

Submission to
the Science
and Technology
Committee inquiry
on the **impact of
social media and
screen-use on
young people's
health**

INTRODUCTION

1. Youthscape is a national youth work organisation, based in Luton. For 25 years we have been expressing Christian faith by meeting young people's holistic needs and embodying a belief that all young people are deserving of equal opportunity and care. Local youth work is at the heart of what we do. Whether in high schools or our after-school drop-in, we support teenagers individually as well as in their peer groups. It's here we develop and pilot the new approaches and ideas that are shared through our national projects. We call this approach deep and wide - intense work in one community, leading to innovative training and resources across the UK. Working in small project teams enables us to develop specialist knowledge and experience on key issues for young people, for example on self-harm, anxiety, or sex and relationships.

2. This submission has been prepared by the Youthscape Centre for Research for the Science and Technology Committee Inquiry into the impact of social media and screen use on young people's health. It is based on the results of a survey of Youthscape's staff team, reflecting on their experience of working with young people and how use of screens/social media impacts their physical and mental health.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3. Access to social networks, information and entertainment through social media and smart phones brings a range of benefits to young people. However, it can also have a detrimental impact on young people's physical and emotional health. Physical impacts include lack of sleep, strain to eyes, neck and back, forms of self-harm and fewer opportunities for exercise. The Youthscape team have a range of concerns about how screen/social media use negatively impacts young people's mental and emotional health. Access to social media is generally unrestricted, so there is huge pressure for young people to be constantly present online, making it very difficult for them to rest. Many social media platforms create anxiety for young people, who are worried about how they are perceived, who has access to images they might have shared and whether they are missing out on important peer conversations. Young people experience bullying online, which makes it harder for them to escape the bullies. Many young people we know would like to use social media less, but don't feel free to reduce their screen use for fear of being socially excluded.

4. As an organisation, we are responding to a number of these challenges through our work with young people. We focus on creating contexts where young people build safe and positive face-to-face relationships with adults, including through our after-school drop-in, our 1-1 mentoring and specific programmes. We help young people think about and respond to the positive and negative impacts of social media/screen use, and we develop specific resources and training packages that address some of those impacts (e.g. self-harm, anxiety). We can see a range of ways that youth work, the education system, parents, technology providers and the government need to respond to better protect the health and well-being of young people.

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND SCREEN USE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

We want to begin by recognising some of the ways that access to screens and social media has a positive impact for the young people we work with. There are undoubtedly more positive aspects to social media use than identified here, but we have highlighted just some of the strengths of new technology for young people.

5. Access to social networks and friendship. For young people who may be house-bound, isolated or who have disabilities, social media reduces barriers to socialising and building friendships. Having access to online communities wherever young people are can provide instant support and be hugely helpful in reducing isolation. We see the ability for young people to make connections across the world as hugely empowering, and something to be both celebrated and encouraged.

6. Affirmation and mood. Young people can feel incredibly affirmed and encouraged when someone likes a picture or posts a positive comment on their social media account. Similarly, accessing and sharing interesting or funny Youtube or Instagram videos can lift young people's mood and bring them together.

7. Campaigning and awareness-raising. Young people are able to use social media tools to raise awareness about the issues they care about, and to share their opinions. When positive content and ideas start trending online, this can help to improve young people's physical and mental health.

8. Ability to be honest about their feelings. Some of the team have observed young people finding it easier to resolve conflict in their friendships using social media than they would have done face to face. An online culture of sharing thoughts and feelings also means that young people are more willing to talk openly to our team about what they are experiencing online. This is very helpful for understanding their needs and providing the right support in response.

9. Education and creativity. Watching videos is often very informative, and young people we know have learned a range of skills through accessing online content, whether that's making a meal or doing make up. They are also exercising their creativity in using certain apps and social media platforms, creating and curating content for their friends and wider community.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SCREENS/SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON PHYSICAL HEALTH

The team has also identified a range of ways that social media and screen use negatively impact the health of young people they work with.

10. Lack of sleep. Our team know many young people who have interrupted sleep because they check their phones for updates throughout the night. This can lead to constant tiredness and an inability to concentrate during the day.

