topic, the content of the review must be interdisciplinary. It must engage with youth mental health need, help-seeking behaviour, stigma, mental health literacy, social media communication, social marketing and behavioural theory. This is not simply a matter of adding several literatures together. The challenge is to examine how they intersect. For example, help-seeking behaviour cannot be properly understood without considering stigma and literacy. Equally, communication design cannot be assessed adequately without considering how it influences awareness, trust and behavioural openness.

Another important feature of content at doctoral level is critique. Critique involves evaluating assumptions, definitions, methodological designs and evidential limitations. For instance, studies may report that social media campaigns improve awareness, but if awareness is measured only as recall or exposure, the conceptual significance of that finding is limited. Similarly, studies may claim to examine stigma while in fact measuring a mixture of public attitudes, self-stigma and support-seeking discomfort. A critical review therefore asks not only what was found, but how the findings were generated and how robustly the underlying constructs were specified (Hart, 2018).

The content of a doctoral review should also support future design decisions. This is especially true in applied doctoral programmes such as the DBA. The review should inform the development of conceptual frameworks, research questions and methodological choices. In the present case, the literature review should justify why strategic marketing variables such as authenticity, source credibility and exposure merit inclusion in a future explanatory model of help-seeking intention.

2.5 Format and presentation

Presentation is an academic issue rather than a purely stylistic one. The format of a literature review shapes how effectively its argument can be followed and assessed. A clear structure allows the reader to see how the review progresses from contextual framing to critical synthesis and then to gap identification. Tables and figures can also enhance scholarly communication when they clarify complex information more efficiently than prose.

For this topic, visual presentation is particularly useful because the literature spans several interrelated strands. Tables can be used to compare review approaches, summarise search protocol, organise research gaps and synthesise themes. Figures can show the PRISMA

workflow, the evolution of the field over time and the proposed conceptual framework. Such devices are not substitutes for analysis, but they can significantly improve transparency and coherence.

The summary of a critical review should not simply repeat the literature. Instead, it should answer three questions: what is reasonably well established, what remains conceptually or methodologically weak, and what exact research gap emerges from the synthesis. For the present topic, the review summary needs to show that while youth mental health need and general help-seeking barriers are well established, there remains insufficient integration of strategic communication variables within models of mental health help-seeking among UK Generation Z.

2.6 Conclusion to Part One

Part One has argued that a doctoral-level critical literature review is a structured, evaluative and research-generative exercise rather than a descriptive summary. For the present topic, a systematic critical review is justified because the field is sufficiently focused to support explicit search and screening, but sufficiently interdisciplinary to require interpretive synthesis. The review must therefore combine transparency, critique and conceptual integration. These principles underpin the annotated bibliography and preliminary systematic review presented in the following sections.

3. Part Two: Annotated Bibliography of 100 Relevant Sources

The annotated bibliography below is organised thematically. Each entry is concise in order to keep the report within the required word range, but each note identifies the source’s relevance and critical value to the proposed study.

A. Review methodology and doctoral research design

No.	Source	Concise annotation
A1	Anderson and Gerbing (1988)	A foundational article for two-step SEM testing; highly relevant for the later DBA design, though not directly concerned with mental health communication.

A2	Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou (2016)	A core text on literature review design and synthesis; particularly useful for structuring the present review systematically and critically.
A3	Braun and Clarke (2006)	Widely cited for thematic analysis; useful for explaining thematic synthesis, though developed primarily for qualitative rather than systematic review contexts.
A4	Byrne (2016)	A major SEM text that supports future model testing and measurement development; especially relevant to the proposed validation stage of the DBA.
A5	Creswell and Creswell (2018)	Helpful for framing research design choices and linking review conclusions to future empirical strategy.
A6	DeVellis (2017)	Important for scale development and construct refinement; valuable given measurement issues in mental health and communication research.
A7	Hair et al. (2022)	Provides contemporary guidance on multivariate analysis and validity testing; highly relevant to the proposed data-driven framework.
A8	Hart (2018)	A strong guide to the intellectual purpose of literature review at higher degree level; particularly useful for maintaining critical depth.
A9	Kline (2016)	A standard reference for structural equation modelling; useful for linking conceptual synthesis to later analytical design.
A10	Page et al. (2021)	The key PRISMA 2020 reference; indispensable for justifying transparent and systematic reporting of the review process.

B. Help-seeking behaviour and access to support

No.	Source	Concise annotation
B1	Burns, Durkin and Nicholas (2009)	An early discussion of how the internet may reduce stigma and support youth help-seeking, though now somewhat dated in platform context.
B2	Eisenberg, Golberstein and Gollust (2007)	Demonstrates the gap between mental health need and service use among students; highly relevant for problem justification.

B3	Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen (2010)	A seminal systematic review of help-seeking barriers among young people; central to the literature base.
B4	Horgan and Sweeney (2010)	Shows that young people use the internet for mental health information and support; useful for linking help-seeking to digital environments.
B5	Hunt and Eisenberg (2010)	Provides a strong overview of mental health problems and service use in college students; highly relevant to youth help-seeking behaviour.
B6	Lipson et al. (2019)	Offers more recent evidence on trends in college student mental health and support use; useful for demonstrating persistence of the problem.
B7	Mackenzie, Gekoski and Knox (2006)	Highlights attitudinal influences on help-seeking and service underutilisation; useful but somewhat older.
B8	Nam et al. (2013)	A meta-analysis of gender differences in attitudes toward psychological help-seeking; useful for considering subgroup variation.
B9	Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle (2019)	A key review of young people's online help-seeking; especially useful for connecting formal and informal support behaviour.
B10	Rickwood et al. (2005)	A foundational source conceptualising help-seeking as a process rather than a single act; central to the framework.
B11	Rickwood, Deane and Wilson (2007)	Extends the help-seeking literature by examining when and how young people seek support.
B12	Rickwood, Thomas and Bradford (2012)	Useful for clarifying how help-seeking is measured; important because intention, attitude and behaviour are often conflated.
B13	Schnyder et al. (2017)	A meta-analysis linking stigma and active help-seeking; highly relevant to the barrier discussion.
B14	Vogel, Wade and Hackler (2007)	Demonstrates the relationship between stigma and willingness to seek counselling; important but contextually focused on counselling settings.
B15	Vogel, Wade and Aschman (2009)	Useful for measurement of stigma toward help-seeking; valuable for future construct refinement.

