# Oxford research reveals varied social media effects on adolescents with mental health conditions



Dr Andrew Przybylski, a leading researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, advocates for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media and the mental health of adolescents. His recent work, in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Cambridge, illuminates the fact that the experiences of young people with diagnosed mental health conditions differ significantly from those of their peers. This complexity, he argues, is often overlooked or oversimplified in mainstream media narratives that tend to paint social media as a uniform antagonist in the mental health crisis facing youth.

The research indicates that teenagers exhibiting mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression engage with social media in distinct ways. These adolescents typically report spending more time online and express dissatisfaction with their online interactions, often comparing themselves unfavourably to others. This self-comparison can exacerbate their mental health struggles, revealing that for these individuals, social media may serve as a mirror reflecting their internal struggles, rather than simply a source of joy or connection. In contrast, teens with externalising conditions like ADHD tend to spend more time on social media without the same tendency for self-comparison, suggesting that their relationship with these platforms may differ fundamentally.

Dr Przybylski emphasises the need for research to pivot from simplistic narratives that categorically label technology as harmful. He suggests that social media use should be viewed as a symptom of existing issues rather than a direct cause of mental health problems. This perspective encourages a more detailed inquiry into adolescents' actual experiences. By focusing on how these individuals navigate social media, researchers can better tailor interventions and policies that address their unique challenges, potentially leading to more constructive regulatory measures.

This research comes at a time when other studies highlight the significant pressures faced by young users, particularly during critical developmental stages. For instance, a separate study from Cambridge indicates that girls aged 11-13 and boys aged 14-15 are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of social media, often experiencing decreased life satisfaction linked to its use. This underscores the necessity for age-specific investigations to identify which groups may be most vulnerable and how social media affects their well-being.

Additionally, the University of Cambridge is spearheading a governmental project aimed at comprehensively understanding the impact of smartphones and social media on youth. This initiative seeks to collate existing research and propose new avenues for exploration, equipping policymakers with a clearer view of the intricate relationship between adolescent well-being and digital technology.

The evolution of research methodologies also reflects a growing recognition of this complexity. Researchers are employing innovative techniques, including generative AI, to analyse vast amounts of social media content. This cutting-edge approach aims to link consumption patterns on platforms like TikTok with longitudinal health outcomes, offering valuable insights into how specific types of social media engagement may affect young people's mental health.

In light of these evolving discussions, it has become increasingly clear that understanding the intricate links between social media and mental health demands an abandonment of one-size-fits-all conclusions. Instead, it calls for a commitment to more nuanced, data-informed inquiries that encapsulate the diverse experiences of adolescents. As Dr Przybylski notes, investing in research that accurately reflects the realities faced by young people can pave the way for more effective policy measures and ultimately foster a healthier online environment.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25175045.oxford-professor-social-medias-impact-teen-mental-health/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/adolescents-with-mental-health-conditions-use-social-media-differently-than-their-peers-study)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25175045.oxford-professor-social-medias-impact-teen-mental-health/?ref=rss), [[4]](https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/cambridge-leads-governmental-project-to-understand-impact-of-smartphones-and-social-media-on-young)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25175045.oxford-professor-social-medias-impact-teen-mental-health/?ref=rss), [[2]](https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/adolescents-with-mental-health-conditions-use-social-media-differently-than-their-peers-study), [[3]](https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/scientists-find-that-the-impact-of-social-media-on-wellbeing-varies-across-adolescence)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/scientists-find-that-the-impact-of-social-media-on-wellbeing-varies-across-adolescence), [[5]](https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/using-generative-ai-explore-social-medias-impact-adolescent-health)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-open/article/scoping-review-of-social-media-in-child-adolescents-and-young-adults-research-findings-in-depression-anxiety-and-other-clinical-challenges/947188D6124E4C06AA0A1752C9861F94), [[7]](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2819781)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25175045.oxford-professor-social-medias-impact-teen-mental-health/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/adolescents-with-mental-health-conditions-use-social-media-differently-than-their-peers-study> - A study led by the University of Cambridge reveals that adolescents with diagnosable mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, use social media differently than their peers. These individuals report spending more time on social media platforms and express greater dissatisfaction with their online friend counts. They are also more likely to compare themselves to others on social media and experience mood changes based on the likes and comments they receive. The study suggests that mental health conditions may influence how adolescents interact with social media, or conversely, that social media use could contribute to their symptoms.
3. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/scientists-find-that-the-impact-of-social-media-on-wellbeing-varies-across-adolescence> - An international team of scientists, including researchers from the University of Cambridge, found that the impact of social media on adolescents' wellbeing varies across different stages of adolescence. The study indicates that girls aged 11-13 and boys aged 14-15 are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use, with increased usage associated with decreased life satisfaction in these age groups. The researchers emphasize the need for more targeted research to identify which individuals might be most affected by social media during these critical periods.
4. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/cambridge-leads-governmental-project-to-understand-impact-of-smartphones-and-social-media-on-young> - The University of Cambridge is leading a governmental project commissioned by the UK's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to understand the impact of smartphones and social media on young people. The project aims to improve policymakers' understanding of the relationship between children's wellbeing and smartphone use, including social media and messaging. It will review existing research, assess various methods and data sources, and recommend future research directions to inform government action in this area.
5. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/using-generative-ai-explore-social-medias-impact-adolescent-health> - Researchers at the University of Cambridge are using generative AI to explore the impact of social media on adolescent health. The project aims to analyze large-scale objective content consumption data from platforms like TikTok, linked with longitudinal health outcomes, to understand how social media content affects adolescents' health. This innovative approach seeks to provide a step-change in understanding the relationship between social media use and adolescent health, setting the foundation for further research across various content types and individual outcomes.
6. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-open/article/scoping-review-of-social-media-in-child-adolescents-and-young-adults-research-findings-in-depression-anxiety-and-other-clinical-challenges/947188D6124E4C06AA0A1752C9861F94> - A scoping review published in BJPsych Open examines the relationship between social media use and behavioral health conditions, including depression and anxiety, among youth under 25 years old. The review analyzes 140 studies and finds that increased social media use is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, particularly depression and anxiety. The authors highlight the need for more longitudinal studies and diverse methodologies to better understand the impact of social media on youth mental health and to inform effective interventions.
7. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2819781> - A systematic review and meta-analysis published in JAMA Pediatrics investigates the association between social media use and internalizing symptoms among adolescents and young adults. The study finds a positive association between social media use and internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, in both clinical and community samples. The authors note the paucity of research on clinical populations and emphasize the need for more comprehensive studies to evaluate the impact of social media on mental health.