11. Physical strain. For some young people frequent use causes an increase in neck/back ache, headaches and tired/dry eyes.

12. Self-harm. Self harm 'challenges' which circulate quickly online such as the 'salt and ice challenge' can become quickly popular among young people. Young people do not always recognise these as a form of self-harm, but they can have serious health consequences.

13. Less opportunity to be physically active. The team have observed that some young people who spend a lot of their time on computers/phones also struggle to maintain a healthy weight.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SCREENS/SOCIAL MEDIA USE ON MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH

The Youthscape team identified a range of ways that social media/screen use negatively impact the mental and emotional health of young people they work with.

14. Most of the negative impacts of social media/screen use identified by the team are by-products of the social dynamics of their peer networks and relationships. In some ways social media platforms mirror the social dynamics of adolescent peer groups more generally. For example, young people experience exclusion from particular conversations (group chats) happening online, which can make them feel isolated and insecure. Similarly, young people experience bullying online as well as offline, which can significantly affect their confidence and self-esteem, leading to depression, self-harm and even suicidal feelings and thoughts.

15. However, there are additional dynamics created by these technologies that make these experiences qualitatively different for young people today. Most significantly perhaps, is that young people with smart phones are rarely disconnected from the social media platforms through which their peer relationships are expressed. Our youth workers have identified some of the key challenges associated with these technologies below.

16. Lack of safe space. For those being bullied online, traditionally 'safe' spaces like home can become just as risky as school. Despite being advised to block certain people online, or not to visit certain sites, young people can still continue to be bullied and harassed and struggle to find respite.

17. Pressure to engage makes it hard to switch off or rest. While young people have always needed the affirmation of peers, the design of apps like Instagram and Snapchat provide metrics in the form of 'likes' or 'snapstreaks' that enable young people to quantify and monitor their social acceptability in a peer group. The pressure to 'like' their friends' photos, and to receive 'likes' on their own posts can make it incredibly difficult for young people to switch off from their phones, even when they might want to. For example, 'snapstreaks' is a tool that monitors the number of consecutive days young people have sent each other images using the snapchat app. 'Fear of missing out', or anxiety about being inactive for a period leads young people to use their phones excessively. One young person we work with was highly anxious before a family holiday because poor wifi signal might mean she would be unable to 'like' her friends' photos, and she was worried about what this would mean for their friendship. Constant notifications exacerbate a degree of addictive behaviour for young people when it comes to checking their phones for updates.

18. New metrics or standards to judge self and others. The visibility of some metrics e.g. 'likes', enables young people to compare themselves with their peers in particular ways, as described above. The rise of image-based tools like Instagram and Snapchat can also encourage expectations of 'perfection' in relation to how young people themselves look, or how they portray their everyday lives. These dimensions make it very easy for young people to compare themselves unfavourably, to feel inadequate and to then suffer from low self-esteem.

19. Anxiety about images. Social media and screen use has evolved alongside the accessibility of cameras and an ability to quickly share photos/video. For young people this creates a risk that embarrassing images/videos of them will be shared without their consent. It can also lead to young people feeling pressured to share images of themselves that they might not want to. This can become a form of coercive control or sexual exploitation but is also embedded in a general culture of image sharing which can create anxiety and a sense of loss of control.

20. Changing quality of relationships. Our youth workers have observed that social media/screen use can take huge amounts of young people's energy and change the quality of their face-to-face interaction with their peers. Young people we speak to do recognise that social media could be an extension of face-to-face relationships, rather than the primary expression of these relationships, but sometimes lack the confidence and skills to relate to peers in person.

21. Feeling trapped. A number of young people have expressed a sense of fatalism about their use of screens and social media. Despite being aware of its negative effects, they can feel like disengaging is not possible because of the social implications. As one of our team explains:

"Many of the young people I know say they "wish social media didn't exist" as they feel trapped. They can't come off it completely as that would be a social death but they hate the pressure of being on it."

HOW YOUTHSCAPE RESPONDS

As a charity, Youthscape has a wide variety of projects and approaches we use in our work with young people. Here we highlight some of the ways that we see this work mitigating some of the harmful effects of social media/screen use and helping young people to use it in better ways.

