



Youth, social media and mind health Coming to a crossroad



Where are we at with social media in 2024?

If you're a social media user, it's likely that time has disappeared into a vacuum on a few occasions as you mindlessly scroll through streams of content. Page after page of people baking, decorating, singing, dancing and exercising. For many of us, 4.9 billion¹ to be precise, the dopamine-fuelled allure of social media is hard to resist. It's easy entertainment and grants many of us some light relief from day-to-day routine. But there's no denying that it occupies a large proportion of our time.

In fact, the average person spends 145 minutes² on social media every day, spreading their digital footprint across six or seven platforms. We're more connected than ever before. It may not be the time we're spending on social media that's the problem though but rather the content that we consume when we're on it. With many of us posting the best moments of our lives, never the worst, it can become an all-consuming breeding ground for poor mind health.

For young people in particular, social media can be a complex space and can have a complex impact on their mental health. Depending on their individual vulnerabilities; how much time they spend on platforms; the type of content they consume; and the degree to which it disrupts their physical health, social media has the potential to benefit or harm a young person's wellbeing. It's the fine line between the two that we're going to explore in this article.

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Where's the harm?

1 of 5

The lifestyles of the rich and famous

As digital natives, young people are the most prolific users of social media. Constantly plugged into a world of likes, shares, tags and tweets, they're more connected than any other age group to the wider world. But growing up in an era of rapid social media evolution and 'always-on' culture doesn't come without its challenges. Social media puts a spotlight on the carefully curated lives of influencers, millionaires and models. Lives that set unrealistic standards of perfection and can foster a sense of inadequacy and poor self-esteem in young people.

Compared to older generations who are typically more settled domestically and professionally, the filtered realities and idealised lifestyles on social media make young people more susceptible to feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety. Not only because the highlight reels of influencers and peers create a distorted view of reality, but because they can lead to a vicious cycle of comparison and dissatisfaction with their own lives.



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Where's the harm? continued

Body image

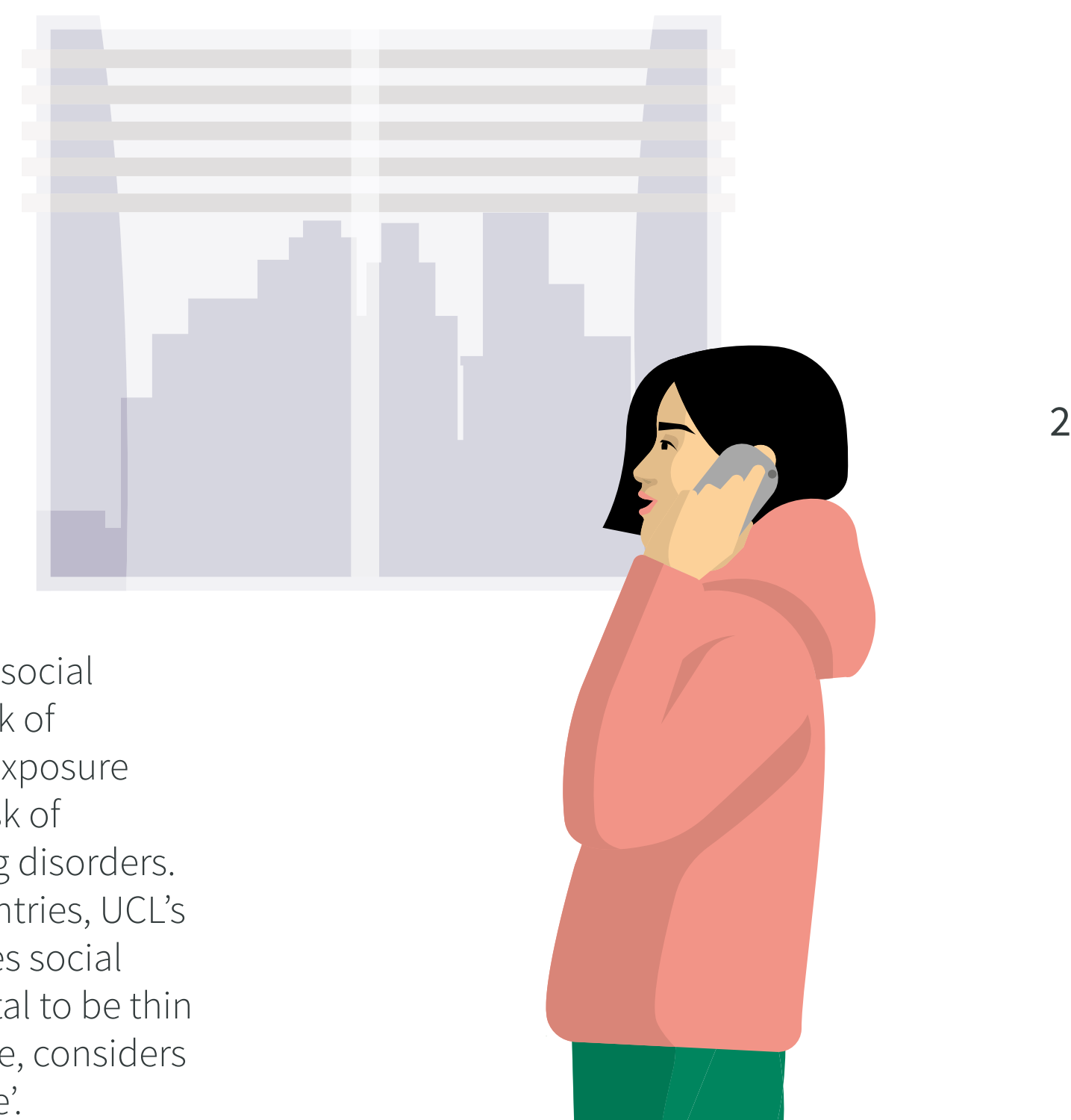
As well as exposing young people to 'aspirational' content, social media can play a key role in how they view their bodies. On the one hand, social media provides a platform for body positivity, health and fitness inspiration but it can also provoke unhealthy comparisons that affect a young person's relationship with their body.

