



## 53 • Social media, young people • and mental health

### Summary

This briefing paper is based on a brief scan of evidence from a range of sources to identify key themes in what is known about the impact social media (and their use) can have on young people's wellbeing, and the ways in which they can be harnessed positively. It is not a comprehensive review of the literature but is intended as a stimulus for debate and discussion.

As with any new technology of such significance in people's lives, there has been a great deal of public and political concern about the effects of social media use on young people's physical and mental health and safety. This has generated a number of research studies and reviews internationally, as well as debates in the media.

Evidence about the roles social media play in relation to our mental health is still emerging. And while more has been said and written about the potential risks and dangers, evidence has come to light on both positive and negative impacts that may be associated with social media use.

Researchers have also sought to understand what constitutes 'problematic' use of social media and what might help to mitigate the risks this presents while also (but to a lesser extent) looking at how social media can be employed to make a contribution to improved wellbeing and mental health.



## Negative impacts on mental health

Research into the negative impacts of social media on mental health has identified a number of interrelated potential risks.

### Addiction

So-called ‘social media addiction’ is thought to affect around 5% of adolescents and has been described as potentially more addictive than both alcohol and cigarette consumption (Jenner, 2015; Hofmann, Vohs, Baumeister, 2012). According to the OECD, in the UK, ‘extreme’ internet users had overall lower life satisfaction than ‘moderate’ users. Some studies have found evidence that young people can develop addictions to social media use. This may particularly be the case for introverted young people (for whom it can replace social interaction and destabilise personal relationships) or those receiving negative feedback online, creating a dependency for further feedback. Some qualitative studies have shown that dependency on social media can have consequences such as poor sleep patterns within young people, often to the detriment of their performance in school and during exams. (RSPH, 2018; O’Reilly *et al.*, 2018). A dominant theme in the literature is that of compulsivity, that is, an ‘urge’ to check and keep updated with various online platforms.

Compulsive ‘checking’ of one’s social media has been linked to aspects of ‘fear of missing out’ or FOMO (see page 3 for more on this) in young people. Survey data has shown that adolescents:

- Lose more sleep through use of social media than intended;
- Are disturbed by notifications during sleep, compelling them to check;
- Find it difficult to relax in the evening after using social media.

(Scott *et al.*, 2016).

These negative impacts on sleep work in a cyclical causal relationship with mental wellbeing (that is, sleep loss arising from social

media addiction can lead to poorer mental health, and poor mental health can lead to sleep loss and heavy social media use).

### Unhelpful comparisons

The impact of persistent and damaging comparisons with the lives of others may be a driver for poor mental health. This has been identified both in research studies and individual narrative accounts as a risk factor for reduced wellbeing if users focus on the positive experiences of others. A variety of studies have posited that social media use is strongly associated with negative self-esteem and self-image. One of the most prominent root causes of this association has been the advent of image-manipulation techniques and photo-sharing based platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat (Education Policy Institute, 2017). In particular, the notion of the ‘idealised’ body image has been shown to have detrimental impacts on self-esteem. This is most notable in young women, to the extent that as many as 9 in 10 teenage girls say that they are unhappy with their body (RSPH, 2017; Lamb, 2015; Tiggeman & Slater, 2012). The 24/7 circulation of widely viewable manipulated images on social media platforms may perpetuate unrealistic expectations of young people, having a detrimental impact on self-esteem and self-worth when unmet. In addition, related to this is the problem of harmful online advice and information, specifically in the context of potentially impressionable adolescents. So-called ‘extreme communities’ (Bell, 2007) run the risk of trivialising, and by extension normalising, very real health problems. Some user-created pages and groups have been known to trivialise issues such as suicide and self-harm, often using them as punchlines in attempts at dark humour (which has now seemingly been normalised into mainstream internet humour, such as ‘memes’). Some studies have speculated that this may encourage a ‘suicide contagion’ (i.e. Daine *et al.*, 2013), although the evidence is still unclear.

## Jealousy

The idea of ‘Facebook envy’ has been the subject of a number of research studies, particularly focusing on the impact of ‘passive following’ on social media. Some studies have identified associations between this problematic use of social media and depression, which is exacerbated with greater use. The increase in social media use has been a double-edged sword. Although users can now communicate and stay up to date with friends and family more easily and faster than before, people are now consciously more aware of what they are missing out on. The popular concept ‘Fear of missing out’ (FOMO) has come to the fore as a psychological phenomenon with multifaceted implications for young people’s mental wellbeing. According to Przybylski *et al.* (2013), FOMO can be described as ‘a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent’ and that it is ‘characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing’. FOMO has been linked to high levels of social media engagement; that is, FOMO increases in line with intensity of social media use. The need to be continually connected with what other people are doing (so as to avoid missing out) can cause feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and distress, feelings which are exacerbated because individuals are constantly being made aware of their friend’s and family’s activities (RSPH, 2017; Przybylski *et al.*, 2013).

## Substitution for social interaction

Studies have identified that substituting social media activity for other forms of social interaction can increase the risk of loneliness, particularly among heavy users of social media. What is more, some studies have shown that young people who exhibit traits of social anxiety utilise social media platforms for purposes of self-presentation (Casale & Fioravanti, 2015).

Social media platforms provide opportunities for socially anxious people to meet unsatisfied needs, resolving an often significant deficit of ‘offline’ relationships. Social media may also give socially anxious young people the opportunity to engage in conversation with more confident language, something they might find difficult offline.

This exacerbates problems of loneliness by discouraging offline, real-world interactions (Casale & Fioravanti, 2015). In addition, online mediums may also damage self-reflection capabilities and degrade individuals’ mental wellbeing – Turkle (2011) suggests that the ‘tethered self’, encouraged by ‘always on’ communication technology, simultaneously distracts us from, and undermines, our vital real-world experiences.

