

Insights podcast: Our digital lives and our wellbeing

With Daniel Wheatley and Abigail Coxon

Chris Coates

Hello and welcome to Insights, the podcast from Understanding Society. Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that captures life in the UK in the 21st century. Every year, we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about different aspects of their lives. The Insights podcast looks at how people use the data. What does research tell us and how can it change things?

This episode looks at our increasingly digital lives and how they affect our wellbeing. Our guests this time are Dr. Daniel Wheatley, Reader in the Department of Management at the University of Birmingham, and Abigail Coxon, principal Economist at the Youth Futures Foundation, which is the national What Works Centre for youth employment and has a specific focus on marginalised young people.

So, Dan, you've looked at this area a couple of times. There was a paper in 2019 about social media and wellbeing and you've done some more research recently about digital technology more generally. Can you take us through what you found, starting with that first paper?

Dan Wheatley

Absolutely. Thank you, Chris. So, in the 2019 paper published in the British Journal of Sociology, we explored the relationship between social media use and subjective wellbeing. So self-reported wellbeing. In that paper, we identified a pattern in which high levels of use, which is over four hours per day, of social media use was linked to lower levels of wellbeing. Specifically, we identified that heavier users tended to be younger, those in education or current training, also though those who are unemployed or in other ways socially disadvantaged. And so we identified this pattern of use having a negative effect and those effects being compounded over time, potentially. That research used the Understanding Society survey, and we looked at two years of data comparing patterns and changes over that period

More recently with the same collaborator, so that was- that paper was done with my collaborator Sarah Buglass. More recently with the same collaborator, we embarked on some research, also using Understanding Society datasets around this time last year, which explores more broadly patterns of digital technology engagement across different age groups. And we explored this again in the sense of its impact on levels of wellbeing. With respect to the new research, what we identified is certain forms of digital technology engagement appear to be, on average, more negative in terms of their wellbeing effects, while other forms of digital technology use seem to be more positive. Specifically within that, we found a distinction between more passive activities, for example, passive engagement in social media use, which would be the kind of scrolling through social media, they seem to have a more negative impact on wellbeing. Similarly, we found that engaging in certain types of streaming activity in that more passive way may have a negative impact on wellbeing.

In comparison, we identified that more active engagement with digital technologies can actually be beneficial for wellbeing. We noted with respect to several uses of digital technology, including posting on social media, online purchasing, streaming music, and gaming, that all of these activities can actually have positive effects on wellbeing. That said, there are still differences that we uncovered and some differentiated effects.

So we identify some key differences between generations. And so there seems to be a generation effect that relates to the overall normalisation of these activities. So for example, with Generation Z, younger individuals, we see a normalisation of social media use, of other forms of digital technology engagement, including gaming, that might lessen the overall effects of those activities, meaning that different levels of engagement might not have such a starkly different impact. That's not to diminish the potential impacts that these activities may be having on wellbeing, but it's just acknowledging that the normalisation of the engagement levels with them might mean that younger people may feel those impacts to a less extreme extent.

We also find differences with older adults, for example, where we identify particularly positive effects being obtained from streaming music, which existing research has also shown the positive effects of that type of engagement, including related to nostalgia and other feelings that can have positive impacts on wellbeing.

Chris

So it's interesting in that for older people, if they're streaming music that is passively receiving content, but it's kind of a different kind of content, isn't it? And then maybe if you're younger and you're just scrolling through TikTok or Instagram or whatever, maybe that's a different kind of experience. Does that kind of ring true as an interpretation?

Dan

Absolutely. And while that's not something that we can necessarily directly draw out of the data, what we can obtain is those patterns and trends. What we can do is draw on other existing research that explores some of these phenomena. So there's research within the psychology field, within economics, within sociology, just as examples, that explore how different forms of digital technology use impact on people. So yeah, as you outlined there, Chris, engaging in social media, perhaps scrolling through TikTok or Instagram or similar, there's been a variety of research that's shown some of the impacts that that can have on people psychologically, including in relation to things like fear of missing out and concerns around the portrayal of other people's lives on those, on those social media fora diminishing one's own feelings around, around their own life and own wellbeing.

