Does social media influence girls away from sport?

School: St Mary's School for Girls

Matilda Bevan, Isabella Day, Megan Evans, Beatrice Foakes, Elizabeth Khan, Ella Withy

Contents

Section 1: Introduction 1
Section 2: Literature Review 1
Section 3: Methodology 3
Section 4: Data Analysis 3
Key findings: 4
Differences between year groups 4
Final open question 5
Section 5: Evaluation 5
Section 6: Conclusion 5
Section 7: References 6
Section 8: Appendices 7
Appendix 1: Microsoft Form Survey 7
Appendix 2: Bar charts of key findings 11

Section 1: Introduction

Social media is an important part of many teenagers lives. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram allow people to share photographs, videos and information about their interests. However, social media may affect how girls feel about themselves and whether they want to participate in sport. Some girls may feel inspired by seeing female athletes online, while others may compare their appearance with people they see on social media. Our report hopes to explore whether social media plays a fundamental part in turning girls away from sport by looking at body image, confidence, barriers to participation as well as the possible positive effects of social media.

Section 2: Literature Review

One possible reason why social media could influence girls away from sport is its effect on body image. Body image means how someone feels about and views their own body. Social media often shows images of people who appear to have 'perfect' bodies. This may encourage girls to compare themselves with others and feel less confident about their appearance.

Burnette, Kwitowski and Mazzeo (2017) and Papageorgiou, Fisher and Cross (2022) studied a group of girls aged 12–14 and 14–17 respectively to investigate their experiences of social media and body image. Both their research found that girls could experience appearance concerns and compare themselves with others online. This is particularly relevant because the participants were a similar age to the girls in this research project. This suggests that social media may affect girls' confidence and could influence their willingness to participate in sport if they become worried about how they look - when wearing sports kit or playing in front of others. However, the researchers also identified the importance of support and confidence in helping girls deal with these pressures which could reduce the impact. Furthermore, these studies mainly investigated body image rather than whether girls actually stopped playing sport. Therefore, they suggest a possible connection but do not prove that social media causes girls to leave sport.

Other factors may also discourage girls from participating in sport. Slater and Tiggemann (2011) studied roughly 700 teenagers and investigated sport participation, teasing and body image concerns. They found that girls participated in organised sport less often than boys and experienced higher levels of teasing. The researchers suggested that teasing and body image concerns might contribute to girls' lower participation rates.

This research is important because it shows that girls may face several barriers, including fear of being judged by others. Social media could increase these concerns if girls worry about photos, comments or comparisons. However, teasing can also happen at school and in sporting environments without any connection to social media. This means that other influences must also be considered when investigating why girls choose to participate in sport or stop taking part.

Although social media may create pressure about appearance, research suggests that sport itself can have positive effects on how girls feel about their bodies. Jankauskiene and Baceviciene (2022) studied a sample of teenage girls and explored whether taking part in sport affected the relationship between beauty ideals and how girls viewed their bodies. Their findings suggested that sport participation could reduce some of the negative effects of adopting thin body ideals. In other words, girls who play sport may learn to value what their bodies can do rather than focusing only on how they look. This suggests that sport could help some girls develop a more positive attitude towards their bodies.

It is also important to consider evidence that challenges the idea that social media always has a negative effect. Maes and Vandenbosch (2022) studied a large group of adolescent girls to investigate Instagram and TikTok use. They found that using these platforms did not predict later increases in the opinions of beauty ideals or unhappiness with appearance. This suggests that social media use does not automatically lead to negative body-image changes. Girls may respond differently depending on the content they see and their personal experiences.

Social media can also encourage girls to participate in sport by showing female athletes, sharing information about sports clubs and provide access to supportive communities. Watson-Mackie et al. (2024) reviewed many studies involving over 10,000 participants to investigate whether technology could support physical activity among young women aged 13–24. Some studies found positive effects on physical activity, including through websites and social media. However, the overall evidence was limited, and the quality of the studies varied, suggesting that technology can encourage activity in some situations, but its success depends on how it is used.

