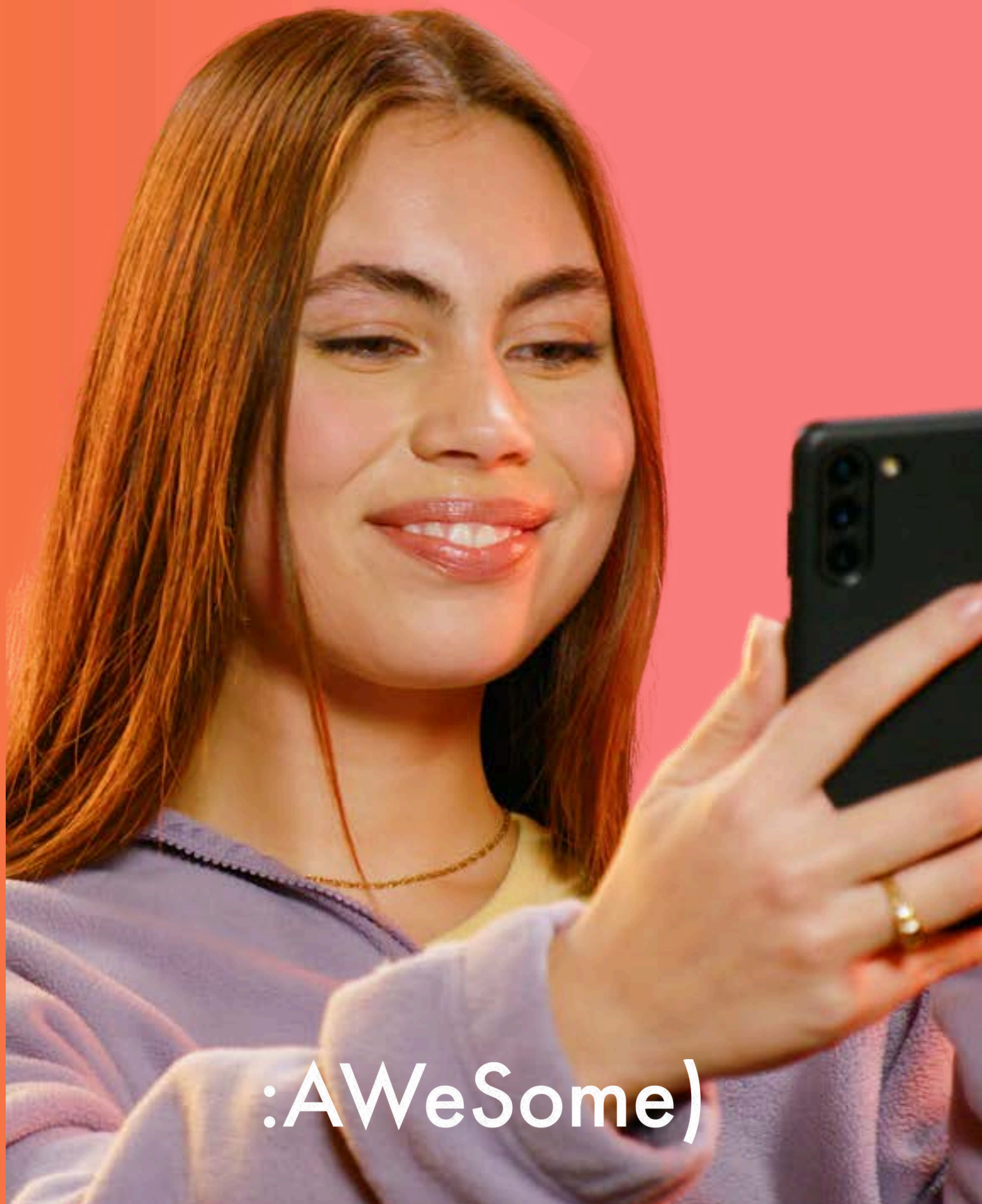
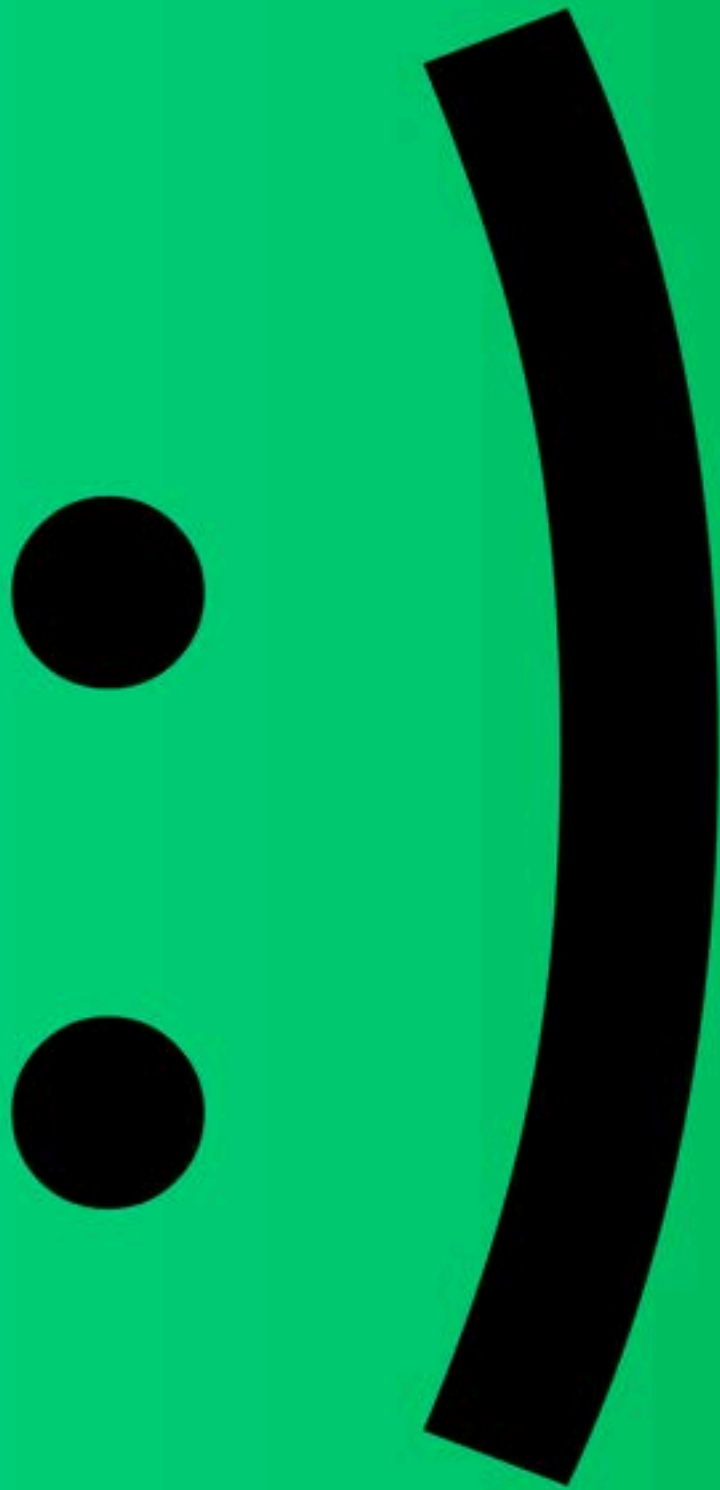


Through Teens' Eyes

*The Benefits and Drawbacks
of Social Media*



:AWeSome)



:AWeSome)

Through Teens' Eyes

The Benefits and Drawbacks of Social Media

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Colophon

Research

The research presented in this publication was conducted by researchers of project AWeSome, which stands for Adolescents, Well-being and Social Media, led by Professor Valkenburg.

Project AWeSome is part of the Center for Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media (CcaM) of the Department of Communication Science at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCOR), University of Amsterdam.

How to cite

Van der Wal, Amber, Janssen, Loes, Verbeij, Tim, Bij de Vaate, Nadia, Beyens, Ine, & Valkenburg, Patti (2024). Through Teens' Eyes: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Social Media, Center for Research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media (CcaM), University of Amsterdam.

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Center for research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media



Introduction

Teens have a great affinity with social media and are often the first to embrace new platforms and features. As a result, their way of communicating, expressing themselves, and presenting themselves is constantly changing. It is, therefore, important to get an up-to-date picture of what teens think are the drawbacks and benefits of their social media use. This requires reliable and up-to-date data.

