

Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health: Science and Technology Committee

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**Inquiry into Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health**

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**We are happy to provide oral evidence if require and could include young people in contributing to this. Please contact Professor Carrie Paechter on carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk for further information**

1. **Executive Summary**

* Our submission is based on six pieces of research examining:
  + Young people’s engagement with social media and vulnerability to online risks
  + Young people’s experiences of cyber bullying
  + Effects of social media and screen use on young people’s physical and mental well-being
  + Experiences of care leavers
  + How young women compare themselves to images on Instagram
* High levels of social media use are associated with negative psychological outcomes
* Who individuals connect to through social media can impact on the vulnerability
* Ease with which individuals can be identified and contacted using social networking sites can create potentially harmful situations for some
* Social work practitioners and carers responsible for ensuring the health and wellbeing of children in care need to be up to date with developments in social media
* Young people curate their online presence and compare themselves to others they see online. This can affect mood
* Young people have a clear understanding of behaviours that constitute cyber bullying
* Involvement in cyber bullying has a number of psychological impacts and also impacts on learning
* Online social interaction can also lead to positive emotions among users
* Further research is needed which could monitor the impact of social media on health. This could include using apps to continuously monitor user interaction with social media in conjunction with the gathering of contextual information about mood and behaviour

**2. Submission**

Our submission is based on six research projects:

The first research project was carried out with UK based social media users, aged 13 to 77 years. The project examined associations between social media engagement and users’ vulnerability to online risks, by exploring the role of psychological motivations and online behaviours (e.g., online friending). The project combined self-reported data with data digitally derived from participant social media networks.

The second research project was carried out with young people age 11-15. This project examined young people’s experiences of cyber bullying and the impact it has on them.

The third research project was carried out with adolescents (13 - 17 years), emerging adults (18 - 21 years) and adults (22+years), combining both self-reported surveys and digitally derived network data.

The fourth research project investigated the effect on mood of 50 participants as they received thousands of digital alerts over a five-week period.

The fifth study explored the experiences of looked-after children and care leavers, and contact with birth family.

The sixth research project was a small-scale student project that investigated how young women compare themselves to Instagram pictures, and how it makes them feel.

The findings provide insight in to young people’s engagement with social media and some of the consequences of such engagement.

*Social Media*

Social media is a pervasive force in today's digital society offering users, young and old, the ability to develop and maintain their social circles on interactive, multimedia rich online platforms. Constant connectivity to social media is common, due in part to the widespread availability of mobile internet connectivity and a plethora of social media applications. Increased connectivity to social media has been linked to a variety of potentially risky online behaviours such as increased rates of online ‘friending’ and self-disclosure.

The frequent use of social media has been linked to individuals developing a fear of missing out (FOMO). Social media platforms provide their users with opportunities to compare themselves to other users, known and unknown. Comparisons can be drawn between social connections (e.g., who a user is connected to), social activities (e.g., what a user is doing) and physical appearance. On platforms where user-based content is predominantly curated to show an idealised version of the self, such comparisons with others can result in social media users feeling socially inferior to their connections. As a result, individuals who are high in FOMO are said to exhibit lower levels of self-esteem.

The findings of our research support the notion that high levels of social media use are associated with negative psychological outcomes such as increased levels of FOMO and decreased self-esteem. Further, the research suggests that over time these negative psychological outcomes would appear to drive further connectivity to social media, suggesting the start of a potential spiral of problematic social media use.

Social media users demonstrating higher levels of FOMO were found to engage in higher levels of self-disclosure online and reported having larger networks of connections. Such FOMO inspired online behaviours were linked to increased rates of reported vulnerability to online risks (i.e., data misuse, cyber harassment) and psychological harms (i.e., decreased self-esteem).

Connecting to large, diverse networks of online connections is associated with greater reported online vulnerability to online risks and harms. Social media users with larger networks demonstrate an increased likelihood to connect to online profiles which may or may not provide a true or complete representation of a normal online user (e.g., a personal profile being used for commercial purposes). Connecting to such misclassified profiles can further increase the risk of vulnerability to social media users. Our research indicated that social media users are not always aware of the presence of such connections on their networks.