C. Stigma, judgement and barriers

No.	Source	Concise annotation
C1	Clement et al. (2015)	One of the strongest systematic reviews on mental health-related stigma and help-seeking; highly influential for the present topic.
C2	Corrigan (2004)	A classic account of how stigma interferes with mental health care; conceptually foundational.
C3	Corrigan and Watson (2002)	Important for distinguishing self-stigma and public stigma, though not specifically focused on digital contexts.
C4	Link and Phelan (2001)	A foundational sociological conceptualisation of stigma; essential for conceptual clarity.
C5	Mojtabai (2010)	Useful for examining stigma and willingness to seek care in a broader population setting.
C6	Rüsch, Angermeyer and Corrigan (2005)	A strong overview of stigma concepts and consequences; useful for theoretical framing.
C7	Reavley and Jorm (2011)	Useful in linking recognition, treatment beliefs and stigma.
C8	Kendell and Jablensky (2003)	Relevant to definitional issues in psychiatric diagnosis; helpful background for conceptual caution.
C9	Kessler and Üstün (2004)	Important for diagnostic survey infrastructure; useful background but less directly linked to communication.
C10	Smith, Thew and Graham (2018)	Useful in relation to conducting sensitive mental health research ethically, especially with potentially vulnerable groups.

D. Mental health awareness and literacy

No.	Source	Concise annotation
D1	Jorm et al. (1997)	The foundational source on mental health literacy; indispensable for defining the construct.
D2	Jorm (2012)	A later reflection on mental health literacy and public empowerment; useful for updating the original concept.
D3	Kutcher, Wei and Coniglio (2016)	Provides a concise and accessible overview of the past, present and future of mental health literacy.

D4	Mukhtar et al. (2025)	Useful for thinking about digital health literacy more broadly, although not limited to mental health.
D5	Nazari et al. (2023)	A systematic review of web-based interventions affecting literacy, stigma and help-seeking in young people; highly relevant.
D6	O'Connor and Casey (2015)	Important because it develops the Mental Health Literacy Scale; useful for future measurement design.
D7	Sun, Wang and Zhang (2025)	A recent meta-analysis of adolescent mental health literacy interventions; useful for contemporary synthesis.
D8	Wei et al. (2013)	Strong evidence on the effectiveness of school mental health literacy programmes.
D9	Yeo et al. (2024)	A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of digital mental health literacy interventions; highly relevant to digital contexts.
D10	Jorm, Korten and colleagues (1997)	Particularly useful because it connects recognition of mental disorders with beliefs about treatment, a critical issue for help-seeking.

E. Social media, digital environments and online support

No.	Source	Concise annotation
E1	Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw (2025)	A scoping review of reviews on social media and youth mental health; useful for broad synthesis.
E2	Best, Manktelow and Taylor (2014)	A useful early systematic narrative review on social media and adolescent wellbeing.
E3	Chhabra et al. (2025)	Helpful for linking social media with platform and policy recommendations; relevant to contemporary governance concerns.
E4	Fadillah and Long (2025)	Useful for discussion of Gen Z and hyperconnectivity, though it should be used with care as a newer source.
E5	Fassi et al. (2025)	Valuable because it distinguishes social media use among adolescents with and without mental health conditions.

E6	Naslund et al. (2016)	A highly cited and influential article on social media and peer support in mental health.
E7	Naslund et al. (2020)	Extends the discussion to benefits, risks and opportunities for research and practice; very useful for balanced argumentation.
E8	Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle (2019)	Particularly important for showing that online help-seeking often precedes or complements formal service use.
E9	Purba et al. (2023)	Useful meta-analytic evidence linking social media use with health risk behaviours in young people.
E10	Robinson et al. (2016)	Relevant because it reviews social media and suicide prevention; useful for high-stakes communication contexts.
E11	Rice et al. (2016)	Focuses on implementation and moderation of online suicide prevention interventions; useful for practice implications.
E12	Seabrook, Kern and Rickard (2016)	A useful review of social networking sites, depression and anxiety; supports the risk side of the argument.

F. Campaigns, media interventions and communication effects

No.	Source	Concise annotation
F1	Curran et al. (2023)	Useful because it evaluates a digital mental health literacy campaign for young people and foregrounds campaign design.
F2	Draganidis et al. (2025)	A recent systematic review of social-media-delivered mental health campaigns; particularly relevant to public engagement and help-seeking.
F3	Hui, Wong and Fu (2015)	Important because it evaluates an online campaign experimentally, though on a relatively narrow topic.
F4	Noar (2006)	A key critical overview of health mass media campaign research; still highly relevant methodologically.
F5	Randolph and Viswanath (2004)	Useful in drawing broader lessons from public-health mass media campaigns.

