

# #StatusOfMind

Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing



# Contents

Section	Page
1. Background	6
2. Potential effects of social media (negative)	8
3. Potential effects of social media (positive)	13
4. Profiling social media platforms: the YHM survey	17
5. At a glance: ranking of social media platforms by health impact	18
6. Calls to action	24



## KEY POINTS

- 91% of 16-24 year olds use the internet for social networking
- Social media has been described as more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol
- Rates of anxiety and depression in young people have risen 70% in the past 25 years
- Social media use is linked with increased rates of anxiety, depression and poor sleep
- Cyber bullying is a growing problem with 7 in 10 young people saying they have experienced it
- Social media can improve young people's access to other people's experiences of health and expert health information
- Those who use social media report being more emotionally supported through their contacts



## CALLS TO ACTION

- Introduction of a pop-up heavy usage warning on social media
- Social media platforms to highlight when photos of people have been digitally manipulated
- NHS England to apply the Information Standard Principles to health information published via social media
- Safe social media use to be taught during PSHE education in schools
- Social media platforms to identify users who could be suffering from mental health problems by their posts, and discreetly signpost to support
- Youth-workers and other professionals who engage with young people to have a digital (including social) media component in their training
- More research to be carried out into the effects of social media on young people's mental health







# Foreword



Shirley Cramer, CBE  
Chief Executive – Royal Society for Public Health



Dr Becky Inkster  
Cambridge Neuroscience – University of Cambridge

Social media is now a part of almost everyone's life, but none more so than our young population of digital natives. Its rise to popularity during the mid-2000s has revolutionised the way in which we communicate and share information, both as individuals and as a society. Whilst social media has permeated nearly every aspect of the mainstream, we are only just beginning to take stock of the extent to which it impacts our lives. With growing consideration given to the importance of mental health and wellbeing within the health debate, there has never been a more pertinent time to talk about the relationship between social media and mental health.

Social media has become a space in which we form and build relationships, shape self-identity, express ourselves, and learn about the world around us; it is intrinsically linked to mental health.

We must therefore strive to understand its impact on mental health, and especially the mental health of the younger population. The highest incidence of social media use is seen amongst those aged 16 – 24. That these years are a crucial period for emotional and psychosocial development only enforces the need for greater understanding of social media's impact.

It certainly isn't all bad news; social media platforms can promote a sense of community and facilitate the provision of emotional support. With its almost universal reach and unprecedented ability to connect people from all walks of life, social media holds the potential to wield a mighty power as a positive catalyst for good mental health.

But there are also risks, risks which if not addressed and countered, can and have already opened the door for social media to cause significant problems for young people's mental health and wellbeing. Being a teenager is hard enough, but the pressures faced by young people online are arguably unique to this digital generation. It is vitally important that we put safeguards in place.

We hope that this report, its findings, and the issues it explores can really push forward the conversation surrounding social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing. We hope that this conversation will be transformed into action that empowers young people with the knowledge and tools to navigate social platforms online in a way that protects and promotes their health and wellbeing. Social media isn't going away soon, nor should it. We must be ready to nurture the innovation that the future holds.

# Background

Social media has revolutionised the way we connect with each other. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are now used by one in four people worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The use of social media has become an integral part of many people's lives, connecting them with friends, family and strangers from across the globe.

Many young people have never known a world without instant access to the internet and social networking platforms. The internet and social media has transformed the way in which this generation - commonly known as 'digital natives' - interact and communicate with each other.<sup>2</sup> While this presents great opportunities for innovation, learning and creativity, emerging evidence is raising concerns about the potential implications for our young people's mental health.

Social media addiction is thought to affect around 5% of young people,<sup>3</sup> with social media being described as more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol.<sup>4</sup> Such is the concern surrounding social media and young people that in late 2016 MPs debated the issue in Parliament.<sup>5</sup> The platforms that are supposed to help young people connect with each other may actually be fuelling a mental health crisis.<sup>6</sup>

Daily, or almost daily use of the internet has risen rapidly in the last decade. In 2006, just 35% of people in the UK used the internet on a daily basis. This figure has now climbed to 82% of people in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Overall use of social media has also risen broadly in line with internet use. In 2007, only 22% of people in the UK had at least one social media profile; by 2016, this figure had risen to 89%.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform with around 30 million UK users. Twitter comes in as the second most used with 15 million UK users. The next most popular platforms are Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram and Snapchat.<sup>11</sup>

Social media use is far more prevalent among young people than older generations. The 16-24 age group are by far the most active social media users with 91% using the internet for social media. Compare this with 51% of 55-64 year olds and only 23% of the 65 plus age range and it is clear there is currently a generational disparity when looking at social media usage.<sup>12</sup>

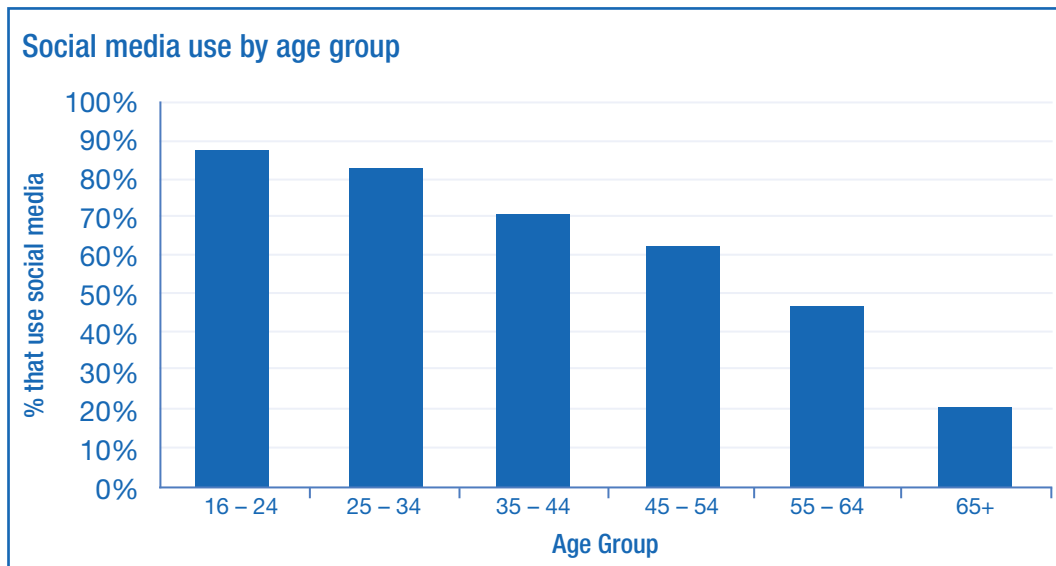
## **Social media:**

“websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”





## 91% of 16-24 year olds use the internet for social media



Source: Office for National Statistics

The way young people communicate and share with each other has changed. With social media being such a new phenomenon, the exact effect it is having on the mental health, emotional wellbeing and physiology of young people is currently unclear and much of the evidence available is conflicting. However, recent studies have raised serious concerns about the possible detrimental effects the rise of increasingly frequent social media use is having on our young people – and in particular, their mental health.

Adolescence and early adulthood is a critical and potentially vulnerable time for social and emotional development, which means understanding the effects of social media on health at this stage is of particular interest. This report explores both the positive and negative impacts social media, identified by expert academics, may be having on young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing, and suggests ways in which the risks to health can be mitigated, whilst harnessing and promoting the positive aspects. Social media can and should be utilised as a tool for good – the challenge is to ensure social media companies are doing their utmost to make platforms a safe place to be, and for our young people to be equipped with the relevant skills to be able to navigate them and know where to seek help, should they need it.

## What are the potential negative effects of social media on health?

### 1. Anxiety and depression

One in six young people will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives and identified rates of anxiety and depression in young people have increased by 70% over the past 25 years.<sup>13</sup> Our own research has shown that young people themselves say four of the five most used social media platforms actually make their feelings of anxiety worse (See YHM survey - page 18).

