#SO.ME

What do young people think about social media and their mental health?

What is this research about and why have we done it?

We know that lots of people are concerned about social media and its **impact on young people's mental health** and wellbeing. Unfortunately, most of what we know so far **has not considered young people's own views** and experiences. We want to **change this.**

We, the #So.Me Team, have been **talking to young people** to find out directly from them **about their experiences of social media** and the role this may have in their mental health and wellbeing.

Embedding young people's voices in this research will help us to **better understand the impact of using social media**, and **produce better learning** that is directly aligned with young people's experiences.

What we did

We held group discussions with young people in **three schools across Greater Manchester**. These were organised by year group with **young people in years 7, 8, 9 and 10** (aged 12-15).

Who we spoke to:

26
Young people
a mix of genders

10
Young people
in years 7 & 8

16
Young people
in years 9 & 10

Young people from White/White British, Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British, Asian/ Asian British, and other ethnic backgrounds

Young people told us they use social media for 5 key reasons

1 Plugging into our social worlds

Social media is how young people connect to others (friends, people they know, and people they don't). It is also how they keep up-to-date or 'in the know', and supports them to engage in hobbies and interests.

"Just having an account sort of like makes your presence kind of there and like you're still connected with other people, and you can still see what they post and see what's going on for them."

2 It's how we learn new things!

Young people use social media to find things out – this can be through intentional searching but also by chance when they happen upon something they find interesting. Young people spoke about this in relation to school work, practical skills, and knowledge about people, places and events.

3 It's always there when I need to relax and chill out

Young people told us they use social media to chill out, take their mind off things and entertain themselves. This can be when they are in a good mood, or when they feel low.

4 Social media shows you who I am

Young people use social media to express themselves and who they are as a person, for example through the people they follow, groups they belong to and posts they share. They share things about themselves and their hobbies and skills on social media, as a means of presenting and promoting themselves. For example, sharing pictures or videos of their artwork, musical performances, or brands they are associated with.

"I've learnt a lot of like just cool, fun facts [...] – it can spark an interest in something. Like you didn't really realise you had an interest in space or something, and then you see a video about it and you're like, "Actually, that's really interesting." So, you can like learn new things."

5 It's cool, and I want to fit it

Whilst social media allows young people to express themselves, Young also spoke about using it as a means of 'fitting in'.

Young people identified 5 key risks of using social media

1 I can't control other people's actions

Young people told us about problems such as cyberbullying, receiving nasty comments, trolling and 'catfishing', which stem from how easy it is to connect with someone on social media, and the 24/7 nature of that connection. They also said social media is an environment where inappropriate behaviour is accepted, and prejudices and discrimination are often visible. This can make social media feel like an uncomfortable or unsafe place to be.

2 I don't like the content I see

Despite the use of algorithms that help you to 'curate' your feed, young people told us there is still a risk you will see negative or inappropriate content. They also said this is something they don't feel able to do anything about.

3 Social media is a time waster

Young people said that a potential problem with social media is that you can get distracted by it, or spend more time on it that you intend to. This means it can get in the way of other things that might be more important.

"Like there's just people that bully people. Like I actually experienced racism on Roblox, like how is that even possible?"

4 A dominant voice

Because things on social media spread so quickly and so far, it could be extremely influential. People can also fill their feeds with a particular point of view, which means they are not exposed to other, different points of view.

"I think it's scary how influential it can be, especially to like younger people. 'Cos I don't think I'd be influenced at my age, or maybe I would, but I think it's scary that younger people could get their opinions based off social media, which isn't always factual."

5 Do you get me?

One of the biggest risks with social media is that it is really easy to miscommunicate without the benefits of body language and tone. Young people said they often worried their messages or posts might been taken the wrong way by others.

Young People's negative experiences with social media

"Sometimes it's like also – you're like, "Oh my gosh, I don't really want to touch my phone," but you start feeling like you're going to miss out or something, like you just have to touch your phone."

"And you'd do it again tomorrow as well. And even I've tried to go – like I've been going sports and everything. I still find a way to go on my phone when I'm at sports. It's like I can't escape it. It's like once you're there, you're there."

Am I missing out?

When young people see others having a great time on social media, or if they spend time away from social media, they worry they are missing out on something good. Young people also told us they could feel excluded, for example when they saw their friends were doing something together that they weren't invited to.

Am I good enough?

One of the biggest worries related to how they think people might judge them through social media and if they are going to be criticised. Young people spoke about this often in relation to how they look (#beautystandards), but it also occurred in relation to their overall lives and achievements. Social media often left them feeling like they were not good enough.

"[A]lso like beauty standards, I feel like that – especially like when you see someone pretty and you've just posted something, and it's like, 'Oh, why am I not going viral like them?'"

Conflict and anti-social behaviour

Given that young people spoke about the risks of cyberbullying and trolling, being criticised on social media was something that led to negative feelings for young people. They expressed negative experiences on social media through seeing inappropriate, disturbing, or offensive content.

I don't feel in control

Young people told us they sometimes do not feel in control of their social media use. Going on it is a habit that they can find hard to break. This can make them feel frustration or guilt when they realise they have spent lots of time on social media without setting out to.

