

Are Teenagers in England Addicted to Social Media? (And Does It Matter?)

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There have been lots of concerns raised recently about social media use among young people. This includes links found between time spent on social media and declines in mental health. Similarly, some are now likening constant internet use to an addiction, with teenagers suffering withdrawal symptoms if their smartphone is taken away.

But how frequently do young people in England access social media? Are they any more or less ‘addicted’ to the internet than young people in other countries? And does this supposed addiction to the internet really do their mental health any harm?

Evidence from the latest PISA data available may well hold some clues.

Social media use and internet addiction as measured by PISA

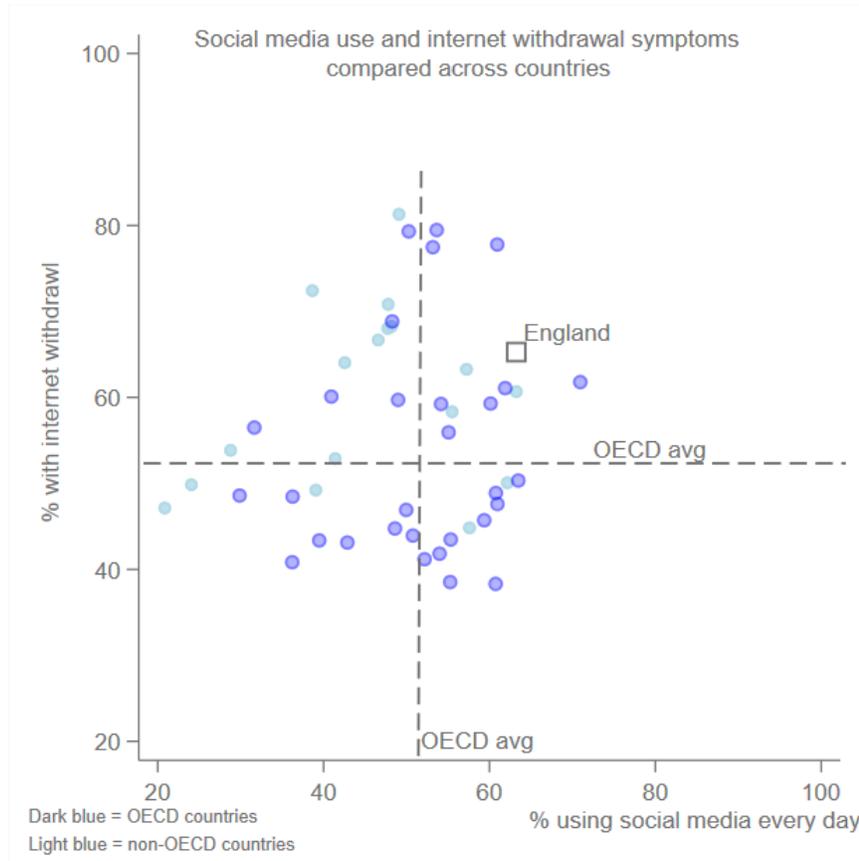
In PISA 2015, 15-year-olds from more than 40 countries including England completed a questionnaire about their use of technology.

This included a question on the frequency with which they used social networks on a five-point scale (from almost never through to every day). They were also asked the following question about whether they suffered withdrawal-like symptoms if they were not able to connect to the internet:

‘I really feel bad if no internet connection is possible’. (Strongly disagree to strongly agree).

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The chart below compares responses to these two questions from teenagers in England to those of teenagers in other countries.



England is in the top-right quadrant – illustrating that it is above the OECD average on both measures. That is, young people in England are more likely to use social media every day and more likely to express withdrawal symptoms if internet access is taken away than young people in most other countries across the world.

The important question

But does this matter?

The table below illustrates a correlation between daily social media use and internet ‘addiction’.

Social media use and internet withdrawal symptoms of teenagers in England

	Social media use	
	Not every day	Every day
Experiencing symptoms of internet withdrawal	53 %	71 %

In total, 71% of daily social media users in England experienced internet withdrawal symptoms. This compares to 53% of teenagers who use social media less frequently. A similar difference held after differences in the gender, socio-economic status, academic achievement and school attended of social media users were taken into account.

Teenagers who experience the strongest withdrawal symptoms also reported the lowest life satisfaction scores on a scale of 0 to 10, as the next table shows.

Internet withdrawal symptoms and the life satisfaction of teenagers in England

Life satisfaction score	I really feel bad if no internet connection is possible		
	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4 and below	13%	13%	22%
5	7%	9%	10%
6	11%	10%	10%
7	17%	18%	17%
8	22%	23%	17%
9	19%	16%	12%
10	12%	12%	12%
<i>Average score</i>	<i>7.31</i>	<i>7.23</i>	<i>6.8</i>

In particular, the average life satisfaction score for teenagers who strongly agreed that they felt bad when no internet was available was 6.8 out of 10. This is half a point lower than for teenagers who did not report suffering internet withdrawal symptoms, who had an average life satisfaction score of 7.31 out of 10.

In other words, daily social media use among teenagers in England is linked to symptoms of internet withdrawal. This, in turn, is then associated with lower levels of life-satisfaction. Of course, these relationships are correlational rather than causal. They nevertheless highlight how important it is that we develop a better understanding of the impact that social media has upon teenagers’ lives.

This text has been posted on the blog international-education.blog and it is available in different languages on international-education.blog

Jerrim, J. (2019). Are teenagers in England addicted to social media? (And does it matter?) Retrieved from <https://international-education.blog/en/are-teenagers-in-england-addicted-to-social-media-and-does-it-matter/>

The blog International-Education.Blog is an outcome of the project OCCAM. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 76500.