Anxiety can have a hugely detrimental impact on a young person's life. Feelings of overwhelming worry and panic can take over and make it hard for them to leave the house, attend classes or lectures, or perform at work. Anxiety may be diagnosed as a specific mental health disorder such as Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), panic disorder, social anxiety disorder or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).<sup>14</sup>

Research suggests that young people who are heavy users of social media - spending more than two hours per day on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram - are more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression).<sup>15</sup> Seeing friends constantly on holiday or enjoying nights out can make young people feel like they are missing out while others enjoy life. These feelings can promote a 'compare and despair' attitude in young people. Individuals may view heavily photo-shopped, edited or staged photographs and videos and compare them to their seemingly mundane lives. The findings of a small study, commissioned by Anxiety UK supported this idea and found evidence of social media feeding anxiety and increasing feelings of inadequacy.<sup>16</sup>

The unrealistic expectations set by social media may leave young people with feelings of self-consciousness, low self-esteem and the pursuit of perfectionism which can manifest as anxiety disorders.<sup>17</sup> Use of social media, particularly operating more than one social media account simultaneously, has also been shown to be linked with symptoms of social anxiety.<sup>18</sup>



**Anonymous** • 20-24 y/o  Northern England

"...it has increased my level of anxiety and social anxiety... I'm constantly worried about what others think of my posts and pictures."



As well as anxiety disorders, nearly 80,000 children and young people in the UK suffer with severe depression.<sup>19</sup> There is growing evidence linking social media use and depression in young people, with studies showing that increased use is associated with significantly increased odds of depression.<sup>20</sup> Using social media for more than two hours per day has also been independently associated with poor self-rating of mental health, increased levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon has even been labelled as '*Facebook depression*' by researchers who suggest that the intensity of the online world - where teens and young adults are constantly contactable, face pressures from unrealistic representations of reality, and deal with online peer pressure - may be responsible for triggering depression or exacerbating existing conditions.<sup>22</sup>

One piece of research has even gone as far as attempting to predict depression in individuals based solely on their social media postings. They were able to predict depression with up to 70% accuracy merely by studying an individual's posts on Twitter.<sup>23</sup>





## 80,000 children and young people in the UK with severe depression



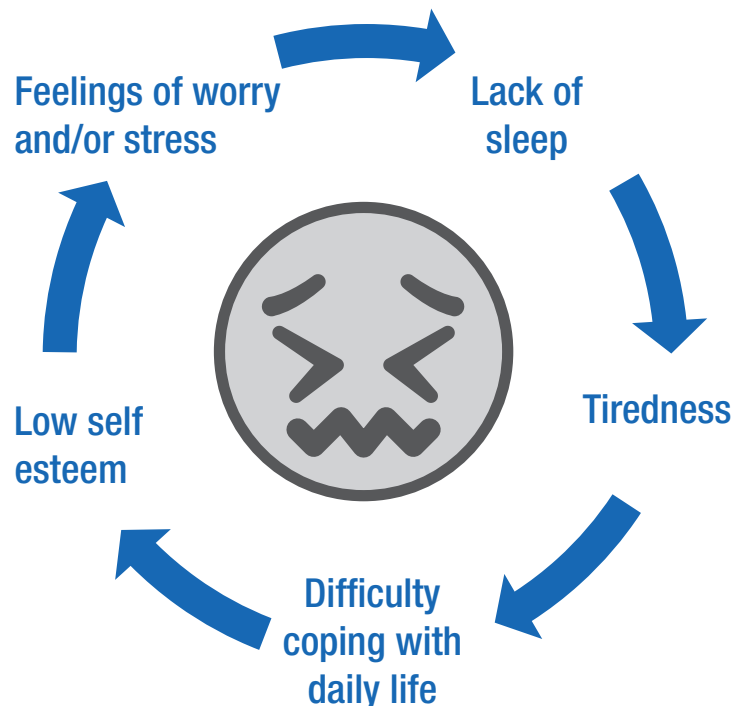
**Anonymous** • 14-16 y/o Southern England



“This [social media] resulted in me not eating properly and losing a lot of weight and becoming very depressed, I finally recovered which was hard for myself to be bullied online again in year 8. Overall I would say social media has caused me many issues and has caused me to be depressed many times.”

### 2. Sleep

Sleep and mental health are tightly linked. Poor mental health can lead to poor sleep and poor sleep can lead to states of poor mental health.<sup>24</sup> Sleep is particularly important for teens and young adults due to this being a key time for development.<sup>25</sup> The brain is not fully developed until a person is well into their twenties and thirties.<sup>26</sup> Sleep is essential for allowing us to function properly during waking hours and teens need around 1-2 hours more sleep every night than adults.<sup>27</sup> Poor sleep is linked to a wide range of both physical and mental health conditions in adults including high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, heart attack, stroke and depression.<sup>28,29</sup>



Source: Mind



**Anonymous** • 14-16 y/o Northern Ireland



“...the time you can spend on some of these apps - they can be very addictive. I lose time to revise, can't do homework, can't interact with family/friends and lose a lot of sleep at night time.”



## Nine in 10 girls say they are unhappy with their body

Numerous studies have shown that increased social media use has a significant association with poor sleep quality in young people.<sup>30</sup> Using social media on phones, laptops and tablets at night before bed is also linked with poor quality sleep, even more so than regular daytime use of social media.<sup>31,32</sup> It is thought that the use of LED lights before sleep can interfere with and block natural processes in the brain that trigger feelings of sleepiness, as well as the release of the sleep hormone, melatonin.<sup>33</sup> This means it takes longer to fall asleep and individuals end up getting fewer hours of sleep every night.<sup>34</sup>

One in five young people say they wake up during the night to check messages on social media, leading them to be three times more likely to feel constantly tired at school than their classmates who don't use social media during the night.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Body image

Body image is an issue for many young people, both male and female, but particularly females in their teens and early twenties. As many as nine in 10 teenage girls say they are unhappy with their body.<sup>36</sup>

There are 10 million new photographs uploaded to Facebook alone every hour, providing an almost endless potential for young women to be drawn into appearance-based comparisons whilst online.<sup>37</sup> Studies have shown that when young girls and women in their teens and early twenties view Facebook for only a short period of time, body image concerns are higher compared to non-users.<sup>38</sup> One study also demonstrated girls expressing a heightened desire to change their appearance such as face, hair and/or skin after spending time on Facebook.<sup>39</sup> Others have suggested social media is behind a rise in younger generations opting to have cosmetic surgery to look better in photos, which has implications for physical health through unnecessary invasive surgery. Around 70% of 18-24 years olds would consider having a cosmetic surgical procedure.<sup>40</sup>

Recent decades have seen increased discussion and awareness of the impact of the images of women and girls we see on TV and in other traditional media. However, very little research and focus has been directed towards the impact social media is having on our young people as regards body image. Given how many young people are using social media and how many images they are viewing on a daily basis, it is important that further research is carried out into the consequences of social media for body image.



**Anonymous** • 20-24 y/o  Northern Ireland

"Instagram easily makes girls and women feel as if their bodies aren't good enough as people add filters and edit their pictures in order for them to look 'perfect'."







**91% of young people who reported cyberbullying said no action was taken as a result**

#### 4. Cyberbullying

Bullying during childhood is a major risk factor for a number of issues including mental health, education and social relationships, with long-lasting effects often carried right through to adulthood.<sup>41</sup> The rise of social media has meant that children and young people are in almost constant contact with each other. The school day is filled with face-to-face interaction, and time at home is filled with contact through social media platforms. There is very little time spent uncontactable for today's young people. While much of this interaction is positive, it also presents opportunities for bullies to continue their abuse even when not physically near an individual. The rise in popularity of instant messaging apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp can also become a problem as they act as rapid vehicles for circulating bullying messages and spreading images.

