Exploring Adolescents' Digital Activity and Mental Health:
Insights from the DIORA Study

Adolescents today spend a significant amount of time online, engaging in a wide range of activities. While concerns about the potential negative impact of digital activity on mental health exist, being online can also bring positive experiences. What makes the difference between negative and positive outcomes? We really don't know! The DIORA study aims to explore these effects in more detail, focusing on how adolescents navigate their online experiences and manage any challenges they encounter.

What is the DIORA study?

In March 2024, we surveyed 552 Year 9 students from six schools in the UK about their digital habits, how they felt these affected their daily lives, and the steps they took to manage any challenges. We also asked about their mental health, including levels of wellbeing, anxiety, and depressive symptoms using established measures. We also spoke to 110 adolescents to explore their experiences in more depth.

What have we found so far?

Digital activities are mostly positive, only occasionally risky
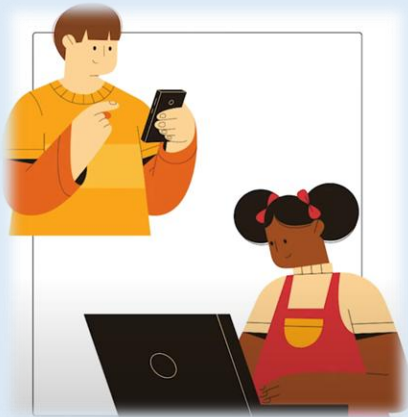
- The most common online activities were social interactions (chatting with friends and family) and leisure activities (playing games, doing hobbies), which occurred most days of the week.

- Activities that could pose a risk for mental health were much less frequent. Still, some adolescents engage in social comparison and viewing risky content, such as violent material.

- Adults often worry about screen time. On an average school day, adolescents spend around three hours online, over half of them spend at least two hours online. However, our research suggests that the amount of time spent online matters less than the specific things they do during that time.

"My friends posted a story on their profile with a picture we took earlier with a nice caption to it. [...] It made me feel happy and loved." (girl, Year 9)

"I was trying to style my hair, but it just looked messy because I'm not meant to brush my hair dry which I found out on that [TikTok] tutorial. [...] It made me feel included that other people had my type of hair and happy." (girl, Year 9)

"Someone helped me clean my Playstation by giving me a tutorial easily step by step [...] [...] It made me feel relieved because I knew my Playstation would work even better and stay cold." (boy, Year 9)

"I won in a Fall Guys [game] tournament that was live on YouTube [...] [I was] happy I was congratulated by the streamer [...and] I celebrated." (boy, Year 9)

Positive emotions related to being online are more common, but adolescents sometimes experience negative feelings as well

- Many adolescents felt positive after being online, frequently reporting feelings of being valued, loved, and hopeful.

- However, some also experienced negative emotions, such as feeling worried, stressed, lonely, or insecure, but these were reported only occasionally.

Being online is seen as having more positive effects on mental health than negative

- Adolescents generally believed that being online had more positive than negative effects on their mental health. Three in four children (76%) reported that being online has had at least a slightly positive impact on their mental health and half did not see any negative effects (49%).

- However, some expressed slight concerns! Slightly less than half were somewhat worried about how being online affected them (48%, while 52% were not worried at all). The most common negative impact was less sleep (71% experienced this problem at least once during the past two weeks), followed by school difficulties (experienced by 61%) and family conflicts (57%).

- The overall assessment of their mental health showed that most adolescents reported no major mental health concerns. Still, about a quarter experienced symptoms of depression and 1 in 5 reported symptoms of anxiety. Also 1 in 5 reported challenges with emotional regulation, hyperactivity, or peer relationships.

- While these mental health and behaviour problems are close to the national averages and can be related to any issues in their lives, they show that some adolescents might require further support.

"I was being treated really horribly as I was getting called names just because of my accent. [...] It made me upset as I had never experienced such hate like that [so I left]." (boy, Year 9)

"I was playing games on Roblox and experienced racism. [...] the person(s) said it proudly and with hatred. [...] I didn't really get too upset, but I was feeling uneasy. [.... After that I] reported it." (girl, Year 9)

"I got killed after killing 3 other people and my squad didn't even try to help me. [...] It made me feel irritated and annoyed. [...] I left the game and turned Fortnite off." (boy, Year 9)

"I had a video made about me on an anonymous account [on TikTok] in year 7 saying I had a big forehead [... I felt] upset but I got over it eventually." (girl, Year 9)

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Many adolescents actively manage their online experiences, with three key strategies

- Most often they look for ways to enhance their positive engagement, for example through seeking out positive content, avoiding negative influences, and focusing on uplifting experiences.

- They also use coping actions, such as blocking or reporting harmful content or accounts once or twice per week.

- The third strategy is to reduce their online engagement, for example by taking breaks from social media or limiting time spent online (also once or twice per week).

- While most took steps to create a positive online experience, seeking advice or stopping internet use altogether was rare.

Adolescents take steps to manage their online activities, even if they are not worried about their mental health

- Adolescents who were more concerned about the negative impact of digital activity on their mental health tended to take more steps to manage it.

- Interestingly, those who believed being online had a positive effect on their mental health were also proactive in managing their online habits.

- Our further research will explore whether taking control of online experiences leads to better mental health outcomes, or if existing mental health challenges drive more management behaviours.

What's next?

In March 2025, we will follow up with the same group of adolescents to understand how their digital habits and mental health have changed over time. This will help answer important questions such as:

- Does poor mental health lead to riskier digital behaviours, or vice versa?

- Can actively managing online activity help improve mental wellbeing?

- How do young people feel about their online experiences, and what support do they need?

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Useful resources for young people

	Mental health tips from young people for young people bit.ly/health-skills (By ySKILLS)
YOUNGMINDS	**Information on mental health that you can trust** bit.ly/YMinds (by YoungMinds)
stem4 supporting teenage mental health	**Tips on asking for help** bit.ly/stem4infor (stem4)
Beat Eating disorders	**Advice if worried about eating and body image** bit.ly/bea3info (by Beat)
CELEBRATE WHO YOU ARE WITH PRIDE POSITIVE IDENTITIES SERVICE Believe in children Barnardo's	**Trusted advice on specific issues** Barnardo's bit.ly/barnard0s
	Advice for online issues bit.ly/stem4info (stem4)

Need urgent support?

If you or someone you know needs support, these organisations offer free and confidential help:

- *Childline: Call 0800 11 11 or visit www.childline.org.uk*

- *Young Minds: Text YM to 85258 or visit www.youngminds.org.uk*