With respect to something like, you know, the example I gave of older people and streaming music, there's been past research that's explored the effects of music, music making, but also music listening. So the active versus the more passive again and even the more passive engagement with music has been shown to have potentially beneficial wellbeing effects in relation to links with the way it generates nostalgia, the way it can generate positive emotion and similar types of impact.

Chris

Okay. Also, we did a podcast a few months ago about engagement with the arts. This obviously isn't covered in your research, but it also seems to me to be saying something about creativity in that if you are actively generating content in some way on social media, perhaps that has a beneficial effect more than simply looking at other content.

Dan

Absolutely. And interestingly, using the Understanding Society data sources again, I have published two pieces of research in 2017 and 2019 that looked specifically at the effects of engagement in arts, cultural, and sporting activities on wellbeing and some consistency in findings here in terms of more active engagement in some of these creative activities being

beneficial to wellbeing and more passive engagement, while potentially in some cases still delivering benefits, having a lesser effect.

Chris

Is there something kind of specifically useful about Understanding Society data in this area?

Dan

Yes, absolutely. So Understanding Society offers several benefits to researchers in exploring themes around social phenomena. The variety of coverage in Understanding Society is central to the benefits it offers, so it captures data on lots of different activities we engage with in our lives, from the examples we're exploring today around digital technology use to through to things we do in our working lives, social lives, and other aspects of life.

The data also provides specific benefits through its longitudinal component. So by collecting data from a panel of people year on year, acknowledging some variation in membership of that panel over time, that allows for change to be measured and change to be explored, and that provides a richness to the analysis that we can conduct, and enables us to generate greater understanding of the effects that different behaviours and different uses of time and different ways in which we engage with the world have.

So from research I've conducted in exploring the impacts of digital technologies on wellbeing, through to looking at arts and cultural and sporting engagement, through to looking at the impacts of flexible working arrangements and patterns of work time, all of these have been facilitated by the nature of the data collected in Understanding Society, which is rich in volume as well as quality.

Chris

Abigail, if I can turn to you. The Youth Futures foundation produced a report this summer about what's driving a decline in young people's mental health and you also used Understanding Society. Can you take us through what that showed you?

Abigail

Yeah, that would be great. And it's great to hear about Dan's research as well. And it definitely chimes with some of the things that we've found within this piece of research. But I guess before talking about the findings of the current research, it would be worth just mentioning a bit more about Youth Futures and why we as an organisation are focusing on mental health as a key topic. You've mentioned that we're the National What Works Centre for Youth Employment, but what we do is sort of working to drive change in policy and practise to support all young people to achieve good work.

And we do this not just by building evidence of what works, but also actively translating and embedding this knowledge into action for systemic change, and the problem that we've got at the moment is that the UK has a persistent and complex youth unemployment and inactivity challenge. So around 948,000 young people in the UK are not in employment or education or training, which is what we commonly define as NEET. And that's equivalent to around 1 in 8 young people between the ages of 16 to 24. And so getting young people onto a successful and rewarding path to work, it's not just an essential step in their wellbeing, but key to really our national prosperity. And in fact, if we were able to reduce the UK NEET rate to match the Netherlands, which is the OECD's best performer, this would boost the UK economy by around £69 billion. And it would also mean that approximately half a million more young people could be earning or learning.

So I guess where mental health comes into that is that, unlike the post 2008 financial crisis, where most young people who were NEET were actively looking for work, today's challenge is also fuelled in part by growing rates of economic inactivity. So an increasing number of people not working and they're not studying and they're not looking for work. And over the past three years, long term sickness has been the primary driver of that increase in inactivity and mental health is the most common cause of that. So although there's a growing recognition that poor mental health can both be a cause and a consequence of youth unemployment, the underlying drivers of the youth mental health crisis remain poorly understood and less well evidenced.