Seven in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying, with 37% of young people saying they experience cyberbullying on a high-frequency basis. Young people are twice as likely to be bullied on Facebook than on any other social network.<sup>42</sup> These statistics are extremely worrying for the overall health and wellbeing of our young people. Victims of bullying are more likely to experience low academic performance, depression, anxiety, self-harm, feelings of loneliness and changes in sleeping and eating patterns – all of which could alter the course of a young person's life as they undertake important exams at school or university,<sup>43</sup> and develop personally and socially.



**Anonymous • 20-24 y/o**  Midlands

"I was bullied in person and then on Facebook by a group of girls from school... I began to stop eating, hardly slept and became extremely anxious leaving the house and going to school... it has definitely affected my mental health and wellbeing."



**Anonymous • 14-16 y/o**

"Anonymous bullying online over Twitter around personal things has led to me self-harming and left afraid of going to school. Bullying on Instagram has led me to attempt suicide and also self-harm. Both caused me to experience depressive episodes and anxiety."



Cyberbullying can take many forms including the posting of negative comments on pictures and directed abuse via private messages. Almost all social networking sites have a clear anti-bullying stance. However, a national survey conducted by Bullying UK found that 91% of young people who reported cyber bullying said that no action was taken.<sup>44</sup> Ensuring our young people are safe from abuse online via social media must be a top priority for parents, schools and social media companies.

## 5. Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

The concept of the 'Fear of Missing Out' (FoMO) is a relatively new one and has grown rapidly in popular culture since the advent and rise in popularity of social media. The term is particularly used by young people, with digital language research showing that 40% of parents do not know what the term means.<sup>45</sup> In essence, FoMO is the worry that social events, or otherwise enjoyable activities, may be taking place without you present to enjoy them. FoMO is characterised by the need to be constantly connected with what other people are doing, so as not to miss out. FoMO is associated with lower mood and lower life satisfaction.<sup>46</sup>



**Anonymous • 17-19 y/o**  Northern England

"I have to have my phone charger to get on Facebook, otherwise I feel disconnected and start biting my nails."



The sharing of photos and videos on social media means that young people are experiencing a practically endless stream of others' experiences that can potentially fuel feelings that they are missing out on life – whilst others enjoy theirs – and that has been described as a 'highlight reel' of friends' lives.<sup>47</sup> FoMO has been robustly linked to higher levels of social media engagement, meaning that the more an individual uses social media, the more likely they are to experience FoMO.<sup>48</sup> Many people experience some degree of FoMO and for many it may not be a problem. Increasingly, however, young people are reporting that FoMO is causing them distress in the form of anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.



**Anonymous • 17-19 y/o**  Scotland

"During my fourth year exams (when I was 16) I was put under the pressure due to the fact I was under the impression I'd be missing out if I switched off from social media. Therefore, I could not fight my urge and focus properly on studying due to my worry."



## What are the potential positive effects of social media on health?

### 1. Access to other people's health experiences and expert health information

Social media has prompted a revolution in peer-to-peer interaction and sharing. Social networking offers young people who may be suffering from mental health issues an opportunity to read, watch or listen to, and understand, the health experiences of others – relating them back to their own reality.

Research into this phenomenon suggests the act of learning about others' health experiences may be hugely beneficial to those experiencing health issues themselves. Reading blogs or watching vlogs on the personal health issues of others their own age may improve young people's health literacy, prompt individuals to access relevant health services and enable individuals to better explain their own health circumstances or make better health choices.<sup>49</sup> Health campaigns can gain credibility through community promotion on social media, and the very personal nature of someone sharing their experiences can provide others with practical strategies and coping mechanisms.<sup>50</sup>



**Anonymous** • 17-19 y/o  Northern Ireland

"I have anxiety and on many occasions I have found videos that put how I feel into words and explain it, and this benefits me a lot making me feel more confident."



Social media may also offer an invaluable opportunity to engage young people with more conventional health messaging. Those in their teens and early twenties are traditionally difficult to engage with health issues, particularly mental health, and are low healthcare utilisers. However, taking health messages to the interactive spaces young people frequent on social media may be one way to ensure they are receiving expert health information that other demographics may receive through more conventional channels.<sup>51</sup>

This information may come in the form of signposting to health services or even physicians making themselves available online for young people to communicate with. Studies suggest that young people with mental health issues are heavier users of social media, presenting a golden opportunity to enhance the presence of health care services online to offer help and support to those young people who need it.<sup>52</sup>

Existing evidence suggests that interacting with patients online can improve their care and health outcomes.<sup>53,54</sup> However, information shared on social media is not always reliable. Expert information is easily mixed with information that may not be credible or correct. The emergence of 'fake news' on social media has real world implications for young people and their health outcomes. Measures to ensure information is credible and can be trusted by young people would need to be in place before social media is used as a means to spread official health information – although the potential is there for it to be a useful tool.



## 2. Emotional support and community building

Young people are increasingly turning to social media as a means of emotional support to prevent and address mental health issues.<sup>55</sup> Conversations on social media can emerge and provide young people with essential interaction to overcome difficult health issues, particularly when they may not have access to that support face-to-face.

Sharing problems or issues with friends, peers and broader social networks can be met with positive reaction. Nearly seven in 10 teens report receiving support on social media during tough or challenging times. Further research shows that Facebook users are more likely to report having higher levels of emotional support than general internet users – suggesting social media may be a catalyst for increased levels of this support. With many young people having hundreds or even thousands of ‘friends’ on social media there is a vast network of potential support available should it be needed.

The community building aspect of social media is also a distinct positive aspect for many young people. By joining ‘groups’ or ‘pages’ young people can surround themselves with like-minded people and share their thoughts or concerns. These groups may be minorities in the real world, but can build online communities that provide a safe network for young people, such as those from the LGBTQ+ community or ethnic minorities that are at higher risk for compromised mental health.<sup>59</sup> Social media allows these young people to connect with each other and build a sense of community, despite geographical separation.<sup>60</sup>



**Nearly seven in 10 teens report receiving support on social media during tough or challenging times**

## 3. Self-expression and self-identity

Self-expression and self-identity are important aspects of development throughout the teens and early twenties. This stage is a time when young people try new things and experiment with different aspects of themselves and their identity. Young people may pass through several identity phases throughout this period before developing a comfortable sense of self.<sup>61</sup> It is important throughout this period that young people have a means to express themselves and explore who they are as people.

Social media can act as an effective platform for accurate and positive self-expression, letting young people put forward their best self.<sup>62</sup> They are able to personalise their profiles and feeds with images, videos and words that express who they are and how they identify with the world around them. Social media platforms are also places for young people to share creative content and express their interests and passions with others. Being able to ‘like’ or ‘follow’ pages, groups and individual figures means young people can build an ‘identity catalogue’ that represents their identity as people. Further to this, social media has driven a revolution in young people being able to express their political identity, where they may not be politically engaged through conventional channels.<sup>63</sup>



**Anonymous** • 20-24 y/o  London

“When I was feeling alone at university with no real friends I saw every day, having access to the support network provided by friends from home over Facebook was more valuable than I can possibly express.”





While social media may offer a platform for young people to express themselves, it is important to remember that expressing oneself online may lead to abuse or negative feedback being received in return. It is therefore essential that our young people are properly protected should this happen.



**Anonymous** • 14-16 y/o  Midlands or East of England

“Social media allows me to post and express myself in a way I can’t do in everyday life. I can use it as a place to vent my feelings when I have no one to talk to.”



#### 4. Making, maintaining and building upon relationships

Social media platforms offer young people a useful tool to make, maintain or build upon real world interpersonal relationships. This may be through staying connected with friends and family members around the world who would otherwise be contacted less frequently, socialising online with friends seen on a daily basis, reviving ‘dormant’ relationships through online interaction or meeting new friends made online – though young people should approach this with caution and only meet for the first time in safe environments.<sup>64</sup>

The enhancement of real world interaction is key to the success of social media. For young people, the possibility to coordinate social events, organise family get-togethers or arrange a date, with a few clicks of a button, was unimaginable prior to its advent, but is now completely ingrained in the way young people live their lives.