Whether it's a simple FaceTune 'fix', an Instagram filter or the use of AI tools to warp the size and shape of our bodies, there are plenty of options to change how we look. In fact, editing apps alone perpetuate harmful beauty stereotypes and suggest that our authentic selves aren't good enough. One report³ from City, University of London studied 175 women and nonbinary people aged 18-30 and found that 90% of respondents had used editing tools or a filter before posting online. And while social media may not be wholly to blame for negative body image in young people, exposure to everyone's 'best' photos undoubtedly creates a culture of comparison and competition.

Another study⁴ by UCL researchers found that social media users aged 10-24 may not only be at risk of developing poor mental health from an over exposure to filtered images, but they could also be at risk of developing serious image concerns and eating disorders. Examining evidence from 50 studies in 17 countries, UCL's researchers found that social media aggravates social comparison and promotes the idea that it's vital to be thin or fit. Lead author of the study, Alexandra Dane, considers it to be 'an emerging global public health issue'.

“Through the lens of social media, someone else can always look better, skinnier or prettier. The outcome is a population of young people at risk of corroded body image, gaping discrepancies between their actual and ‘polished’ online selves, and an increased likelihood of engaging in compensatory disordered eating behaviours.”⁴

Alexandra Dane, UCL Institute for Global Health



2 of 5

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Where's the harm? continued

Body image continued

So, with more and more young people putting themselves under a microscope, it's not surprising that some are changing their bodies using unhealthy methods in an attempt to achieve what they see online.

Some social media companies are even perpetuating this problem by hosting harmful content. Under scrutiny and exposed more recently for this is TikTok. A report⁵ by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) found that the platform has been promoting and glorifying deadly and illegal bodybuilding drugs to young boys and men. The CCDH heavily criticised TikTok for encouraging unrealistic physiques and toxic ideas of masculinity and strength by amplifying its algorithms and continuing to enable its influencers. In the UK alone, the CCDH found that steroid-related content was viewed 89 million times by users aged 18-25.

These findings have thrown up some serious concerns about the dangerous territories lurking beneath the surface of social media. Without protective measures in place, young people are at serious risk of consuming insidious, dark content that can have damaging or, in some cases, life-changing effects.



3 of 5

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Where's the harm? continued

Doomed to doomscroll?

