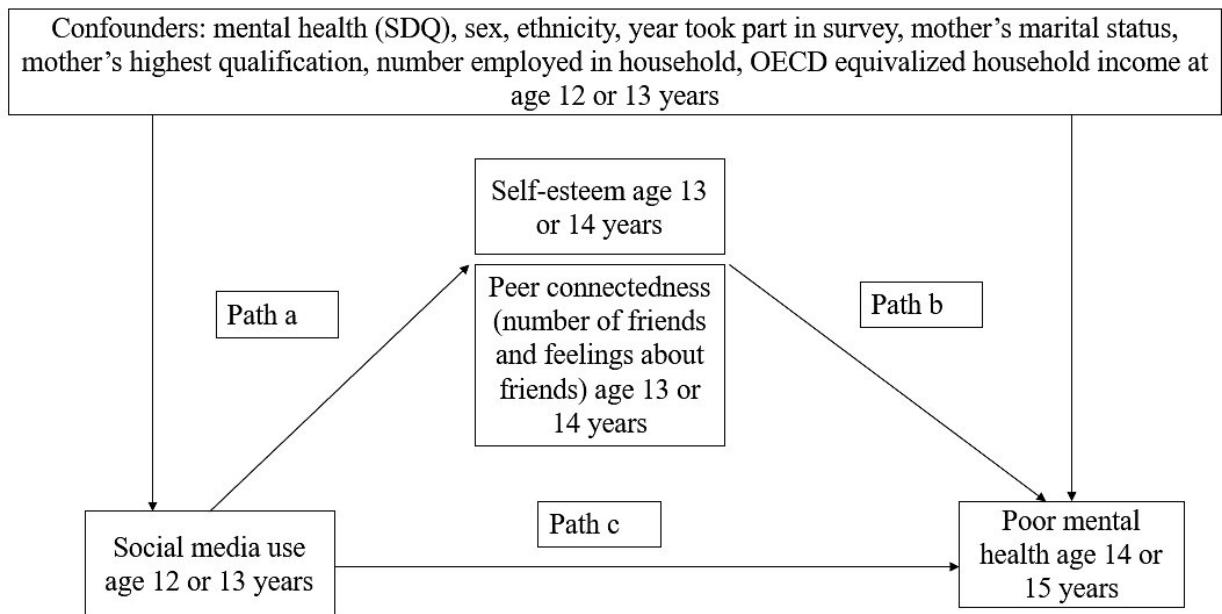


# Social media unlikely to cause mental health problems in adolescents

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Proposed mediation model for the relationship between social media use and poor mental health. OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; SDQ: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Credit: *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2023). DOI: 10.2196/43213

There is little evidence to show that teenagers in the UK who spend more time on social media have worse mental health, finds a new study by UCL researchers.

The study, published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, examined the link between [social media](#) use and mental [health](#) in more than 3,000 participants, aged between 10 and 15 years old, from the Understanding Society household survey.

The World Health Organization reports that one in seven adolescents (aged 10—19 years of age) experiences a [mental disorder](#), and half of all mental illness begins by the age of 14 years.

The number of young people with [mental health conditions](#) has increased over the last 20 years and social [media](#) has often been cited as one of the reasons.

To assess this, researchers measured the number of hours spent on social media on a five-point scale from "none" to "seven or more hours" at the ages of 12-13 years. They then examined data on [self-esteem](#) and social connectedness (ie. having strong friendships) at the ages of 13-14, before finally assessing mental health at the ages of 14-15.

The findings showed that there was little evidence to suggest that more time spent on social media was associated with later mental health problems in adolescents in the UK.

However, there may be a link between social media and the negative impact it had on young people's self-esteem.

Now the researchers are calling for prevention strategies and interventions to improve mental health associated with social media use—while considering factors such as self-esteem. This could include targeted education on how to manage social media.

Lead author, Dr. Ruth Plackett (UCL Institute of Epidemiology & Health) said, "Our findings provide some reassurance that social media

may not be as harmful to young people's mental health as previously thought."

"However, we also need to be aware that social media can have both positive and negative effects on young people's mental health, and there are still many unanswered questions."

"For example, while social connectedness did not seem to explain the relationship between [social media use](#) and mental health, our study shows that it is important to consider factors like self-esteem when trying to improve young people's mental well-being."

Previous literature reviews and cross-sectional studies, including a recent UCL-led paper, have indicated that social media usage could be linked to eating disorders in young people.

However, the new study uses a longitudinal survey analysis to provide greater clarity regarding the nature of the relationship, to grant insight into the impact of social media on young people over time.

Dr. Plackett said, "What makes our longitudinal survey analysis novel is that it is looking at this relationship over time and we found no significant impact on mental health generally, which is similar to some other [longitudinal studies](#) in this area."

"This suggests that the relationship between the two is complex and likely influenced by several other factors and we should be cautious about interpreting social media as the cause of [mental health](#) problems."

## **Study limitations**

The study was limited by the relatively small sample size in the complete case analysis and may have been underpowered. But a sensitivity analysis

was performed on a larger imputed sample where similar results were found.

The analysis was also based on self-reported data and may not correlate with objective measures, such as observed time spent on social media.

Meanwhile, the study only focused on those with data at 12-13 years old and 14-15 years old, which may limit the generalisability of the findings and analysis using different ages, or [time](#) between ages and a trajectory analysis may yield different results.

**More information:** Ruth Plackett et al, The Longitudinal Impact of Social Media Use on UK Adolescents' Mental Health: Longitudinal Observational Study, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.2196/43213](#)

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