There is evidence to suggest that strong adolescent friendships can be enhanced by social media interaction, allowing young people to create stronger bonds with people they already know – supporting the idea that, in social terms, the ‘rich-get-richer’.<sup>65</sup> Social media can also act as a ‘second phase’ of interaction after an initial face-to-face encounter with someone new. This means even the most brief interactions can be continued via social media whereas these relationships may have otherwise been lost.



**Anonymous** • 14-16 y/o  Southern England

Social media has made me able to stay in touch with family and friends whom I would not speak to otherwise. It allows me to keep in contact with my friends on a daily basis.



# Profiling social media platforms: YHM survey

In early 2017, the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) conducted a UK-wide survey of 1,479 14-24 year olds asking them about five of the most popular social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and Youtube. The aim of the survey was to find out how they feel each of these platforms impacts their health and wellbeing (both positively and negatively) and make comparisons between these platforms, as well as asking them their views on a number of policy recommendations.

In the survey, we asked young people, from their personal experience, to what extent each of the social media platforms they use made certain health-related factors better or worse. They ranked these issues from -2 (a lot worse), through 0 (no effect) to +2 (a lot better).

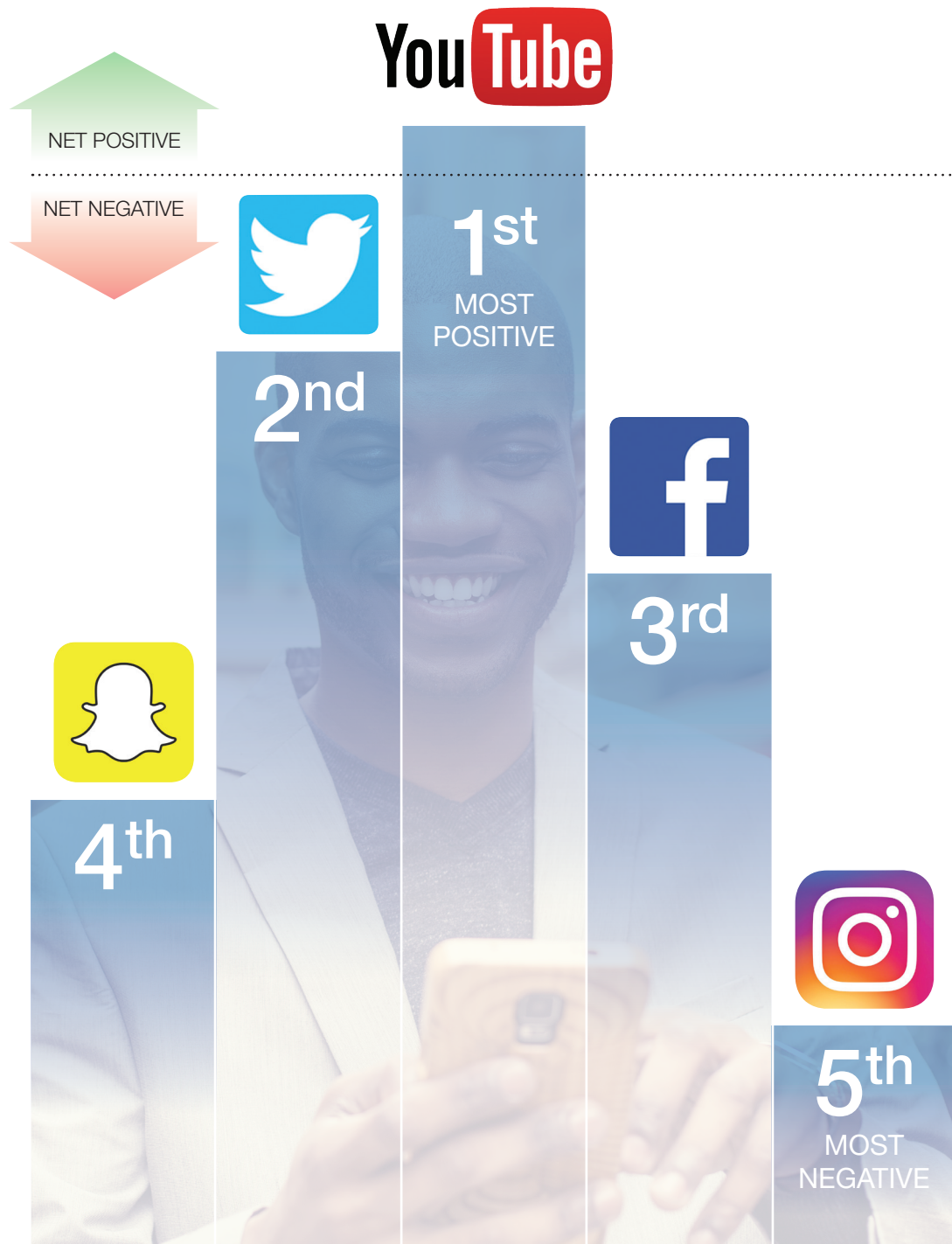
<b>The factors asked about were as follows:</b>	
1.	Awareness and understanding of other people's health experiences
2.	Access to expert health information you know you can trust
3.	Emotional support (empathy and compassion from family and friends)
4.	Anxiety (feelings of worry, nervousness or unease)
5.	Depression (feeling extremely low and unhappy)
6.	Loneliness (feelings of being all on your own)
7.	Sleep (quality and amount of sleep)
8.	Self-expression (the expression of your feelings, thoughts or ideas)
9.	Self-identity (ability to define who you are)
10.	Body image (how you feel about how you look)
11.	Real world relationships (maintaining relationships with other people)
12.	Community building (feeling part of a community of like-minded people)
13.	Bullying (threatening or abusive behaviour towards you)
14.	FoMO (Fear Of Missing Out – feeling you need to stay connected because you are worried things could be happening without you)

Based on the above questions, below are the survey results for each of the social media platforms in order of their net impact on young people's health and wellbeing – with the most positive first, and most negative last.

