

A qualitative exploration of social media and adolescent subjective wellbeing: listening to the voices of young people.

Deborah Webster, Laura Dunne and Ruth Hunter; Queen's University

Correspondences to: dwebster03@qub.ac.uk

Introduction

With the ongoing increase of adolescents' media use (Twenge, Martin and Spitzberg, 2018), social media is now intertwined with the daily life of adolescents (Weinstein, 2018). Indeed, half of all ten-year-olds now have a smartphone, and 74 per cent of 12-15-year-olds are allowed to take their phones to bed (Ofcom, 2020). The volume of research in this area has recently grown (Malvini Redden and Way, 2017) and the question of whether social media has a detrimental impact on adolescents has become controversial (Orben and Przybylski, 2019). While many studies have found social media use to have a negative association with wellbeing outcomes (Woods and Scott, 2016; Kelly *et al.*, 2018), other studies have found that social media use can have a positive impact on subjective wellbeing (Kimball and Cohen, 2019; Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Despite the growth in studies, there is a need for more qualitative work (Dubicka and Theodosiou, 2020), specifically listening to the voices of young people themselves.

This summary paper presents the findings of a qualitative study that sought to elicit the views and experiences of adolescents on social media use and subjective wellbeing. The study asks the research question: In what ways do young people think that using social media impacts their subjective wellbeing?

Methodology

Three schools, representing three different types of co-educational post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, participated in the study. Ethical approval was granted in advance of the study from Queen's University Belfast and individual pupil, and parental consent was secured from all participants. Six focus groups took place, separated by gender, across three schools. A total of forty pupils, all aged 13, participated.

The pupils were asked a range of questions about their social media use and if they thought it impacts their mood, body image, self-esteem, loneliness and sleep. A thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using Nvivo software—a programme used by qualitative researchers to help organise and analyse data. Five main themes were identified: comparison, connectedness, positive mood, feeling left out, and sleep deprivation.

Initial Results

Comparison

The theme of comparison emerged most frequently across all the focus groups. The pupils talked about how they compared themselves to celebrities and their peers. They said this made them feel unhappy with their own bodies and lives. While they recognised that users manipulated their photographs to create a perfect image, this did not prevent them from feeling negative about themselves, “If I’m having a bad skin day then looking on Instagram makes me feel worse” (Pupil A, Female, School 2). Other studies suggest that an increase in social media use can lead to an increase in social comparison (Chou and Edge, 2012; Yang, 2016).

Connectedness

The pupils talked about feeling connected to their friends through social media by using platforms to make new friends or more commonly using social media to talk to their current friends from school, “on social medias like Discord you can just talk to people like lots of people like twenty people at a time for like hours...so you’re connected” (Pupil G, Male, School 2). This finding supports a recent Pew Review survey, which found the main benefit of social media, according to teens, was feeling connected to friends (Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

Positive Mood

Pupils talked about how watching funny videos, and humorous content online increased their positive mood and made them smile, laugh and feel happy. This was brought about either by scrolling/browsing online or by videos sent to them by their friends, “I would like find funny things on Instagram then it would make me laugh and then I would feel better”

(Pupil C, Female, School 2). Similarly, in a study with adolescents in China, gratifications received from social media were found to have a positive influence on adolescent's mood (Apaolaza, He and Hartmann, 2014).

Feeling left out

Pupils talked about how not being tagged in a post made them feel left out, and the impact of not being tagged in a photograph was detrimental to their self-esteem:

“I do feel like it (social media) has made me feel a wee bit more lonely...if you don't get tagged in a picture...you kinda get put down by it” (Pupil C, Female, School 2).

This feeling of being left out, or a fear of missing out, has been associated with increased use of Facebook in a study with High School students (Beyens, Frison and Eggermont, 2016).

Sleep Deprivation

The pupils talked about later bedtimes and disturbed sleep as a result of using social media. “Without social media, I would be in bed quite a lot earlier so I would” (Pupil B, Male, School 1). A study with adolescents in Scotland, similarly found social media use to be related to poor sleep, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem in adolescents (Woods and Scott, 2016).

Conclusion

Social media is ubiquitous in the lives of adolescents and will remain so for the foreseeable future. While much research has investigated its impact on subjective wellbeing, often the voice of young people is ignored. As explained in the introduction, there is a need for more adolescent-centred approaches, which seek to find out how children and young people themselves, as consumers of social media, think their subjective wellbeing is impacted by its use. This study addresses this need by exploring the impact of social media on subjective wellbeing from the perspective of adolescents. While the study is ongoing, this summary reported on the method and early findings of the research. So far, the message is that social media use can impact adolescent subjective wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. It has a positive impacts in terms of connecting the young person with friends and increasing

positive mood. However, its negative impacts include comparing their bodies and lives to celebrities and their peers, feeling left out, and experiencing sleep deprivation.

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Authors

- Deborah Webster is a PhD Student in the school of Social Science, Education and Social Work (SSESW), Queen's University Belfast. She has a background in education and safeguarding. Deborah's research interests include social networks, social media and adolescent wellbeing.
- Dr Laura Dunne is a Chartered Psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Education in the School of Social Science, Education and Social Work (SSESW), Queen's University Belfast. She is a Fellow of the Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation (CESI). Laura's research interests lie in three main areas; child health and wellbeing, early child development and peace building in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs), and programme evaluation.
- Dr Ruth Hunter is a Reader in Public Health at the Centre for Public Health, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests include investigating the role of social networks and social network interventions for health and wellbeing, and she has recently held a Career Development Fellowship from the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) in this area.