In conclusion, our research highlights three common themes that consistently appear in discussions about girls in sport as well as social media:

- **Appearance pressure**
  Social media provides a platform for comparison with others which could lead to body dissatisfaction/self-consciousness.
- **Barriers to sport**
  Body image, teasing and fear of judgement may make some girls less comfortable participating.
- **Positive influence**
  Social media can also expose girls to female athletes, sporting communities, exercise ideas and positive role models.

These are the areas we will be exploring in more detail in our data capture to help us answer our main question.

Section 3: Methodology

Our research methods consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data. Our qualitative data took the form of online research which consisted mostly of academic articles and websites which helped built the basis for our literature review. We had hoped to conduct interviews with key sporty students and a long-standing PE teacher to gain insight into their experiences within sport. However, we ran out of time to conduct these before our data analysis deadline.

Quantitative data was mainly drawn from our online survey. We randomly selected 5 students from each tutor group (3 in each year) across years 7-10. This was so we could get a wide spread of data within year groups (to reduce bias) as well as investigate if age had any impact on sports participation or body image. Ideally this meant we planned for a sample size of 60, however due to either lack of consent or students not wanting to take part we collected a sample of 40, with a roughly equal spread across all year groups.

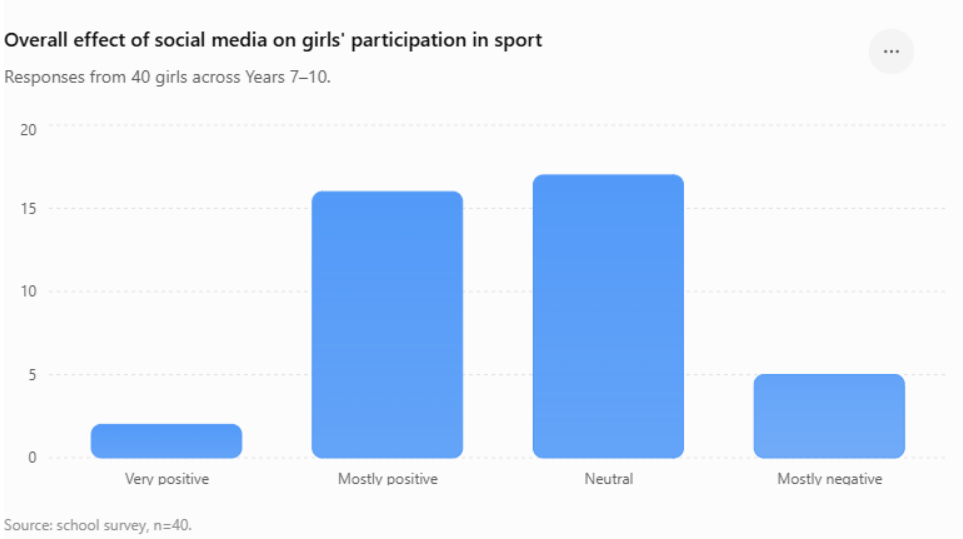
We asked for consent from all students to take the survey and use their data. All data was all collected anonymously through a Google Form with 20 questions. We carefully considered the questions so we could collect the right data to best answer our question. They were based around the three key themes from the literature review so we could make clearer distinctions between correlation and causation. We used closed questions to make the data easier to analyse and compare, however the final question was open ended to allow for any unexpected insights as well as capture each student's experiences to help explain their data.

Section 4: Data Analysis

The survey data suggests that social media does influence girls' relationship with sport, but it does not appear to influence girls away from sport overall. Instead, its influence is mixed, with both positive and negative effects.