So that's why we carried out this research with the University of Manchester and UCL, and it's the first of its kind to explore the population-level rise in poor youth mental health. And we really wanted to look at this issue from a genuinely agnostic standpoint. It was, and still is really important to us to really understand the problem, because if you don't know what's driving it, you can't meaningfully design and invest in interventions that we know will work for young people. So although the data shows us that there is a rise in youth mental health issues, so within this research, the Understanding Society data showed a substantial rise in mental health symptoms among young people from about 2010, 2012, particularly in low mood and anxiety, and then the primary care data also reinforced this trend. We saw a threefold increase in the number of people in contact with primary care for a mental health issue. So in 2000, one, in 44 young people were in contact with primary care, and by 2019, that was 1 in 11 young people in contact with primary care for a mental health issue.

So there were two things that we really wanted to do with this research. The first one being we wanted to answer the question of whether this is a genuine rise, because, as you'll know, there's lots of discussion in the media about over diagnosis and, you know, change in resilience and all that sort of stuff. And the robust analysis that was undertaken in this work provided really strong evidence that this is a genuine rise. There hadn't been a change in the way young people were responding to mental health surveys. And actually, we found that this has been consistent over time. So this isn't just about changes in language or awareness. Also, the link between mental distress and negative outcomes like drinking, smoking, being NEET has actually grown stronger. So that suggests that symptoms are not being reported at lower thresholds than they were before.

And when it came to resilience, the analysis found that, in general, young people's responses to common stresses like bullying or family conflict have stayed largely stable over time. So all of this points quite clearly to a real rise in mental health problems.

And then the second thing we wanted to do, we wanted to look at this in the round to understand the issues at play and why this might be happening. So the research looked at 10 drivers, which were chosen in consultation with a range of experts, and there were four that were identified as having the strongest evidence behind them. So one of those was employment precarity and affordability pressures. So financial insecurity has increasingly impacted young people since 2010, and it appears that this is driven largely around lower access to stable jobs and careers, and affordability pressures, so in particular around housing costs. The other driver was declining sleep quality. So the markers of young people's sleep quality have deteriorated. And this is one that isn't discussed much in the public domain. But the robust evidence links poor sleep to higher rates of depression and anxiety symptoms.

The other one was reduced access to children and youth services. So we know that funding for youth services in England has declined massively since 2010. And the evidence suggests that these types of early intervention services were previously having a positive effect on young people's mental health.

And then the last one but not least, and the reason why we're here today, is social media and smartphone use. So what the research found was that the most robust evidence indicated that social media and smartphone use has a small negative impact on mental health, which is contributing to the recent trends at the population level, given their widespread adoption since around 2010. And the theories behind this driver suggest that social media and smartphone use are having an impact on mental health through mechanisms such as social comparison, cyberbullying, displacement of beneficial activities like sleep and exercise, and also increased exposure to harmful content.

But I guess it's important to recognise that this is a complex picture. And what really came to light in this research is that there are multiple factors that are influencing this rise in poor mental health for young people. And then, I guess, just lastly, the research also looked at several other theories, but they either lack strong evidence of changing over time in the way that aligned with mental health trends, or they weren't clearly linked to worsening mental health. Or the evidence base was, was just in general, too limited to assess them properly.

Chris

It's kind of interesting that you talked about the media talking about resilience, because it seems, surely it's more about the opportunities that young people have. That's going to be more of an issue.

Abigail

Yeah. When we first started this research, we did sort of categorise the sort of risk and resilience factors, and the way that resilience was thought about was not only at the individual level, but also the systems around the individual that impact their resilience. So it was sort of being compared as a risk factor within itself. And what we found, when comparing young people now to young people a generation ago and how their mental health is impacted by negative, I guess, risk factors in their life, we found that that hadn't changed. It had changed for financial insecurity as a risk factor, a notable change between young people now and young people before. The stressor that we found did have some change in terms of young people's resilience. So the impact of that stressor on their mental wellbeing. For young people now, the effect of financial stresses are impacting their wellbeing more than a generation ago. But when we looked at all different types of stresses like bullying, family stress, those didn't change in terms of young people's resilience compared to young people a generation ago.

Chris

So it's interesting you talked about boosting the economy as well, and you launched your report at Parliament and there's obviously, there's quite a focus from the current government on investing to create economic growth. So are there specific things that you're asking the government to do to address all this?

