

Attitudes, health, and social media use

Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study at Age 23

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is one of the UK's leading longitudinal birth cohort studies, tracking the lives of around 19,000 young people born across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland between 2000 and 2002. As these young people move through key stages of life, the study provides a unique insight into the experiences, opportunities, and challenges shaping a generation.

A series of briefing papers presenting initial findings from the age 23 survey has recently been published.¹⁻⁵ This report builds on those initial findings by providing a broader profile of cohort members at age 23 and offering deeper insights into their lives as they transition into adulthood. It examines a range of topics, including attitudes, health, and social media use.

Findings are presented for the cohort as a whole and across key demographic groups, including sex, ethnicity, country of residence, and educational pathway, highlighting both common experiences and important differences among young adults in the UK today. To explore generational differences, comparisons are also made, where comparable measures are available, with Next Steps, a nationally representative English cohort born around a decade earlier and surveyed at a similar age (age 25) in 2015/16. These comparisons are made specifically to English MCS participants.

ABOUT THE DATA

Millennium Cohort Study Age 23 Sweep

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a UK longitudinal birth study. It is following the lives of around 19,000 young people born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000–02. At age 23, 9,675 study members took part in a 60–75 minute survey, either online or with an interviewer. Data from this and previous sweeps of MCS are available to download from the UK Data Service.

AUTHORS

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Key findings

- Over half (55%) supported government redistribution of income from those who are better off to those who are less well off.
- More than half (57%) reported voting in the 2024 General Election.
- Environmental concerns were widely shared, with only 11% believing environmental problems are overstated.
- Most young adults (62%) rated their general health as very good or excellent.
- Almost one-quarter (23%) reported a longstanding physical or mental health condition that limits their daily activities.
- Around one in five (21%) spent five or more hours per day on social media, while almost half (45%) felt addicted to it at age 23.
- Around one in five (19%) felt more connected and happier online than in real life, while online victimisation was relatively uncommon (3%).
- Heavy social media use, online connectedness, and online victimisation all declined between ages 17 and 23.

Results

About the confidence intervals

Confidence intervals

The figures show estimates for the overall cohort and selected subgroups, with 95% confidence intervals, which indicate the level of certainty around each estimate. Overlapping confidence intervals often suggest that differences between groups may not be statistically significant and may be due to chance.

Unless otherwise stated, only subgroup differences that are statistically significant are discussed in the text. Some apparent differences shown in the figures may therefore not be mentioned in the text because there is insufficient evidence that they reflect real differences.

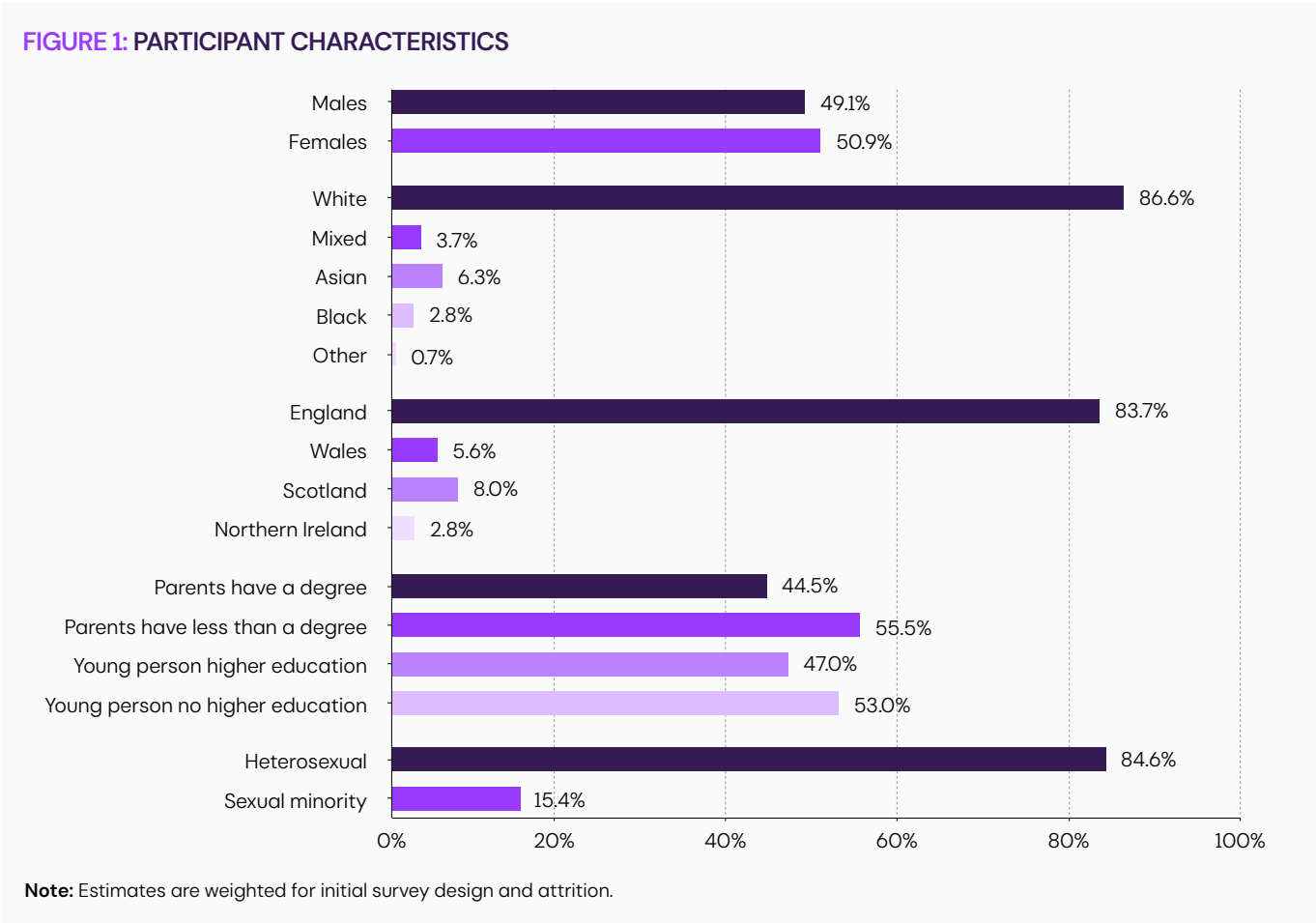
About the study participants

Figure 1 presents the characteristics of MCS participants at age 23. All estimates are weighted to account for the original survey sampling design and attrition over time, ensuring that the findings remain representative of the wider cohort.