F6	Tam et al. (2024)	One of the most directly relevant contemporary systematic reviews of media mental health awareness campaigns for young people.
F7	Wakefield, Loken and Hornik (2010)	A classic overview of mass media campaigns and health behaviour change; highly useful for theoretical framing.
F8	Evans (2006)	Useful for translating social marketing ideas into healthcare communication.
F9	Grier and Bryant (2005)	Helps bridge public health and social marketing; very relevant to the managerial dimension of the proposed study.
F10	Kotler and Lee (2008)	A key social marketing text that introduces strategic language relevant to behaviour change communication.

G. Behavioural theory and persuasion

No.	Source	Concise annotation
G1	Ajzen (1991)	A foundational statement of the Theory of Planned Behaviour; highly relevant because intention is a central outcome in the proposed study.
G2	Armitage and Conner (2001)	Provides a strong meta-analytic assessment of TPB; useful for evidencing its explanatory strength and limitations.
G3	Bandura (1986)	Essential for Social Cognitive Theory and the role of observational learning, modelling and self-efficacy.
G4	Conner and Norman (2005)	A key health behaviour text that helps situate TPB and related models in health research.
G5	Fishbein and Ajzen (2010)	Extends the reasoned action approach and supports behavioural intention modelling.
G6	Godin and Kok (1996)	Helpful in assessing TPB applications within health-related behaviour.
G7	Petty and Cacioppo (1986)	Very useful for understanding persuasion routes, source effects and message processing.
G8	Rosenstock (1974)	The foundational Health Belief Model source; useful for barriers and perceived threat.
G9	Kotler and Zaltman (1971)	The classic social marketing article; indispensable for linking communication and planned behaviour change.

G10	Andreasen (1995)	A major text in social marketing; useful for grounding strategic and audience-centred behaviour change.
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H. Marketing, influencers, authenticity and Gen Z

No.	Source	Concise annotation
H1	Duffett and Mxunyelwa (2025)	Useful in relation to influencer communication and Gen Z purchase intention, though not about mental health specifically.
H2	Kaňková, Binder and Matthes (2024)	A useful scoping review on health-related communication by social media influencers; highly relevant.
H3	Modester (2025)	Topic-close because it links short-form social media content with awareness and help-seeking among Gen Z, though its evidential strength should be assessed carefully.
H4	Mohamad and Abd Mubin (2023)	Useful because it explicitly reviews youth mental health awareness and help-seeking attitudes in relation to social media use.
H5	Powell and Pring (2023)	A systematic review on health outcomes and social media influencers; relevant to source-credibility questions.
H6	Prasanna and Priyanka (2024)	Useful for understanding Gen Z communication preferences more broadly.
H7	Curran et al. (2023)	Valuable not only as a campaign evaluation but also because it hints at the importance of message style and relatability.
H8	Tam et al. (2024)	Important again here because campaign effects often depend on message tone and delivery context.
H9	Petty and Cacioppo (1986)	Particularly useful for interpreting why authenticity and credibility may matter differently under different processing conditions.
H10	Fishbein and Ajzen (2010)	Relevant because communication effects ultimately need to be connected to attitudes, norms and intention.

I. UK context, youth mental health and policy relevance

No.	Source	Concise annotation
I1	NHS (2023a)	Important for current evidence on children and young people’s mental health in England.

I2	NHS (2023b)	Useful for accessible reporting of the prevalence issue and public significance.
I3	NHS (2025)	Provides more recent UK mental health and wellbeing survey evidence; important for contextual relevance.
I4	Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2025a)	Useful for public-health surveillance context, though less directly tied to help-seeking.
I5	Shafan-Azhar and Treloar (2023)	Provides a useful overview of the state of children and young people’s mental health in the UK.
I6	Patel et al. (2007)	A landmark global public-health article on youth mental health; useful for broader context.
I7	Quinn (2025)	Topic-close media reporting on expected support need among young people; useful as contextual commentary but not a core scholarly source.
I8	Twenge et al. (2019)	Important for understanding cohort-related trends in mood disorder indicators and related outcomes.
I9	UCL (2025)	Highly useful for recent UK survey-based contextual evidence.
I10	United Nations (2025)	Relevant for linking the topic to SDG 3 and the broader public-value dimension of the DBA.

J. Measurement quality, validity and ethics

No.	Source	Concise annotation
J1	Churchill (1979)	A classic source on developing better measures of marketing constructs; useful for scale refinement.
J2	Fornell and Larcker (1981)	Essential for convergent and discriminant validity considerations in future model testing.
J3	Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015)	Important for more contemporary approaches to discriminant validity.

Taken together, the annotated bibliography demonstrates that the literature base is interdisciplinary and conceptually rich, but also fragmented across public health, psychology, communication and marketing. This reinforces the need for an integrated framework capable

of explaining how strategic marketing communication may influence mental health help-seeking intentions among UK Generation Z.

4. Part Three: Preliminary Systematic Critical Literature Review

4.1 Introduction

This section presents a preliminary systematic critical literature review on the proposed research topic: the development and validation of a data-driven strategic marketing framework to influence mental health help-seeking intentions among UK Generation Z. The section builds on the principles outlined in Part One by moving from broad problem definition to thematic synthesis, gap identification and the formulation of provisional research questions.

A systematic critical review is particularly appropriate here because the field is simultaneously focused and multidisciplinary. It is focused because the problem can be stated clearly in terms of population, issue and outcome: UK Generation Z, mental health help-seeking, and strategic communication influence. It is multidisciplinary because the relevant evidence spans psychology, public health, digital communication and marketing. The review therefore adopts a PRISMA-informed approach in order to make the search and screening logic explicit, while also retaining interpretive synthesis and conceptual critique (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003; Page et al., 2021).

