Is social media screen time really associated with poor adolescent mental health?  A time use diary study

# Details

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## Sample

4,032 participants in the Millennium Cohort Study aged 13-15

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

## Implications For Educators About

Other

# Abstract

Background: There is increasing concern regarding the potential impact of social media use on the mental health of young people. Previous research has relied heavily on retrospective accounts of social media screen-time. Yet recent evidence suggests that such self-report measures are unreliable, correlating poorly with more objective measures of social media use. In principle, time use diaries provide a less biased measure of social media use. Methods: We analysed cross-sectional data from the Millennium Cohort Study to explore associations between social media screen-time as recorded in time use diaries (TUD) and key mental health outcomes – self-harm in
the past year, depressive symptoms (Short Mood and Feelings Questionnaire), self-esteem (shortened Rosenberg scale) – in adolescence. Social media TUD data were available for 4,032 participants (25.4% aged 13; 73.5% aged 14; 1.1% aged 15). Results: Following adjustment for confounders, a greater amount of time spent on social media was associated with an increased risk of self-harm (adjusted OR per 30-minute increase in weekday use: 1.13, 95%CI 1.06 to 1.21) and depression (adjusted B ==0.36, 95%CI 0.22 to 0.50) and lower levels of self-esteem (adjusted B = -
0.12, 95%CI -0.20 to -0.04) in females. Findings were similar for weekday and weekend use.
Limitations: The cross-sectional nature of the data limits inference in relation to the causal direction of these associations.
Conclusions: Future research should examine the direction of the associations with self-harm and other mental
health outcomes and explore gender differences in how adolescents engage with social media as well as how
much time they spend online.

# Outcome

"In this large population-based study of adolescents, using novel time use diary data, we found that a greater amount of time spent on social media was associated with increased risk of self-harm and depression and lower levels of self-esteem in females. Findings persisted after adjustment for covariates, including prior mental health problems... The findings here show that 30-minute increments in exposure were independently associated with a clear increase in depressive symptoms and risk of self-harm and poor self-esteem." (Barthorpe et al, 2020: 866).