The cohort was evenly balanced by sex, with 49.1% males and 50.9% female. Most participants were of White ethnic background (86.6%), while 6.3% identified as Asian, 3.7% as Mixed ethnicity, 2.8% as Black, and fewer than 1% as belonging to another ethnic group. Reflecting the population distribution of the UK, the majority of participants were living in England (83.7%),

with smaller proportions residing in Scotland (8.0%), Wales (5.6%), and Northern Ireland (2.8%).

By age 23, almost half of participants (47.0%) had either completed or were currently enrolled in higher education. Educational attainment was also relatively high among their parents, with 44.5% holding a university degree or higher qualification. In terms of sexual identity, the majority of young adults (84.6%) identified as completely or predominantly heterosexual, while around one in six (15.4%) identified with a sexual minority group.



Attitudes

At age 23, cohort members were asked about a range of social and political attitudes, including views on income redistribution, environmental issues, democracy, and electoral participation. Together, these responses provide a snapshot of how young adults in the UK think about some of the key issues facing society today.

51.5%

agreed or strongly agreed that “democracy may have its problems, but is the best system of government”.

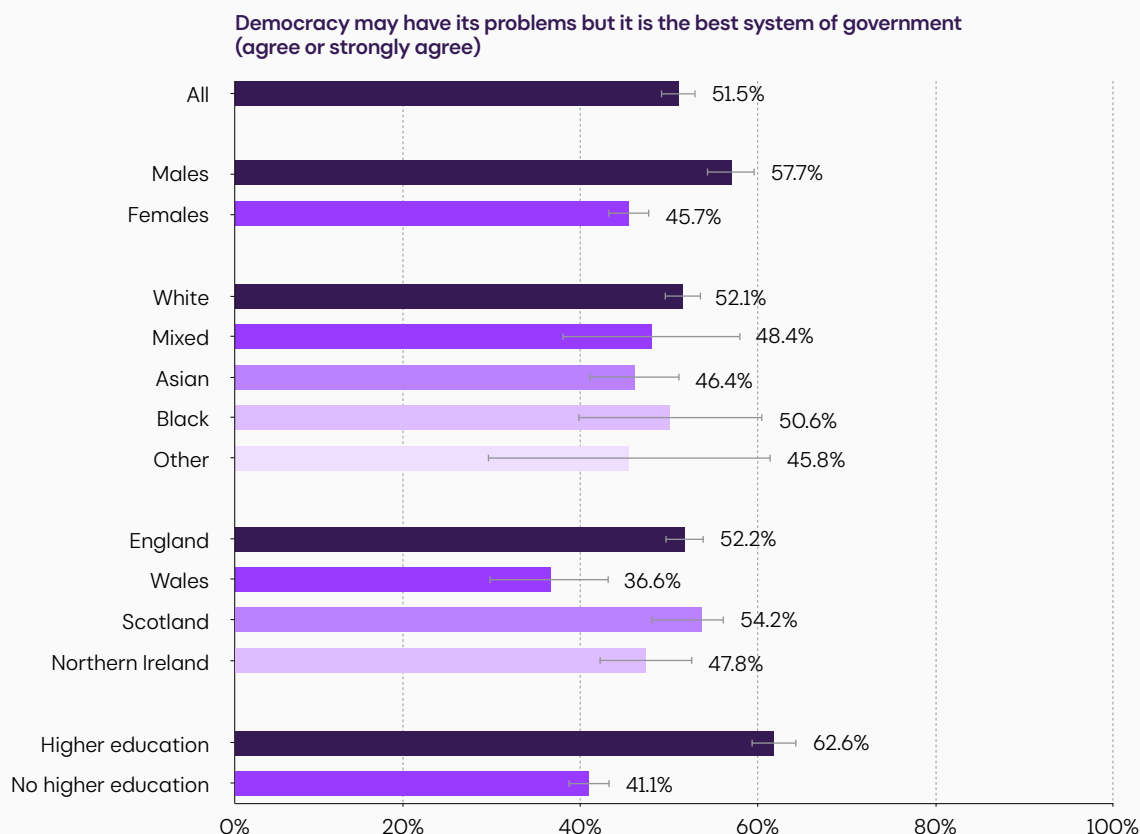


Democracy

Just over half of participants (51.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that “democracy may have its problems, but it is the best system of government” (Figure 2). Support for this statement was higher among males (57.7%) than females (45.7%). There were also marked differences across the UK, with agreement considerably lower in Wales (36.6%)

than in England (52.2%) and Scotland (54.2%). Educational background was another important factor: participants with higher education were substantially more likely to express confidence in democracy (62.6%) than those without higher education, among whom only 41.1% agreed with the statement.