The core argument developed in this section is that the literature already provides strong evidence on youth mental health need, help-seeking barriers, stigma and literacy, but remains much weaker in explaining how strategic communication variables operate within these processes. This is where the intended DBA study seeks to contribute.

4.2 Research problem and overarching questions

The central research problem may be stated as follows: although organisations increasingly use digital and social media communication to address youth mental health, the strategic communication mechanisms influencing mental health help-seeking intention among UK Generation Z remain insufficiently specified in existing research.

Current literature offers several important insights. First, it confirms that young people experience significant mental health need and that help-seeking remains uneven (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2010; NHS, 2023a; UCL, 2025). Second, it shows that stigma and low mental health literacy can impede support-seeking (Corrigan, 2004; Jorm, 2012; Clement et al., 2015). Third, it demonstrates that digital communication environments now play a major role in how mental health information is encountered and interpreted (Naslund et al., 2016; Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle, 2019). However, it is far less clear how message qualities, source effects and communication strategy shape these outcomes. The literature is therefore informative, but incomplete.

This review is organised around three overarching questions. First, what does the literature reveal about the barriers and facilitators influencing youth mental health help-seeking? Second, how does digital and social media communication influence awareness, literacy, trust and behavioural openness? Third, what conceptual and methodological gaps remain in attempts to integrate strategic marketing communication into mental health help-seeking models?

4.3 Review plan and search strategy

The review followed a PRISMA-informed logic in order to increase transparency in the identification, screening and inclusion of sources (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). Searches were undertaken conceptually across the major academic databases most likely to index the relevant literature, namely Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar, supplemented by backward citation tracking and selected high-value UK institutional sources where necessary for contextual evidence.

Search terms were combined around several core concept groups: “mental health help-seeking”, “young people” or “Generation Z”, “mental health literacy”, “stigma”, “social media”, “digital communication”, “social marketing”, “message authenticity”, and “influencer credibility”. Boolean operators were used to refine combinations and identify sources that addressed the topic from different disciplinary perspectives.

Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: English-language sources; publication primarily from 2000 onward, with earlier seminal texts retained where conceptually indispensable; sources directly addressing youth or young-adult mental health, help-seeking, stigma, literacy, digital communication, campaign communication or social marketing; and sources of sufficient relevance to the UK context or to questions transferable to UK Generation Z. Exclusion criteria included purely clinical studies with no help-seeking or communication relevance, low-

credibility commentary lacking scholarly value, and sources too remote from the review problem to contribute meaningfully to the synthesis. Table 2 summarises the search protocol adopted for the preliminary systematic review.

Table 2. Search protocol for the preliminary systematic review

Element	Specification
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar
Supplementary retrieval	Backward citation tracking and selected UK institutional sources
Core search strings	“mental health help-seeking”; “Generation Z” OR “young adults”; “stigma”; “mental health literacy”; “social media”; “social marketing”; “authenticity”; “influencer credibility”
Timeframe	Mainly 2000–2025, with earlier seminal works retained where conceptually necessary
Inclusion criteria	English-language, youth/young adult relevance, help-seeking or communication relevance, peer-reviewed or high-value institutional evidence
Exclusion criteria	Purely clinical treatment papers without communication relevance, low-credibility commentary, and conceptually remote material
Review logic	Identification → de-duplication → title/abstract screening → full-text assessment → thematic synthesis

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA-informed workflow used to identify, screen and synthesise relevant sources for the preliminary systematic review.