Key findings:

- **Social media can encourage girls to participate in sport.**
  23 out of 40 girls (58%) said social media had encouraged them to try a sport or exercise activity. This was particularly more noticeable in Years 8 and 9.
- **Female athletes and fitness influencers have some positive influence.**
  26 out of 40 girls said female athletes or fitness influencers motivate them to be active either “a little” or “a lot”. This suggests that seeing women participating successfully in sport can provide motivation and positive role models.
- **However, appearance and body image are significant concerns.**
  19 girls (48%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media creates pressure about appearance or body image in sport. Furthermore, 20 girls (50%) said they had compared their appearance or fitness level with people they see on social media at least sometimes.
- **But, despite this barrier this does not usually result in girls avoiding sport.**
  29 out of 40 girls (73%) said they had never avoided sport because of worries about appearance, photographs or being judged online. Only 6 said they had done so, with a further 5 saying they had sometimes.
- **Social media does not appear to significantly replace sporting activity.**
  32 girls (80%) said social media reduces the time they spend doing sport “not really” or “not at all”. Similarly, 29 girls (73%) said they had never or rarely chosen social media instead of participating in sport.
- **Overall attitudes are more positive or neutral than negative (see chart below).**
  18 girls (45%) viewed social media as mostly or very positive for girls participating in sport, compared with only 5 (13%) who viewed it as mostly negative. The largest group, 17 girls (43%), were neutral.



Differences between year groups

There are some interesting differences between the year groups. Year 9 pupils were particularly positive - 7 of 12 described social media's effect as mostly positive - while only 2 considered it mostly negative. In contrast, Year 7 pupils were more neutral, with 7 of 10 choosing the neutral response.

Year 10 showed the strongest negative experiences. Three of the seven Year 10 pupils said social media had made them less confident about participating in sport, and three had avoided sport because of concerns about appearance, photographs or being judged online. This is noticeably higher than in Years 7–9 and could suggest that the negative impact of social media becomes more significant as girls get older. However, since the Year 10 sample is only seven pupils, this observation should be considered lightly.

Final open question

The last open-ended question helped explain the data. Several girls recognised that social media can create unrealistic expectations about appearance, body shape and how sporty someone should look.

However, there were also strongly positive views. One pupil felt that sports influencers were encouraging girls to become more active, while another highlighted the supportive comments girls often leave on sporting posts. This reinforces the idea that social media itself is not necessarily the problem; the type of content girls encounter appears to matter.

Section 5: Evaluation

Upon reflection, our approach to the report throughout the process is mixed. We should have used the time more efficiently at the start to plan and prepare as this would have helped ease pressure towards the end. Overall, however, we worked effectively as a team and in the later stages we had a clearer division of roles allowing for all members to contribute fairly and valuably.

An initial problem we encountered was finding research that linked sport and social media and its impact on girls. Some of what we primarily found was either focused on girls' equality in sports or social media's impact on girls. However, once we isolated the three key themes from the evidence, it became easier to evaluate information linking the two areas.

The process of collecting data went well. The survey was well designed, and our findings complimented our wider research on the subject. The only improvement could have been selecting more participants to make the data more robust. Plus, as previously mentioned, it would have been interesting to include some interview data from girls doing sports at a high level as well as insights from a sports teacher to go deeper into the factors that impact why girls either remain or leave sport.

Another challenge we faced, was that we were unable to meet with our partner school before the report deadline due to time constraints and scheduling.

Section 6: Conclusion

In conclusion, the research suggests that social media influences girls' attitudes about sport, but does not generally push them away from participating. Comparing the literature review with the survey findings shows that social media can have both positive and negative effects. It can inspire girls through female sporting role models and motivate them to try new activities. However, appearance-focused content can encourage comparisons and create pressure to look a certain

way, potentially reducing confidence and making some girls feel uncomfortable participating in sport.

There are limitations to this research, as the relatively small survey sample cannot represent all girls. Furthermore, the findings suggest possible links between social media and sporting attitudes but do not prove that social media directly causes girls to stop participating. Other factors, including friendship groups, teasing and opportunities to play sport, may also influence their decisions.

Overall, social media does not appear to influence girls away from sport as a whole, but appearance-related pressures can negatively affect some girls. Its influence depends largely on the content they see and how they respond to it. Encouraging positive sporting content and focusing on ability, enjoyment and participation rather than appearance could help reduce these pressures. Ultimately, social media can be both a barrier and a source of encouragement, depending on how it is used.