In this report, we address questions such as: Which platforms are most used by teens in 2023? What influence do teens think social media have on their self-esteem or happiness? Do they see social media as a source of distraction and comfort when something unpleasant has happened or when something is bothering them? Or do they experience pressure or even stress to always be available online? And what parents know about their social media use?

The aim of this report is to provide knowledge about the social media use and well-being of teens aged 14 to 17. With this report, we want to update everyone involved in advice or policy regarding teens' social media use, such as schools, social workers, policymakers, journalists, researchers, and, of course, teens themselves.

To follow us, please check www.project-awesome.nl

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The research

In January 2023, we interviewed 480 teens from all over the Netherlands online. Two weeks later, they completed an online questionnaire about their social media use. By 'social media' we mean online platforms on which you can exchange information, such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Discord. But not, for example, Netflix and Spotify.

The teens were 14-17 years old at the start of the study, a developmental stage of life in which teens are going through crucial physical, emotional, and social developments that can have a major impact on their well-being.

Sample

Age: 480 teens from 14 to 17 years old: 50% 14/15-year olds and 50% 16/17-year olds.

Gender: 213 boys (44.4%), 263 girls (54.8%), 3 non-binary (0.6%).

Identity: 450 teens identify mainly as Dutch, 30 as different (e.g., Moroccan, Turkish, Antillean, Surinamese).

What to expect

Graphs: To facilitate the interpretation of graphs, we sometimes only list the most relevant answer categories (e.g. often, very often).

'What stands out': To emphasize certain results, some chapters have subheadings that are labeled 'What (also) stands out'.

Group differences: We systematically investigated whether there are differences in gender and age groups.

Gender: We only report differences between boys and girls because the group of non-binary and gender-fluid teens was too small to make reliable statements about this group. We did include all genders in the total scores.

Quotes: The quotes scattered throughout the report were obtained from the personal interviews with the participating teens as well as from six focus groups that we held in preparation for this study. ¹



Highlights

- **Most used social media:** We asked teens to name up to three platforms that they use the most. Both boys and girls use TikTok (74%) and Snapchat (69%) the most. Facebook is only mentioned by less than 1%.
- **Perceived influence on happiness:** More than half of teens (61% boys and 48% girls) think that social media have a good influence on how happy they feel.
- **Perceived influence on self-esteem:** Almost 40% of teens think that social media have a bad influence on their self-esteem. This is especially true for girls: Almost half of girls indicate that social media have a bad influence on their self-esteem, while this applies to only a quarter for boys.
- **Perceived influence on friendships:** Most teens feel that social media has a good influence (57%) – or no influence (36%) – on how close their friendships are. Only 7% feel that social media has a bad influence on their friendships.
- **Distraction and comfort via social media:** If teens have experienced something unpleasant or are struggling with something, they often or very often use social media to seek distraction (72%), to put the situation into perspective with humor (45%), or to share it with friends (23%).
- **Stress due to social media:** Teens experience remarkably little stress due to social media (only 2% often or very often suffer from such stress).

- **Other causes of stress:** Compared to stress caused by social media, teens experience much more stress due to school or homework, their situation at home, their own problems (money, arguments), what others think of them, and the sum of all the things they have to do. These causes of stress occur twice as often in girls compared to boys.
- **Availability stress due to social media:** Teens say they experience little stress due to social media, but a quarter often or very often feel obliged to be always available, which is also a form of stress.
- **Parental knowledge:** Most teens believe that their parents know little about the fun things they experience on social media. And certainly not much about the not-so-fun things. Parents of girls know more about both things than parents of boys.



Most popular platforms

We asked teens to name up to three social media platforms that they use the most. As Figure 1 shows, a whopping 74% of teens cite TikTok as one of their three most used platforms. Snapchat (69%) is a close second. About half of the teens mentioned WhatsApp and Instagram.

Boy (16): "I often snap with those who have Snapchat. But many of my friends don't have Snapchat, so I'll use WhatsApp with them."

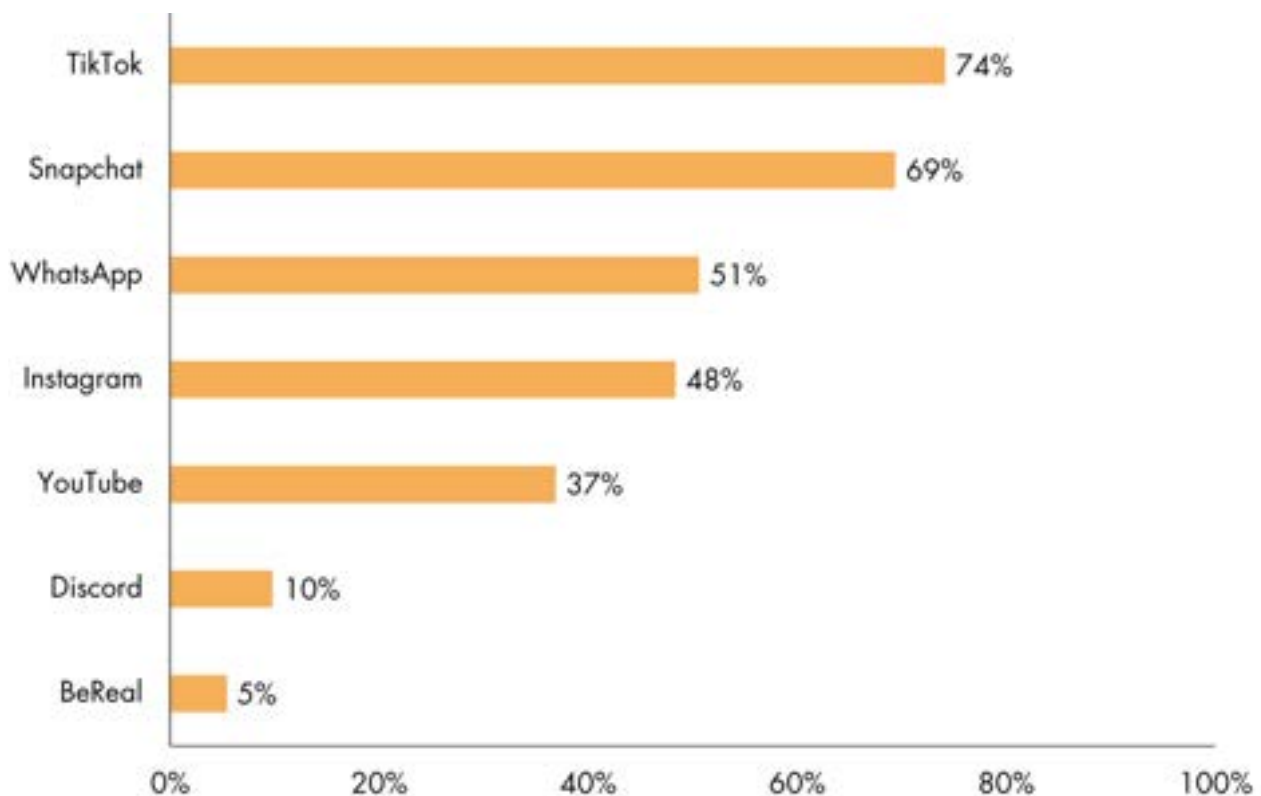


Figure 1 - Most used platforms among 14- to 17-year-olds.

What stands out:

- When teens are asked which three social media platforms they use most frequently, they mention 14 different platforms.
- Seven social media sites are mentioned only by about 1% of teens: Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, Face-Time, Reddit, Telegram, and LinkedIn. These platforms are omitted from Figures 1 and 2.
- TikTok has grown tremendously in popularity. By comparison, in 2019, only 8% of the 14 & 15-year-olds used TikTok.²
- Facebook, on the other hand, seems to have fallen even further in popularity than in 2019.²



“
Girl (16): “On Instagram, I think a lot is made more perfect than it is. And it is less like that on TikTok. There's a lot more going on on TikTok, a lot more different things.”

Girl (16): “TikTok will make you die of laughter. You then send the videos to each other via Snapchat, or you tag friends who are also on TikTok.”

Boy (15): “Sometimes after 1.5 hours on TikTok I think what am I doing, but during that time you don't think that.”

