

Fashionable FitBits discourage young teens from exercising, study finds

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Credit: Brunel University

Wearable activity trackers could be doing more harm than good in encouraging young teenagers to exercise, new research from Brunel University London suggests.

Demand for FitBits soared among 11-15 year-olds last year, and [The Times](#) referred to the gadget as the 'latest status symbol' for kids.

Over decades, physical [activity](#) interventions targeted at young people in schools have only produced modest effects. Finding new ways to motivate young people is vital for long-term health, and - for a generation tethered to their mobiles - fitness devices seemed to be a new and exciting way to help.

A new study by Dr Charlotte Kerner (Brunel University London) and Dr Victoria Goodyear (University of Birmingham) found that the opposite could be true.

Their research with school pupils aged 13-14 showed that wearing a FitBit for eight weeks demotivated the teenagers from exercising rather than encouraging them to do more.

Surveys and focus groups conducted before and after the trial period concluded that the device (in this case, the FitBit Charge wristband and app, which retails for around £100) ultimately made participants feel less confident about their competence at exercising, less connected to their peers, and less like they had autonomy or choice over how to engage with physical activity.

The FitBit app is designed with features to encourage competition and interaction among peers, and while pupils reported that they set up competitions in their friendship groups, the end result did not always have positive implications.

The FitBit 'community' often helped encourage pupils to engage with discussions about physical activity and develop common understandings and behaviours, but the competitive element often led to peer-pressure to achieve goals. In some cases, it induced a sense of guilt and other negative feelings of self.

Competition was an external pressure to engage in physical activity

rather than an internal motivator, and while the desire to get to the top of the leaderboard encouraged some participants to be more active, most of the pupils did not report engaging in activity 'for fun' during the 8-week period.

The research team noticed a short-term novelty effect where some participants were more active for the first few weeks, but it was consistently reported that after a month, pupils became bored of the FitBit. After that, reported [physical activity levels](#) declined.

"I did it for the first four weeks, and then the last couple of weeks I just sat at home all day," reported one participant.

Dr Kerner comments: "Our data suggests that peer-comparison was a key factor in undermining levels of competence and autonomous motivation. There wasn't a desire for our participants to be more active for themselves and their own goals, or for fun, it was simply because they wanted to beat their mates. Self-determined forms of motivation are much better in encouraging people to engage in a particular behaviour.

"Additionally, the pre-defined daily target encouraged by FitBit is 10,000 steps. It's not a personalised target and our results show that many participants found it undermining. They said it was unfair, especially if you lacked the ability to achieve those targets.

"They strived to achieve it but would often fall short. That made them feel really bad about themselves, and put them off exercise. The app had a negative influence on their perceptions of what being competent at activity means because these pre-defined targets were not relevant to individual needs."

The researchers suggest that digital technologies could still play a useful role but practitioners (for example, PE teachers) should help support and

educate young people in personalisation and interpreting data for individual goals and ability, rather than encouraging young people to compare themselves to others or a normative standard of achievement. It is vital to promote autonomy as young people's motivation to be more physically active. They need to see themselves as capable and confident, and the 'origin' of their behaviours rather than a 'pawn'.

Study participants (44 girls and 40 boys) were recruited from six randomly selected PE classes within two schools, a non-selective private school in the South East of England and a comprehensive in the North West.

The research team conclude that research should continue with a larger group of [young people](#) to enable further solid conclusions on the role of healthy lifestyle technologies in [physical activity](#) behaviour.

More information: Charlotte Kerner et al. The Motivational Impact of Wearable Healthy Lifestyle Technologies: A Self-determination Perspective on Fitbits With Adolescents, *American Journal of Health Education* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/19325037.2017.1343161](https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2017.1343161)

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