One of the benefits of social media is its ability to connect us with the world. In a matter of seconds, we can source the latest news and receive real-time updates, too. But if we don't put the right checks and balances in place, an overconsumption of what's going on around us can do more harm than good to our mental health. That's where doomscrolling plays its part.

Founded in the pandemic as a term to explain the excessive or obsessive urge to look through bad news, doomscrolling can be a means for some people to make

sense of what's going on around them. It certainly isn't exclusive to young people, but their 'always-on' culture does make them more likely to spend long periods of time online, binging on negative news. And the demanding nature of digital devices doesn't make it easy for young people to escape the pessimism or uncertainty they may have about the future. Receiving push notifications with every breaking story; being able to hurdle from one piece of negative news to the next; and having all of this quite literally at their fingertips can cause heightened anxiety and paranoia from being in a constant state of alert.

To add fuel to the fire, the sophisticated algorithm models developed by social media companies can track a user's engagement with certain content and feed them more of its kind. So before we know it, our feeds are full of catastrophic news and we're struggling to self-regulate or rationalise the chaos.

For young people who are already experiencing mental health challenges, doomscrolling can create a vicious circle. Despite the feeling of being connected to others through shared experience, it's a very solitary activity that can even exacerbate depressive symptoms.

Dr. Jasmin Wertz, a specialist in child behavioural and emotional problems at the University of Edinburgh, explains this phenomenon:

“The danger is that social media can make pre-existing issues worse... if you're already feeling lonely and isolated, you might be more negatively affected by what you see - because you're already vulnerable. There is research to suggest that people who already have problems use social media in more destructive ways, making them even worse.”⁶



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Where's the harm? continued

Four tips to stop doomscrolling



1. Focus your attention on something else

It's easier said than done but redirecting your attention to something else, preferably away from your phone or computer, will limit your exposure to negative stories. Do something that makes you feel good instead.



2. Give yourself a time limit

It's good to stay informed, that's what the news is for, but protect yourself from entering doomscrolling territory by limiting yourself to 10 minutes of scrolling per day.



3. Seek out the good

Rather than reading about the bad, why not watch something funny, read a positive news story or listen to a happy podcast.



4. Practice gratitude

Journal or simply write down what you're grateful for. Start by making a list of three things you don't need to be fearful of.

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Where's the good?

So to put our advice into practice, we're going to stop doomscrolling about social media and look at the good stuff. After all, there's two sides to every story and social media isn't uniformly or inherently bad. Used with healthy parameters, it can bring plenty of positives to the lives of young people.

