

# Irony and humour keep teenage #gymnads healthy on social media

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Teenage boys rely on social media to access a wealth of information about living a healthy lifestyle—but rather than being victims of online harms, such as an unhealthy body image obsession, the majority are able

to use humour, irony and banter to navigate social media content.

In a new study, published in *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, researchers in the University of Birmingham's School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, investigated how young boys use Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube to learn about [physical activity](#), diet, and [body](#) image.

Over a 12-month period, more than 1,300 teenage boys from 10 schools and from a range of socio-economic and [ethnic backgrounds](#) engaged a series of class activities, interviews, workshops and a survey.

In contrast to popular opinion, the study showed teenage boys were intelligent and critical users and generators of social [media](#). For example, they used irony, through hashtags like #gymlad to enable them to post selfies about their bodies in the gym without fear of ridicule, and within a context of acceptable banter.

"The evidence from teenage boys indicated that you can be a gymlad if you're 'ripped', with a toned gym body, but you can also use gymlad in an ironic way," says lead researcher, Dr. Victoria Goodyear. "Using humour and irony means that boys can still aspire to have gym bodies and be motivated by sport, exercise and healthy diets, but without the risk of being put down or ridiculed by their peers."

"What's particularly important about this research is that it shows young people are critical users and generators of social media who are able to evaluate and think clearly about what they see, do and use online," says Dr. Goodyear.

"Young people can't turn off social media—it's not an option. But while we see plenty of news coverage about the negative impact of social media on health and [body image](#), in reality, we are seeing [teenage boys](#)

accessing information, learning and being motivated by it, but also finding ways to not put themselves at risk of 'body shaming' that could lead to unhealthy habits."

The research highlights the need for adults—parents, carers and teachers—to try to better understand and empathise, rather than criticise how young people use social media. The team has published guidance on this topic. In addition, a new partnership with Google offers a professional development programme to educate teachers in this field.

"We need to support adults to become more digitally literate, so they understand both the positive and the negative potential of [social media](#)," says Dr. Goodyear. "They can then help young people navigate these landscapes to produce positive health education outcomes."

**More information:** Victoria Goodyear et al, #Gymlad - young boys learning processes and health-related social media, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2019.1673470](#)

Provided by University of Birmingham

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