Social Media and Mental Health: Who Is Affected and How

Name Date Class

Reading

1 It is eleven at night, and you are supposed to **wind down**. You pick up your phone to answer one message. Forty minutes later you are still scrolling, tired and vaguely annoyed by a stranger's holiday photos. The harder question is whether it adds up to a mental health problem, and scientists disagree about the answer.

2 Large studies give a calmer picture than many news stories. When researchers compare young people's screen use with their well-being, the **correlation** is usually negative but small. In one analysis of hundreds of thousands of teenagers, screen use explained less than half of one percent of the differences, and bullying and poor sleep were more strongly linked to well-being. But an average can hide a lot. If social media helps some people and hurts others, the two effects may **cancel out**. So the useful question is who is affected, and how.

3 Gender appears to matter. A World Health Organization report on a survey of around 280,000 young people in 44 countries and regions found that girls were more likely than boys to struggle to control their use, while boys were more likely to have problems with gaming. In British data on 14-year-olds, the link between heavy use and symptoms of depression was also stronger for girls. Online **harassment**, lost sleep, and constant comparison with other people's lives are **plausible** explanations, though these studies show links, not proven causes. Age matters too. In one large UK study, girls seemed most **vulnerable** between 11 and 13, and boys between 14 and 15, a pattern researchers suggest may reflect puberty, which starts later in boys. The negative link was most **pronounced** in young adolescents, and the gap between girls and boys appeared only then.

4 How you use social media may matter more than how long you use it. A US study that followed thousands of children from about age ten found that total screen time did not predict later problems, but a rising pattern of **compulsive** use was linked to worse mental health. Time, in other words, is a **blunt** measure. Researchers also contrast passive use, such as scrolling, with active use, such as chatting with friends, which is often linked to slightly better well-being. Yet in a Dutch study of 14- and 15-year-olds, almost half felt better after passive use, about four in ten noticed no change, and roughly one in ten felt worse. For some teenagers, an hour of messaging can be a **lifeline**; for others, a trap.

5 Most research has focused on teenagers; for older adults the picture is milder and less clear. Some studies suggest that social media may reduce loneliness, but the evidence is **tentative**. A 2025 analysis that **pooled** results from many studies found no clear overall link between social media use and loneliness in older adults, though studies done before the Covid-19 pandemic pointed to a small benefit. What social media does to an older person's mood seems to depend on who is using it and why.

6 Does social media cause these problems, or do unhappy people simply use it more? Both may be true: in the UK study, falling life satisfaction also predicted later social media use. In a three-week experiment with US university students, those who limited Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to about thirty minutes a day became less lonely and less depressed than those who carried on as usual. Yet a 2025 review of adults who briefly stopped using social media found no significant effect on mood, while another review of trials asking people to **cut back** found a small improvement. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that the evidence points clearly to harm, especially for girls. Critics such as the psychologist Candice Odgers **dismiss** the idea that social media is driving an epidemic of teenage mental illness, noting that most evidence is correlational.

7 Meanwhile, the practical advice is modest. Notice how you feel after you log off, instead of counting minutes. Keep your phone out of the bedroom, since sleep seems to be a main route from heavy use to low mood. If you cannot reduce your use even though you want to, talk to a doctor, a counselor, or someone you trust. Many people may find that the benefits **outweigh** the costs, provided that the habit stays under their control. Australia began enforcing a minimum age of 16 for major platforms in December 2025, and researchers there plan to follow young people for several years. Their findings may show which of today's arguments holds up.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**wind down**	_____	**A**	a link between two things that change together
2	**correlation**	_____	**B**	to reduce how much you do or use
3	**cancel out**	_____	**C**	to reject an idea as not worth considering
4	**harassment**	_____	**D**	too rough to show fine detail
5	**plausible**	_____	**E**	very hard to control or stop
6	**vulnerable**	_____	**F**	to be more important than something else
7	**pronounced**	_____	**G**	seeming reasonable and possibly true
8	**compulsive**	_____	**H**	to make each other's effects disappear
9	**blunt**	_____	**I**	very noticeable or strong
10	**lifeline**	_____	**J**	not certain or final
11	**tentative**	_____	**K**	combined from separate sources
12	**pooled**	_____	**L**	repeated unwanted behavior that upsets someone
13	**cut back**	_____	**M**	easily harmed or affected
14	**dismiss**	_____	**N**	to relax after a period of activity
15	**outweigh**	_____	**O**	something that gives vital help or support

