





MONITORING YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA DIET: GUIDELINES FOR TEENAGERS



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In this resource, we consider some of the research relating to the impact of social media on how you think and feel. As you read it, consider the impact that it has on your own thoughts about social media platforms.



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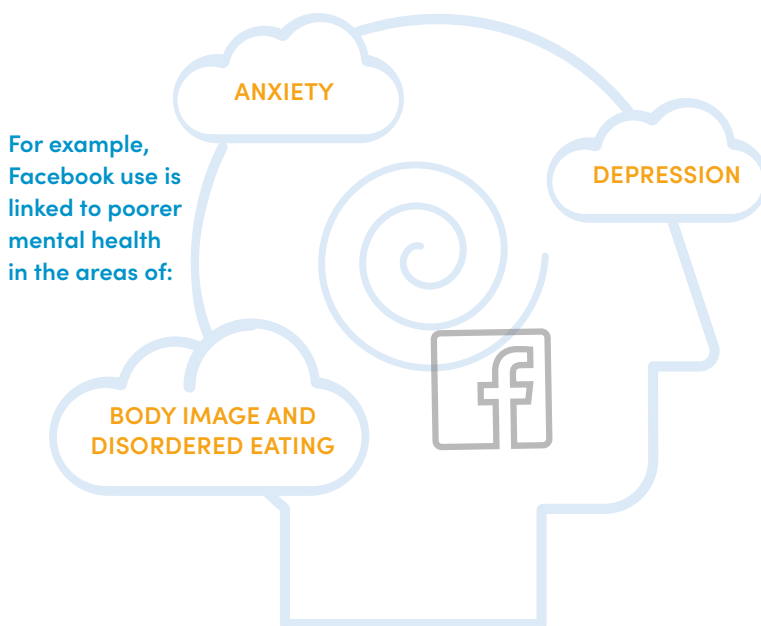
SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2022, over 4.59 billion people used social media worldwide. This number is projected to increase to almost six billion in 2027. At the beginning of 2023, **in the UK**, there were 57.1 million active social media users - that's 84.4% of the population! In 2022, **children and teens in the UK spent an average** of 114 minutes per day on TikTok (the most popular social media app). This was followed by Snapchat and Instagram. **Research from the UK** has found that 67% of children and young people say that social media makes them feel happy all or most of the time, and that it helps them to feel closer to their friends. It also found that three in ten children aged 8-17 had experienced someone being nasty or hurtful to them via apps or platforms, whilst only two in ten experienced this in face-to-face interactions.

Social media can go wherever we go, thanks to smart devices. So, we can use our favourite social media sites anytime, anywhere. Social media platforms include sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, etc.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

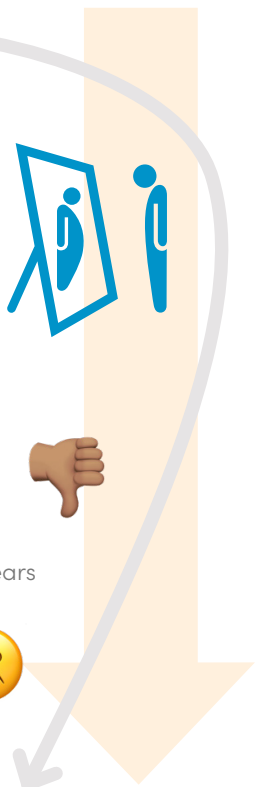
You might have heard that some people are worried about how using social media might impact on people's mental health.



Research has found that social media use is associated with a small increase in body image disturbance (this means that it's linked to feeling worse about your body). This happens more when your use of social media is 'appearance-focused' (meaning that you tend to compare your appearance to others').

Additionally:

-  Social media causes a small to moderate immediate increase in eating disorder risk.
-  Instagram, but not Facebook, appears to increase eating disorder risk.
-  Seeing people who meet appearance ideals is an especially harmful part of social media use.



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WHY DOES SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECT BODY IMAGE AND DISORDERED EATING?