Section 7: References

Burnette, C.B., Kwitowski, M.A. and Mazzeo, S.E. (2017) '"I don't need people to tell me I'm pretty on social media": A qualitative study of social media and body image in early adolescent girls', Body Image, 23, pp. 114–125. [online]

Jankauskiene, R. and Baceviciene, M. (2022) 'Adolescent girls' participation in sports is associated with lower negative effects of internalization of thin body ideals on self-objectification: Findings from a cross-sectional study', Eating and Weight Disorders – Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity, 27, pp. 3289–3300. [online]

Maes, C. and Vandenbosch, L. (2022) 'Adolescent girls' Instagram and TikTok use: Examining relations with body image-related constructs over time using random intercept cross-lagged panel models', Body Image, 41, pp. 453–459. [online]

Hannah Thompson-Radford and Joe Cable, (2024) 'Women's sport and social media: the arguments over shared or separate accounts', The Conversation, https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.c4e76xran [online]

Papageorgiou, A., Fisher, C. and Cross, D. (2022) '"Why don't I look like her?" How adolescent girls view social media and its connection to body image', BMC Women's Health, 22, article 261. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01845-4 [online]

Slater, A. and Tiggemann, M. (2011) 'Gender differences in adolescent sport participation, teasing, self-objectification and body image concerns', Journal of Adolescence, 34(3), pp. 455–463. [online]

Watson-Mackie, K. et al. (2024) 'Technology-supported physical activity and its potential as a tool to promote young women's physical activity and physical literacy: Systematic review', Journal of Medical Internet Research, 26, article e52302. [online]

Section 8: Appendices

Appendix 1: Microsoft Form Survey

1. What year group are you in?

( ) Year 7

( ) Year 8

( ) Year 9

( ) Year 10

2. How often do you take part in sport or physical activity outside PE lessons?

( ) Every day

( ) 3–5 times a week

( ) 1–2 times a week

( ) Rarely

( ) Never

3. What sports or physical activities do you currently do?

_____

4. Which social media apps do you use most often? (Select all that apply)

( ) TikTok

( ) Instagram

( ) Snapchat

( ) YouTube

( ) Pinterest

( ) Other

5. About how much time do you spend on social media each day?

( ) Less than 1 hour

( ) 1–2 hours

( ) 3–4 hours

( ) 5+ hours

6. How often do you see sport or fitness content on social media?

( ) Very often

( ) Often

( ) Sometimes

( ) Rarely

( ) Never

7. Has social media ever encouraged you to try a sport or exercise activity?

( ) Yes

( ) No

( ) Not sure

8. Has social media ever made you feel less confident about participating in sport?

( ) Yes

( ) No

( ) Sometimes

9. Do you think social media creates pressure about appearance or body image in sport?

( ) Strongly agree

( ) Agree

( ) Neutral

( ) Disagree

( ) Strongly disagree

10. Have you ever avoided sport because of worries about appearance, photos, or being judged online?

( ) Yes

( ) No

( ) Sometimes

11. Do female athletes or fitness influencers on social media motivate you to be active?

( ) A lot

( ) A little

( ) Not really

( ) Not at all

12. Do you think girls are represented fairly in sports content on social media?

( ) Yes

( ) No

( ) Not sure

13. Compared with other activities (scrolling, messaging, watching videos), does social media reduce the time you spend doing sport?

( ) A lot

( ) A little

( ) Not really

( ) Not at all

14. Overall, do you think social media has a positive or negative effect on girls participating in sport?

( ) Very positive

( ) Mostly positive

( ) Neutral

( ) Mostly negative

( ) Very negative

15. Have you ever chosen to spend time on social media instead of taking part in sport or physical activity?

( ) Often
( ) Sometimes
( ) Rarely
( ) Never

16. How important is social media in your daily life?

( ) Very important
( ) Quite important
( ) Somewhat important
( ) Not very important
( ) Not important at all