FIGURE 2: ATTITUDE TO DEMOCRACY

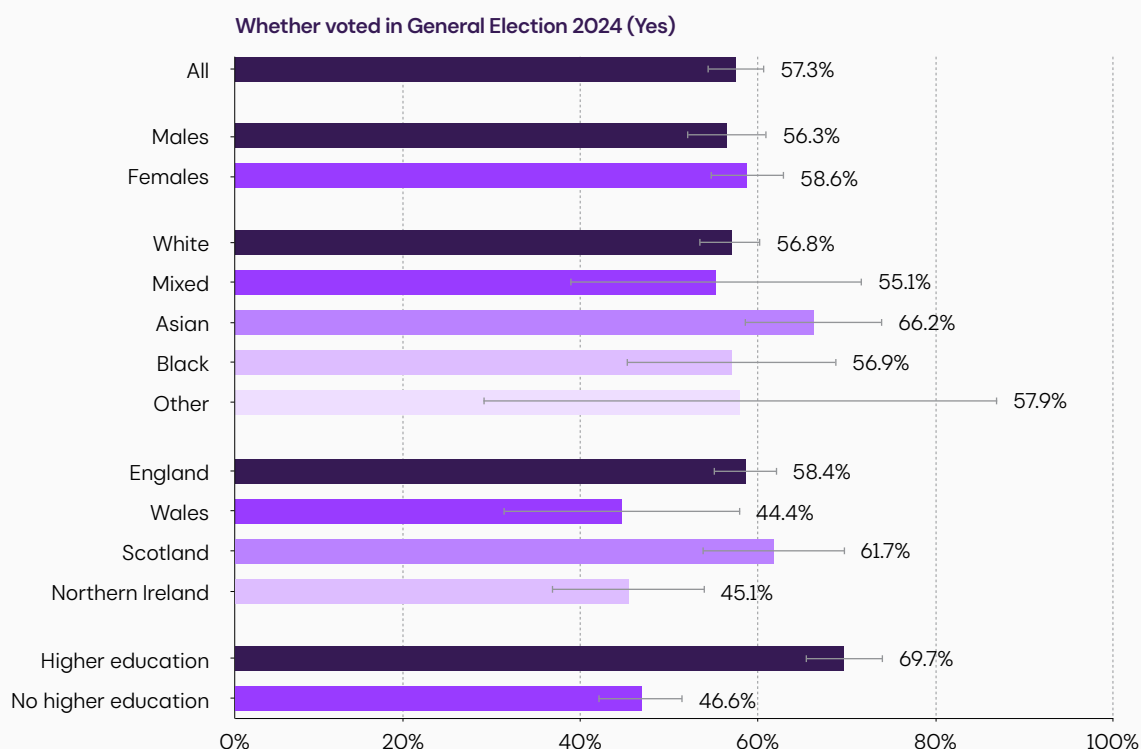


Voting behaviour

Among participants interviewed after the 2024 General Election, over half (57.3%) reported that they had voted (Figure 3). Electoral participation varied significantly across the UK nations, with lower levels of voting reported in Northern Ireland (45.1%) than in England (58.4%) and Scotland (61.7%). The strongest

differences, however, were observed by educational pathway. Nearly seven in ten young adults with higher education experience (69.7%) reported voting, compared with fewer than half (46.6%) of those without higher education.

FIGURE 3: VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN GENERAL ELECTION



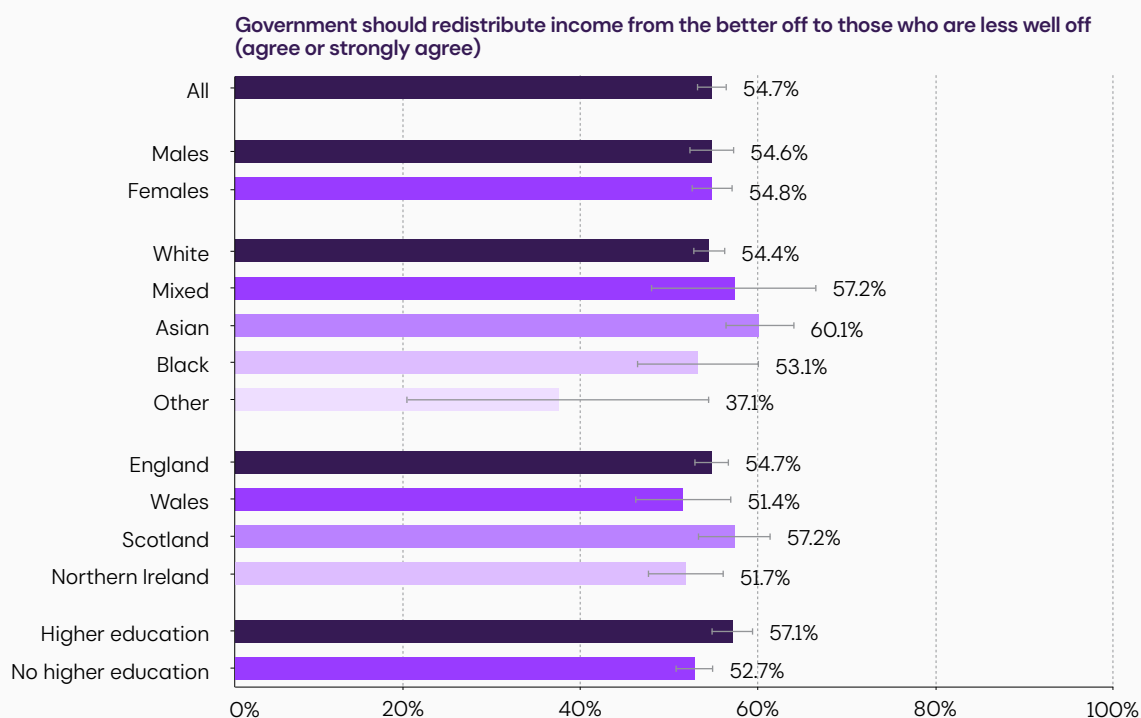
Note: These analyses are based on subsample of participants (N=2,002) who at age 23 were interviewed after the 2024 General Election.

Income redistribution

A majority of cohort members (54.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that “the government should redistribute income from those who are better off to those who are less well off” (Figure 4). Support for income redistribution was somewhat higher among

those with experience of higher education (57.1%) than among those without (52.7%). While attitudes also varied slightly by sex, ethnicity, and country of residence, these differences had no statistical significance.