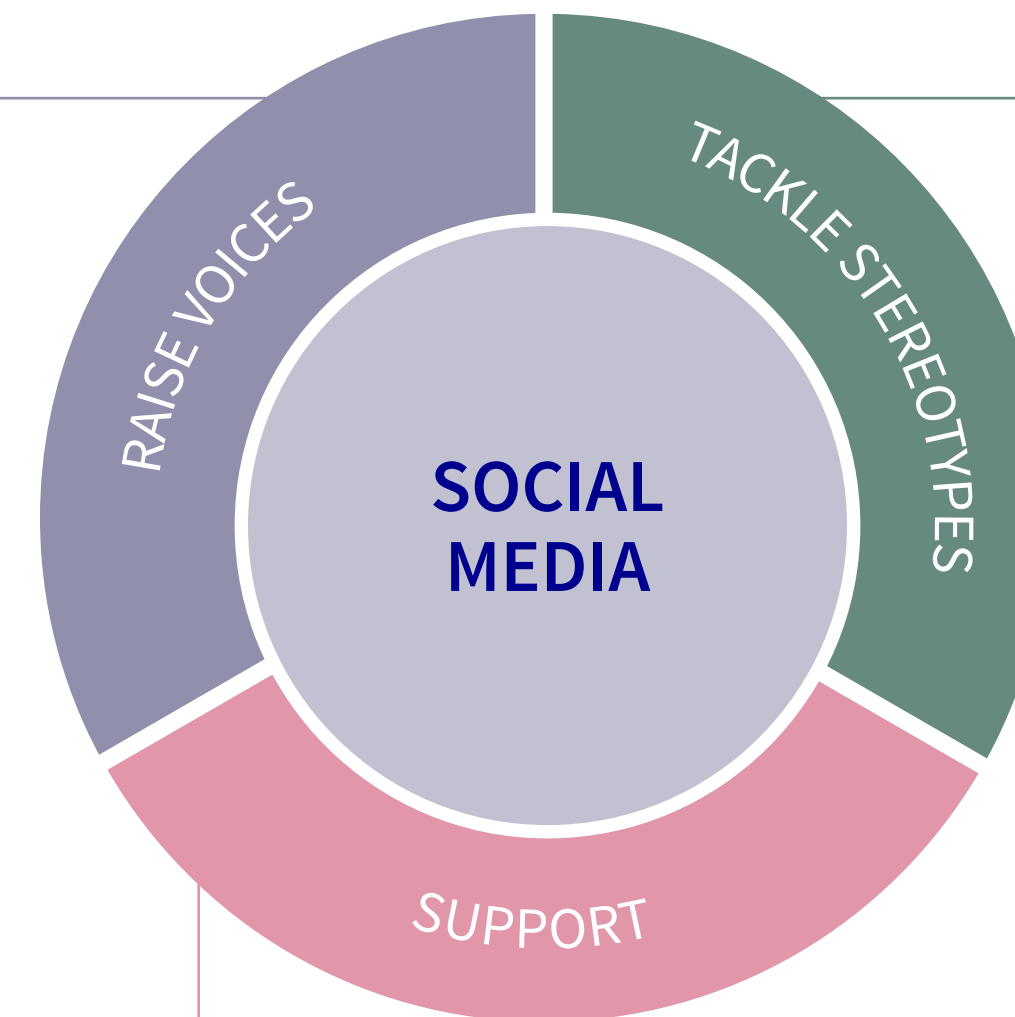
What's social about social media?

When it comes to connectedness, social media triumphs. For young people especially, it can help them to relate, identify and form communities with people who have similar abilities and interests. It also offers an inclusive space for self-expression and a vital ecosystem of support.

And for people of any age in a marginalised group(s), social media really comes into its own. As well as providing strong networks and social inclusion, it can provide a more diverse backdrop than their realities allow for.

For many, social media is a tool of empowerment that can help to:

Social media platforms give people from disadvantaged groups the chance to express their stories, viewpoints and personal experiences. It helps to raise issues and inform other users.



By giving marginalised populations a forum for free discussion, social media can go some way to dispelling myths and assumptions that support prejudice and discrimination.

Social media can be used to raise support and engagement for a variety of causes and initiatives. Legislation, regulations and societal attitudes may change as a result.

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Where's the good? continued

2 of 2

A problem shared...

On the theme of connectedness, social media is also helping to open the dialogue about mental health. It's a growing space for people to share and destigmatise their mental health challenges. Online peer support groups have been found to provide emotional support, insights, experiences and strategies about the day-to-day challenges of living with mental illness.

Spearheading the peer support model in the US right now is MTV Entertainment. They're acting on data from their recent survey⁷ which found that young adults are most likely to turn to a friend first if they're struggling with their mental health. The problem is, 70% of the young people they surveyed wouldn't feel prepared to provide that support if a friend came to them for help. Teaming up with non-profit charity, Active Minds, MTV have developed a campaign that gives young people the tools to simply and effectively help someone of the same demographic through mental and emotional challenges. Progress!

Awareness is growing

Much of what's shared in the media suggests that young people are oblivious to the negative effects of social media. That they aren't conscious of what influences them. But they are – especially the generation of Myspace and Bebo users who've witnessed the changing landscape of social media for decades. In fact, some are starting to resist the expectation to be instantly responsive on social media and are seeking new ways to be more productive. That doesn't mean they're plunging into a radical digital detox, but are rather using apps and other technology to cut out distractions and help them stay on task. Ironic as this productivity hack sounds, it's very recently been named and gone viral on TikTok as #MonkMode. With 78 million views to date, the hashtag is proof that a growing number of us are looking to pull away from the incessant stream of notifications and distractions that occupy so much of our time.