Young People's Positive experiences with social media

Deepening connections

Young people told us that social media helps them to feel connected to others. For example, social media is a way of arranging meet ups with friends, knowing what's going on at Dance club, and being part of an event even when you can't physically be there.

They also said it is an important way they build and maintain friendships, from sharing silly videos with friends, showing their support, to speaking to family on the other side of the world.

"Yeah, my friend sends me TikToks when she knows I'm in a mood, mostly of cats falling down stairs…"

Feeling like I belong

Social media is a space where young people can see others like them – from the same backgrounds or cultures, or having the same experiences as them. Positive interactions with others can support a sense of wellbeing and community belonging.

"[T]he community you're in in social media can feel like a loving one, so like a community that you fit in. It's really positive, so you don't find any negative stuff."

…and relax

Social media is entertaining and spending time on it makes young people feel relaxed. Young people said this is likely linked to how it supports social connections, hobbies, and learning, and the fact that there is something for everyone.

"[L]ike if you're like watching a cooking video or something – there's like a couple of guys on there that do really like good cooking videos, and that'll like motivate you."

Motivation station

Young people told us they find motivation and inspiration through social media. It is a great place to see what others are doing and get ideas.

How does young people's social media use and experience vary by age?

For the young people we spoke to, here are some differences we noticed.

1 Young people in years 7 and 8 were more **influenced by their parent's views** of social media, in terms of what platforms they used.

2 Young people in years 9 and 10 mentioned that their **friends and peers influence their choice of platforms** (i.e. which platforms do they need to be on to 'fit in'?).

However, all age groups spoke using social media platforms **based on what they think is important and how useful they think they are**. They are critical of different platforms, and often their choices about using social media are considered and deliberate.

"But I feel like it's just maybe to fit in, 'cos everyone has Instagram and they all have – I don't really know."

"I use Instagram mainly because it just has stuff that I think's more important on it, instead of just TikTok, which is – I think it's unhealthy […] Instagram is a bit more… say formal or like helpful."

3 Young people in years 7 and 8 spoke more commonly about **using social media for a specific purpose**, e.g. to look something up, play with filters, or get in touch with a friend.

"Yeah, well, I mean, it's like if I go on TikTok, it's because I have literally got nothing to do. I'm just trying to find something to fill my head."

Young people in years 9 and 10 spoke more commonly about using social media **in an opportunistic or subconscious way**, e.g. to fill time when they couldn't do anything else, or accidentally 'finding' themselves on social media without any specific intention.
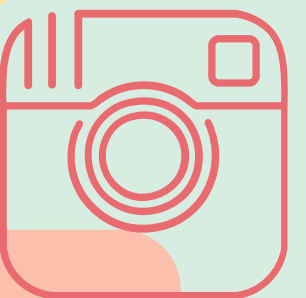
So what?

1

Social media narratives structure the way young people think about and experience social media

"I think adults think like low of it. I do understand because there is like [bad things] about social media, and I feel like they should like trust us more - to like an extent though."

The way young people view social media is **influenced by wider societal views and narratives**. This likely partly explains the fact that young people described spending time on social media as not a good use of their time. It is important to recognise this, because young people told us there are **both positives and negatives of using social media**.

Social media is a central part of young people's lives, so **only holding a negative view of social media is unhelpful in supporting them** to use and experience it in positive and safe ways. We need to create spaces where parents, schools and young people can have open conversations about why social media is important and where it is challenging for young people. We need to explore **where different perspectives come from** and create room for more open mindsets, to ensure young people feel able to talk about their experiences.

"But adult opinions would be different from ours, because they haven't grown up with it the same. It hasn't been there from an early age where it just mixes with your head a lot more."

"My dad's so against social media, especially Tik Tok now. He's really scared of it, like to the point he wants the UK to ban Tik Tok from everyone. He just doesn't like it at all."

So what?

2
Young people are active agents in their own social media experience and we need to better equip them with the skills to successfully navigate this world.

We've still got lots to learn about young people's social media experiences, but here are some of the initial things we are learning

"I have [...] a normal Tik Tok account with like a lot of people on it, and then a private one with like only people I'm friends with. [...] Like I'm more comfortable with the ones on the – I mean, they're both private, but like on the other one, because like you know exactly who's going to see it and stuff."

Young people spoke about sometimes **feeling a lack of control** – over the content they see, the people they interact with, and their own social media use. On the other hand, we also heard from young people about **ways they take control:** Young people told us they do not use certain platforms (or features of platforms) because they do not think they are appropriate, they hide and/or report content they do not like, and take control of their privacy through privacy settings and the use of multiple accounts. This suggests **we need to work with young people** to develop strategies and **skillsets to help keep them safe and feel in control** of their social media experience.

This research is part of the #So.Me project, which aims to develop a self-report measure of young people's social media experiences, to better understand which experiences impact on mental health and wellbeing. You can find out more about the project at www.so-me-study.org.

Thank you to the schools and young people who took part in these conversations! Your participation has helped to ensure the #So.Me project is grounded in young people's views and experiences.

Authors: Dr. Jo Hickman Dunne, Molly Anderton, Pratyasha Nanda, Dr. Emily Banwell, Dr. Louise Black, and Dr. Margarita Panayiotou