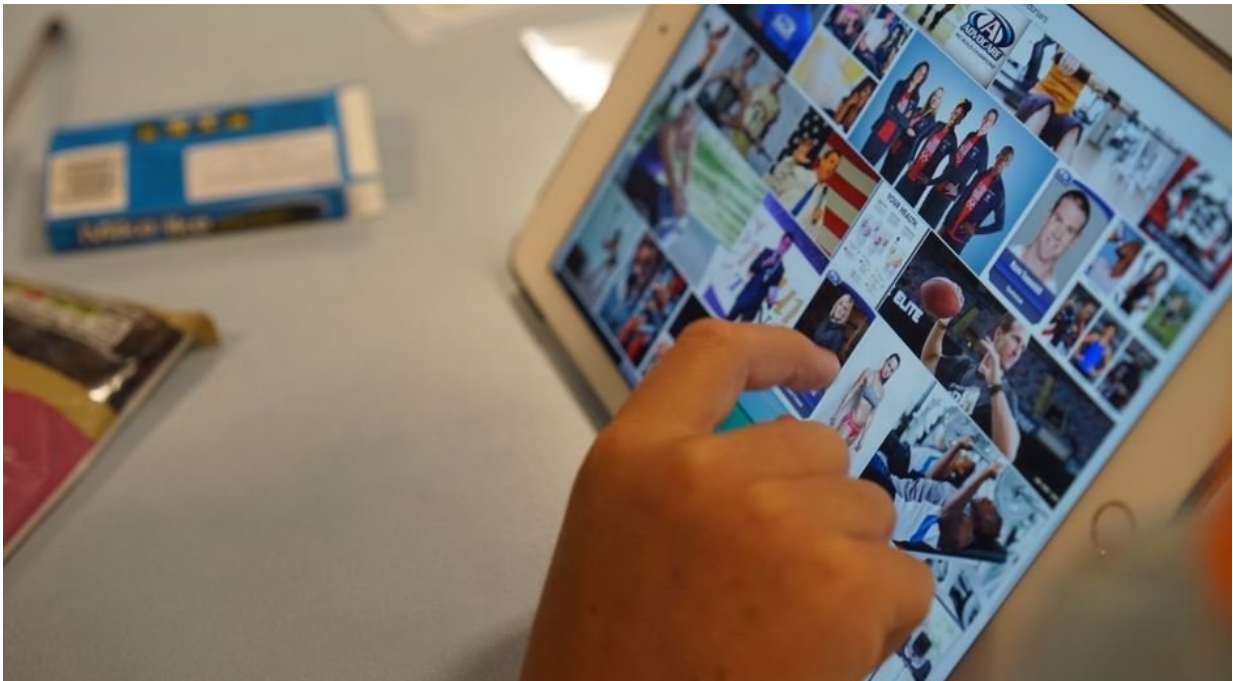


New study sheds light on teenagers' online habits

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A new study sheds light on teens' online habits. Credit: University of Birmingham

Teenagers are far more critical users of social media than we give them credit for, and need to be better supported in reaping the benefits social media can have.

A new study by the University of Birmingham published today (January

25th) in *Sport, Education and Society* sheds light upon teens' online habits, finding that young people are not simply passive recipients of all the content available online, as commonly thought.

Analysing 1,300 responses from teenagers aged 13 to 18 from ten UK schools, researchers set out to discover how young people engaged with health-related [social media](#), and understand the influence this had on their behaviours and knowledge about health.

They discovered that most teenagers would 'swipe past' health-related content that was not relevant to them, such as 'suggested' or 'recommended' content, deeming it inappropriate for their age group.

Many were also highly critical of celebrity-endorsed content, with one participant referring to the celebrity lifestyle as 'a certain lifestyle that we are not living' because they were more likely to be 'having surgery' than working out in the gym.

However, many participants still found it difficult to distinguish between celebrity-endorsed content and that posted by sportsmen and women, leaving them vulnerable to celebrity influence.

The pressure of peers' 'selfies', which often strove for perfection, and the complex social implications of 'liking' each other's posts, were recurring themes in the young people's responses. Both of these activities had the potential to alter teenagers' health-related behaviours.

Lead author Dr Victoria Goodyear, of the University of Birmingham's School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences emphasised the need to be more aware of both the positive and negative impacts [social media](#) can have upon young people.

She said: "We know that many schools, teachers and parents/guardians

are concerned about the health-related risks of social media on young people.

"But, contrary to popular opinion, the data from our study show that not all young people are at risk from harmful health-related impacts. Many young people are critical of the potentially damaging information that is available."

Despite teenagers' ability to assess [content](#), the study emphasizes that adults still have a crucial role to play in supporting young people and helping them to understand how harmful health-related information might reach them.

Professor Kathleen Armour, the University of Birmingham's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education, adds: "It is important to be aware that [teenagers](#) can tip quickly from being able to deal competently with the pressures of social media to being overwhelmed.

"If they are vulnerable for any reason, the sheer scale and intensity of social media can exacerbate the 'normal' challenges of adolescence. Adult vigilance and understanding are, therefore, vital."

Dr Goodyear suggests that adults should not ban or prevent young people's uses of social media, given that social media provides significant learning opportunities. Instead, schools and parents/guardians should focus on young people's experiences with the media and help them to think critically about the relevance of what they encounter and both the positive and harmful effects this information could have.

Crucially, discussions about the risks of social media must be introduced into the classroom, helping to address the current gap which exists between the ways in which [young people](#) and adults understand social media.

More information: Goodyear et al (2018). 'Young People and their Engagement with Health-related Social Media: New Perspectives'. Sport, Education and Society www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17440017.2017.1423464

Provided by University of Birmingham

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