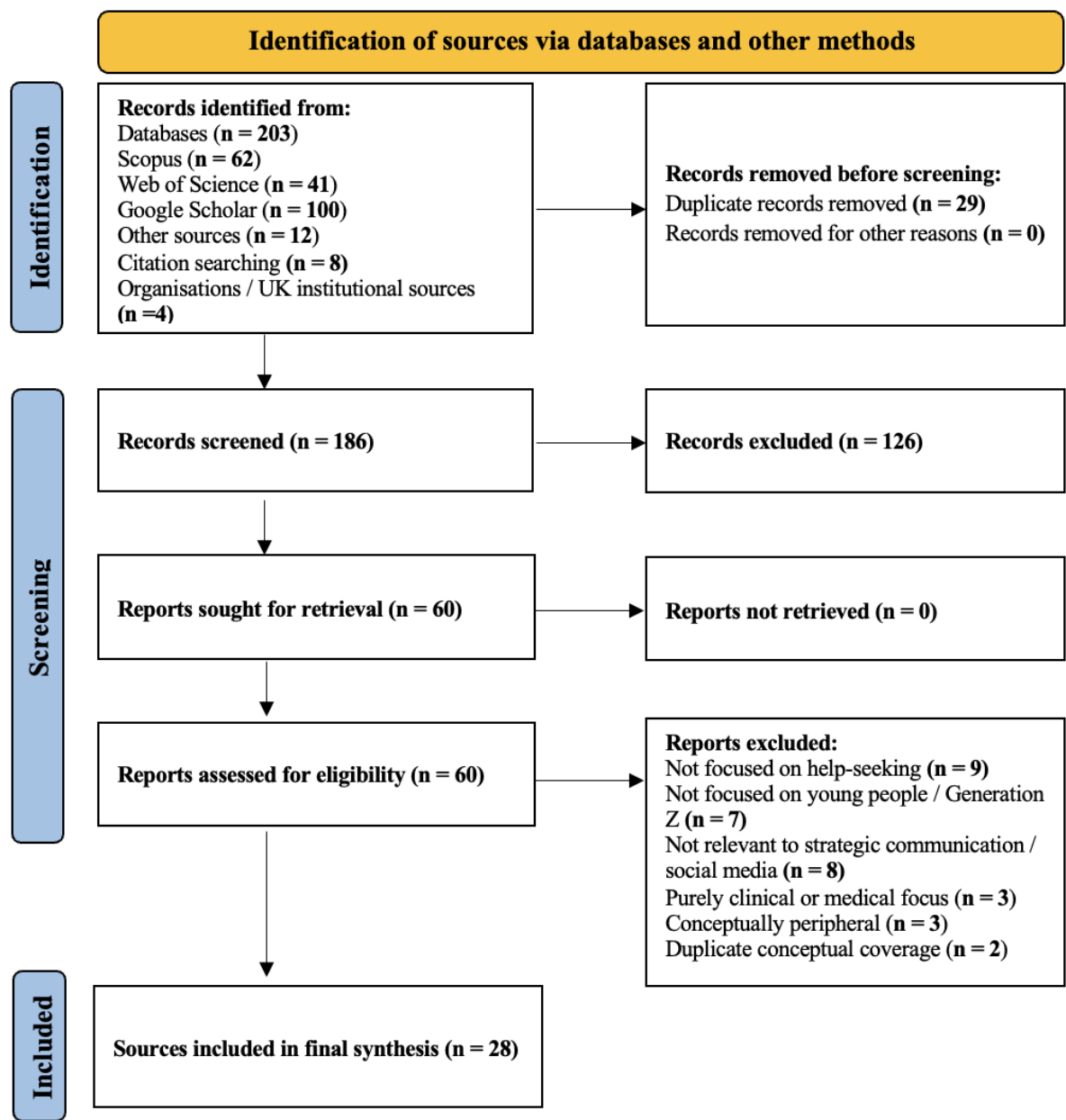


Figure 1. PRISMA-informed workflow used to identify, screen and synthesise relevant sources.

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on Page et al. (2021).

4.4 Literature evolution and key principles

The literature on youth mental health help-seeking has evolved in identifiable stages. Earlier work focused primarily on help-seeking attitudes, counselling utilisation and service underuse.

During this stage, researchers sought to understand why individuals experiencing distress did not seek formal support, and key attention was given to attitudes, stigma and perceived barriers (Rickwood et al., 2005; Mackenzie, Gekoski and Knox, 2006).

A second stage shifted attention towards mental health literacy and public awareness. Research increasingly suggested that low recognition of symptoms, poor knowledge of treatment options and fear of social judgement all played important roles in preventing timely help-seeking (Jorm et al., 1997; Corrigan, 2004; Kutcher, Wei and Coniglio, 2016). This improved conceptual understanding, but communication remained mostly implicit rather than strategically modelled. A third phase emerged with the rise of social media and digital environments. Researchers began to examine how online spaces function as settings for support, disclosure, identity work and information seeking (Naslund et al., 2016; Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle, 2019). More recently, campaign evaluations and influencer research have introduced questions of media strategy, authenticity and source effects, yet these remain under-integrated with help-seeking theory (Tam et al., 2024; Kaňková, Binder and Matthes, 2024; Powell and Pring, 2023). Table 3 outlines the evolution of the literature across key phases of development.

Table 3. Literature evolution timeline

Period	Dominant focus	Significance
1990s–mid-2000s	Help-seeking attitudes, counselling use, service barriers	Established the support gap but paid limited attention to digital communication
Mid-2000s–2010s	Stigma, literacy, awareness and treatment recognition	Expanded the analysis beyond service access to social and cognitive barriers
2010s	Social media, online support, platform-based communication	Positioned digital environments as part of the help-seeking pathway
2020s	Campaign design, influencer communication, authenticity, integrated models	Raised new strategic questions but left major mechanism gaps unresolved

4.5 Global trends and local dynamics

Internationally, youth mental health is widely recognised as a major public-health concern. Patel et al. (2007) identified youth mental health as a global challenge requiring earlier intervention, while later work has reinforced the developmental importance of adolescence and emerging adulthood as periods of heightened vulnerability and identity formation. The global literature also shows that help-seeking behaviour is shaped not only by symptom severity but by culture, stigma, service accessibility and knowledge of support pathways.

Within the UK, the topic has particular urgency. National survey evidence indicates a substantial burden of mental distress among children, adolescents and young adults, while commentary continues to highlight pressure on support systems and unmet need (NHS, 2023a; NHS, 2023b; NHS, 2025). More recent UK evidence suggests that a large proportion of young people anticipate needing mental health support and often rely initially on informal forms of assistance (UCL, 2025). This indicates that the help-seeking problem is not reducible to prevalence alone; it is also a problem of communication, navigation and behavioural readiness. What remains less well developed in the UK literature is an integrated explanation of how strategic digital communication may influence help-seeking intentions among young adults. Public-health evidence is relatively strong on need and access, while communication evidence is stronger on platform use and campaign reach. The literature is much weaker when it comes to explaining how particular message and source characteristics may influence awareness, trust, stigma or behavioural openness.

4.6 Theme One: Help-seeking as a staged and socially mediated process

The help-seeking literature consistently indicates that support-seeking is not a simple response to distress. Rickwood et al. (2005) conceptualise help-seeking as a process involving awareness of a problem, articulation of need, availability of support options and willingness to engage a source of help. This is a major conceptual advance because it shows that help-seeking must be understood as staged and mediated rather than automatic.

Subsequent work supports this interpretation. Rickwood, Deane and Wilson (2007) and Rickwood, Thomas and Bradford (2012) demonstrate that help-seeking research often conflates intention, attitude, preference and behaviour, thereby obscuring important distinctions. Similarly, Eisenberg, Golberstein and Gollust (2007) and Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) show that many young people with mental health difficulties do not access professional support, even

when need is evident. This indicates that the gap between need and action is structural as well as psychological.