FIGURE 4: ATTITUDE TO INCOME REDISTRIBUTION

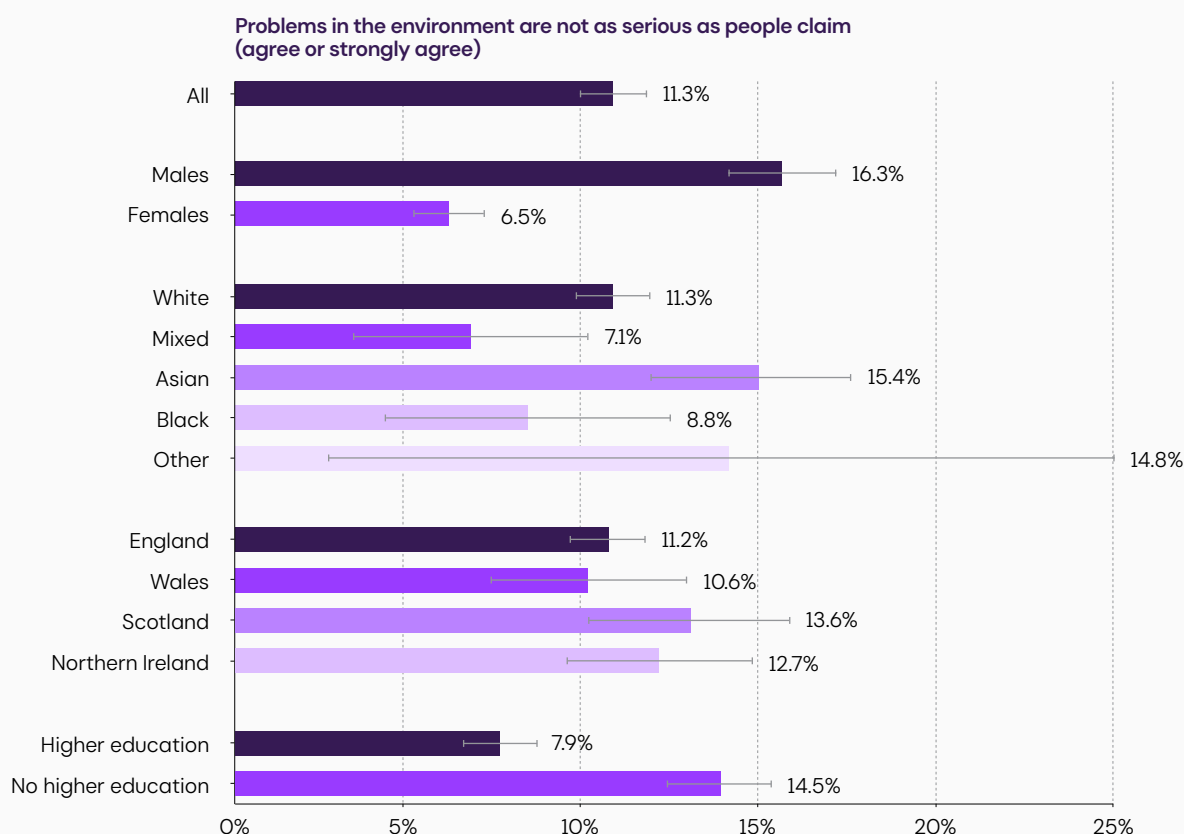


Environmental problems

Most young adults viewed environmental issues as a serious concern. Only around one in ten participants (11.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that “problems in the environment are not as serious as people claim” (Figure 5). However, notable differences emerged across groups. Males were more than twice as likely as females to hold this view (16.3% compared with

6.5%). Agreement was also higher among participants of Asian ethnic background (15.4%) than among those of White (11.3%) or Mixed (7.1%) ethnicity. In addition, those without higher education were almost twice as likely as those with higher education to downplay the seriousness of environmental problems (14.5% versus 7.9%).

FIGURE 5: ATTITUDE TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS



Health and health behaviour

At age 23, cohort members were asked about their general health, whether they had a longstanding condition that limited their daily activities, and their levels of physical exercise. Together, these measures provide an overview of both perceived health and health-related behaviours during early adulthood.

General health

Overall, young adults in the UK reported positive health. Nearly two-thirds of participants (62.0%) rated their general health as very good or excellent (Figure 6). There were differences across ethnic groups, with a lower proportion of participants of Mixed (50.4%) and Asian (56.1%) ethnic backgrounds than those of White ethnicity (63.2%) reporting very good or excellent health. Health ratings were particularly high in Northern Ireland, where almost three-quarters (73.1%) reported being in very good

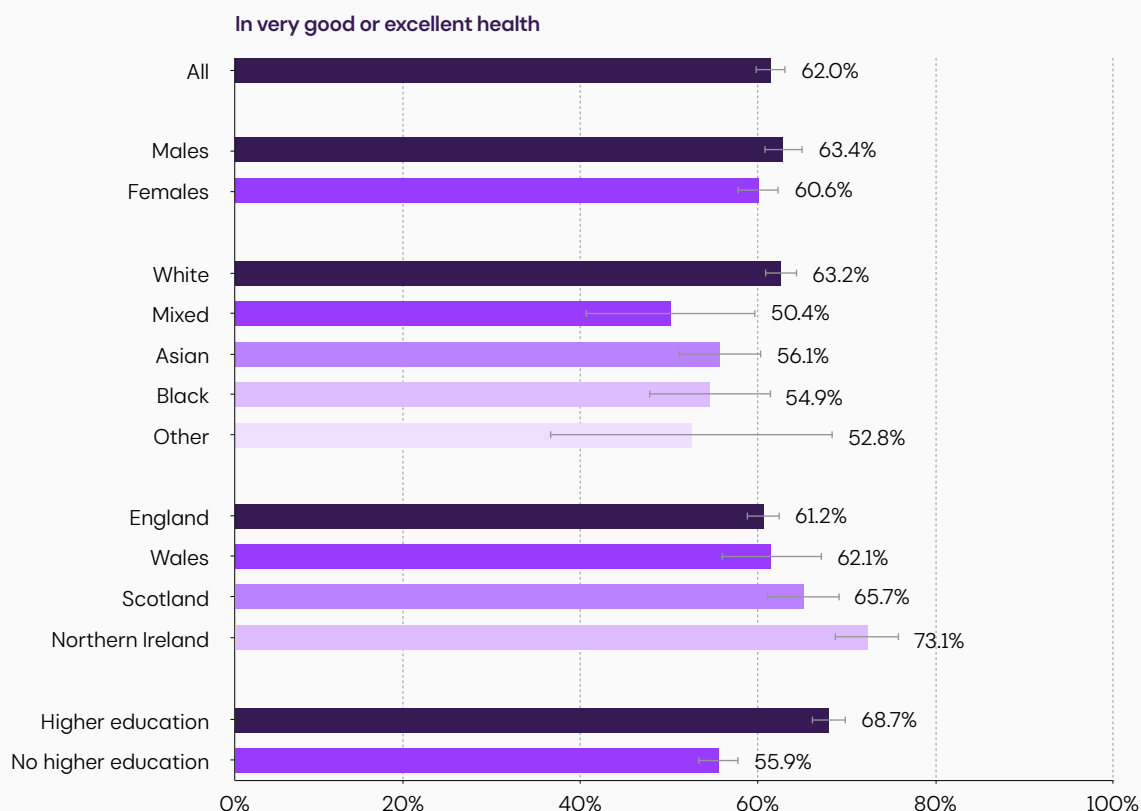
62%

of young adults rated their general health as very good or excellent.



or excellent health. Educational background was also associated with self-rated health: almost seven in ten participants with higher education (68.7%) reported very good or excellent health, compared with 55.9% of those without higher education. Levels of self-rated health in English MCS participants were similar to young adults in the English Next Steps cohort, where 61.9% reported being in good or excellent health at age 25.

FIGURE 6: GENERAL HEALTH



Longstanding limiting condition

Almost one-quarter of participants (23.4%) reported having a longstanding physical or mental health condition that limited their activities (Figure 7). A substantially higher proportion of females than males reported a limiting condition (29.4% compared with 17.1%). The prevalence of limiting conditions was also relatively high among participants of White origin (24.1%), compared to those of Asian (14.0%) and those of Black (16.3%) ethnicity. Participants living in Northern Ireland were much less likely to report a limiting condition (14.2%) compared to those in the other UK nations where figures ranged between 23.2% and 28.3%. Those without higher education reported a limiting condition more frequently than those with higher education experience (25.7% compared with 20.9%).