Gender

What stands out in Figure 2:

- 82% of girls cite TikTok as one of the three most used platforms, compared to 64% of boys.
- Girls use Snapchat and Instagram more than boys. Boys use YouTube and Discord more than girls.



Girl (15): "On TikTok, I see all sorts of really funny things. And nice things, and you know, things that I love and then I think, oh, that's cool!"

Girl (15): "I'm on Snapchat all day long with friends, just snapping and stuff. So I think that's about 4 hours or so. And then the rest is TikTok and Insta."

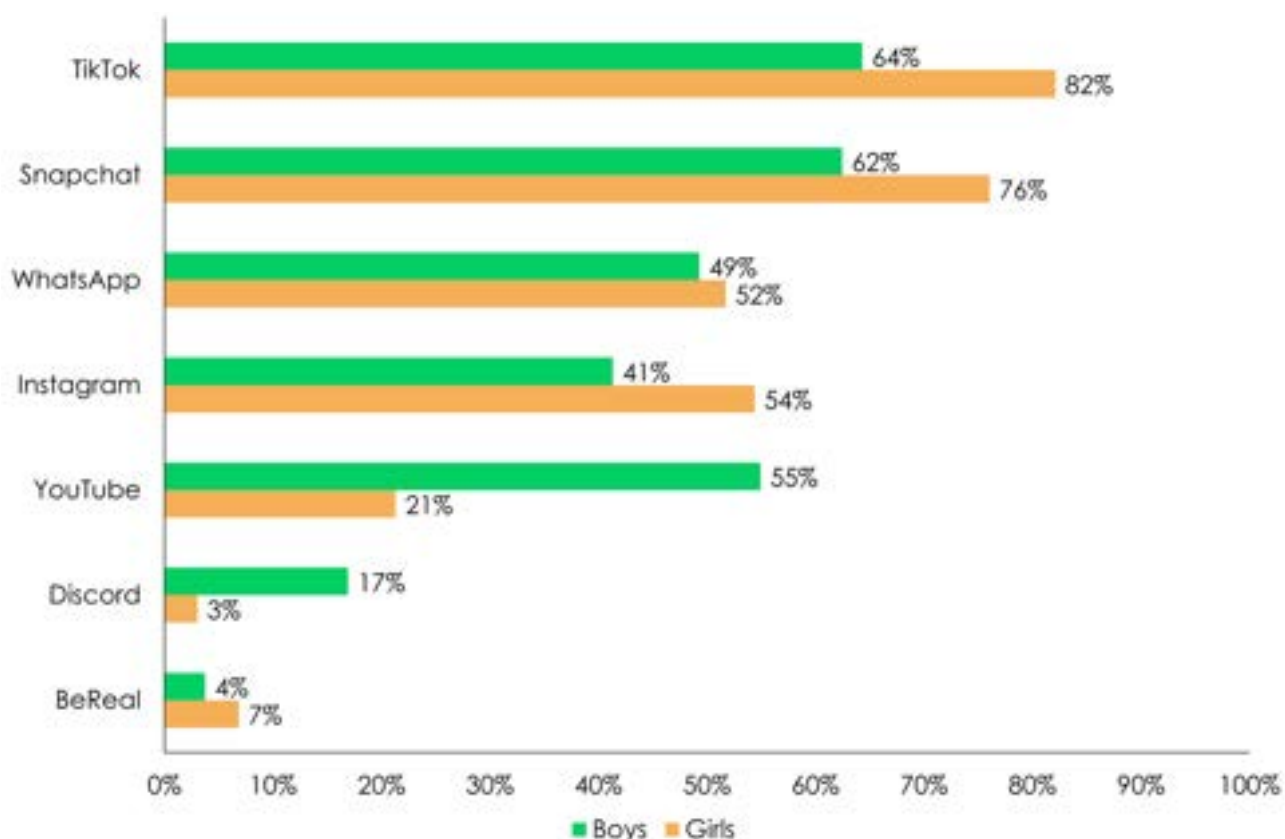


Figure 2 - Most used platforms by boys and girls

Age

- 14/15-year-olds (43%) are more likely to cite YouTube as the most used platform than 16/17-year-olds (30%).
- 16/17 year-olds (61%) are more likely to cite Instagram as the most used platform than 14/15-year-olds (35%).



Girl (14): "I watch a lot of tutorials for school on YouTube. But also, for example, tutorials to learn how to cook and for new recipes."

Boy (17) "I follow certain people on Insta and check Insta to see if anything else has happened. You can see that immediately on Insta."

Social media's impact on feelings of happiness

The influence of social media on feelings of happiness differs from person to person, according to our latest research.³ Social media use have a positive effect on one person, a negative effect on another, and no effect on another. How do teens themselves experience the influence of social media?

Figure 3 shows that more than half of teens (54%) think that social media have a good influence on how happy they feel and a quarter of teens think that social media have a bad influence.

Girl (16): "For me, I think that social media have a positive influence. Because nowadays, take TikTok for example, there is actually just a lot of positivity."

Boy (16): "TikTok has ruined my attention span, so to speak, so I was like okay, you know, I'm quitting in March. It is not okay."

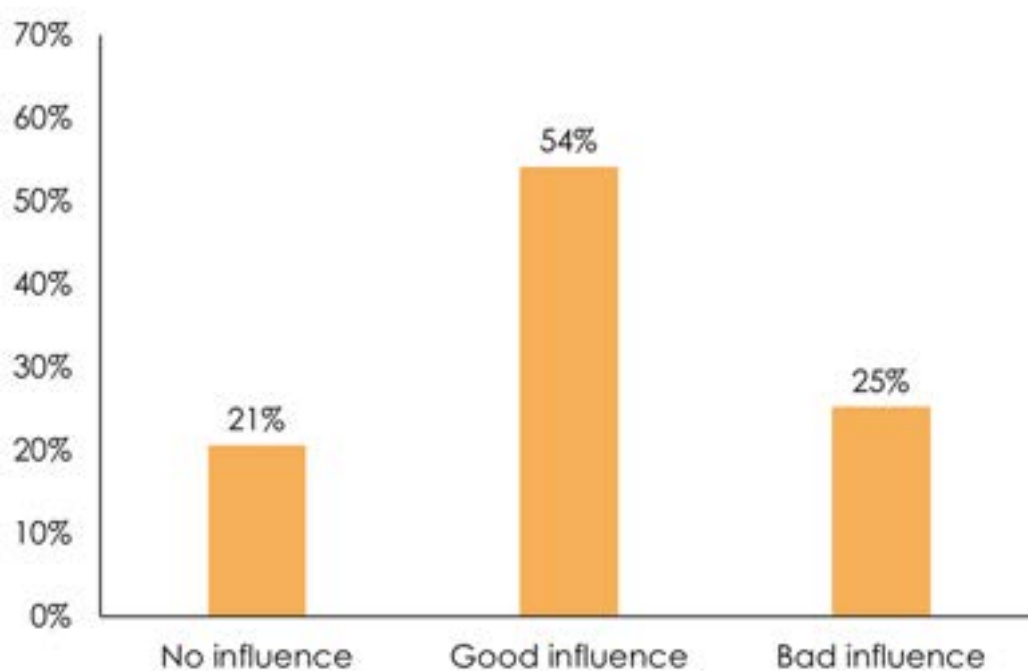


Figure 3 - Perceived influence of social media on happiness

What also stands out:

- Boys (61%) are more likely than girls (48%) to experience that social media have a good influence on how happy they feel.
- Girls (31%) are more likely than boys (18%) to believe that social media have a bad influence on how happy they feel.
- There are no major differences between 14/15 year-olds and 16/17 year-olds.



Boy (15): "Social media makes me a bit sad about all the misery in the world. Without social media, you know less about that."

Social media's impact on self-esteem

Society is concerned about social media's influence on teens' self-esteem, especially on the self-esteem of girls. The perfect pictures and the beauty filters could make them insecure. In this study, we asked teens how they think social media affects their self-esteem.

What the results show:

- About a quarter of teens (23%) think social media have a good influence on how they feel about themselves.
- On the other hand, a whopping 36% think that social media have a bad influence on how they feel about themselves.
- The remaining proportion (41%) think that social media have no influence on how they feel about themselves.

