

DOES DIGITAL ACTIVITY HELP OR HINDER ADOLESCENTS' MENTAL HEALTH?

Despite many previous studies, we still can't answer this question. This is because we do not know yet which digital activities are risky, and which protect mental health. We also don't know why some adolescents are more susceptible to the negative impacts of digital activity. This is why in the DIORA* project we carefully designed with adolescents a new questionnaire to measure in detail their digital activities and experiences.



**Dynamic Interplay of Online Risk and Resilience*

WHAT HAVE WE DONE SO FAR?



In the summer of 2023, we asked nearly 200 16–20-year-olds to answer questions about their digital activity and how it makes them feel. We also asked about their mental health (symptoms of depression and anxiety) and psychological wellbeing.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

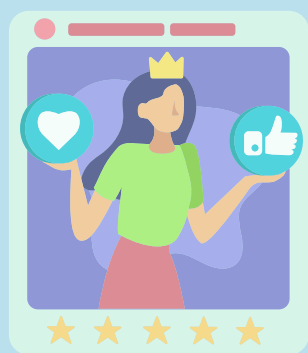
1) THE AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT ONLINE MATTERS LESS THAN THE SPECIFIC THINGS PEOPLE DO DURING THAT TIME.

Although the overall amount of time spent online was linked to worse mental health, these effects were weak. What people actually **did** online seemed a lot more important.

Activities like seeing illegal, violent or sexual content, comparing oneself to others, being treated in a nasty or hurtful way, and chatting with strangers could be especially bad for mental health.



2) SOME DIGITAL ACTIVITIES WERE STRONGLY ASSOCIATED WITH FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY.



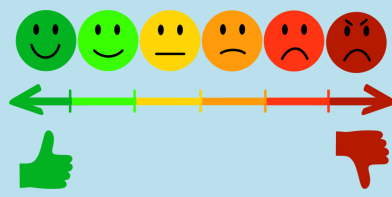
Comparing one's physical appearance and popularity to others online, watching dark or negative content and seeing hate towards certain people could be bad for mental health and wellbeing. Young people in our study experienced these quite often.

Other risky online activities, like watching violent or sexual content, being treated in a hurtful way, and seeing content related to self-harm or disordered eating are also bad for mental health but these were rarely experienced by young people in our study. Social media activities were mostly linked to negative feelings and poor mental health but not as strongly as other clearly 'risky' activities.

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3) PEOPLE MORE OFTEN FEEL POSITIVE THAN NEGATIVE AFTER BEING ONLINE. BUT THE NEGATIVE FEELINGS, WHEN THEY HAPPENED, WERE MORE STRONGLY RELATED TO DIFFERENCES IN MENTAL HEALTH.

In our study, four of the top 5 feelings reported after being online were positive. Young people most often felt entertained, happy, safe and loved.



Negative feelings after being online were common but less frequent. Feeling drained, insecure and stressed were reported in the top 10 most frequent feelings after being online.

The most frequent digital activities were also generally positive and non-risky. They included watching fun and positive content, scrolling through social media feeds, and playing games.

4) ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT WAS WEAKLY RELATED TO SOME POSITIVE ASPECTS OF MENTAL HEALTH



Entertainment online activities like playing games, doing hobbies, or having fun with friends or family and feeling good after being online seemed to be good for psychological wellbeing. Feeling positive after being online was also linked to less depression.

THE NEXT STEP

We are now using the new questionnaire to test how digital activities link to changes in mental health over a 12-month period.

We are inviting adolescents aged 13 to 14 years (Year 9/S3) to take part in this study. If you'd like to find out more or take part, scan the QR code below.



You can also email the DIORA team at diora@kcl.ac.uk.