Compared with MCS participants in England, a much lower proportion of Next Steps participants reported a longstanding condition that limited their daily activities (13.4% compared with 23.4%). A likely contributor to this difference is the substantial increase in longstanding mental health conditions among young adults. As shown in a previous briefing paper, rates of longstanding mental health problems were more than twice as high among English MCS participants as among those in the Next Steps cohort.³ In turn, another briefing paper found that chronic mental health problems were a key risk factor for being NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) at age 23, and may help explain why unemployment rates were higher in the MCS than in Next Steps.¹

29.4% of females reported a longstanding limiting condition

compared to
17.1%
of men.

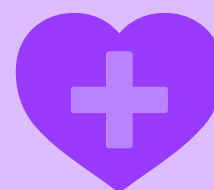
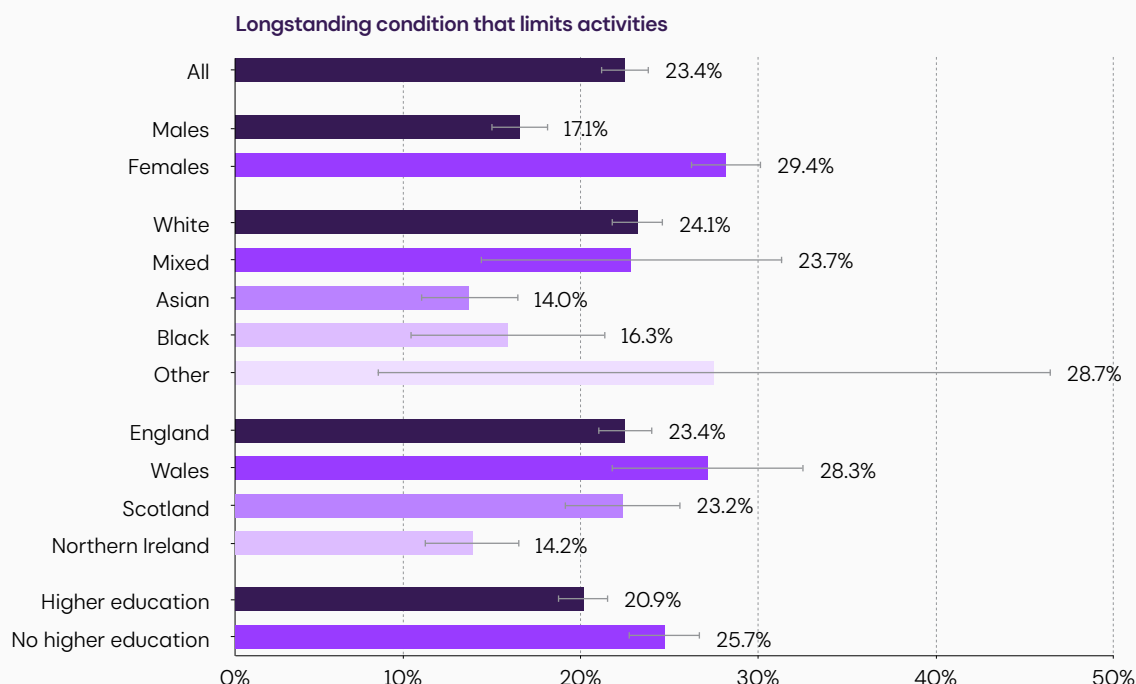


FIGURE 7: LONGSTANDING CONDITION THAT LIMITS ACTIVITIES

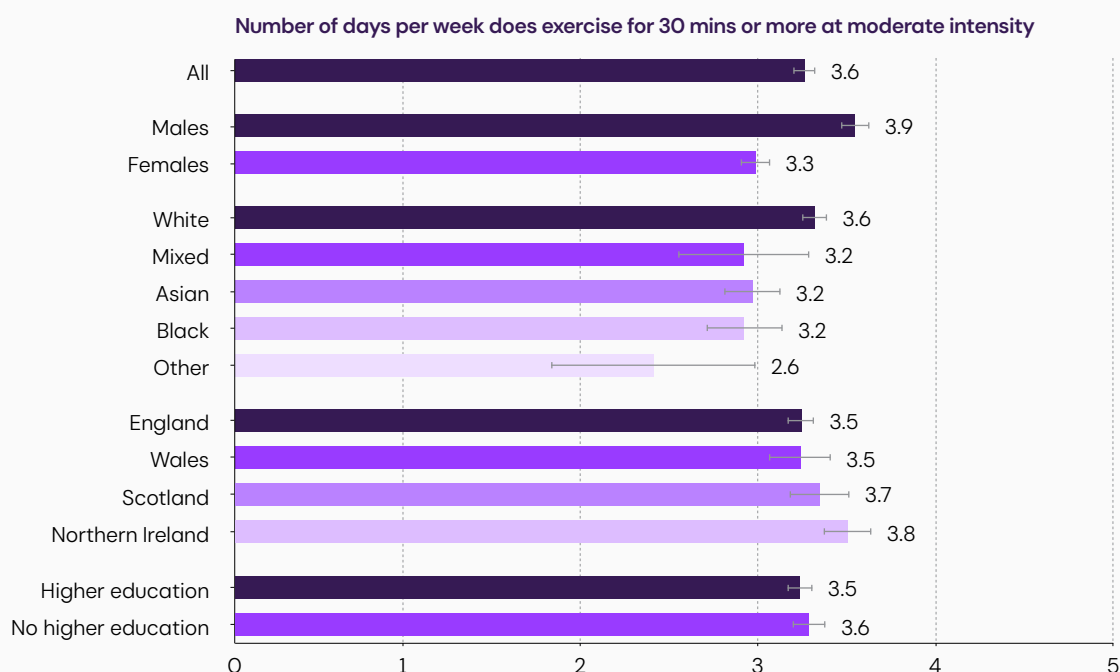


Physical exercise

Participants reported undertaking moderate-intensity physical exercise for at least 30 minutes on an average of 3.6 days per week (Figure 8). Males reported exercising more frequently than females (3.9 versus 3.3 days per week). Participants in Northern Ireland reported the highest average levels of physical activity (3.8 days per week) whereas the figure was lowest in England (3.5 days), although the confidence intervals overlapped. Higher levels of exercise were observed among participants of White

ethnic background, who reported exercising on average 3.6 days per week, which was significantly higher than for those of Asian (3.2 days), Black (3.2 days), and other origin (2.6 days). Compared with the English only MCS participants at age 23 who reported exercising 3.5 days per week on average, young adults aged 25 in the Next Steps cohort reported slightly lower levels of physical activity, exercising 3.1 days per week on average.