Gender

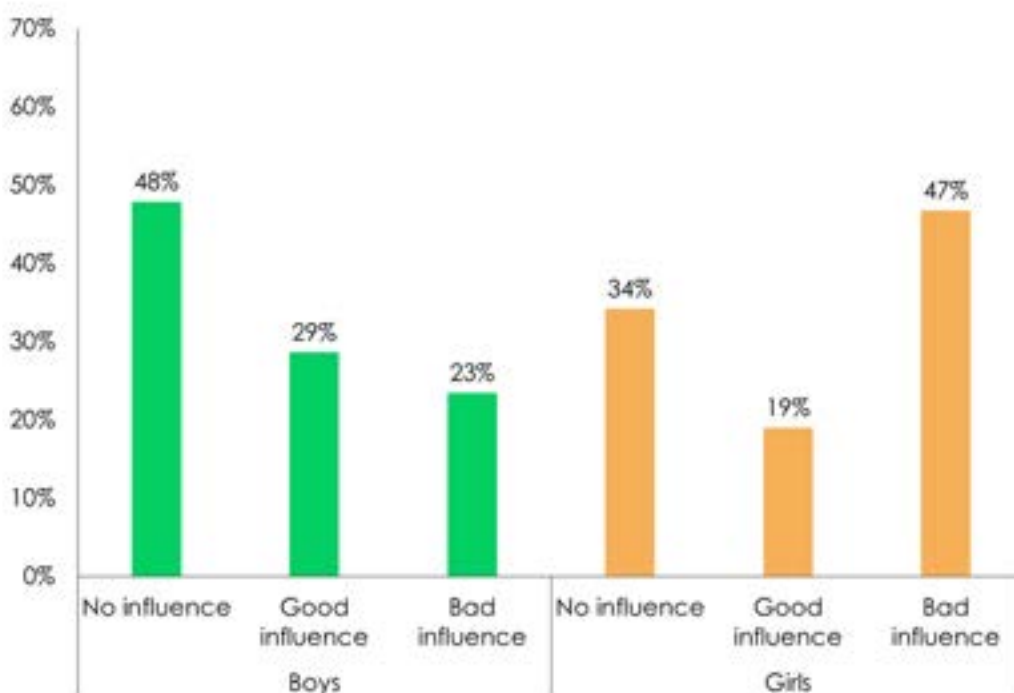


Figure 4 - Perceived influence of social media on self-esteem for boys and girls

What stands out in Figure 4:

- Almost half of the girls experience that social media have a bad influence on how they think about themselves, while this is only the case for almost a quarter of the boys.
- Boys are more likely to experience a good influence of social media on their self-esteem than girls.

”

Boy (17): “For me, social media is motivating. If you see someone who is shredded, all muscular, you want that too. You know what? I’m just going to exercise now, better go to the gym than lie on the couch.”

Age

- 16/17-year-olds are more likely (42%) to feel that social media have a bad influence on their self-esteem than 14/15-year-olds (31%).

”

Girl (16): “I think social media have brought my self-esteem down in the years I’ve been using it. When you see models all the time and all that and you’re still very young yourself and you don’t know how it all works.”

Social media's impact on friendships

In recent years, social media has changed the way teens communicate with each other and maintain relationships. Social media make it easier to maintain contact, but at the same time, the contact may be a bit more distant or superficial. How do teens themselves experience the influence of social media on how close their friendships are?

Figure 5 shows that 57% of teens think social media have a good influence on how close they are with their friends. Only 7% experience a bad influence of social media on how close they are with friends. We found no significant differences between boys and girls and the two age groups (14/15 vs 16/17 year-olds).

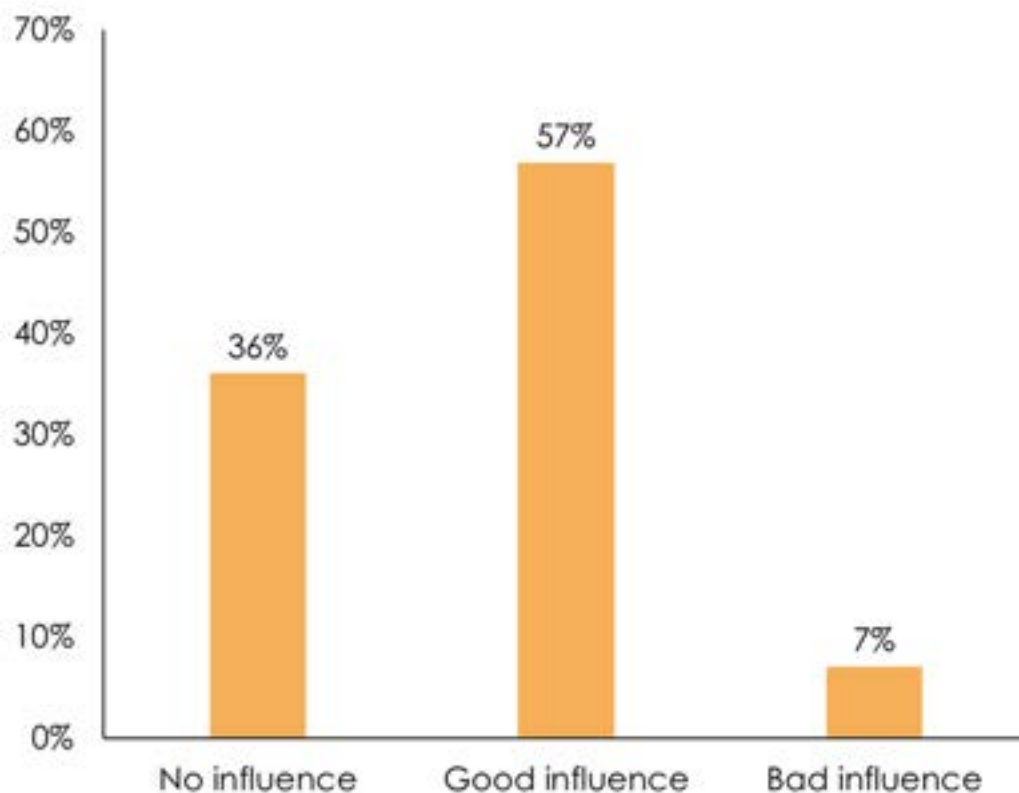


Figure 5 - Perceived influence of social media on friendship closeness

”

Girl (14): "I think it's positive that social media brings you into contact with people you either know via others or just know from afar and that the contact has become stronger and that bond has become stronger as a result."

Girl (15): "I'm really much more social because of social media. I also have more contact with friends now, actually."



Seeking distraction & consolation

Social media may have a positive influence on how teens feel. This positive influence may arise because teens use social media to their avail if something is bothering them, for example to find friends or to look for distractions. Platforms could also help teens to vent their sorrows by sharing them with someone or to offer them humor to put their sorrows into perspective. How often do teens make use of these options offered by platforms?

Seeking distraction

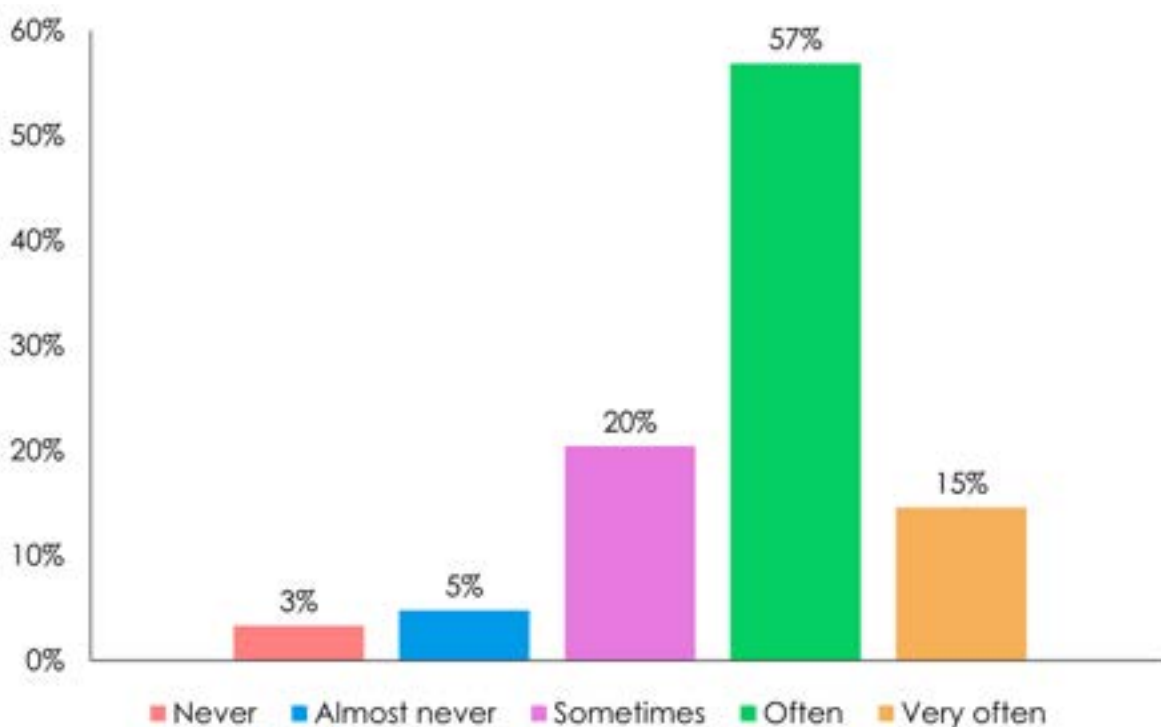


Figure 6 – Distraction seeking on social media to cope with everyday struggles

What stands out in Figure 6:

- 72% of teens often or very often go to social media to look for distraction when something unpleasant has happened or when something is bothering them.
- Only 8% almost never or never seek distraction on social media.



Boy (16): "If I've had a bad day, I'll check Snapchat to see if people have sent me messages and then I'll go on Netflix or something. Just look at what I'm following at that moment to clear my head and not think about reality."

Boy (14): "If I'm having a bad day, I play games so that I don't think about it."

What further stands out:

- More girls (82%) than boys (59%) often or very often seek distraction on social media.
- There are no significant differences between the age groups.



Girl (17): "If I don't feel well, I don't call people, but then I scroll on TikTok until I go to sleep."

Girl (14): "If I'm 'sad' I'll spend more time on social media anyway, then I don't feel like doing other things."

Sharing unpleasant experiences

What stands out in Figure 7:

- Just under a quarter (23%) of teens often or very often turn to social media to share with someone when something unpleasant has happened or when something is bothering them.
- Half of the teens almost never or never turn to social media to share with someone when something unpleasant has happened or when something is bothering them.

In our previous research, teens often said that they would rather seek offline social support when something unpleasant has happened or something is bothering them than to do so on social media. ¹

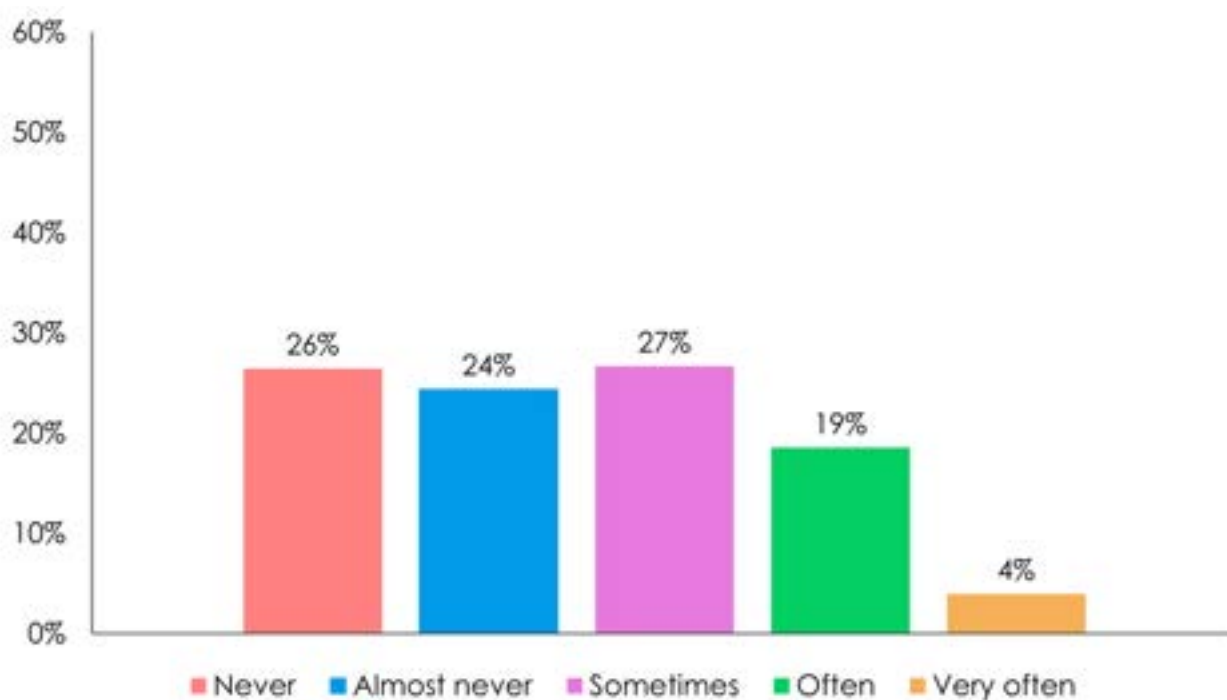


Figure 7 – Turning to social media to share that something is bothering them

What further stands out:

- More girls (26%) than boys (18%) often or very often turn to social media to share something unpleasant has happened or if something is bothering them with someone.
- There are no significant differences between the two age groups.



Girl (14): "I'm spamming the whole group app. I'm spamming everything full of what's happened and then I'm going to watch Tiktok. Most of the time, they don't even respond."

Girl (14): "When I don't feel well, I'm going to call friends online."

Girl (17): "If I don't feel well, I never discuss it on social media."

Girl (14): "If I don't feel so good, then I just go to someone or something or via Snap, usually that's 1-on-1."

Girl (14): "I usually listen to sad music and I text one or two people I know very well or more people with whom I just need to share it."

Watching funny videos

As can be seen in Figure 8, almost half (45%) of teens often or very often turn to social media to watch funny videos when they experienced something unpleasant or when something is bothering them. Just under a quarter (22%) almost never or never do this.

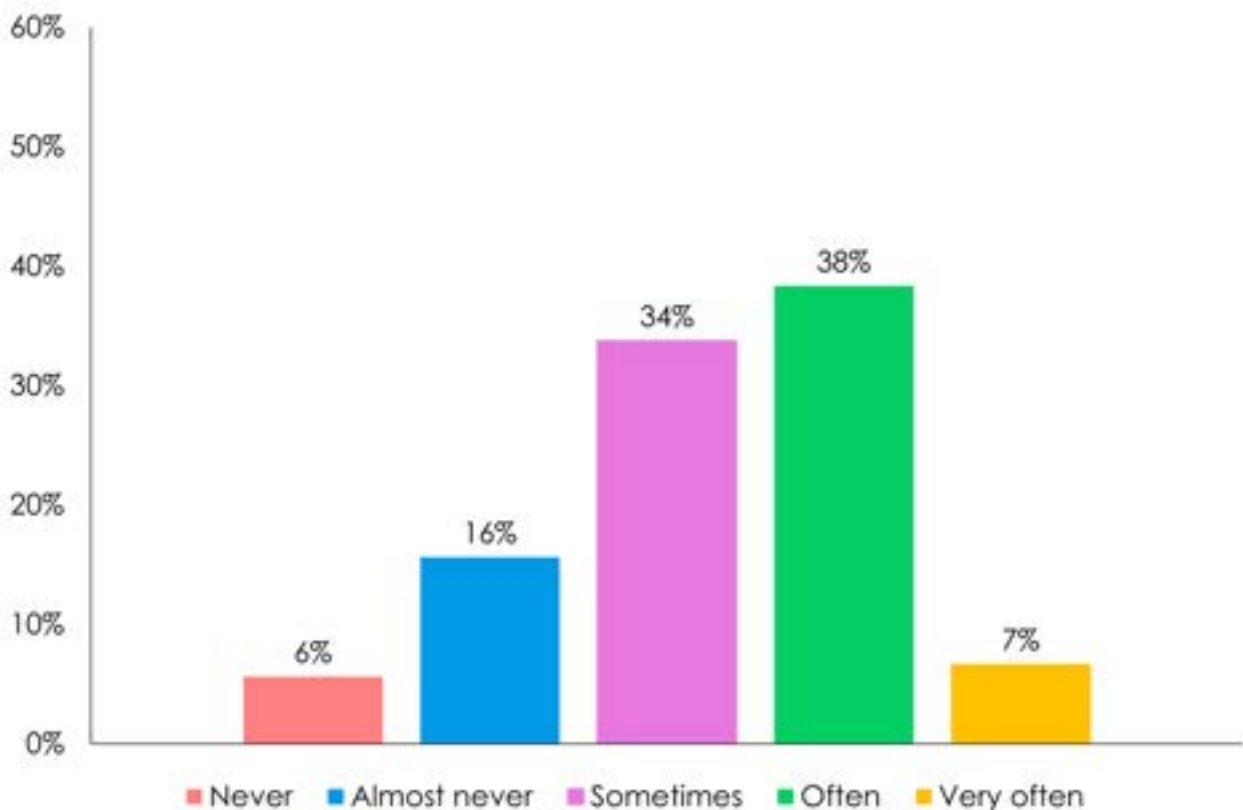


Figure 8 – Watching funny videos on social media to deal with everyday struggles

Boy (15): "When I feel bad, I just watch videos on YouTube that I find funny."