17. Do you think social media focuses more on appearance than sporting ability?

( ) Strongly agree
( ) Agree
( ) Neutral
( ) Disagree
( ) Strongly disagree

18. Have you ever compared your appearance or fitness level to people you see on social media?

( ) Often
( ) Sometimes
( ) Rarely
( ) Never

19. What would encourage more girls to participate in sport?

( ) More positive role models on social media
( ) Less pressure about appearance
( ) More school sports opportunities
( ) More encouragement from friends and family
( ) Other: _____

20. Please explain your opinion about how social media affects girls and sport.

_____

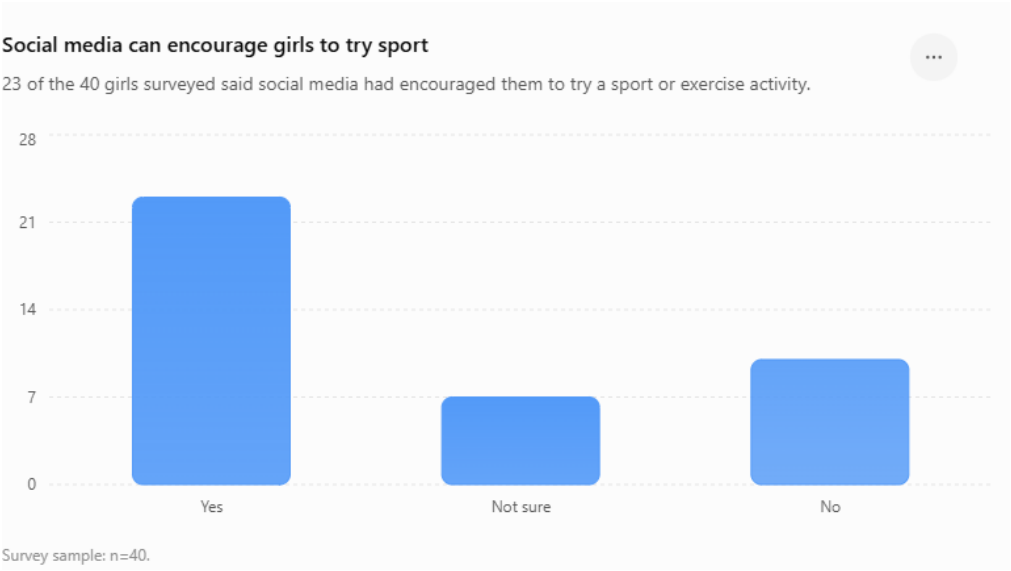
_____

_____

Appendix 2: Bar charts of key findings

1. Social media can encourage girls to try sport

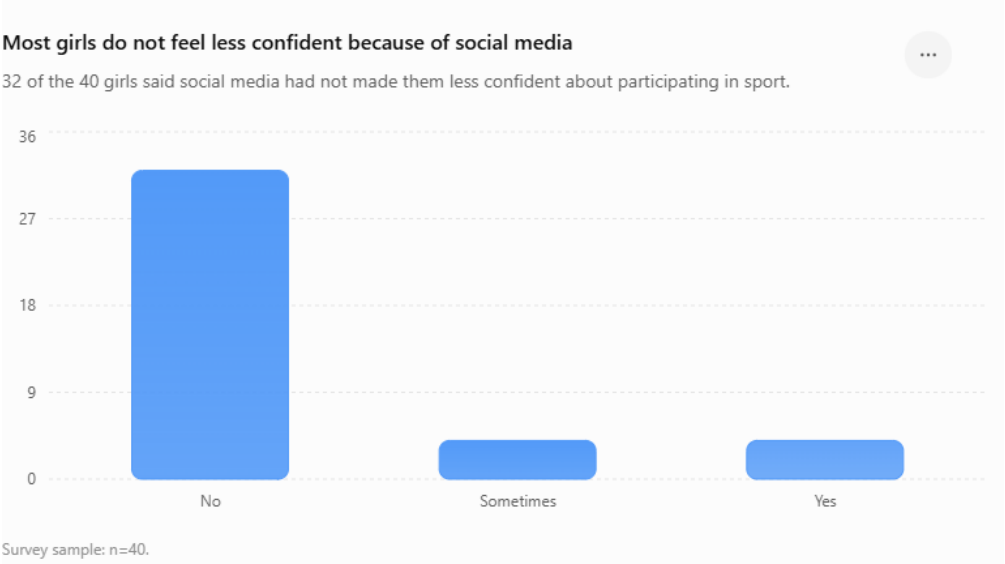
23 of the 40 girls surveyed said social media had encouraged them to try a sport or exercise activity.



