

# Does excessive social media use actually harm the self-esteem of young people?



A Swedish survey has claimed that social media use negatively affects the self-esteem of young people. But such studies must take into account the complex intertwining of online and offline worlds, and recognise that a sharp distinction between life, relationships, and communication online and offline is no longer meaningful. [Stine Liv Johansen](#) is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Children's Literature and Media at Aarhus University. She studies children's media use in different contexts, most recently practices related to children's use of YouTube. She is a member of the Danish Media Council for Children and Youth.

A recent article published on news site [thelocal.se](#) claimed that 'excessive' use of social media is related to low self-esteem among young Swedes (aged 12-16). The article was based on a [survey](#) by a Swedish insurance company about a campaign aimed at teen girls – [#MissLyckad](#) (a wordplay on Miss and the Swedish word for failed or unsuccessful). The campaign sought to help young women improve their self-esteem and encourage them to feel good about themselves. An obviously noble ambition. But what does the survey actually say? And what kind of conclusions may be drawn from it?

The campaign claims that, 'young people feel bad because of social media' and 'the feeling of failure leads to lower self-esteem among young people'. The article as well as the survey fails to fully define what 'excessive' media use is, just as it does not show a specific link between the amount of time spent on media and low levels of self-esteem. This article is just one of many articles – the [Atlantic piece](#) by Jean Twenge perhaps being the [most debated](#) in the last year or so – that are based on a survey with a more-or-less valid foundation. This article and the study behind it is neither better nor worse than others. But one should stop and ask the question:

## Is it social media that makes young people feel insufficient and unsuccessful?

The short answer is: we don't know! This kind of study tells us very little about the specific meanings and uses of social media in relation to adolescence, well-being and identity (see for instance [Larsen](#), 2016); instead it tells us something we may already know about what it means to be a teenager: that teenagers compare themselves to their peers and that they are constantly preoccupied with their own appearance and relations in public spaces – online as well as offline (ibid.). Are they thin enough, beautiful enough, stylish enough? How do they fit into the communities, they are part of? And where are the relevant role models – in school, in the media etc.?

## Broader empirical studies provide nuances

Empirical research, in particular qualitative studies (for instance [boyd, 2014](#) or [Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016](#)), has over the past decade contributed to an understanding of teen life in contemporary Western societies as highly intertwined with digital media use, and social media platforms in particular. Social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram have for many people – not only teenagers – become not only a place to go, but a fully integrated part of everyday life which means that a sharp distinction between life, relationships, and communication online and offline is no longer meaningful. [Larsen and Kofoed \(2016\)](#) in their study of Snapchat and intimacy, as well as my own work on tween's use of digital media in relation to their interest for football ([Johansen, 2016](#)), exemplifies this point. This means that the publics and communities which teenagers refer to as part of their identity development, could just as easily be online as offline.

What does this mean in real life? It means that, for instance, a profile picture on a person's social network profile should be considered a public appearance ([boyd, 2010](#)) and as such they would wish to make sure it represented them in the best possible way. One question in the [#MissLyckad survey](#) asks: 'Is it important to you how your profile picture looks?' A little over half of the respondents answered yes, and of those, slightly more girls than boys (Yes: boys (42%), girls (58%)), indicating perhaps – if anything – that more girls than boys consider this a relevant aspect of their public appearance. But this should not be taken as any kind of evidence regarding the meaning of social media per se. Profile pictures are just one of many ways we as individuals appear in public spaces and it is not a problem in itself if one puts a bit of consideration into this.

### Comparison takes place online – and offline

Another question in the [#MissLyckad survey](#) asks young people whether they feel unsuccessful when comparing themselves to others online. The majority (58%) said 'no', 25% said 'yes' and 17% said 'sometimes'. However this is a rather biased question, coupling the concepts of 'online' and 'unsuccessful' to suggest a direct connection between the two although there is no empirical evidence that online relationships should be more or less competitive than offline ones. Again this does not really say anything about what social media means. In order to deduce anything in particular about the impact of social media, you would have to also ask whether young people feel unsuccessful when comparing themselves to others in general, i.e. in school, on the street, in their family, at sports and so on. But perhaps the separation of possible factors relevant to young people's well-being is not what is most important here. Instead, the [connectedness and messiness](#) of these factors in young people's life – online and offline – must be seen as fundamental, which is why simplified questions and answers might not actually tell us much about life as it is lived by young people today.

### Talk to them

The most important takeaway from this study is that young people (a little over half of them in the survey, at least) are eager to talk about their use of social media, their well-being and their relations to their peers. They would like [adults](#) – which would often mean their [teachers](#) – to engage in discussions about this with them. This is something everyone who is involved with young people on a regular basis should take into consideration. How do we provide the space (and time) for an unbiased, non-judgemental and non-panicked talk about the things that matter to young people today – online or offline? One answer is to not jump on the media-panic bandwagon and not take media headlines at face value, and instead start talking to young people about their lives as they are played out and performed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### Notes

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The campaign (in Swedish) with links to the full study can be found at <http://misslyckad.se/>

*This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

### References:

Johansen, Stine Liv (2016): Being a Football Kid. Football as a Mediatized Play Practice. In: Schwell et.al. (ed.): *New Ethnographies of Football in Europe. People, Passions, Politics*. Palgrave MacMillan