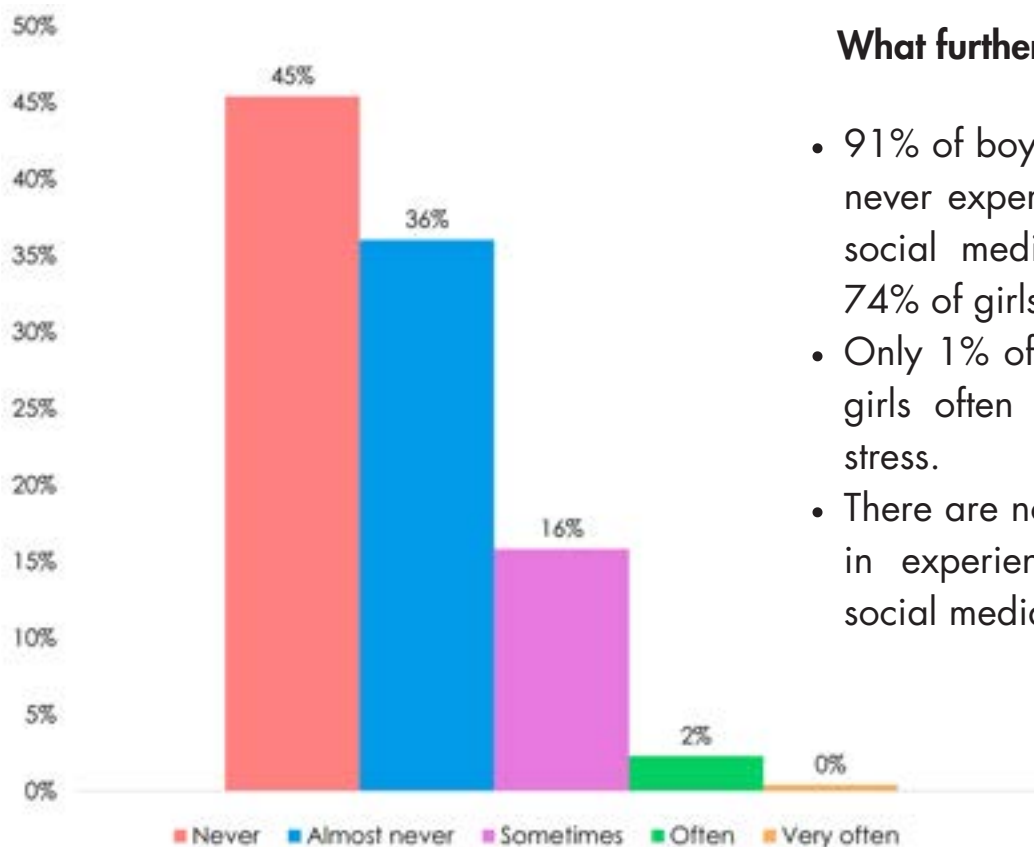
What further stands out:

- Boys and girls don't differ in their need to watch funny videos when something unpleasant has happened or when something is bothering them.
- There are no significant differences between the age groups.

Stress from social media

As shown in the previous chapters, social media can help teens deal with unpleasant experiences or if something is bothering them. But social media can also cause teens stress, for example because they spend too much time on it, don't get nice reactions, or feel excluded. How often do teens experience stress due to social media?

As can be seen in Figure 9, this does not seem to happen very often. The majority (81%) of teens indicate that they almost never or never suffer from stress caused by social media. In addition, 2% often experience stress due to social media. None of the teens experience stress from social media very often.



What further stands out:

- 91% of boys never or almost never experience stress from social media, compared to 74% of girls.
- Only 1% of boys and 3% of girls often suffer from such stress.
- There are no age differences in experienced stress from social media.

Figure 9 – Stress caused by social media among teens

Other causes of stress

We wanted to compare the stress experienced by teens through social media with other possible causes of stress. That's why we also asked teens how often they get stressed by:

- School/homework.
- Their situation at home, such as (money) worries, problems, or arguments.
- Their own problems, such as health, arguments with others, secrets, debts.
- What others think of them.
- "Everything" they have to do (school, homework, part-time job, sports).

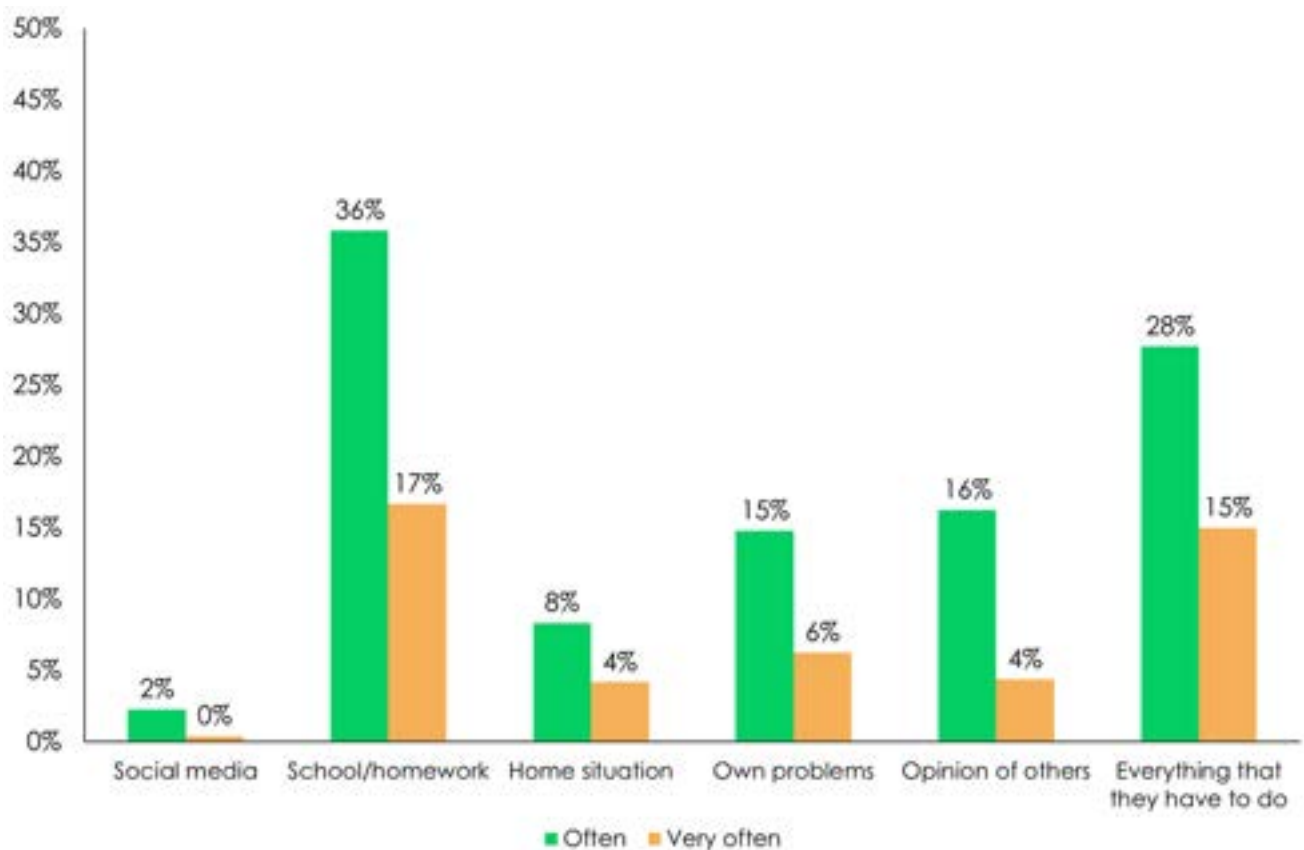


Figure 10 – Comparing six causes of stress among teens

What stands out in Figure 10:

In Figure 10, for the sake of clarity, we have only compared the answers 'often' and 'very often' (incl. social media). Some teens are often or very often stressed about their own problems and what others think of them. But teens find that school/homework and everything they have to do is by far the most stressful. The lives of teens are completely filled, and for some, their lives may be too full.