## Cyberbullying

The growth of the internet has created new avenues in which online communications can be misused to engage in cyberbullying. Surveys of young people have pointed to rising concern about cyberbullying. One recent UK study of over 100,000 young people indicated that only 1% were exclusively bullied online and 3% were bullied using both cyber and traditional methods. This compared with a third of children who reported traditional bullying. This study tends to represent cyberbullying as a minority experience for most young people in comparison with other traditional forms of bullying. Although cyberbullying as a form of online harm only affects a small percentage of young people, some studies have identified cyberbullying as the type of online harm that most upsets young people (85% of those who have been victims report being upset by it) (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2011). Various studies have posited robust associations between cyberbullying and mental health, specifically in terms of suicide and self-harm (Daine *et al.*, 2013).

## How social media can boost mental health

Researchers have identified two main ways in which social media use can benefit young people's mental health. The first is the construction of social capital: creating and sustaining connections between people and thereby reducing loneliness. This has been found to benefit people who use social media to communicate actively with others. Although most major social media platforms receive poor scores in metrics relating to impacts on mental health and wellbeing, the picture isn't all bad. The video sharing site YouTube, for instance, was shown to have a net positive impact on young people's mental wellbeing (see RSPH, 2017). YouTube in particular achieved good scores for measures such as self-expression, awareness, self-identity and community building (it did, however, score poorly for its impact on sleep loss). This stands in comparison to platforms such as Instagram, which was shown to have a net negative impact, particularly with measures such as body image, FOMO and bullying. In general, however, social media platforms score well for measures such as emotional support and awareness.

The second beneficial effect relates to boosting people's self-esteem by presenting a positive version of ourselves to the world and our networks. It is unclear whether these potential benefits are sustained over time, whether there are differential impacts relating to a person's vulnerability, or if they might become addictive. Addressing these questions will be important to understand how social media can boost self-esteem and social capital in a way that reaches those at greatest risk of poor mental health and that is sustained over time.

Online platforms and social forums can also facilitate mental health 'learning' by providing

connections between people with shared or similar experiences, giving them the opportunity to engage in communication similar to a lived experience group. Young people with poor mental health may find it difficult to find support offline due to social anxiety, and thus social media can act as a useful tool for socially anxious people to mitigate feelings of distress they may encounter through offline engagement, whilst also finding support from sharing their experiences with people who can empathise and relate. Social media, as well as the internet in general, can also be a useful tool for information seeking. Although the pitfalls of poor information are well documented, there are a variety of legitimate outlets such as the NHS choices 'Moodzone' website. Since self-referral is now an option for those seeking help for mental health crises, online resources play an important role.

### A tool for help-seeking

Social media use might also be harnessed in the future as a tool for promoting help-seeking for mental health. Delays in getting help for a mental health difficulty lead to poorer long-term outcomes as well as more distress in the short-term. Digital media could play an important part as platforms for outreach and support for young people where existing methods of engagement have been largely unsuccessful. As mentioned in the RSPH 'Status of Mind' report, social media platforms do have the potential to improve mental health awareness, in addition to promoting self-expression and facilitating campaigns. YouTube, for instance, scored well in metrics such as self-expression, awareness, self-identity and community building.

## Taking action to improve wellbeing and reduce risk

Many of the leading social media companies have already taken a number of steps to support wellbeing among their users and reduce the risks. Facebook, for example, has taken steps including assisting users to find supportive groups, encouraging more direct communication between close friends, introducing crisis management services via Messenger and upgrading suicide prevention tools. One of Facebook's tools has been trialled in the USA and involves the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to scan posts and pick up on consistent patterns of suicidal thought. The idea is that AI will be able to flag potentially worrying posts to human moderators, who can then use signposting efforts to direct users towards appropriate services. This technology will not however be implemented in the EU for the foreseeable future due to data protection legislation (Constine, 2017). This is not to rule out something similar, or indeed the technology being eventually implemented in the EU.

Creating opportunities to help one another and signposting towards support can be important steps for people experiencing difficulties, regardless of whether their difficulties have

any association with social media use. Digital self-help tools for young people are still at an early stage of being assessed for their effectiveness but they may hold considerable promise. And a growing number of services offer psychological support online through trained therapists. Several commentators have also called for better education for young people on how to use social media healthily and avoid the potential risks. Some reports have recommended that social media lessons could be implemented into Citizenship/PSHE lessons in schools, giving young people the opportunity to learn about aspects of social media use (such as online 'etiquette'). Given that social media is now a major facilitator of human interaction, it is vital that users are aware of its language and various nuances.

*"We need to teach children how to cope with all aspects of social media – good and bad – to prepare them for an increasingly digitised world. There is real danger in blaming the medium for the message."*

(Professor Simon Wessely, former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists)

## Conclusions

The evidence we have seen produces a mixed and uncertain picture about the way social media interacts with young people's mental health and wellbeing. There are clearly some significant risks, but it is unclear whether they affect some groups of people more than others, how they interact with existing vulnerabilities and how they develop over time. Likewise, there are clearly opportunities to use social media to support wellbeing, reduce risk and offer help to those who need it. But most are in their infancy and require further evidence.

Stakeholders in mental health policy such as the Department of Health and Social Care,

Department for Education, think tanks and charities must work in conjunction with the social media industry in order to establish facts and causal inferences. Coordination and communication efforts between relevant groups and organisations should produce a shared prevention strategy for social media which addresses its negative impacts, whilst making use of its positive aspects and not restricting users' freedom to engage in online communities. Policy ideas may include increased signposting efforts as well as the use of 'nudge' policies and behavioural economics.

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