What it shows: This is strong evidence against the idea that social media simply pushes girls away from sport. A clear majority (58%) said it had encouraged them to try a sport or exercise activity.

2. Most girls do not feel less confident because of social media

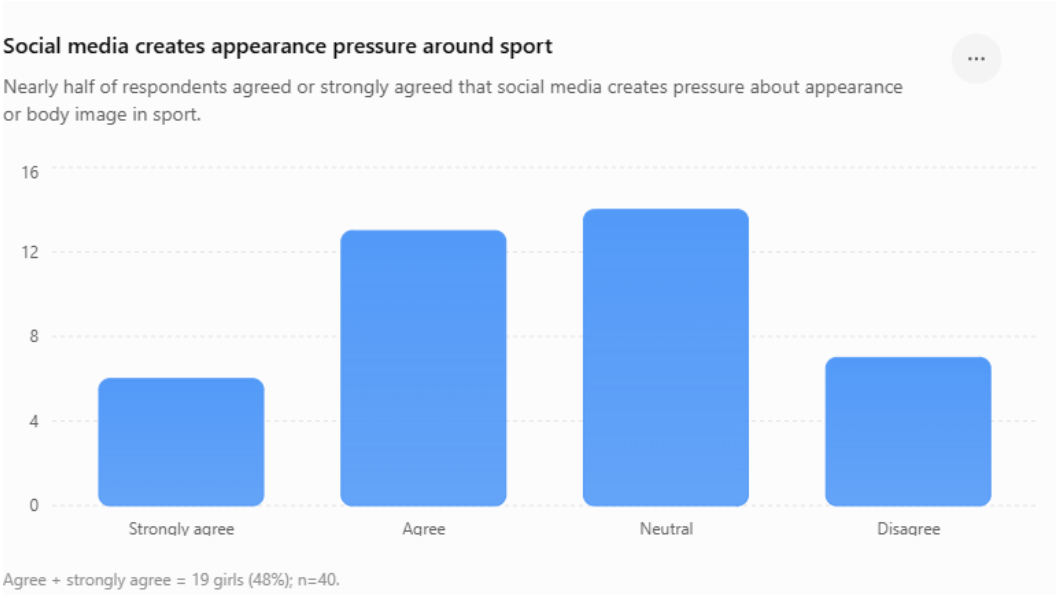
32 of the 40 girls said social media had not made them less confident about participating in sport.



What it shows: Only 8 out of 40 (20%) reported that social media had made them less confident either sometimes or yes. This supports the conclusion that the negative effect exists, but is not experienced by the majority.