Gender

As Figure 11 shows, girls experience about twice as much stress as boys for all six causes of stress.

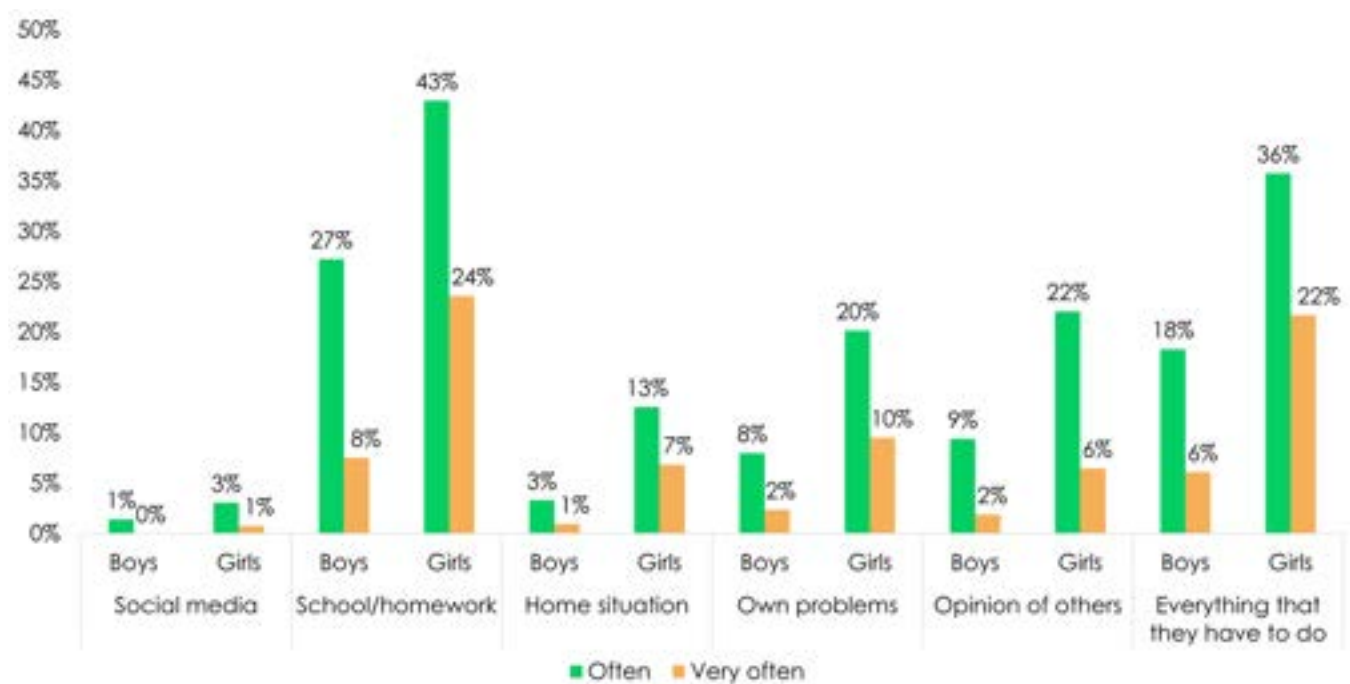


Figure 11 – Six causes of stress compared between boys and girls

What further stands out:

- There is no difference between the age groups in the causes of stress.

Availability stress

Teens experience little stress due to their social media use, especially compared to other causes of stress, such as school/homework and everything else they have to do. The relatively low 'social media stress' may be due to the fact that teens have the idea that they can choose to use social media themselves, while stress causes such as school/homework and everything they have to do are imposed on them, by their school, parents or family.

However, the ubiquity of social media can make teens feel like they always need to be available and respond to messages immediately. And that is also a form of stress, which is called availability stress.⁴ How often do teens experience such stress?



What Figure 12 shows:

- More than a quarter of teens (26%) feel obliged to always be available on social media.
- Almost half of teens (47%) are not bothered by this feeling.

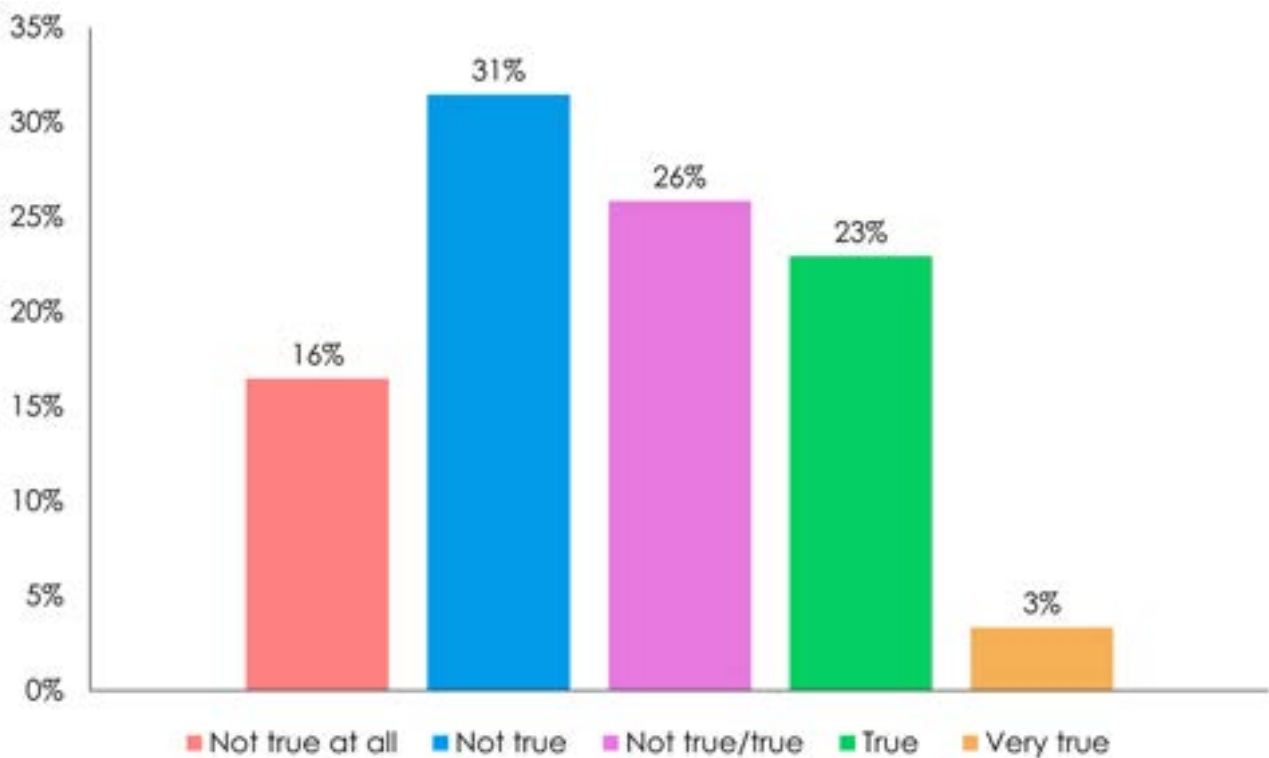


Figure 12 – Availability stress on social media among teens

What further stands out:

- Girls (30%) feel more obliged to always be available on social media than boys (21%).
- There are no major differences between age groups in their experience to always be available on social media.

Boy (14): “Yes, you do get the feeling that you always have to reply to your friends. Why else would you be on your phone? And since you're always on Snapchat anyway, responding is easy.”



