# One in five schoolgirls in Wales faces problematic social media use, survey reveals



# The Growing Challenge of Problematic Social Media Use Among Schoolgirls in Wales

Recent research from Public Health Wales and Cardiff University's School Health Research Network has highlighted a pressing concern regarding social media usage among secondary school girls in Wales. According to the 2023 SHRN Student Health and Well-Being Survey, which gathered responses from approximately 130,000 students aged 11 to 16, one in five schoolgirls struggles with problematic social media use. In stark contrast, only one in ten boys reported similar challenges. This troubling disparity calls for urgent attention as it emerges from findings that pinpoint particularly high rates of problematic use among girls in Year 10, where the figure rises to a concerning 21%.

The survey assessed students on their ability to manage social media usage, the extent to which they may neglect other activities due to social media, and whether their online presence was affecting their relationships with family and friends. Responses reveal a deeper issue; Emily van de Venter, a health improvement consultant for Public Health Wales, noted that while social media fosters connectivity, many young users report negative impacts on personal relationships, engagement with hobbies, and troubles in limiting their online time.

Additionally, the research delineates socioeconomic disparities in social media usage patterns. Girls from lower-income households exhibited the highest rates of problematic engagement at 20.8%, whereas boys from similar backgrounds reported a lower rate of 12.1%. This trend persists across different economic strata, with middle-income families exhibiting rates of 19% for girls and 10.3% for boys. SHRN Director Dr Kelly Morgan remarked on the significance of these findings, suggesting that comprehensive questions around social media use can illuminate varying experiences among different groups, ultimately enhancing our understanding of this complex issue in the context of wider health behaviours.

The findings in Wales echo broader trends reflected in international studies evaluating adolescent social media use. A significant study published in the Journal of Public Health Research revealed that among 103,971 students surveyed, 12.1% reported problematic social media use, focused primarily on higher rates among girls. Young individuals living in care settings were particularly vulnerable, facing heightened risks of cyberbullying and exposure to explicit material, which correlated with lower mental well-being scores.

Moreover, insights from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, which encompassed over 280,000 children across 44 countries, found a marked increase in problematic social media use among teenagers, expanding from 7% in 2018 to 11% by 2022. This same research highlighted that girls more consistently report issues with problematic use compared to boys, emphasising the need for targeted interventions.

Further complicating the landscape of social media use among younger demographics, a Cardiff University report indicates that nearly half (48%) of Welsh children aged seven to eleven are already engaging with social media. This predilection for online platforms raises urgent questions about the long-term sustainability of mental health among younger populations.

In light of these statistics, experts are advocating for strategic interventions aimed at addressing the growing demand for healthier social media practices. Swansea University research underscores that even a modest reduction in social media usage—by just 15 minutes daily—can lead to significant health benefits, including improved general well-being and decreased feelings of loneliness and depression. This highlights the potential for small changes to have more substantial positive outcomes, particularly in a demographic already faced with the mental health crises exacerbated by social media.

As these findings outline the complex interplay between gender, socioeconomic status, and digital engagement, they also serve as a clarion call for parents, educators, and policymakers alike to take concerted action. Fostering a more balanced approach to social media could help mitigate the adverse effects experienced by many young people today, creating a healthier environment for future generations.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25145962.social-media-one-five-schoolgirls-struggles-use/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2773033-social-media-regularly-used-by-48-of-primary-age-children-in-wales%2C-report-shows)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25145962.social-media-one-five-schoolgirls-struggles-use/?ref=rss), [[5]](https://nation.cymru/news/rise-in-addictive-like-behaviours-among-teenagers-towards-social-media-study/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/25161032231204967), [[3]](https://stem4.org.uk/two-new-surveys-from-the-who-and-stem4-highlight-sharp-rise-in-problematic-teenage-social-media-use/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://nation.cymru/news/rise-in-addictive-like-behaviours-among-teenagers-towards-social-media-study/), [[6]](https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/observatory/data-and-analysis/shrn-data-dashboard/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://stem4.org.uk/two-new-surveys-from-the-who-and-stem4-highlight-sharp-rise-in-problematic-teenage-social-media-use/), [[7]](https://www.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-events/news/2023/03/new-swansea-university-research-shows-reducing-social-media-use-by-just-15-minutes-a-day-can-improve-your-health.php)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/25145962.social-media-one-five-schoolgirls-struggles-use/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/25161032231204967> - A 2023 study published in the Journal of Public Health Research analyzed data from the School Health Research Network's 2017/18 survey, involving 103,971 Welsh students aged 11 to 16. The research found that 12.1% of students reported problematic social media use, with higher rates among girls (22%) compared to boys (12%). The study also highlighted that young people in care were more likely to engage in negative online experiences, such as cyberbullying and sharing explicit images, which were associated with lower mental well-being scores.
3. <https://stem4.org.uk/two-new-surveys-from-the-who-and-stem4-highlight-sharp-rise-in-problematic-teenage-social-media-use/> - A blog post by stem4 discusses findings from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, which surveyed 280,000 children aged 11, 13, and 15 across 44 countries. The study revealed a significant increase in problematic social media use among teenagers, rising from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. Girls reported higher levels of problematic use than boys (13% vs 9%). The post also highlights concerns about the persuasive design of social media apps exposing young people to harmful content and activities.
4. <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/news/view/2773033-social-media-regularly-used-by-48-of-primary-age-children-in-wales%2C-report-shows> - A Cardiff University report reveals that nearly half (48%) of Welsh children aged seven to 11 regularly use social media. The survey, conducted by the School Health Research Network, involved 354 primary schools and 32,606 pupils. Key findings include that 63% of learners own a smartphone, and 46% have been bullied at school in the past couple of months. The report emphasizes the need for further research into the impact of social media on younger children.
5. <https://nation.cymru/news/rise-in-addictive-like-behaviours-among-teenagers-towards-social-media-study/> - An article in Nation.Cymru reports on a study highlighting a rise in 'addictive-like behaviours' among teenagers towards social media. The study found that 12% of adolescents in Wales exhibit such behaviours, with the highest prevalence among 15-year-old girls. The research also noted that problematic social media use is more common in UK countries compared to the HBSC average, with marked increases observed over the past four years. The study underscores the need for interventions to address these issues.
6. <https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/observatory/data-and-analysis/shrn-data-dashboard/> - The SHRN Data Dashboard by Public Health Wales provides comprehensive data on various health behaviours among students in Wales. In 2023, 42% of females scored high or very high on mental health assessments, compared to 27% of males. The dashboard also highlights disparities in fruit and vegetable consumption between students from high and low affluence families, and an upward trend in girls feeling pressure from schoolwork over the years.
7. <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-events/news/2023/03/new-swansea-university-research-shows-reducing-social-media-use-by-just-15-minutes-a-day-can-improve-your-health.php> - Swansea University research published in the Journal of Technology in Behavior Science indicates that reducing social media use by just 15 minutes a day can significantly improve general health and immune function, and reduce levels of loneliness and depression. The study involved 50 participants aged 20-25 over three months, comparing outcomes between those who reduced their social media usage and those who did not. The findings suggest that even modest reductions in social media use can have positive health effects.