FIGURE 8: PHYSICAL EXERCISE

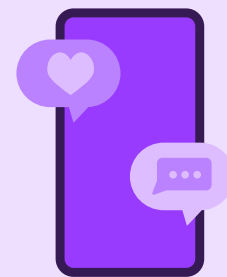


Social media use

At age 23, cohort members were asked about the amount of time they spend on social media; whether they felt addicted to it; whether they felt more connected and happier online than in real life; and whether they had experienced online victimisation. Looking across adolescence and early adulthood also provides insight into how patterns of social media use have changed over time.

21.4%

at age 23 reported
spending five or more
hours per day on
social media

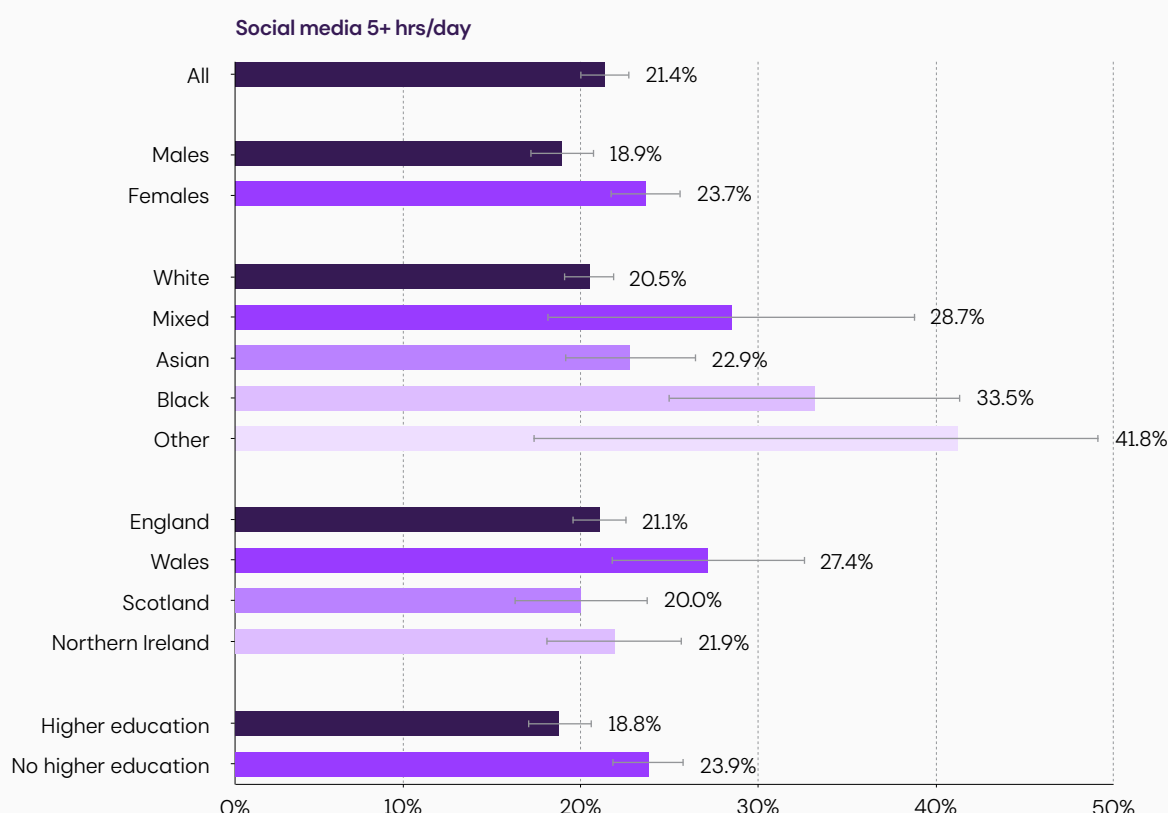


Time spent on social media

At age 23, just over one in five participants (21.4%) reported spending five or more hours per day on social media (Figure 9). Females were more likely than males to report this level of use (23.7% compared with 18.9%). Heavy social media use was particularly common among participants of Black ethnic background (33.5%) compared to those of White ethnicity (20.5%). Participants with higher

education experience were less likely than those without higher education to spend five or more hours per day on social media (18.8% compared with 23.9%). Compared with MCS participants, intensive social media use was less common among young adults in the Next Steps cohort, with 14.1% reporting spending five or more hours per day on social media.