What parents know

It's important for parents to know what their children are doing on social media and to listen to their questions and concerns. Only then can parents help their children to use social media responsibly and safely. But how much do parents know about who their children are interacting with on social media? And how much do teens tell their parents about the positive and negative things they they experience onj social media?

Girl (14): "Lately I've been getting messages from people on social media who start texting me "hey, can I get to know you?" I find that irritating, but I don't discuss it with my parents. I just block them."

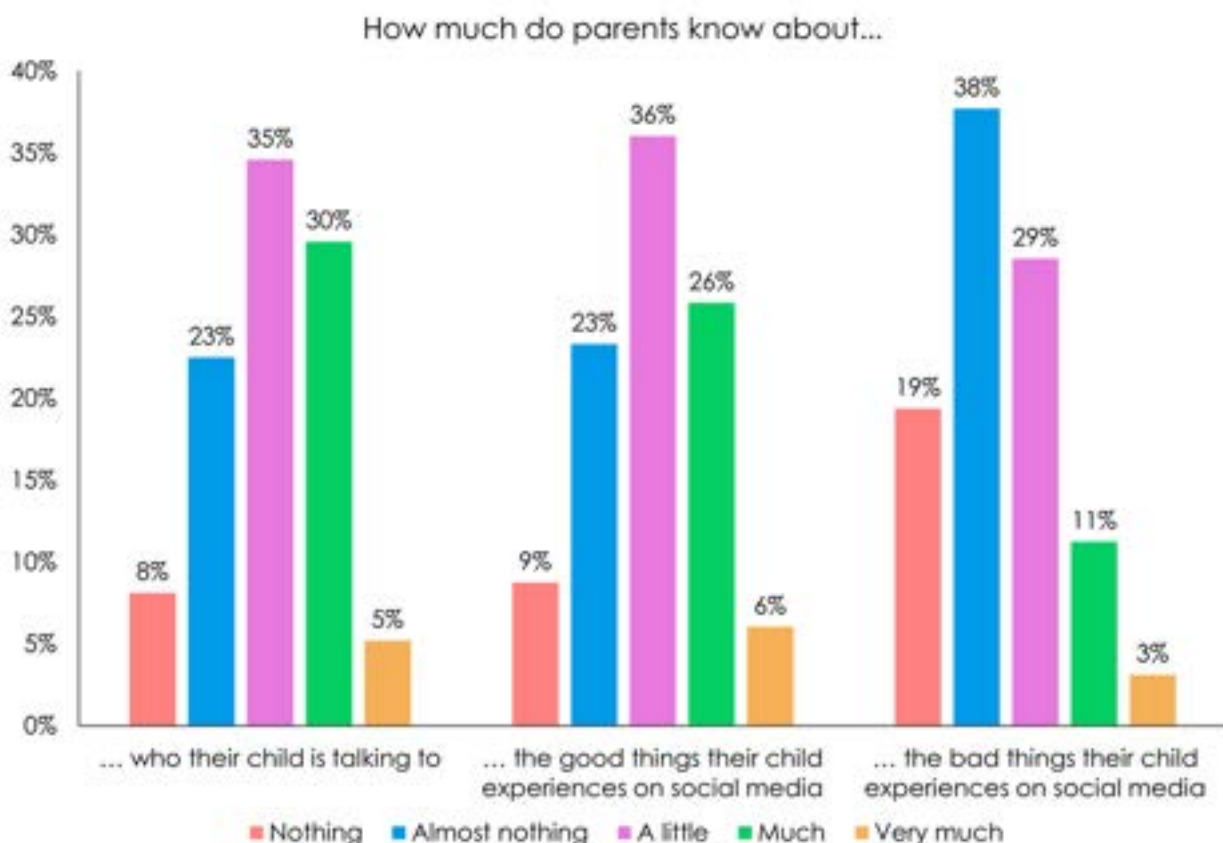


Figure 13 - What parents know about their child's social media use

What stands out in Figure 13:

- 31% of teens say their parents know almost nothing or nothing at all about who they interact with on social media. A similar group thinks that their parents know (very) much about it.
- There are similar proportions in what parents know about the fun things teens experience on social media. 32% of teens say that their parents know almost nothing or nothing at all about it, while 32% also say that their parents know (very) much about it.
- According to teens, parents know less about the not-so-fun things teens experience on social media. Only 14% of teens say that their parents know (very) much about these things, compared to 57% who know almost nothing or nothing at all about it.

Girl (16): "I had Insta when I was eleven. And then I got a dickpic and I was really shocked by that. I showed it to my parents, crying."



Boy (14): "My parents don't allow me to post anything. There is a lot of bullying on social media, my mother often thinks so. That's why I'm not allowed on TikTok."

Gender

- More girls (41%) than boys (27%) say their parents know (very) much about they interact with on social media.
- More girls (38%) than boys (24%) say that their parents know (very) much about the fun things they experience on social media.
- More girls (20%) than boys (8%) say that their parents know (very) much about what they experience on social media.

Conclusions

Teens are heavy users of social media. Most of them use three to five different social media every day and spend hours a day on their phones. There are concerns about this practice among parents and teachers, and sometimes among teens themselves. As a result, negative reports about the influence of social media appear more often in the media than positive ones. But the negatively painted picture doesn't match the nuanced results we usually find in scientific research.

This report shows the drawbacks and benefits of social media use. The pluses prevail. More than half of teens think that social media have a good influence on how happy they are. And also striking: The majority of them think that social media have a good influence (57%) on how connected they feel with their friends.

But this report also shows the cons of social media use. More than a third of teens think that social media have a bad influence on their self-esteem. This is even true for about half of the girls. A quarter of teens also say they feel less happy because of social media. Such percentages are worrying.

A small proportion of teens (2%) are stressed by social media. But they say their stress is much more often caused by school, homework, and everything else they have to do. However, more than a quarter of teens feel pressure to always be available on social media. And after all, that is also a form of stress that can contribute to everything they have to do.

It is striking that the teens in particular do not often discuss the negative experiences on social media with their parents. They talk more to their parents about the fun things they experience there than about the less pleasant things.

Recommendations

Why do teens discuss their negative experiences with social media so little with their parents? Our conversations with them showed that parents then take it too seriously and that the teens are afraid that they will no longer be allowed on that platform or will be restricted in some other way.

It is therefore important that parents have an open conversation about the possible negative influence of their child's social media. They should approach these discussions with a neutral attitude and ask about their children's experiences without judgment. When parents are overly concerned, they end up learning less about what their child is really going through.

Many teens admit in the conversations that social media are 'addictive'. This is especially true for the latest generation of social media, such as TikTok and BeReal. Some teens have their own strategies to combat the addictive effect of social media. This can vary from deleting a certain app, to unfollowing certain accounts or following a different type of account. For example, accounts that promote 'body positivity' or that only bring positive news.

What's next

These results are based on the perception and experience of teens themselves. We asked these questions in a questionnaire but also in personal interviews with each of the 480 teens in this study. In those interviews, teens were remarkably honest and open about their good and bad experiences with and on social media.

The experiences shared by the teens in this report are a snapshot. Yet, they are very similar to our recent long-term studies, in which we followed teens for seven months. In that study, too, using the most advanced statistical techniques, we found that the influence of social media on feelings of happiness, self-esteem and friendships differs from person to person.^{3,5,6}

The research reported in this report is part of a larger study. In January 2023, the 480 teens completed the questionnaire on which this report is based. Immediately thereafter, with their permission, we started following them for a hundred days. On each of those 100 days – in the evening – they answered a series of questions via their phones, for example, about what they had done on social media that day and how they experienced it.

On May 2, 2023, we received their 100th diary. The collaboration and the conversations with the teens have taught us a lot. In the coming period, we will share our results on the 100-day diary study with the same teens included in this report. To keep up to date with our research, follow us on Twitter (@UvA_AWeSome) or visit our website: www.project-awesome.nl.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all 480 teens who participated in our research. In addition, we would also like to thank the teens who participated in our focus group and focus groups. They helped us tremendously in formulating the right questions.

We would also like to thank Arianne Westhuis of @ease, who was there in the background in case teens experienced psychological problems during our research.

Finally, we would like to thank Martin Siebelhoff, CEO of Choice Insights and Strategy, who helped us build a representative sample.

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