The study into the effects of mobile phone digital alerts on mood found that out of more than half a million notifications, 32% resulted in negative emotions, triggering users to feel upset, nervous, afraid or ashamed.

The ease of identification of individuals on social media can create potentially harmful situations for looked after children and care leavers. Social media sites provide a way for these children and young people to reconnect or increase contact with birth family, potentially without the knowledge of birth family or social work practitioners. Children enter care for a range of reasons, including abuse or neglect, which may result in contact with their birth parents and/or relatives being restricted or prohibited in order to protect the child from further harm. However, it is not uncommon for families to want to reconnect or increase contact and the recent growth in social media use can threaten contact arrangements designed to protect these children. In the case of care leavers, re-establishing or increasing contact with birth family can be beneficial as it can increase a young person’s social support network as they make the transition from care into adult life. However, it can also be very damaging, depending on the specific circumstances which resulted in the young person being removed from their birth family.

Young women discussing their use of and response to Instagram images reported that they actively sought ‘likes’, curating their accounts and posting images at particular times of day in order to attract more. They also reported social pressure to ‘like’ their friends’ images due to awareness about embarrassment if you get no ‘likes’. While they were aware that many images had been digitally altered, and altered their own images before posting them, they still compared themselves to others’ images, which could affect how they felt about themselves, though this was usually short-lived.

*Cyber bullying*

Cyber bullying is frequently identified as one of the most common harms that young people experience when using social media and digital technology. Cyber bullying behaviours can be text based (e.g., comments about an individual; threatening or hurtful comments sent to an individual; rumours) or image based (e.g., where images are used beyond the intended audience, taken when those in them are unaware, or modified). Compared to school-based bullying, the potential audience is much greater, and episodes of cyber bullying can occur at any time. For some young people it may not be the content of the cyber bullying messages that they fear but rather that a message has the potential to arrive at any time.

There is huge variation in the reported prevalence rates for experiencing cyber bullying ranging from less than 1 in 10 to more than 7 in 10. Similar variation is also evidence for involvement in cyber bullying as a perpetrator with reported prevalence rates ranging from less than 1 in 10 to 1 in 2. This variation may be accounted for by the age of samples, the time frame young people are asked to report on, and fear that disclosure of involvement in cyber bullying would limit access to digital technology.

The young people in our research regarded cyber bullying as distinct from other behaviours such as banter. While banter was something that occurred between friends who knew the behaviour was a joke, cyber bullying was seen as a negative behaviour that was the action of an anonymous coward. However, there is evidence that some young people may engage in cyber bullying to get their own back on those who bully them in the face-to-face world.

The young people in our research also thought that cyber bullying was something that happened to others and that they were relatively unlikely to experience to cyber bullying. However, the young people said that their perceptions of safety changed when their friends or they themselves experienced cyber bullying.

Involvement in cyber bullying either as a target or a perpetrator has been associated with a number of negative psychological outcomes such as reduced self-esteem and greater anxiety and depressive symptoms. Our own research highlights that the impact of cyber bullying also extends to the school environment and this is especially the case for young women. Specifically, those young people who had greater involvement in cyber bullying were more likely to report negative attitudes towards learning and school.

*Recommendations*

* Greater awareness of the role FOMO (fear of missing out) in vulnerable networks is needed
* Social media users and educators need to be aware of the diverse nature of online connections that individuals can make
* Social workers and carers responsible for ensuring the health and well-being of children in care need to ensure that they keep up with developments in social media
* Further research is needed to explore how looked after children, care leavers, and their birth families reconnect or increase contact using social networking sites, their experiences in and outcomes of that contact, and the implications for both young people and social work practice.
* Greater understanding of the prevalence of involvement in cyber bullying is needed
* Educators need to be aware that the impacts of cyber bullying extend in to the school environment
* Further research is needed that monitors the impact of social media on mental health. This could include using apps to continuously monitor user interaction with social media in conjunction with the gathering of contextual information about mood and behaviour