The strongest systematic evidence points to recurring barriers such as self-reliance, stigma, lack of knowledge, concerns about confidentiality and uncertainty about service access (Gulliver, Griffiths and Christensen, 2010; Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle, 2019). These findings are highly relevant because they suggest that communication interventions may influence help-seeking indirectly by changing knowledge, normalisation and perceived safety rather than by triggering immediate service use.

4.7 Theme Two: Stigma remains central, but its operationalisation is inconsistent

Stigma remains one of the most persistent explanations for delayed or avoided help-seeking. Corrigan (2004) argues that stigma interferes with mental health care by linking support-seeking to shame, weakness or anticipated discrimination. Corrigan and Watson (2002) distinguish between public stigma and self-stigma, while Link and Phelan (2001) provide a broader sociological account of stigma as a process involving labelling, stereotyping and exclusion.

This body of work makes stigma conceptually indispensable. However, the literature also reveals considerable inconsistency in how stigma is measured. Some studies focus on perceived public stigma, others on self-stigma, and others on generic mental illness stigma or attitudes toward counselling (Vogel, Wade and Hackler, 2007; Vogel, Wade and Ascherman, 2009). This inconsistency limits cumulative knowledge because different studies may appear to examine the same construct while in fact measuring different phenomena.

For the present topic, this matters because communication may influence different forms of stigma in different ways. A campaign may reduce perceived public judgement without changing internalised stigma, or it may normalise discussion without increasing formal help-seeking. The literature therefore supports treating stigma as important, but not as a simple or singular construct.

4.8 Theme Three: Mental health literacy and awareness are necessary but not sufficient

Mental health literacy provides another major strand of explanation. Jorm et al. (1997) introduced the concept as knowledge and beliefs that aid recognition, management and prevention of mental disorders. Subsequent work has emphasised that literacy includes not only symptom recognition but also understanding of treatment, confidence in response options and help-seeking readiness (Jorm, 2012; Kutcher, Wei and Coniglio, 2016).

The literature generally indicates that improved literacy is associated with more positive attitudes toward support and greater readiness to seek help. Systematic reviews of educational and digital interventions suggest that literacy can be improved, at least in the short term, through school-based, web-based and media-based efforts (Wei et al., 2013; Nazari et al., 2023; Yeo et al., 2024). However, the effect sizes are often modest, and many studies rely on short-term self-report outcomes.

A further limitation is conceptual looseness around the term “awareness”. In campaign research, awareness is sometimes treated as recall or visibility rather than as substantive mental health literacy. This weakens analytical clarity. For the present study, it is therefore important to distinguish between mere communication exposure and meaningful awareness involving recognition, understanding and perceived actionability.

4.9 Theme Four: Social media is a communication environment, not a single variable

The literature on social media and mental health has grown rapidly, but it often treats social media use in broad and undifferentiated ways. Reviews show that social media is associated with both risks and potential benefits. On the one hand, there is evidence linking social media use with depression, anxiety, comparison pressure and other risks in some contexts (Seabrook, Kern and Rickard, 2016; Purba et al., 2023; Agyapong-Opoku, Agyapong-Opoku and Greenshaw, 2025). On the other hand, social media can facilitate information access, peer support, disclosure and community formation (Naslund et al., 2016; Naslund et al., 2020).

This suggests that social media should not be conceptualised as inherently harmful or inherently beneficial. Rather, it is a communication environment whose effects depend upon message type, source, interactional norms, platform affordances and audience characteristics. Pretorius, Chambers and Coyle (2019) show that young people often use online spaces as initial points of information and support-seeking. This makes digital communication highly relevant to help-seeking pathways.

However, many studies still rely on crude measures such as frequency of use or general platform exposure. Such measures are insufficient for strategic analysis because they reveal little about what kinds of messages, communicators or formats actually influence awareness and behavioural openness. This is where a marketing perspective becomes especially valuable.

4.10 Theme Five: Media campaigns can influence outcomes, but mechanism evidence is weak

Public-health and campaign literature suggests that media interventions can influence awareness, attitudes and, in some cases, behaviour. Wakefield, Loken and Hornik (2010) argue that mass media campaigns can contribute to behaviour change under the right conditions, while Randolph and Viswanath (2004) highlight the need to understand health communication in crowded media environments. More recent mental health-focused reviews suggest that youth campaigns can increase knowledge and, occasionally, improve attitudes or help-seeking outcomes (Curran et al., 2023; Tam et al., 2024; Draganidis et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the evidence base remains methodologically uneven. Campaign studies often combine several communication elements simultaneously, making it difficult to identify which components produced any observed effect. Many evaluations also prioritise reach, impressions, clicks or engagement metrics rather than robust behavioural indicators. Noar's (2006) criticism of health campaign research remains highly relevant: without clearer theory and better mechanism testing, it is difficult to move beyond general claims that campaigns "raise awareness".

For a DBA project concerned with practical strategy, this is a major limitation. Organisations need to know not only whether campaigns may work, but how and under what conditions. In other words, managerial usefulness depends upon mechanism clarity.

4.11 Theme Six: Authenticity and credibility are strategically important but theoretically underdeveloped

One of the most significant emerging themes in youth-oriented communication is the role of authenticity and source credibility. Influencer and creator-led communication is increasingly used to normalise discussion of mental health, model disclosure and improve relatability. The broader persuasion literature strongly suggests that source effects and message processing matter to behavioural outcomes (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

Recent reviews indicate growing scholarly attention to health-related influencer communication, but the evidence remains underdeveloped (Powell and Pring, 2023; Kaňková, Binder and Matthes, 2024). Credibility in mental health communication appears to be multidimensional. Young audiences may value expertise, but they may also respond strongly to relatability, lived experience, sincerity and perceived motive. Similarly, authenticity is frequently invoked as desirable, yet the concept is often used loosely to mean honesty, emotional candour, consistency, vulnerability or non-institutional tone.