Abigail

We were really delighted to have input and support for this work from a genuinely brilliant independent advisory group, which included clinicians, leading academics, policy stakeholders, and that was chaired by the former Shadow Cabinet Minister for Mental Health, Luciana Berger. And it was really fantastic to see such strong engagement at the parliamentary launch. We had a whole range of stakeholders coming together to discuss this critical issue. And importantly, we heard directly from one of our Futures Voices group

ambassadors about what this actually all means for young people's lives. You know, was really impactful.

So, yeah, from this research we did identify a number of implications for the current policy environment and the findings really do reinforce the need for a whole systems approach focused on prevention and early intervention. So, you know, with employers, educators, government, all working together, given sort of the number of drivers that are contributing to this issue, I guess I'd like to focus for a moment on the element of this which is most closely related to our work at Youth Futures, the issue of employment.

So young people consistently tell us that good work with secure hours and income is among their top priorities. And the research highlights the importance of employment conditions to young people's mental health and demonstrates the role employers can have in young people's ability to thrive at work and be retained. And from that there's significant potential for employers to improve their mental health, and we want to see this explicitly incorporated in the government's employment rights agenda. Also, as the Youth Guarantee develops, there's a growing opportunity for employers to lead by example here. So ensuring high quality of work is offered to young people, including in contracted hours and wages. But we also know, you know, we need to keep understanding better what works. That's why at Youth Futures, we are developing a series of landmark research trials with employers to understand what interventions are effective in recruitment and retention of young people.

And another important area of our work is building the evidence base on an adapted form of the individual placement and support model for young people. So IPSY, which is a specific scheme to support people with severe mental health issues into employment, and the evidence sort of on the impact of these types of models on young people is very limited. So we're currently scoping out opportunities to set up an evaluation in an English context.

Chris

Daniel, do you have a kind of a sense of what needs to be done in terms of policy?

Dan

Absolutely. I mean, it's a complex picture and there's a few things that connect together that potentially have an important part to play here. So one of the things that Abigail's mentioned is around good work and one of the things we've seen with the Employment Rights Bill is a softening of a lot of the planned enhancements, improvements, whatever we want to call changes to rights for workers to move away from planned moves toward status-oriented rights to things like flexible working, predictable work scheduling, minimum hours, maximum hours, you know, all of those things that Abigail has touched upon in terms of uncertainty within work that creates financial insecurity, but also wider uncertainty and which can have potentially impact on mental health.

And that's happening at the same time as we've got this proliferation of digital technologies that are reaching further and further into our lives, both in the work sphere, but also in the social sphere. And the blurring of the boundaries between those two things makes this a highly complex relationship. Because on the one hand, people have a professional identity that they might be trying to portray through things like LinkedIn and other fora, and on the other hand, they have a social identity that they're trying to put forward through things in particular, like Instagram and other social media outlets that are known to have a very particular culture around them in terms of outward portrayal of someone's life, which is often not in line with real experiences or what most people can expect a life to look like.

And so the combination of these factors, alongside the upheaval of the last five years with the pandemic, the impacts that that had on young people's lives, which should not be discounted at all as being absolutely massive. We had young people growing up having to be homeschooled, in some cases missing out on schooling entirely if their home environment wasn't such that they could engage with schooling properly during that time. We had young people navigating through puberty through into adulthood and having to do so largely in a virtual world. And that is something that we've not encountered before, societally, we've not encountered before. We've encountered pandemics before, but not in the way we encountered it this time. And so the impact of that is definitely part of this picture as well.

So we've got this combination of increasingly flexibilised labour market, that creates high levels of uncertainty and financial precarity, at the same time that we've got a massive social and economic upheaval rising from and continuing following the pandemic. And at the same time we've got this proliferation and increased reach of digital technologies into all aspects of our lives. And so the combination of those factors is, you know, compounds into, into something that's very difficult for young people to navigate through. Navigating through that while trying to grow up at the same time, which everyone knows, having gone through it, you know, everyone goes through this, is a challenge in itself, means that there's lots of different drivers of these challenges.