Championing authenticity

Some social media developers are also making positive moves when it comes to the mental health of young people by creating apps that encourage authentic posting. The introduction of the new BeReal app, for example, has been lighting up the social media stage. According to a survey by Hubspot⁸, usage from Gen Z jumped from 1% to 13% between May 2022 and January 2023. This surge of user interest alone is indicative that young people want to share and view content on social media that's real and free from obscurity. BeReal's commitment to unfiltered content is responding to that demand and is certainly what's needed to combat damaging beauty standards, but will it survive? Time will tell.

Want to achieve your Monk Mode?

Try out some apps such as **Freedom**, **Cold Turkey** or **Forest**. They use timers to block access to your **Kryptonite** platforms and websites, helping you to put an end to your procrastination.

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What needs to change?

1 of 2

We're more connected than ever before and our tech-saturated world is advancing by the day. For some, this is a dystopian nightmare. For others, a lifeline.

But for young people growing up in a world of selfies, highlight reels and influencers, this means using their agency in a way that no other generation has before. It means learning essential skills such as digital regulation and independence and putting these to use in a measured and healthy way online. Something they've never been taught to do. And let's face it, many of us Gen Xers, millennials and baby boomers struggle with our digital autonomy too, because we haven't either. So, what needs to happen to make social media a safer place for young people?

'What we're missing in society is a robust education piece around social media.'

Education

We're taught about danger from a very young age – where we might find it and how to avoid it. Understanding and learning how to gauge risk is fundamental to our development and to our survival. Why then, when social media can be a hazardous space, are young people not receiving the guidance they need to use it in a balanced way?

Many, including mental health charities and providers, education professionals, counsellors and parents are now calling for digital hygiene and literacy to be part of a young person's education. Louisa Rose – Chief Executive of youth mental health charity, Beyond – believes that digital wellbeing needs to be fully embedded into the curriculum and taught before young people have the chance to form a relationship with social media: 'What we're missing in society is a robust education piece around [social media]. It's about prevention and early intervention. By intervening earlier and educating the four to seven-year-old cohorts, we can positively impact future generations.'

Everyone needs to be on the same page though. Especially those at the top. Governments and social media companies have a responsibility to help young people navigate the world of social media, as well as put regulations in place to safeguard the wellbeing of current and future generations.

Making headway in the UK, the government has devised a new set of laws to protect children and adults online. The Online Safety Bill that's currently going through parliament will make social media companies more responsible for their users' safety by tackling illegal content and enforcing age-checking measures for young people. The UK's communications regulator, Ofcom, will have the power to take appropriate action against all social media and tech companies if they're accessible to UK users, no matter where they're based.

**Could this be the start of an international shift?
Let's hope so.**

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“Small differences at an early age can lead to better lives in adulthood. We should be focusing our efforts on younger age groups. Technology is going to be important for young people throughout their lives, but finding the balance is important.”

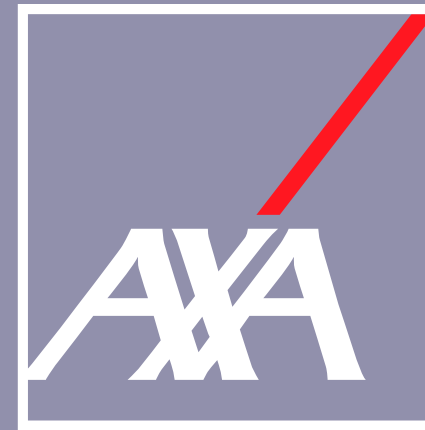
Colin Preece, Counselling Clinical Lead, Teladoc Health

2 of 2

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¹ <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/social-media-statistics/#source>

² <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/social-media-statistics/#source>

³ www.city.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/597209/Parliament-Report-web.pdf

⁴ Dane, A., & Bhatia, K. (2023), The social media diet: A scoping review to investigate the association between social media, body image and eating disorders amongst young people, PLOS Global Public Health journal

⁵ <https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TikToks-Toxic-Trade-Steroids-and-Steroid-Like-Drugs.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.axa.com/en/press/publications/mind-health-and-wellbeing-2023-study>

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cathyolson/2023/10/10/with-mental-health-peer-support-on-the-rise-mtv-enters-the-chat/?sh=352af86712d5>

⁸ <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/fastest-growing-social-media-platforms>

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