

Written evidence submitted by the Manchester Institute of Education at The University of Manchester

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Executive Summary

- The concept of screen time can be problematic when considering wellbeing and mental health. The quality of the time using social media is likely to be a more important factor, than the quantity of time.
- Whilst social media can have negative impacts upon W&MH, factors, such as bullying, family support, and dissatisfaction with schoolwork, might have greater negative impacts.
- Using social media can help to improve the W&MH of children and young people. This can include connecting with friends or engaging with likeminded others and feeling included in activities that might have otherwise been impossible.
- Specific services, that offer professionally moderated and safe social media spaces, can offer vital support for children and young people's W&MH. This can include providing high quality responsive information hosted on the same platforms, support in peer forums and direct access to professionals.
- The Department for Education might take on a role that provides recommendations of quality assured services to that offer web-based mental health and wellbeing support to children and young people accessing education.

What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?

Research conducted by individuals based in the Manchester Institute of Education explores this issue.

Panel network analysis using data from the Understanding Society cohort explores the influence of social media use on the mental health of adolescentsⁱ. It demonstrates that self-reported estimated time spent on social media is amongst the least influential factors (of those included) on mental health across an adolescents' functioning and social life. Other factors, such as bullying, lack of family support and schoolwork dissatisfaction show stronger associations.

However, the reliance of secondary data of time spent on social media (social media 'screen time') here misses the more nuanced understanding of social media experience and engagement. As part of our #So.Me projectⁱⁱ, research is currently being conducted to understand what the key mechanisms of adolescent social media use are that lead to mental health outcomes (i.e. what is it that young people do or experience on social media that may impact their mental health?).

Preliminary findings from focus groups with young peopleⁱⁱⁱ suggests the role of social media plays for adolescents in experiences such as:

- connecting with friends

- seeing people and content they can relate to
- feeling included
- feeling excluded
- comparing themselves to others
- being bullied

These factors need to be considered over and above 'screen time' when assessing the relationship between social media use and their mental health and wellbeing.

Positive Virtual Ecosystems^{iv}: Research often reflects that children and young people use the Internet as a first point of contact when seeking W&MH support. Services that offer a professionally moderated ecosystem of support (i.e. those that offer high quality information about relevant topics, moderated peer-to-peer forums, and direct contact to professionals) are important in counterbalancing unmoderated loosely regulated social media. Services, such as [Kooth](#), offer such support and moderate peer group interactions that enable individuals to share helpful advice and ask questions, support them in feeling less alone and more connected to others.^v

How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children's screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?

Social media guidance for professionals

Currently it can be difficult for educational professionals to determine the quality of the social media resources on offer to children and young people seeking support for their W&MH. The Department for Education might take on a role that provides recommendations of quality assured services that offer web-based W&MH support to children and young people. Further, as ethical guidance is relatively limited for W&MH professionals engaging in social media activities,^{vi} additional guidance and support may be provided for those working with younger age groups.

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ⁱ Margarita Panayiotou, Louise Black, Parise Carmichael-Murphy, Pamela Qualter & Neil Humphrey
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s44220-023-00063-7>

ⁱⁱ [#So.Me \(so-me-study.org\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/erjvz/>

^{iv} <https://pediatrics.jmir.org/2021/1/e23193>

^v <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03069885.2019.1619169>

^{vi} <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/capr.12678>