

DISRUPTING THE FEED

A STUDY INTO TEEN ASPIRATION, MENTAL HEALTH & THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Research Overview

In 2017, The Female Lead commissioned data science company Starcount to analyse the social profiles of teens who chose to follow the social media accounts of The Female Lead's diverse collection of female role models.

Starcount's research, which analysed thousands of the social media accounts of UK teens, found that teenage girls who follow two or more Female Lead role models engage with social media in ways that differ from that of majority of teenage girls in the UK:

- Of all the celebrities teen girls follow, the 50 most influential are 72% male, whereas for teen girls who follow at least 2 people featured in The Female Lead, the 50 most influential celebrities are 80% female
- Role-model following teens were also much more likely self-describe on social media with words such as "aspire", "dream", "enthusiast" and "feminist".

Overall, the results indicated a strong correlation between following female role models on social media and a more positive and aspirational self-image.

In 2018, The Female Lead and Psychologist Dr Terri Apter, Fellow Emerita of Newnham College, Cambridge teamed up to explore whether this was a causal or correlative relationship. Much current research into teen social media usage has focused on keeping safe online and time-limiting exposure to social channels. This research sought to explore whether teenage girls can be encouraged to use social media to expand, guide or reinforce their interests and aspirations by following more high-achieving women on social media.

Methodology

- Qualitative research with 28 teenage girls aged between 14 and 17 drawn from five schools across London and the South East
- The five schools were selected to provide wide social and ethnic diversity amongst our qualitative sample
- The research commenced in the Autumn term of the 2018/19 academic year and concluded in the Summer term of the same academic year.
- Girls were interviewed individually at the beginning and the end of the study about their interests, goals, values, friends and social media usage
- Following their first interviews, each girl was provided with a tailored list of high-achieving females from their stated areas of interest to follow on the social media channels they engaged with most
- Girls feedback in their second interviews how they experienced this intervention, focusing on their aspiration, interests, mental health and how their use of social media changed and evolved over the study period

Key Findings

- **Challenging preconceptions** - Offering teens a diverse range of female role models to follow outside of the typical celebrity profiles and those of their friends, transformed their view of what social media could be used for and gave them 'a completely different outlook'. At the

end of the study, girls were far more likely to see social media as both for entertainment and for 'education and learning'

- **Disrupting the feed** – Offering teens alternative females to follow disrupted what the teens saw each day in their social feeds and 'explore' sections. The algorithm that typically serves people with 'more of the same' content based on what they already follow, started to flag up greater diversity of content and other individuals and organisations related to their passions: 'Other stuff popped up and then I looked at other things to do with my interests'. This in turn led to positive action in terms of their passions and aspirations – one study participant discovered a scholarship programme for RADA that furthered her dream of going to theatre school, another found out about Climate Change marches from an activist TFL recommended, and started attending Climate Change marches herself
- **Self-care and managing toxic influences** – The experience of taking part in the study also prompted some participants to reflect on their social media usage and change it to make it more beneficial for their mental health. Some started taking 'breaks' from social media, some managed their time spent on social media more carefully, and some actively changed who they followed 'I felt things were actually getting me down before because I was following all of these models, so I just had a massive cleanse of all the people that I thought were almost toxic...I literally felt like a happier person'
- **Value of role models situated in context** – The girls that took part in the study cited the benefits of witnessing women pursuing careers within the context of their whole life which included their hobbies, social life and travel. This 'contextualising' of an aspirational career seemed to help these young women visualise their future career possibilities more readily: '(It) showed that you can be a woman, have fun, and be an engineer all at the same time'. Girls also highlighted that it was useful to see the processes involved in working in a field that interested them, rather than just seeing the finished product of an individual's success.
- **Breaking the echo chamber** – The study also demonstrated that suggesting new and different female role models to follow could be useful in expanding the worldview of participants as it offered exposure to new points of view and perspectives. One girl comments "if my friends would follow these kind of people they can see...how people have different opinions and they might not agree with you and you might not agree with theirs (but) you should be onto new ideas." One girl brooded over the issue of race for a while but concluded "it was just interesting to see how some people think".

Conclusions

- Positive interactions with social media can be enhanced by offering teen girls a diverse range of female role models to follow, that align with their personal interests and career aspirations
- Contrary to the majority of current usage, social media can actually offer a unique opportunity to connect young people to the lives of career role models outside of their personal sphere, that have the potential to inspire, drive their ambition and build self-esteem
- The Female Lead will be creating new educational resources to support the findings of our 'Disrupting The Feed' research including a curated list of 'Recommended Follows' on thefemalelead.com
- The Female Lead will launch a new Social Media Pledge on 8th October 2019, using our research findings to inspire more constructive behaviours on social media, empowering girls to only follow people who make them feel good and encourage them to develop a positive sense of self and belief in what they can achieve