This under-specification matters because strategic decisions depend upon it. Campaign designers must decide whether to use institutional voices, experts, lived-experience advocates or influencers; whether to emphasise informational, narrative or hybrid content; and how to balance professionalism with relatability. The current literature does not yet provide sufficiently integrated or precise answers. This is a central justification for the proposed study. Table 4 summarises the principal themes and limitations emerging from the reviewed literature.

Table 4. Summary of key themes and limitations

Theme	Principal insight	Main limitation
Help-seeking	Help-seeking is staged, social and not reducible to need alone	Intention, attitude and behaviour are often conflated
Stigma	Stigma remains a major barrier to support-seeking	Public stigma and self-stigma are inconsistently operationalised
Literacy/awareness	Knowledge and recognition can improve support readiness	Awareness is often measured too loosely
Social media	Digital spaces create both risks and support opportunities	Use is frequently measured too crudely for strategic interpretation
Campaigns	Media interventions can influence awareness and attitudes	Mechanism testing is weak and engagement metrics are overused
Authenticity/credibility	Message and source qualities appear strategically significant	These constructs remain under-theorised in mental health contexts

4.12 Theoretical integration

The literature supports an integrative theoretical approach rather than reliance on any single model. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is useful because it explains intention through attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage and Conner, 2001). Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) contributes attention to modelling, observational learning and self-efficacy in social environments (Bandura, 1986). The Health Belief Model adds perceived barriers, benefits and threat as relevant dimensions of health action (Rosenstock, 1974). Social marketing then provides the managerial logic linking audience insight, value exchange, segmentation and communication design to behavioural change (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971; Andreasen, 1995; Grier and Bryant, 2005).

No single theory fully captures the present research problem. Help-seeking among Generation Z is shaped by cognition, norms, trust, communication style and digital context. An integrated framework is therefore more appropriate. Strategic communication variables such as authenticity, source credibility and exposure can be conceptualised as exogenous inputs, while awareness, stigma, subjective norms and perceived control function as mediating psychological mechanisms, culminating in help-seeking intention as the primary behavioural outcome.

4.13 Gaps in the literature and potential research directions

The review identifies five major gaps. First, there is an integration gap: the field remains fragmented across psychology, public health and communication, with limited models that integrate strategic marketing variables into help-seeking pathways. Second, there is a construct gap: awareness, literacy, stigma, authenticity and credibility are often defined and measured inconsistently. Third, there is a design gap: much of the literature relies on cross-sectional self-report data, short-term interventions and weak mechanism testing. Fourth, there is a context gap: relatively little research addresses UK Generation Z specifically while also integrating strategic communication variables. Fifth, there is a managerial guidance gap: campaign studies rarely translate findings into actionable communication strategy.

These gaps suggest several important research directions. Future studies should specify communication variables more precisely, distinguish between attention and substantive awareness, separate forms of stigma more carefully, and test mediating pathways rather than relying only on bivariate associations. Research should also examine whether communication effects vary across subgroups within Generation Z and across platform environments. Table 5 presents the major research gaps identified through the preliminary systematic critical review.

Table 5. Research gap matrix

Literature cluster	Typical context	Method tendency	Main emphasis	Gap identified
Help-seeking studies	Students and young adults	Surveys and reviews	Barriers, attitudes, utilisation	Limited strategic communication analysis
Stigma studies	General and student populations	Quantitative scales and reviews	Public/self-stigma	Inconsistent operationalisation
Literacy studies	Educational and digital interventions	Pre/post and review designs	Recognition, knowledge, attitudes	Weak distinction between awareness and behaviour
Social media studies	Platform-based youth environments	Cross-sectional and scoping reviews	Use patterns, risk and support	Measures too broad for strategy design
Campaign studies	Public-health and youth campaigns	Heterogeneous evaluations	Awareness, engagement, attitudes	Weak mechanism testing
Proposed DBA	UK Gen Z adults	Explanatory quantitative design	Communication inputs, mediators, intention	Addresses the integration and mechanism gaps

To consolidate the principal variables emerging from the literature, Table 6 defines the core constructs proposed for the conceptual framework.

Table 6. Proposed conceptual framework constructs and definitions

Construct	Role	Definition
Social Media Exposure	Independent variable	Exposure to mental-health-related content on social media.
Influencer Credibility	Independent variable	Perceived trustworthiness and believability of influencers discussing mental health.
Message Authenticity	Independent variable	Perceived honesty and genuineness of mental health messages.

Mental Health Awareness	Mediator	Recognition and understanding of mental health issues and support options.
Perceived Stigma	Mediator	Perceived judgement associated with mental health difficulties or help-seeking.
Help-Seeking Intention	Dependent variable	Willingness to seek formal support for mental health difficulties.

Together, these constructs provide the basis for the integrated framework proposed in this study. Building on these construct definitions, Figure 2 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework and the hypothesised relationships among the core variables.