FIGURE 9: TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

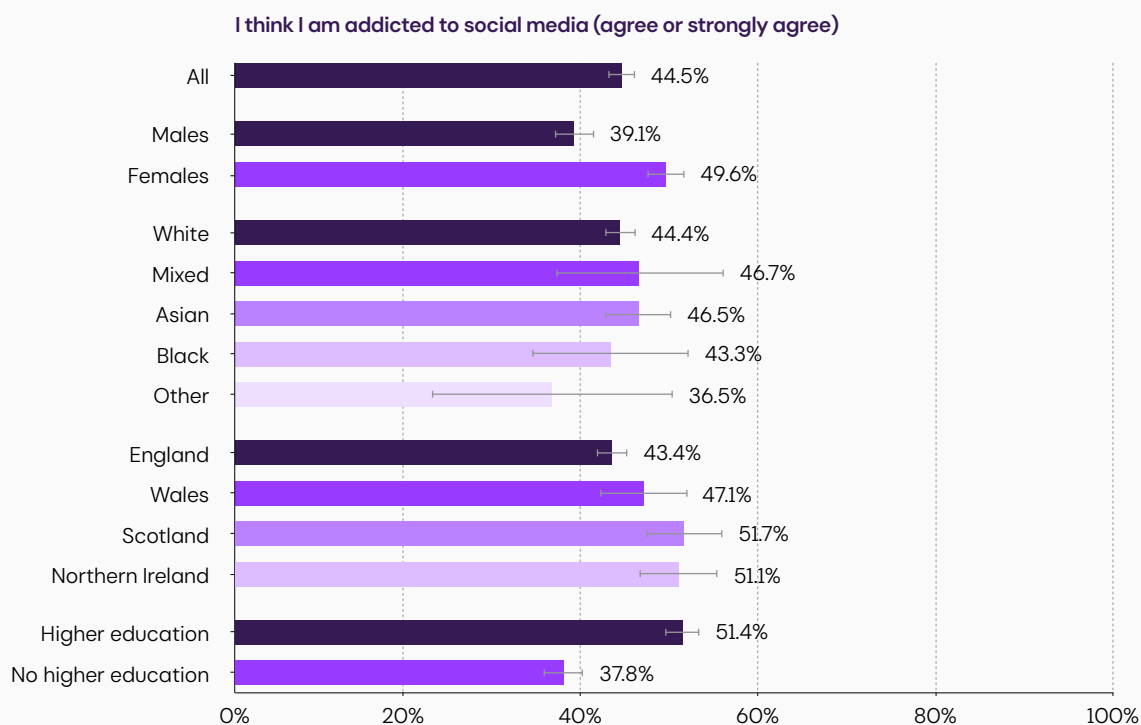


Social media addiction

Nearly half of young adults (44.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were addicted to social media (Figure 10). Females were more likely than males to report feeling addicted (49.6% compared with 39.1%). Agreement was particularly high among participants living in Scotland (51.7%) and Northern

Ireland (51.1%), compared to in England (43.4%). A much higher proportion of those with higher education agreed that they were addicted to social media (51.4%), compared to those with no higher education (37.8%).

FIGURE 10: SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION

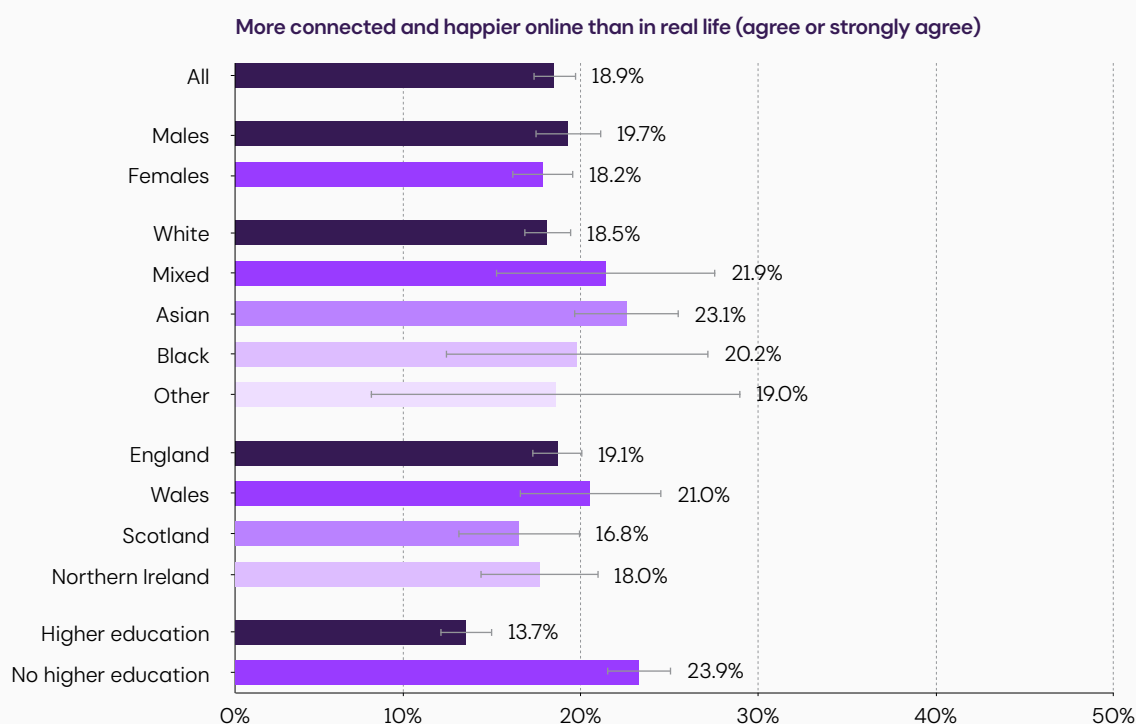


Online connectedness and happiness

Around one in five participants (18.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more connected and happier online than in real life (Figure 11). Participants of Asian ethnicity (23.1%) were more likely to express this view than those of White ethnicity (18.5%).

Educational differences were particularly pronounced: almost one-quarter of participants without higher education (23.9%) agreed that they felt more connected and happier online, compared with just 13.7% of those with higher education experience.