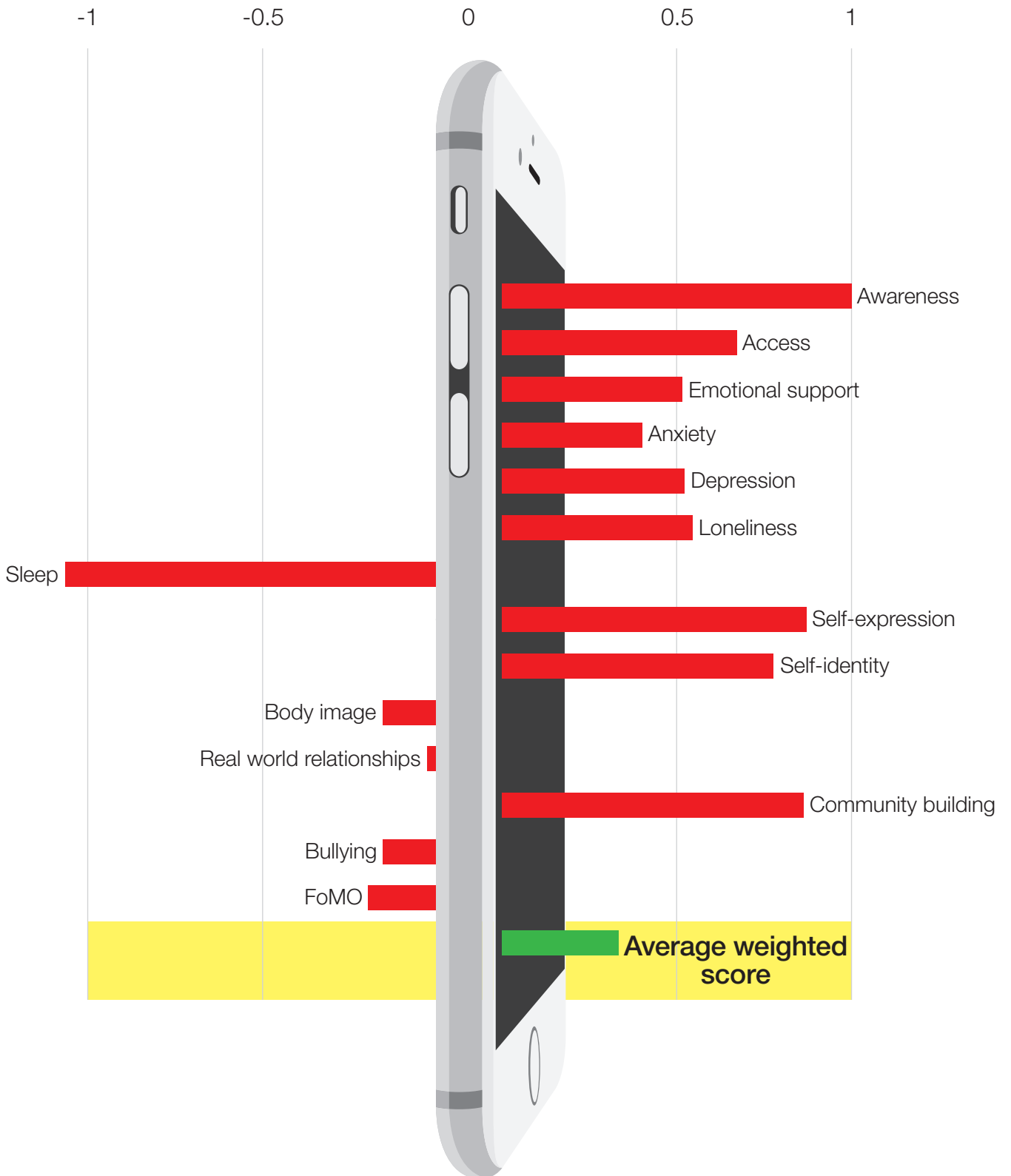


## League Table – Quick guide

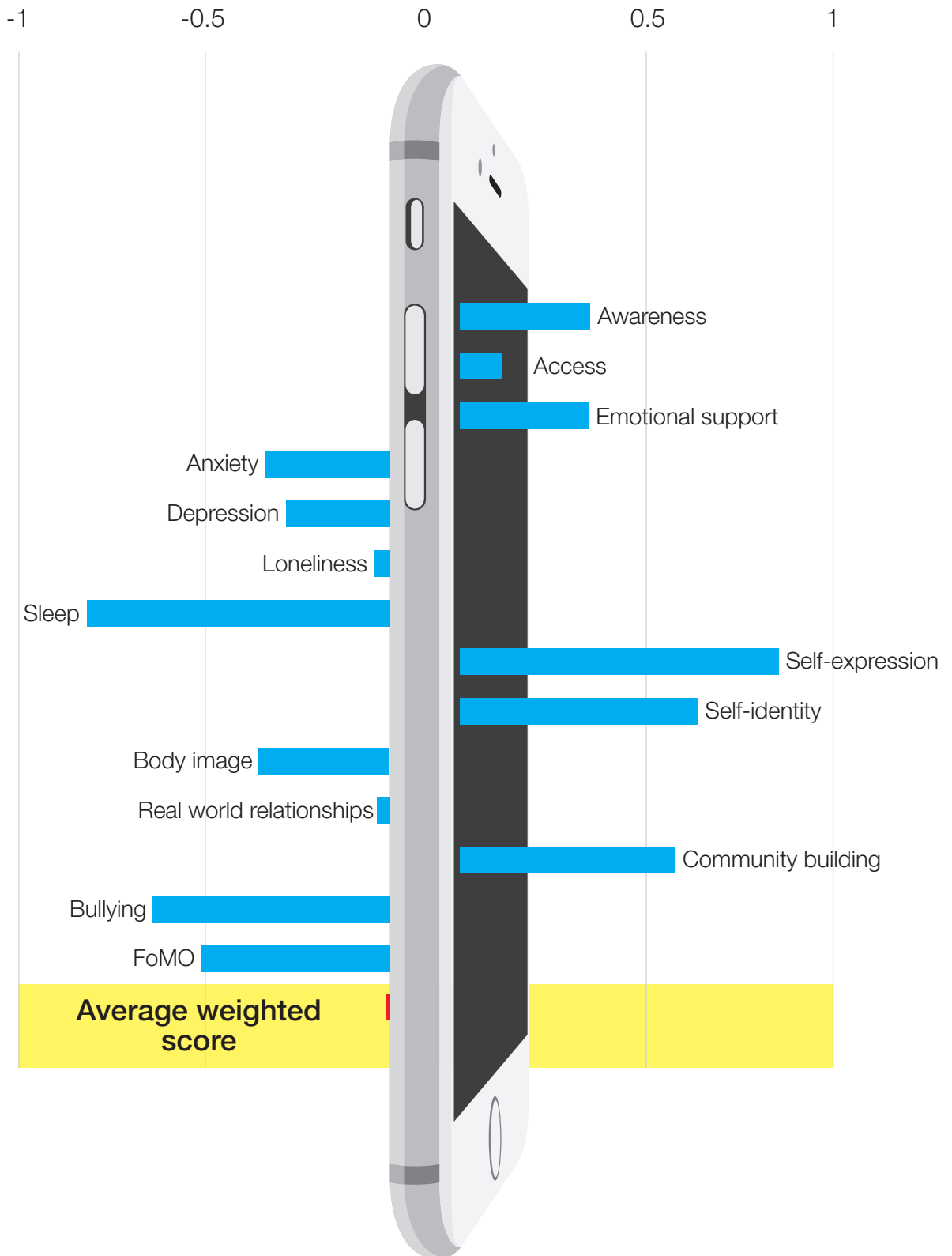
Based on the 14 health and wellbeing-related questions we asked young people to rank, below is a quick guide for each of the social media platforms in order of their net impact on young people’s health and wellbeing – with the most positive first, and most negative last.



