

Social media harms revealed

► By Emma Lee-Potter

PARENTS, TEACHERS and others have frequently warned that social media has a detrimental effect on our young people.

Now a study led by University College London (UCL) has found that spending hours on sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp does have an impact on teenagers' mental health by disrupting sleep and exercise and exposing them to cyber-bullying and harmful online content.

The research, which was published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* in August, analysed data from nearly 10,000 young people between 2013 and 2015. The youngsters were aged between 13 and 16 and were from nearly 1,000 schools across England.

"Our results suggest that social media itself doesn't cause harm, but that frequent use disrupts activities that have a positive impact on mental health, such as sleeping and exercising, while increasing exposure of young people to harmful content, particularly the negative experience of cyber-bullying," explained Professor Russell Viner of UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, who led the research.

This is the first study to follow

teenagers' social media use and mental health over a period of time and the academics found that the indirect effects of using social media are much more pronounced on girls than on boys.

However, they added that while very frequent use of social media indirectly affects teenage mental health, direct effects – such as on brain development – are unlikely.

More than 90 per cent of teenagers in England use the internet for social networking. In 2013, 43 per cent of boys and 51 per cent of girls used social media multiple times a day.

By 2014, these figures had risen to 51 and 68 per cent respectively, while in 2015 the numbers had risen to 69 and 75 per cent respectively.

MORE THAN a quarter of people retweeting or replying to e-sports betting tweets are children under the age of 16, according to a study.

E-sports – or electronic sports – involve players playing computer games against each other, often in big arenas and watched by large crowds.

The *Biddable Youth* report, published by Demos and the University of Bristol, said parents and teachers are probably unaware of gambling advertising on social

media. By using crypto-currencies children may even be able to place bets without access to a bank account.

"We were really surprised at the number of children actively engaging with e-sports gambling accounts," said Professor Agnes Nairn from the University of Bristol, co-author of *Biddable Youth*.

"Our in-depth analysis of the content of gambling advertising tweets leads us to believe that children's e-sports gambling is currently under the radar in two ways. It's online where parents won't see it and it's using clever content marketing such as amusing gifs, memes, pictures and funny stories, designed to appeal to and implicitly influence young people."

Further information

- *Roles of cyberbullying, sleep, and physical activity in mediating the effects of social media use on mental health and wellbeing among young people in England*, Viner et al, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, August 2019: <http://bit.ly/2lvtR85>
- *Biddable Youth*, Smith & Nairn, Demos & University of Bristol, August 2019: <http://bit.ly/2JVGYyL>