FIGURE 11: ONLINE CONNECTEDNESS AND HAPPINESS

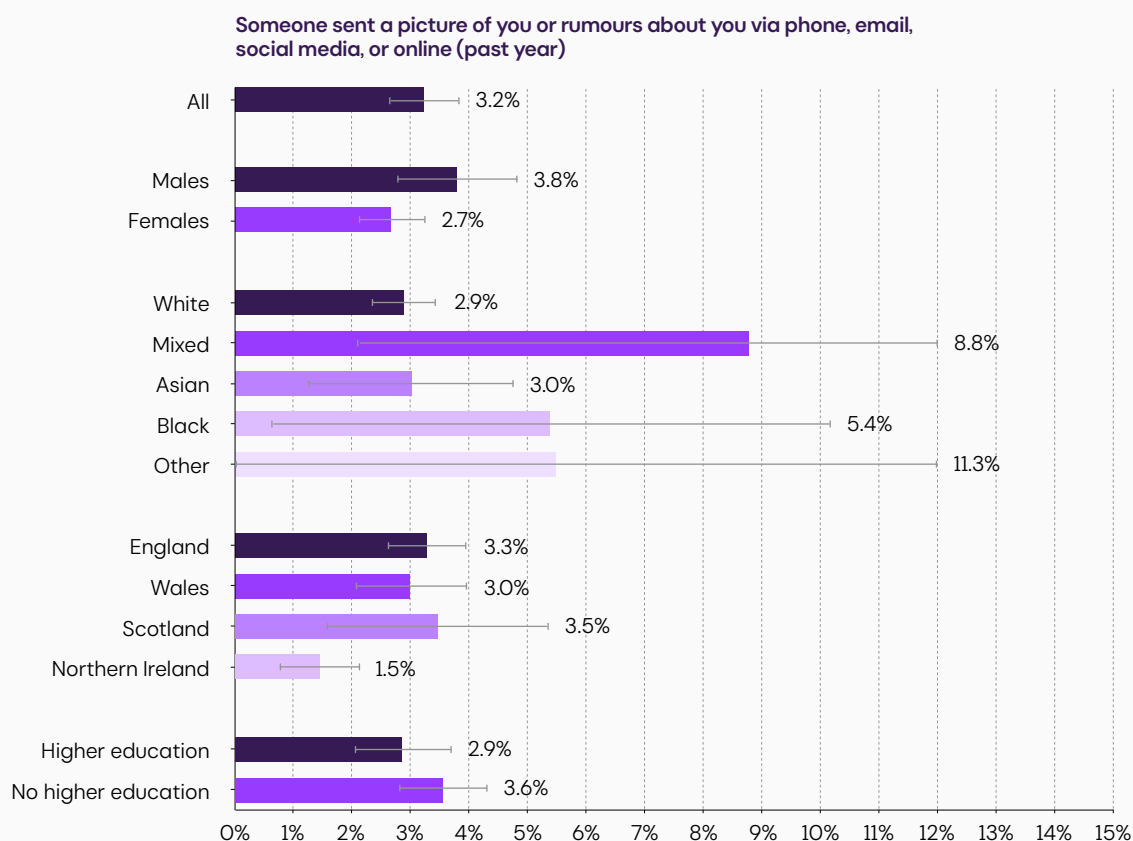


Online victimisation

Experiences of online victimisation were relatively uncommon, with 3.2% of participants reporting that someone had sent pictures of them or spread rumours about them online in the past year (Figure 12). Participants in Northern Ireland reported the lowest level of victimisation (1.5%). Although we

observe differences within sex, ethnicity and educational groups, these differences were not statistically significant, owing to the small overall prevalence of victimisation which make it difficult to detect such differences.

FIGURE 12: ONLINE VICTIMISATION



Social media use over time

In terms of changes in social media engagement over time, we can compare to similar measures at age 17, and at age 14 where available. The proportion of people spending five or more hours per day on social media increased substantially during adolescence before declining slightly in early adulthood. At age 14, around one in five participants (20.8%) reported spending five or more hours per day on social media. This rose to over one third (36.6%) by age 17 before falling to 21.4% at age 23. Social media addiction fell insubstantially from age 17 (46.7%) to age 23 (44.5%), while feeling more connected and happier online fell significantly from 26.9% to 18.9% between age 17 and 23. Those experiencing online victimisation more than halved from age 17 (7.7%) to age 23 (3.2%).

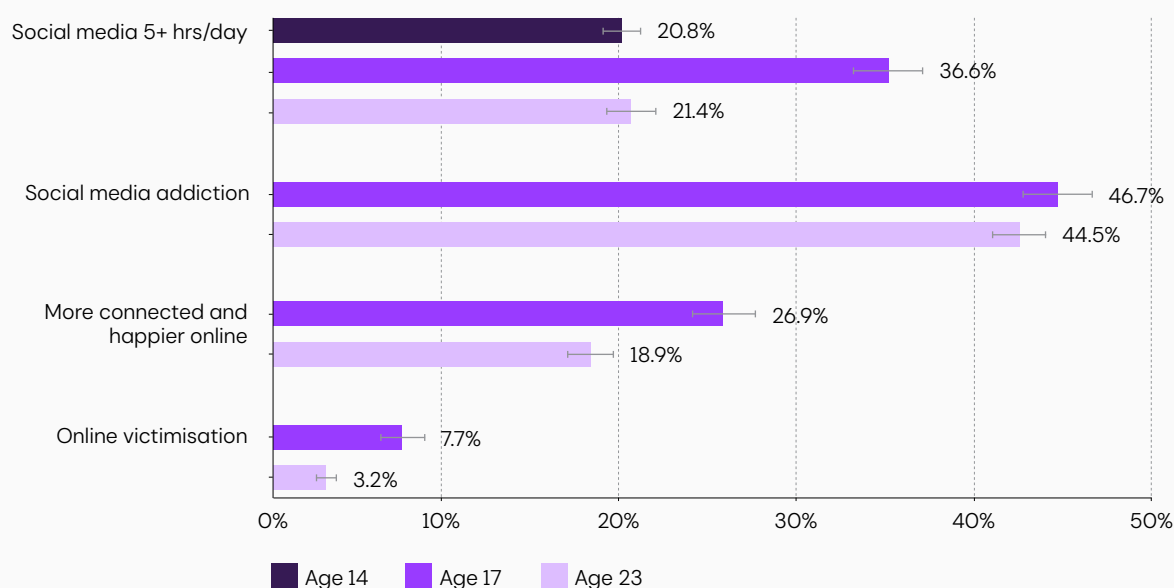
The proportion spending

Five or more hours

daily on social media rose during adolescence before declining in early adulthood.



FIGURE 13: SOCIAL MEDIA FROM ADOLESCENCE TO EARLY ADULTHOOD



Conclusion

The Millennium Cohort Study provides a unique opportunity to understand the experiences of a generation of young people born at the start of the 21st century in the UK. At age 23, participants generally report positive outcomes across many areas of life. Most are in good health, engage regularly in physical activity, recognise the importance of environmental issues, and participate in democratic processes. Social media remains an important feature of daily life, although some indicators of problematic use have declined since adolescence.

Where comparable measures are available, comparisons with the Next Steps cohort born a decade earlier suggest both continuity and change across generations. Levels of self-rated health appear remarkably similar among young adults born a decade apart, while physical activity levels are slightly higher among the MCS generation. At the same time, longstanding limiting health conditions appear

substantially more common among today's young adults, and intensive social media use has become more prevalent.

The findings reveal substantial differences between groups, particularly by educational pathway. Young adults with higher education experience consistently report greater civic participation, stronger confidence in democratic institutions, better health, and lower levels of intensive social media use. Differences by sex, ethnicity, and country of residence are also evident across several domains.

As cohort members continue through adulthood, future sweeps of the Millennium Cohort Study will provide important insights into how these early adult experiences shape later outcomes. The findings presented here therefore offer not only a snapshot of early adulthood in the United Kingdom, but also a foundation for understanding how inequalities emerge, persist, and potentially widen over the life course.

About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a UK longitudinal birth study. It is following the lives of around 19,000 young people born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000–02. There have been seven main sweeps of MCS to date, at ages 9 months, 3, 5, 7, 11, 14, 17 and 23 years. It has tracked measures such as physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and behavioural development, economic circumstances, parenting, relationships and family life across the life course. MCS is core funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and a consortium of government departments.

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