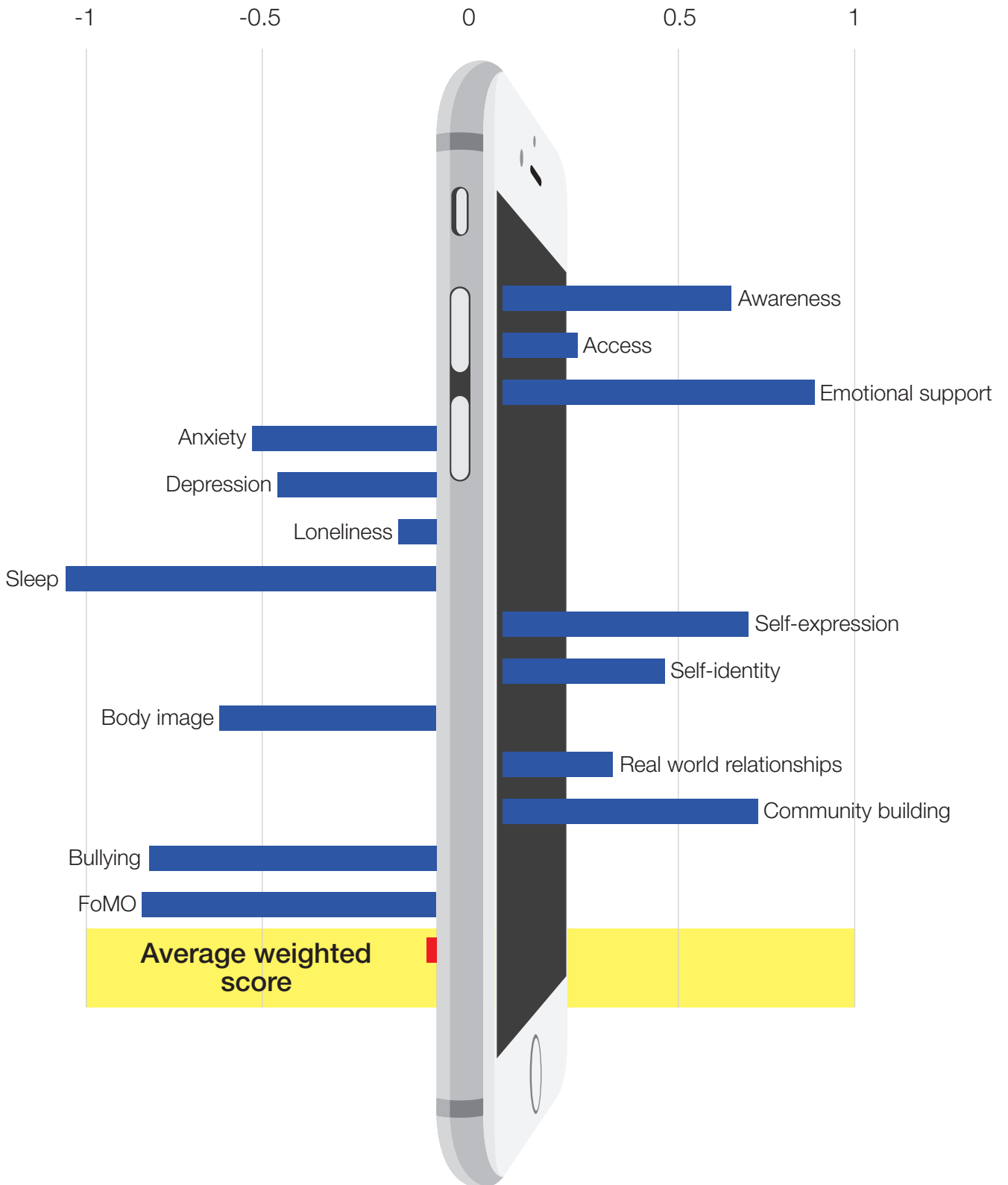
# You Tube



# Twitter

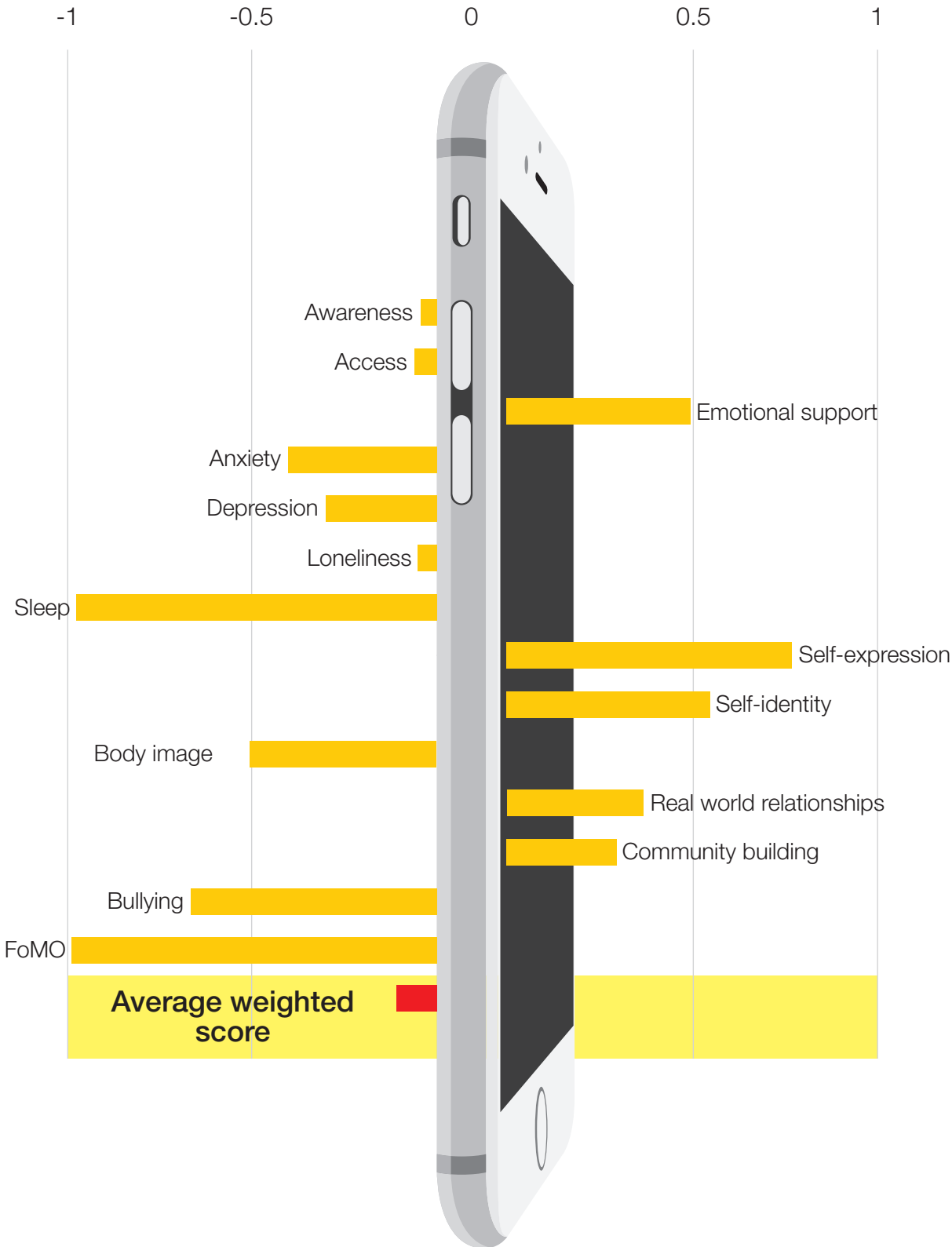


# Facebook

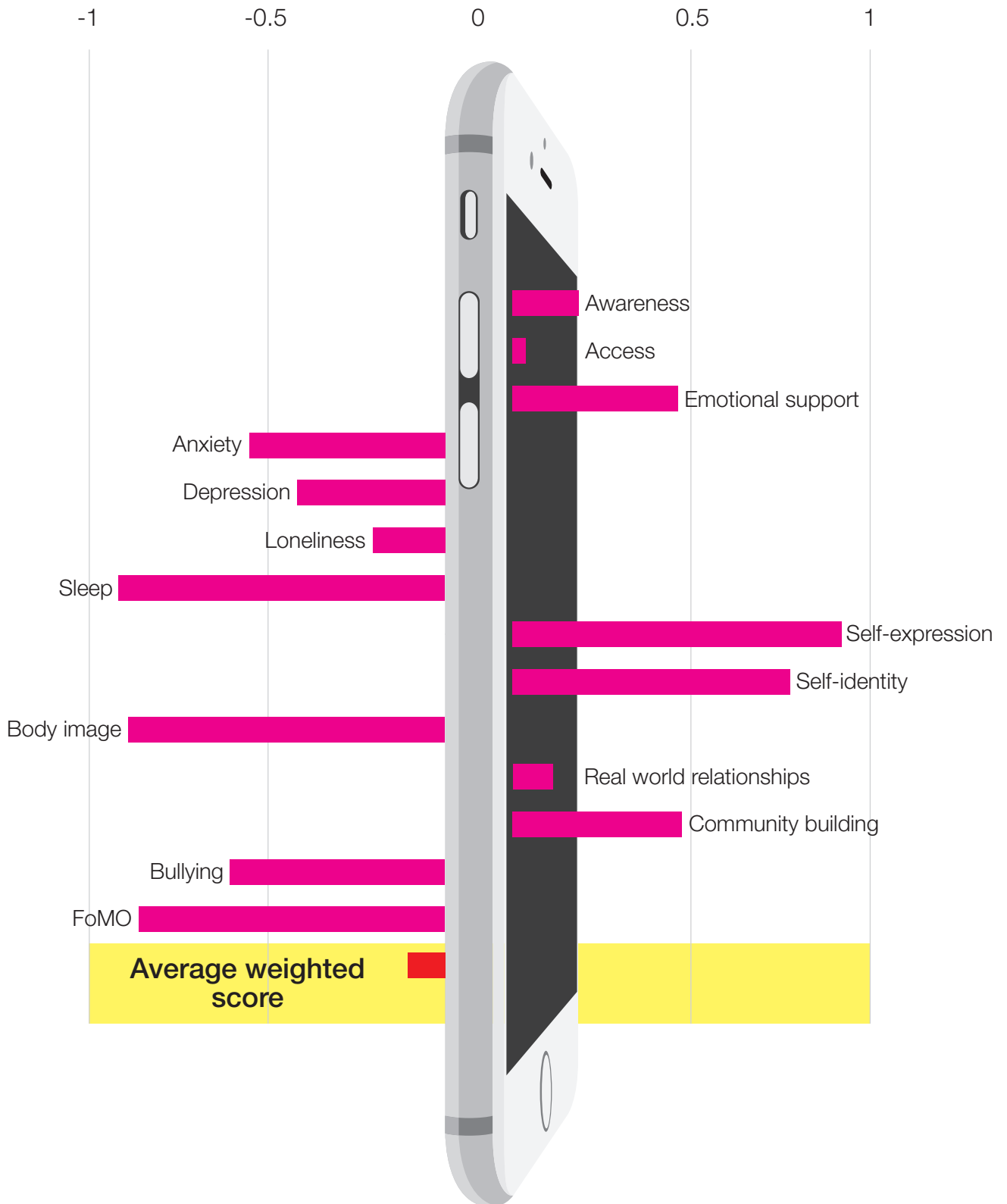




# Snapchat



# Instagram



## What is RSPH calling for?

### 1. The introduction of a pop-up heavy usage warning on social media

The social media platform would track usage and provide the user with a pop-up warning when they breach a set level of usage deemed potentially harmful. It is then up to the user to decide if they carry on using the platform or stop, although the warning may provide links to information and advice on social media addiction.

The evidence is clear that increased use of social media can be detrimental to some aspects of the health and wellbeing of young people. As with other potentially harmful practices, those partaking in them should be informed of the potential consequences before making their own decision on their actions. A pop-up warning would give young people access to this information so they can make informed decisions about their own health.

Some young people would like to see this go further with almost one-third (30%) of the young people who completed our survey supporting the idea of a heavy usage cap, whereby individuals would be automatically logged out of social media if they breached a set level of usage.



**Seven in 10 (71%) young people support a pop-up usage warning on social media.**

### 2. Social media platforms to highlight when photos of people have been digitally manipulated

This may be in the form of a small icon or watermark at the bottom of someone's photo that indicates an airbrush or filter has been used that may have significantly altered their appearance.

Young people, and in particular young women, are bombarded with images that attempt to pass off the edited off as the norm. This practice is contributing to a generation of young people with poor body image and body confidence. Fashion brands, celebrities and other advertising organisations may sign up to a voluntary code of practice where the small icon is displayed on their photos to indicate an image may have been digitally enhanced or altered to significantly alter the appearance of people in it.



**More than two thirds (68%) of young people support social media highlighting when a photo has been manipulated.**

### 3. NHS England to apply the Information Standard Principles to health information published via social media

The sheer volume of health information that is now available on social media means that it may be difficult for young people to know which sources they can trust and get reliable and consistent information from. This is especially the case with the emergence of so-called ‘fake news’, meaning trust is declining in information on social media platforms.

The Information Standard is a certification scheme that lets the public know an organisation that is giving out information on health and social care is trustworthy. We would like to see NHS England apply this same quality filter to health information that is published on social media platforms.

### 4. Safe social media use to be taught during PSHE education in school

RSPH has long called for the introduction of comprehensive, statutory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in schools. A component of this education should feature the safe use of social media including: cyber bullying and where to seek help; social media addiction; body image and social media, and other potential effects of social media on mental health. The education system must evolve with the society in which it operates and equip our young people with the tools necessary to navigate the digital age in a way which protects their mental health and emotional wellbeing.



