Have social media ruined a generation? Gallup answers: it depends

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Gallup’s State of the World’s Emotional Health 2026 report links social media use and wellbeing in 97 countries. Moderate use shows the best profile, while heavy use is tied to more anger, stress and sadness. Effects are modest and vary by country and age. The study is observational and cannot prove causes.

If we listen to a certain narrative, the scene has already been written. A generation hunched over a screen, emotions in pieces, teenagers consumed by an algorithm and, while we’re at it, an entire world ruined by a scrolling thumb. **Culprit identified, case closed.** Politics has adapted: according to the Gallup report, which refers to a Reuters article, almost

40 countries are discussing, proposing or adopting age restrictions for social media. But if someone went to look at the numbers, what would they find?

Well, the numbers were collected by Gallup with the World Poll 2026, among adults aged 15 and over in 97 countries, with about a thousand respondents per country. Two new questions were asked: whether in the last week one used a social network of any kind and, if so, for how long per day. **The answer, as reported in Gallup's study State of the World's Emotional Health 2026, is that an average of 81% use them, with a range from 98% in Bahrain and Lebanon to 12% in Chad.**

A premise is necessary, however. The study is observational, so it shows associations, not causes; it measures hours, not what is watched or whether the use is compulsive. **With these declared limits, let's see what emerges.**

The first data point: the raw comparison inflates the benefits

At a glance, users seem to feel much better than non users: sadness at 20% versus 33%, loneliness at 17% versus 29%. It would be a gift to the platforms, if it were not that those who use social media are also younger, more educated, on average healthier and with more people to count on. **Gallup, then, cleans the data of these differences, and the gaps shrink considerably.**

Small but measurable advantages remain: more enjoyment (+2.6 percentage points), more smiles (+3.1), more learning (+3.2), more respect received (+1.9) and a slightly higher life evaluation (+0.1 on a scale from 0 to 10). The only price is stress, which rises by 2.5 points. **It is not an acquittal, it is a modest effect that goes in both directions.**

The twist comes when time is introduced. Gallup distinguishes three groups: limited use (less than 30 minutes a day, non

users included), moderate use (from 30 minutes to two hours) and high use (two hours or more). **In the average of the 97 countries the largest group is the moderate one (39%), ahead of limited (31%) and high (27%).**

And the best profile is precisely the central one. Those who exceed two hours report more anger, loneliness and sadness (+2.2 points each), more stress (+2.0) and more worry (+1.7). But those who use social media very little are not better off: they have less enjoyment, fewer smiles and a lower life evaluation. When time is then treated as a continuous measure, no significant relationship emerges with positive emotions or with life evaluation. It is not a straight line that goes down, it is a curve.

The “it depends” data point: it depends on where and on whom

Here is the “it depends” in its most concrete form. **In high income countries high use is associated with a lower life evaluation, while in non high income countries there is no difference.** In the United States the gap is about 0.3 points, while in Germany and the United Kingdom it is not significant.

Among 15 to 29 year olds, the group most under accusation, the report’s appendix indicates that in 74 countries out of 97 high social media use has no substantial association with life evaluation. In 13 it is negative, in 10 positive. This does not make young people just any group: 47% of 15 to 29 year olds fall into high use, against 12% of over 50s, and among young users 19% spend five hours or more a day online.

So are social media innocent?

It would be the convenient conclusion, and therefore suspect. Gallup does not measure what people see or whether the use is problematic. A 2024 review of over 250,000 people in 28 countries, cited in the report, links problematic use to

generalized anxiety, social anxiety and fear of missing out (see the review published in BMC Psychology).

Moreover, the survey starts at age 15 and the report specifies that it does not assess the policies under discussion nor say anything about children. **As reported in the World Happiness Report 2026, chapter 2, among fifteen year olds in 47 countries higher use is generally associated with lower satisfaction, especially among girls.**

The emotional picture of the world, on the other hand, is not explained by a screen. Gallup recalls that in 2025 worry (38%), stress (36%) and physical pain (33%) remain among the most widespread negative emotions, and that compared with 2006 physical pain has risen by ten points.

Life circumstances matter, and Afghanistan shows it too, where a quarter of people say they smiled or laughed the day before despite a prolonged crisis. **It is the underlying message of the report: understanding how we are doing requires looking at the lives in which social media are embedded, rather than just at the time spent looking at them.**

And what does wine have to do with all this?

It is not a study on wine, and it should be read for what it is. **But those who do industry communication speak to an audience that is largely online: 95% of 15 to 29 year olds and 91% of 30 to 49 year olds use social media, against 60% of over 50s.** Among 30 to 49 year olds, moreover, the largest group (45%) is that of moderate use, that is, the one with the most favorable wellbeing profile.

More than an operational indication it is a reminder: the audience of social media is not a single block. It changes by age, by hours and by country, and **treating it as a monolith, in one sense or another, is the surest way to aim at the wrong**

target.

Key points

1. **Moderate use** (30 minutes to two hours daily) shows the best wellbeing profile across 97 countries.
2. **High use** (two hours or more) is linked to more anger, loneliness, sadness, stress and worry.
3. **Effects are modest** and depend on country: high income nations show a lower life evaluation with high use.
4. **Young people** use social media most: 47% of 15 to 29 year olds fall into high use.
5. **The study is observational**, so it shows associations rather than causes, and measures hours rather than content.