Here's a quick overview of the two theories that researchers most often use to try to understand why social media increases risk factors for eating disorders.



SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

This suggests that there is a “sociocultural ideal” that defines what body type is seen as beautiful (and what is not). This changes over time and culture, but currently in many countries, the ideal body type for females is thin and toned, and for males is muscular. In both cases, the ideal body type is so extreme as to be out of reach for most people.



The ideal body type is spread and supported by mass media, including magazines, TV, movies, and, nowadays, social media. When people see this ideal body, they tend to compare their own body to it. Typically, they find that their own body does not meet that ideal. As a result, they feel unhappy about their own body and may be motivated to take actions to change their body shape so that it becomes closer to the ideal.



OBJECTIFICATION THEORY

This proposes that our culture “sexually objectifies” people’s bodies. That is, it reduces people to their appearance and treats them like “objects” for sexual attraction. This highlights an observer’s perspective on people’s bodies (not a broader perspective that includes both physically observable aspects of a person and more complex, internal aspects, like personality). Seeing pictures or videos others post of themselves on social media may also highlight an observer perspective.



It is thought that being repeatedly exposed to this objectifying perspective leads people to take on an observer’s perspective of their own body (i.e., they “self-objectify”). They then become self-conscious and habitually monitor the way they look, which can lead to feelings of shame and anxiety.

KEY IDEAS



Social media might increase risk for eating disorders

Social media may be bad for your mental health

Social comparison and self-objectification could be key

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AUTHENTICITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

“Authenticity” on social media means realism or truthfulness on social media.

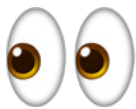
Social media gives people an opportunity to present whatever version of themselves they want. People want to feel like they are achieving well in areas of their lives that matter to them, and they want to feel like others see them in a positive light in those important areas too. A lot of times, as a result, what you see on social media might not be 100% authentic.



SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY

One thing that might help you to get better at picking up on inauthenticity online is to improve your social media literacy. **Social media literacy** is your ability to think critically about the things that you see on social media, including aspects such as accuracy, believability, and potential bias.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself about the things you see on social media:



ACCURACY

Is that what the person looks like in real life (if it's someone you have met in person)?

Does what you know about this person make you think that what they're posting is truthful?



BELIEVABILITY

Are there any aspects of the image that don't look natural?

Is there something about what they're posting that just doesn't seem right?



POTENTIAL BIAS

Does this person have a stake in putting forward a particular image or viewpoint?

Is it possible that this person isn't well informed on this topic?



Remember that people may not be deliberately trying to deceive others through their posts or may not even see what they're posting as inauthentic! Increasing your social media literacy isn't about assigning blame to others, it's about processing the things you see online more consciously and carefully.

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CURATING YOUR FEED

Before we get started on curating your feed, it's important that you know what we mean when we use that phrase. Basically, curating your feed means taking advantage of the options you have on social media sites to control the sorts of content that appears in your feed.

For our purposes, it involves:



"Following" or **"friending"** accounts, or joining online communities, that share content that promotes positive psychological wellbeing for you.



"Unfollowing" or **"unfriending"** accounts, or leaving online communities, that share content that has a negative impact on your psychological wellbeing.



Sometimes, there are factors that make it difficult to unfriend someone that shares this type of content. For example, if your cousin posts pictures of themselves that make you feel bad about your body, it might cause problems in your relationship if you delete them from social media. Many social media platforms have other options (e.g., mute) so you can stay friends with that person but ensure that their posts don't come up in your feed or only come up rarely. Using these options is another way to curate your feed.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

You can make a plan to curate your social media feed by considering:

	What social media content makes me feel good?
	What social media content is useful and interesting to me?
	What social media content is in line with my values?
	What social media content feels most authentic/real to me?
	Does some social media content make me feel better at first, but worse over time?



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What's the most interesting new fact that I've learned?



Has this resource made me think differently about the things that I see on social media? If yes, how?



What strategies might I try when curating my feed?