**Eight in 10 (84%) of young people support safe social media being taught in PSHE**







**5. Social media platforms to identify users who could be suffering from mental health problems by their posts and other data, and discreetly signpost to support**

If social media is contributing to poor mental health in young people we should be utilising the various platforms to reach and help those who are suffering. The existing stigma around mental health issues, particularly in young people, may make it difficult for those suffering to come forward or even know where to look for help. We would like to see technology used to identify those young people who could be suffering from mental health conditions on social media, and provide them with discreet information about where they can find help and advice should they wish to receive it.

**6. Youth-workers and other professionals who engage with young people to have a digital (including social) media component in their training**

Digital technologies, including social media, are so entrenched in the lives of young people that it is no longer possible to support the health and wellbeing of young people without some knowledge regarding the impact these technologies and social media platforms have. If we are to promote the positive aspects of social media, those who have frequent contact with young people should be trained accordingly.

Online toolkits, such as those provided by Aye Mind, can offer digital resources for adults working with young people and help them understand the possible risks and potential for good that social media and the online world offers. Although many adults are themselves on social media, the nature of being a young person means the challenges faced online are different, so it is important adults working with young people are kept up-to-date on the changing landscape of online communication and social networking.

**7. More research to be carried out into the effects of social media on young people's mental health**

The emerging evidence available to us is suggesting that there may be some significant risks posed by social media use to young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing. However, research is thus far limited and due to social media being a relatively new introduction to the lives of young people, far more long-term research will be necessary before we are able to fully understand its effects. We would like to see academic institutions, independent researchers and social media companies fund and undertake much more research into the subject.





**4 in 5 (80%) of young people support social media platforms identifying 'at risk' young people by their posts.**



# Acknowledgments

With special thanks to:



**Dr Becky Inkster**  
NSPN Senior Manager & Wolfson College Research Associate, Cambridge Neuroscience, University of Cambridge



**Professor Mary Morrell**  
Professor of Sleep and Respiratory Physiology at the National Heart and Lung Institute, Imperial College London



**Dr Igor V Pantic**  
Docent (As. Prof.), University of Belgrade, Faculty of Medicine



**Dr Fiona Sim OBE**  
General Practitioner and Special Advisor, Royal Society for Public Health



**Professor John Powell**  
Associate Professor, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford



**Dr Gillian Fergie**  
MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow



**Heather Sloan**  
Health Improvement Lead (Mental Health), UKPHR Scheme Coordinator GGCNHS, Mental Health Improvement Team, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde



**Jodie Cook**  
Owner of JC Social Media

**The Cybersmile Foundation Advisor Team**



**Liam Preston**  
Head of the Be Real Campaign and YMCA England



**Graham Oatridge**  
Contracts Manager, YMCA England



**Naseem Allmomen**  
Market Research and Insight Manager, Rethink Mental Illness

**Professor Kate Hunt**  
Associate Director, MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit

**Dr Trevor Lakey**  
Health Improvement and Inequalities Manager – Mental Health, Alcohol and Drugs, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde