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

blunt	**compulsive**	**correlation**	**cut back**	**dismiss**	**harassment**	**lifeline**	**outweigh**	**plausible**
pooled	**pronounced**	**tentative**	**vulnerable**	**wind down**				

1 Take a warm bath to _____ before going to sleep.

2 There is a strong _____ between height and shoe size, but one does not cause the other.

3 Online _____ can make a teenager feel unsafe in a group chat.

4 Her story sounded _____, but nobody could check the facts.

5 Very young children are especially _____ to heat.

6 The change in air quality was most _____ in the city center.

7 He felt a _____ need to check his messages every few minutes.

8 A person's age is a _____ way to judge how fit they are.

9 The online group was a _____ for people living far from home.

10 The first results are only _____, so please do not share them yet.

11 The researchers _____ data from five countries into one large file.

12 I am trying to _____ on coffee this month.

13 Some experts _____ the claim as exaggerated.

14 For most people, the pleasure of music will _____ the cost of a ticket.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What situation opens the reading, and what question does it lead to?

2 What did the large analysis of teenagers find about screen use and well-being?

3 Why does the writer say that an average can hide a lot?

4 According to the reading, how do girls and boys differ in their experience of social media?

5 At what ages did the UK study find that girls and boys seemed most vulnerable, and what explanation do researchers suggest?

6 Why does the writer call time a blunt measure, and what did the US study find instead?

7 What did the Dutch study show about individual differences, and why does that matter when we read an average?

8 How does the picture for older adults differ from the picture for teenagers?

9 What evidence does the reading give that experiments on limiting or stopping social media give mixed results, and how do Jonathan Haidt and Candice Odgers disagree?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Problematic social media use among young people has risen since 2018."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that the evidence on social media and mental health is already clear."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with Australia's minimum age for major platforms? Is the aim to show that the law works, to point to a real-world test of the debate, or to criticize the government?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** Bullying and poor sleep were more strongly linked to well-being than screen use was.

2 **T / F** The writer says large studies prove that screen use is the main cause of low well-being.

3 **T / F** In the UK study, girls and boys seemed most vulnerable at different ages.

4 **T / F** The World Health Organization report found that boys were more likely than girls to struggle to control their use of social media.

5 **T / F** In the Dutch study, about one in ten teenagers felt worse after passive use.

6 **T / F** The US study found that total screen time predicted later problems better than compulsive use did.

7 **T / F** The writer says research proves that social media reduces loneliness in older adults.

8 **T / F** In the three-week experiment, some students limited their use to about thirty minutes a day.

9 **T / F** Jonathan Haidt and Candice Odgers agree that the evidence clearly shows social media causes mental illness.

10 **T / F** Australia began enforcing a minimum age of 16 for major platforms in December 2025.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Which social media apps or messaging services do you use most? What do you use each one for?

2 How do you usually feel after an hour on social media: better, worse, or about the same? Why?

3 Have you ever tried to cut back on social media? What happened?

4 Do you wind down with your phone at night? How does it affect your sleep?

5 Think of a time when an online group or a message was a lifeline for you or someone you know. What made it so helpful?

6 The reading separates passive use, such as scrolling, from active use, such as chatting. Which describes your day more? Would you like to change that?

7 The reading says girls and boys may be affected at different ages. What differences between girls and boys, if any, have you noticed in how people your age use social media?

8 Why might comparing yourself with other people's lives online affect some people more than others?

9 Older adults may use social media to stay in touch with family. How do the older people you know keep in contact with friends and relatives?

10 The reading says time is a blunt measure. If you wanted to judge how healthy someone's social media habits are, what would you ask them?

11 Haidt and Odgers read much of the same research but reach different conclusions. How do you decide whom to believe when experts disagree?

12 Do you think a minimum age of 16 for social media would work where you live? What problems might it cause?

13 Some people say users should control their own habits; others say companies should change how apps are designed. Where do you stand, and why?

14 If more research showed that social media harms only a small minority of young people, how should society respond: with rules for everyone, or with support for those who struggle? Explain.

Language Focus: Noun Clauses with Whether, Who, How, and What

A noun clause is a group of words with its own subject and verb that works like a noun. It often begins with whether, who, how, what, or which, and it can be the subject, the object, or the complement of a sentence.

In the reading:

- "The harder question is **whether it adds up to a mental health problem**, and scientists disagree about the answer."
- "So the useful question is **who is affected, and how**."
- "**How you use social media** may matter more than **how long you use it**."

Practice: Rewrite these two questions as noun clauses after "Researchers want to know": *"Do boys react differently?"* and *"How much time do teenagers spend online?"*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/social-media-mental-health

Notes