And in terms of what can be done about this, well, there's lots of things that can be done and lots of ways that this can be looked at. I mean, adding on to this as well. But before, before I come on to that point is the elephant in the room, which is AI, which everyone of course is buzzing around. And I myself am leading a funded research project, funded by the Edward Gostling foundation, which is called AI Empowered, which is exploring the impacts of AI on the working lives of disabled people. And our approach to disability includes neurodiversity, includes individuals with long term illness and conditions that may involve mental health as well.

And so, you know, in this environment I've just described, the impact of this disruptive technology coming into play as well, and how that's going to play out in terms of the working lives of disabled people in the UK. And what we're already finding, and this is fairly early stages, but in the emerging evidence that we're generating, is that there are some key concerns around some of the systems in place.

So coming back to Abigail's point about this whole systems approach, it's absolutely essential to look at this. And there are a lot of systems in place, but the enactment of those systems is not always to its potential, and in some cases it's very much less than its potential. And the impact that that has on the individual level can be absolutely massive on people's lives. So, for example, delays in being diagnosed, difficulties in accessing support, all of these things can act to exacerbate what, as Abigail mentioned earlier, what might in some cases be an emerging difficulty someone's having that could potentially – not in all cases, because, you know, mental health is complex – but in some cases it could be supported. Prevention is always a difficult word, but it could be supported or at least reduced in severity. And instead those opportunities in some cases are absolutely being missed.

And so, yeah, I mean, this research that Abigail has talked about seems hugely important. And it very much chimes with some of the work we're doing in our current research project that's exploring some related themes.

Chris

So it seems like overall what we're saying is that there are a lot of things causing the crisis for young people at the moment, so there are going to have to be a lot of different approaches to fixing it.

Dan

I think the point is going back a bit to what Abigail said before about a whole systems approach. So it's looking across the different mechanisms, looking across the different drivers, and identifying ways in which you can drive large scale change through public policy change, and at the same time make those smaller wins through improvements in processes, in systems, and services. And not all of that requires significant financial investment. In some cases it requires significant review and evaluation and inward looking at what's working and what's not, and in doing so, identifying a positive pathway forward.

And coming back to the point about AI. AI in this picture is interesting because it offers a lot of opportunity as well as a lot of risk. And so there's a lot of discussion around how the impact of AI as an emerging disruptive digital technology will potentially compound a lot of the problems that are already present in society. But it also has the power and potential to help support and diminish a lot of the challenges that are currently faced. And that can be through automation, it can be through efficiency improvements, it can be through enhancements to support and services, if correctly and strategically deployed – and the importance is in the latter, it's making sure this is done well. And I think as with anything, you know, something done poorly generates a poor outcome, something done well generates a good outcome. And it's about how you approach things and approaching things carefully and strategically and with a clear idea of what the goals are. What's the aim that we're trying to achieve here in terms of supporting young people and improving their experiences of life, and if that can be identified in terms of what those key aims are, then I'm sure some significant improvements can be made.

And using data like Understanding Society absolutely feeds into those discussions and those arguments, because having a large scale data source that's capturing evidence over time, it has a significant power in helping to inform those decisions.

Abigail

I think there's still a way to go in terms of the evidence base. So taking for example, the evidence on smartphones and social media, on wellbeing and mental health, there are really good randomised control trials and that shows that there is a small negative individual impact on young people. But when you, given the widespread adoption of social media and smartphone use, when you look at the population level, that effect is much, much larger. But it does go without saying that these trials have methodological limitations, and there's more that can be done to improve our understanding. Having more evidence out there to help understand how this is impacting young people's wellbeing is really needed.

And also sort of like evaluations of policies in countries or jurisdictions that have limited access to these technologies would really help as well. But I guess what I wanted to end on and highlight again is that the deterioration in youth mental health is real and it's large. The recent deterioration, it's happened at a rate that we've rarely seen outside of infectious disease outbreaks, and it's having real consequences on young people's lives, and not only that, but it's having effect on their employment outcomes and therefore our society and our economy. So the need for mental health to be prioritised and for, you know, preventative solutions from health services, from education, employers, civil society, and other stakeholders is huge.

Chris

Thank you to Dan and Abigail. That's all for this episode. You can find out more about how Understanding Society data is changing practise and informing policy by visiting our website, understandingsociety.ac.uk, and by following us on social media. Thank you for listening and remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.