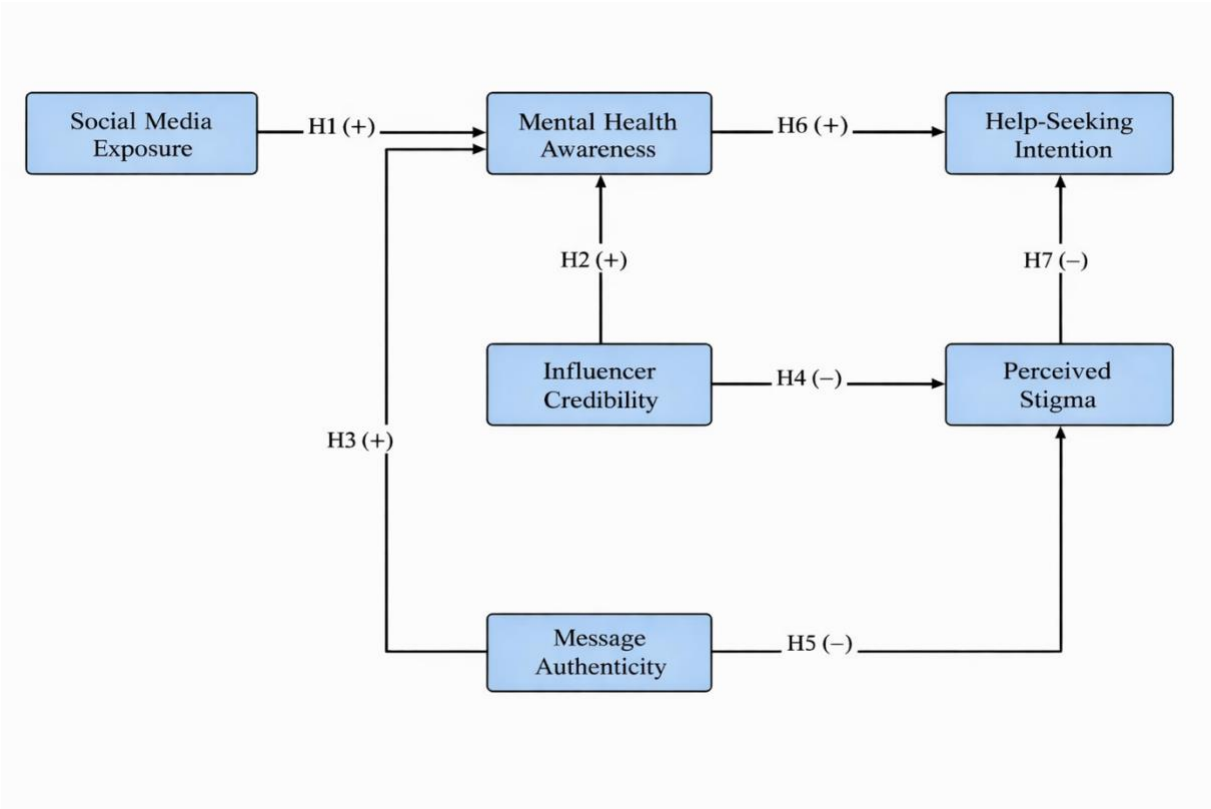


Figure 2. Proposed conceptual framework for social media communication, mental health awareness, perceived stigma and help-seeking intention among UK Generation Z adults.
Source: Author’s own conceptualisation based on the literature reviewed.

4.14 Draft research questions

The literature review supports the following draft research questions:

1. What strategic communication factors most significantly influence mental health help-seeking intentions among UK Generation Z?

2. To what extent do mental health awareness, mental health literacy and perceived stigma mediate the relationship between strategic communication variables and help-seeking intention?
3. How do source-related variables, including influencer credibility and perceived authenticity, affect awareness and behavioural openness in youth mental health communication?
4. How may strategic marketing communication be organised into a validated framework capable of informing youth mental health campaigns in the UK?

4.15 Implications for practitioners and policymakers

The literature suggests that organisations should move beyond viewing youth mental health communication as a simple awareness-raising exercise. Communication appears more likely to be effective when it is understandable, relatable, trustworthy and action-oriented. Campaigns should therefore be judged not only by impressions or engagement rates but by their capacity to improve literacy, reduce uncertainty and support earlier help-seeking.

For policymakers, the key implication is that youth mental health communication requires more rigorous evaluation standards. Reach and visibility are not sufficient indicators of success. For practitioners, especially charities, universities, employers and public-health bodies, the literature indicates the importance of audience-centred communication strategy, credible and authentic message delivery, and better integration between information provision and help-seeking pathways.

4.16 Conclusion to Part Three

The preliminary systematic critical review demonstrates that the proposed DBA topic is both timely and well justified. The literature clearly establishes the seriousness of youth mental health need and the persistence of help-seeking barriers. It also shows that digital communication environments now play a central role in how young people encounter mental health information and support narratives. However, the strategic communication mechanisms operating within these environments remain insufficiently integrated into existing models of help-seeking. The proposed DBA study is therefore justified in seeking to develop and validate a strategic marketing framework capable of explaining how communication variables influence help-seeking intention among UK Generation Z.

Overall Conclusion

This report has argued that a doctoral-level critical literature review must be transparent, analytical and generative. Part One demonstrated that a critical literature review is central to doctoral research because it establishes the intellectual terrain, evaluates evidence and justifies the next stage of inquiry. Part Two presented an annotated bibliography of 100 relevant sources showing the breadth and diversity of the literature relevant to the proposed topic. Part Three then developed a PRISMA-informed systematic critical review of that literature, identifying key themes, theoretical foundations, methodological weaknesses and specific research gaps.

The review concludes that youth mental health help-seeking is influenced by a complex combination of stigma, literacy, awareness, social norms and communication environment. It also concludes that strategic communication variables such as authenticity, source credibility and digital exposure remain under-theorised and under-tested in relation to help-seeking intention. This creates a clear opportunity for the intended DBA study to make an original and practically valuable contribution through the development and validation of an integrated Strategic Marketing for Mental Health framework for UK Generation Z.

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