



Under the influence: how digital media affects teens

EU-funded researchers are shedding light on how digital media use is impacting teenagers and what parents, teachers and policymakers can do about it.

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In today's world, the line between online and offline is increasingly being blurred, especially for children and teens. Navigating this space safely can be a challenge.

Klavdija Berginc, a maths and computer science teacher at a primary school in Kobarid, Slovenia, has witnessed this struggle up close over more than a decade in the classroom.

"I remember a 12-year-old student who simply couldn't function without a screen," she said. "He demanded screentime as a reward for everything – from studying for a few minutes to visiting the dentist."

Young people today use the internet more than ever, with social media becoming central to how they connect and express themselves. Understanding how this impacts their mental health is becoming increasingly urgent.

"We need to teach young people to use smart devices in a smart way," said Berginc. "And help them take more responsibility for their actions online."

A question of balance

Berginc's pupils are taking part in a large-scale EU-funded study called MIMic, which is investigating the role of digital media in the lives of adolescents. Thousands of teens in Belgium, France and Slovenia took part in the study, which will conclude in December 2025.

"Our goal was to understand if young people can grow up in a digital world, while maintaining a healthy balance," said study coordinator Laura Vandenbosch, an associate professor at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium and director of the KU Leuven Media Psychology Lab.

The MIMic researchers examined how teens interact with platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, what they post and consume, as well as how it affects their mood, self-image and views on the world.

“We also looked at content posted by the influencers popular with adolescents – and the political and ethical opinions they express,” said Vandembosch.

The researchers analysed extensive online content, from music lyrics to Instagram posts by celebrities, influencers and athletes.

“At the end of the day, these influencers are opinion makers,” she said.

“They’re not just promoting beauty tips or shopping habits – they’re selling moral values and identity to audiences who are at a vulnerable stage of life.”

Digital influence, real consequences

Such exposure can play a key role during a child’s developmental phase, according to Vandembosch.

“Adolescents are still finding their own identity, and they are very vulnerable to the influence of their peers – offline and online.”

The study confirms that social media can significantly influence how teens feel about themselves, especially their appearance and sense of self-worth.

“We see direct links between social media use and emotional wellbeing,” said Vandembosch. Regularly viewing idealised images online can lead to an increased pressure to be perfect – in the eyes of peers and parents alike.

However, the researchers also revealed positive effects. For instance, teens exposed to body-positive images reported feeling better about their bodies. But these benefits, like the negative impacts, did not apply to all respondents equally.

Managing reactions

Learning how to manage negative reactions to social media exposure is important. Thankfully, there are skills that can be learned.

The researchers found that if adolescents can stop and reflect when they encounter negative emotions while using social media and then take action to alleviate these feelings, they are much more protected.

“Being aware of the impact of social media is not enough,” said Vandembosch. “You need to take action and, for instance, stop scrolling, stop posting, go outside, or call a friend.”

The negative impact of social media exposure is especially strong at the time of use.

“The effects we studied were particularly intense over a short period, but since teens are almost always online, even short-term impacts matter,” Vandembosch said.

The role of parents

Much depends on the child’s environment, especially the role of parents.

“Children whose parents have strong media literacy skills tend to fare better online,” said Vandembosch.

Berginc agrees. “We try to engage parents, but many don’t acknowledge that their child might have a problem. They often don’t monitor their child’s online activity or put enough effort into learning about internet use.”

Her advice? Open dialogue is key. “Children need to hear that what they see online is only the best part of someone’s life. They should still value their own lives, even with all their flaws.”

It is crucial that parents talk to their children about the online world, but the responsibility should not rest solely with them, said Vandenbosch. “Online platforms and policymakers must step up, too.”

Toward safer platforms

The findings of the MIMlc research team offer valuable insights for developing smarter prevention and intervention strategies.

“We now know which teens are most vulnerable and when they’re most at risk,” said Vandenbosch. “This gives us a solid foundation to push platforms to take protective measures.”

Vandenbosch sees a lot of value in the EU’s Digital Services Act, as well as the European strategy for a Better Internet for Kids, adopted in May 2022. The latter outlines a vision for a “Digital Decade” that protects children from harmful content, promotes digital empowerment and prioritises safe, age-appropriate design for online platforms.

She is hoping that the European Commission will take on board the MIMlc research findings and consider further measures to make the internet safer for children. In particular, they recommend better enforcement of the 13-year age limit for social media use.

Vandenbosch would also like researchers and child protection experts to have greater oversight over new features, such as AI chatbots, introduced on social media platforms.

“We should use this research to advance media literacy in Europe,” she said.

Vandenbosch is proud that the MIMlc study will be presented at the World Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan. There, it will be part of the Commission’s showcase of EU-funded research, demonstrating Europe’s commitment to tackling societal challenges through science and innovation.

“It’s fantastic that people around the world can learn from our findings,” she said. “Awareness is very important in empowering and protecting children online.”

“Our aim was always to improve children’s wellbeing,” she said. “The more people who hear our message, the better we can protect the next generation online.”

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- [MIMlc](#)
- [MIMlc project website](#)
- [Better Internet for Kids](#)
- [New EU strategy to protect and empower children in the online world](#)
- [The EU Digital Services Act](#)
- [EU at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan](#)