3. Social media creates appearance pressure around sport

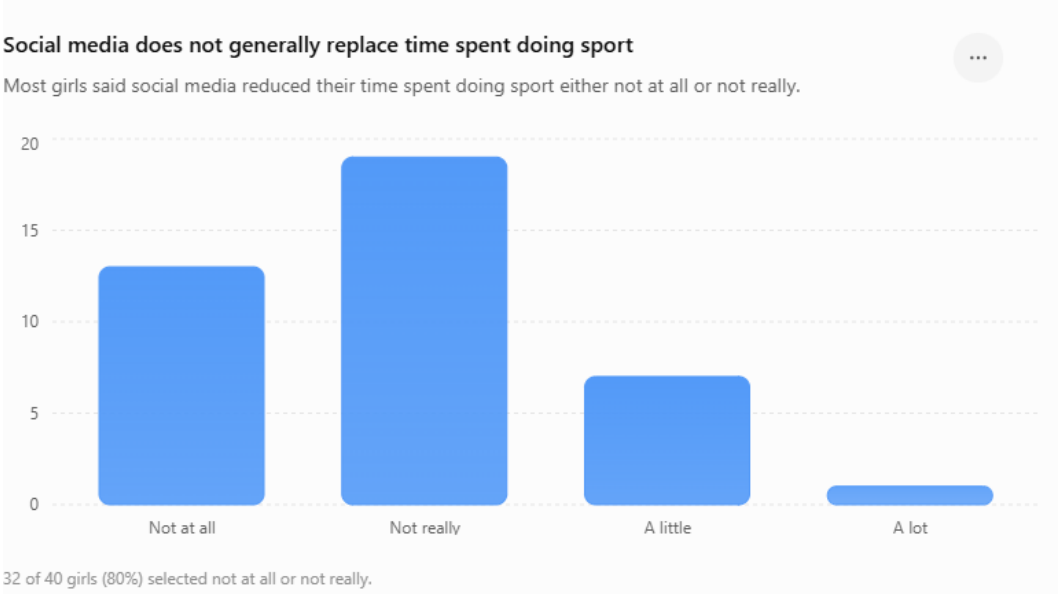
Nearly half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media creates pressure about appearance or body image in sport.



What it shows: Although social media doesn't generally stop girls participating, it clearly creates appearance-related pressure. 19 girls agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

4. Social media does not generally replace time spent doing sport

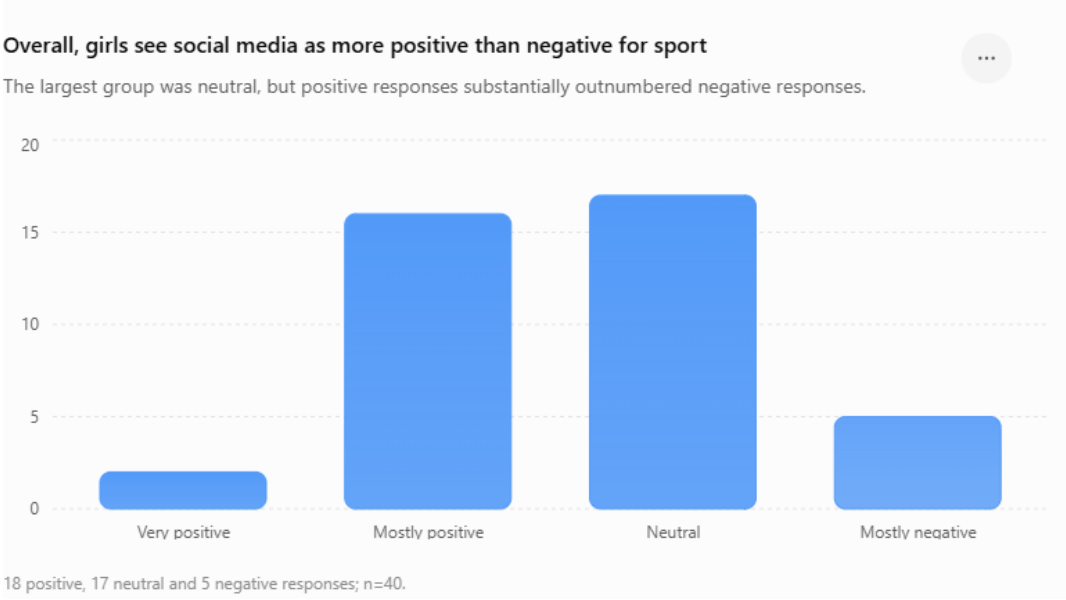
Most girls said social media reduced their time spent doing sport either not at all or not really.



What it shows: Only 1 girl said social media reduced her sporting time “a lot”, while 32 of 40 girls (80%) said “not really” or “not at all”.

5. Overall, girls see social media as more positive than negative for sport

The largest group was neutral, but positive responses substantially outnumbered negative responses.



What it shows: Positive responses (18) considerably outnumber negative responses (5)