22. Direct work with young people. Our work creates multiple opportunities for young people to spend quality face-to-face time with adults who care about them.

- Our drop-in facility is open every day for three hours after school and encourages young people to invest time in building direct relationships
- #Openhouse is a new project that specifically seeks to address experiences of loneliness and social isolation that can be exacerbated by social media. This brings together a group of young people every week to be taught how to cook by a professional chef. Learning a new skill alongside others builds young people's confidence and ability to engage in conversation.
- Our mentoring programme supports young people to work through some of the negative impact of their social media use, including issues around self-esteem, lack of confidence, self-harm and anxiety. In both 1-1 mentoring and drop-in, the team give space for young people to talk about issues related to social media, to challenge some of the negative thoughts/behaviours associated with excessive use of phones and give them tools to make positive changes that could improve their mental health.

23. Online tools. As well as face-to-face work, we work online to create positive content that will support young people's well-being.

- Alumina is our online self-referral programme for young people who self-harm that is run a couple of nights a week by trained counsellors. Young people sign up to enter the chat room, and the sessions cover a range of themes to help young people reflect on their emotions and experiences in a safe place, practice self-care and recover from harm.
- SelfharmUK hosts an online forum where young people and staff can respond swiftly to users with support and affirmation. SelfharmUK also has a Tumblr. This is an important alternative voice in an online space dominated by pro-selfharm sites. The team share content and advice via twitter that can easily be shared and forwarded e.g. the 'Looking after your mental health' poster.

24. Specific resources and training. As a charity, we use our local youth work experience to develop resources and training that address the needs and emerging issues teenagers face. Many of these respond to negative impacts of social media/screen use.

- #Whatif is a new resource we have produced, comprising four games that help teenagers identify and cope with anxious thoughts and feelings. Anxiety is on the rise amongst young people and is often associated with use of social media/screens. The game creates space for young people to talk about how they might handle their emotions out of context, leaving them better prepared to face them in real life.
- #IsitOK? is a card-based game for 14-19 year olds, using images of mannequins in various poses to stimulate discussion about what sexual/bodily images are and are not appropriate or safe to share online. It helps young people think about how images are interpreted.

- 'Thinking about Emotions' playing cards were developed by our selfharmUK team, and are designed for use in small groups or one to one settings for young people aged 13 - 18. Each suit features a different theme facilitating discussions around Understanding Emotions, Coping with Emotions, Expressing Emotions and Emotional Perspectives. The cards create a safe space for young people to express their emotions and develop self-awareness about how their social media use can impact them emotionally

- A range of training courses are available to help professionals and parents. For example, our 'Anxiety in Adolescence' course helps adults understand the main types and indicators of anxiety, methods of support in a one to one and youth group capacity and how we can respond to cultures of perfectionism and fear of failure. Our 'Young People and Self-Esteem course' provides a theoretical framework for understanding self-esteem, as well as with practical session ideas and resources for working with young people. Other training courses help parents and professionals understand and respond to the negative impacts of self-harm, online pornography and cyberbullying.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final section we have highlighted a few areas where we can see the need for further work and investment if we are to better protect young people's health and well-being in relation to their screen use.

25. In our experience, relationship based open-access youth work is crucial to young people having the time and space to explore their experiences of social media/screen use and be supported toward more healthy use of technology. These forms of youth work urgently need investment.

26. We work closely with schools and recognise the importance of education in supporting young people in their social media/screen use. It is important that schools acknowledge both the positive and negative impacts of social media/screen use so that young people engage with these messages. There are multiple places in the curriculum where young people can be taught about this, from PSHE (relationships) to I.T (privacy settings) and biology (how smartphone use affects your brain and body).

27. Parents need support and education, to equip them to a) model healthy use of screens/social media and b) understand how to support their children, e.g. reducing access to phones at night.

28. Technology providers should be incentivised to design software and apps that maximise young people's health and well-being, and at the very least minimise harm.

29. There should be a role for central government in designing public health campaigns that encourage people to take screen-free days, or to engage in 'digital detox' activities.

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YOUTHSCAPE
CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH

YOUTHSCAPE.CO.UK
INSTAGRAM TWITTER @YOUTHSCAPE
FACEBOOK @MEETYOUTHSCAPE