## References

1. Whiteman, H. 2015. Social media: How does it affect our mental wellbeing? [Accessed Feb 17] Available from: <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/275361.php>
2. VanSlyke, T. 2003. Digital natives, digital immigrants: Some thoughts from the generation gap. [Accessed Feb 17] Available from: [http://technologysource.org/article/digital\\_natives\\_digital\\_immigrants/](http://technologysource.org/article/digital_natives_digital_immigrants/)
3. Jenner, F. 2015. At least 5% of young people suffer symptoms of social media addiction. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: [https://horizon-magazine.eu/article/least-5-young-people-suffer-symptoms-social-media-addiction\\_en.html](https://horizon-magazine.eu/article/least-5-young-people-suffer-symptoms-social-media-addiction_en.html)
4. Hofmann, W. Vohs, D. Baumeister, R. 2012. What people desire, feel conflicted about, and try to resist in everyday life. [Accessed April 17] Available from: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797612437426>
5. Adcock, A. Bate, A. Woodhouse, J. 2016. Effect of social media on the mental health of young people. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CDP-2016-0196#fullreport>
6. Collishaw, S. Maughan, B. Goodman, R. Pickles, A. Time trends in adolescent mental health. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15482496>
7. Office for National Statistics. 2016. Internet access – households and individuals: 2016. [Accessed Feb 17] Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2016>
8. Ofcom. 2015. Adults' media use and attitudes. [Accessed Feb 17] Available from: [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/82112/2015\\_adults\\_media\\_use\\_and\\_attitudes\\_report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/82112/2015_adults_media_use_and_attitudes_report.pdf)
9. See ref. 7
10. Think Digital First. 2017. The demographics of social media users in 2017. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <http://www.thinkdigitalfirst.com/2016/01/04/the-demographics-of-social-media-users-in-2016/>
11. Rose McGroary Social Media. 2016. UK social media statistics for 2016. [Accessed Feb 17] Available from: <http://www.rosemcgroary.co.uk/2016/01/04/social-media-statistics-2016/>
12. See ref. 7
13. The Mental Health Foundation. 2004. Lifetime impacts: Childhood and adolescent mental health – understanding the lifetime impacts. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: [https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/lifetime\\_impacts.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/lifetime_impacts.pdf)
14. National Institute of Mental Health. 2016. Anxiety disorders. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>
15. Sampasa-Kanyinga Hugues and Lewis Rosamund F. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking. July 2015, 18(7): 380-385. doi:10.1089/cyber.2015.0055.
16. Anxiety UK. 2012. Anxiety UK study finds technology can increase anxiety. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/for-some-with-anxiety-technology-can-increase-anxiety/>
17. Anxiety.org. 2016. Compare and despair. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <https://www.anxiety.org/social-media-causes-anxiety>
18. Becker, M. Alzahabi, R. Hopwood, C. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking. February 2013, 16(2): 132-135. doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0291.
19. Green, H., McGinnity, A., Meltzer, H., et al. (2005). Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain 2004. London: Palgrave.
20. Lin, L. y., Sidani, J. E., Shensa, A., Radovic, A., Miller, E., Colditz, J. B., Hoffman, B. L., Giles, L. M. and Primack, B. A. (2016), ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND DEPRESSION AMONG U.S. YOUNG ADULTS. *Depress Anxiety*, 33: 323–331. doi:10.1002/da.22466
21. Sampasa-Kanyinga Hugues and Lewis Rosamund F. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking. July 2015, 18(7): 380-385. doi:10.1089/cyber.2015.0055.
22. American Academy of Pediatrics. 2017. Clinical report – The impact of social media on children, adolescents and families. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/127/4/800.full.pdf>
23. De Choudhury, M. Gamon, M. Counts, S. Horvitz, E. 2015. Predicting depression via social media. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: [http://course.duroufei.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Choudhury\\_Predicting-Depression-via-Social-Media\\_ICWSM13.pdf](http://course.duroufei.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Choudhury_Predicting-Depression-via-Social-Media_ICWSM13.pdf)
24. Mind. How to cope with sleep problems. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/sleep-problems/>
25. National Institute of Mental Health. 2016. The teen brain: 6 things to know. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>
26. Sather, R. Shelat, A. Understanding the teen brain. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=3051>
27. National Sleep Foundation. Teens and sleep. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/teens-and-sleep>
28. Colten, H.R. Altevogt, B.M. 2006. Sleep disorders and sleep deprivation: an unmet public health problem. [Accessed Mar 17] Available from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20669438>
29. Nutt, D. Wilson, S. Paterson, L. 2008. Sleep disorders are core symptoms of depression. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181883/>

30. Scott, H. Gardani, M. Biello, S. Woods, H. 2016. Social media use, fear of missing out and sleep outcomes in adolescents. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308903222\\_Social\\_media\\_use\\_fear\\_of\\_missing\\_out\\_and\\_sleep\\_outcomes\\_in\\_adolescence](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308903222_Social_media_use_fear_of_missing_out_and_sleep_outcomes_in_adolescence)
31. Woods, H. Scott, H. 2016. #sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence* - August 2016 DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.05.008
32. Xanidid, N. Brignell, C. 2016. The association between the use of social network sites, sleep and cognitive function during the day. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563215301357>
33. Harvard Health – Harvard Medical School. 2015. Blue light has a dark side. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/blue-light-has-a-dark-side>
34. NHS Choices. 2013. Do ipads and electric lights disturb sleep? [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.nhs.uk/news/2013/05May/Pages/Do-iPads-and-electric-lights-disturb-sleep.aspx>
35. Power, S. Taylor, C. Horton, K. 2017. Sleepless in school? The social dimensions of young people's bedtime rest and routines. *Journal of Youth Studies*. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2016.1273522>
36. Lamb, B. 2015. *Human diversity: Its nature, extent, causes and effects on people*. Singapore. World Scientific Publishing.
37. Mayer-Schönberger, V., & Cukier, K. (2013). *Big data: A revolution that will transform how we live, work and think*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
38. Tiggeman, M. Slater, A. 2013. The internet and body image concerns in preteenage girls. *The journal of early adolescents*, Vol 34, Issue 5, pp. 606-620. 10.1177/0272431613501083
39. Fardouly, J. Diedrichs, P. C. Vartanian, L. Halliwell, E. 2015. Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young womens body image concerns and mood. *Body Image*, 13. pp. 38-45. ISSN 1740-1445 Available from: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/24574>
40. The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons. 2016. 'Daddy Makeovers' and Celeb Confessions: Cosmetic Surgery Procedures Soar in Britain. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://baaps.org.uk/about-us/press-releases/2202-super-cuts-daddy-makeovers-and-celeb-confessions-cosmetic-surgery-procedures-soar-in-britain>
41. Scott, E. Dale, J. Russel, R. Wolke, D. 2016. Young people who are being bullied – do they want. *BMC Family Practice* BMC series – open, inclusive and trusted 2016:116 DOI: 10.1186/s12875-016-0517-9
42. Ditch the Label. 2013. The annual cyberbullying survey. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.ditchthelabel.org/cyberbullying-statistics-what-they-tell-us/>
43. Stop Bullying.gov. 2017. Effects of bullying. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/>
44. Bullying UK – Family Lives. 2016. National bullying survey: Children and young people. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.bullying.co.uk/cyberbullying/what-to-do-if-you-re-being-bullied-on-a-social-network/>
45. Packham, A. 2015. What do fleek, bae and FoMO mean? 90% of parents baffled by text speak. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/05/01/what-do-fleek-bae-fomo-mean-text-speak-guide\\_n\\_7187306.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/05/01/what-do-fleek-bae-fomo-mean-text-speak-guide_n_7187306.html)
46. Przybylski, A. Murayama, K. DeHaan, C. Gladwell, V. 2013. Motivational, emotional and behavioural correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behaviour*. Volume 29, Issue 4, July 2013, Pages 1841–1848. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.014>
47. Gupta, A. Tips to get over your FoMO, or Fear of Missing Out. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.adaa.org/blog/tips-get-over-fomo>
48. See ref. 46
49. Ziebland, S. Wyke, S. 2012. Health and illness in a connected world: How might sharing experiences on the internet affect people's health? *Milbank Q.* 2012 Jun; 90(2): 219–249.
50. Published online 2012 Jun 18. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0009.2012.00662.x
51. Repper, J. Carter, T. 2010. Using person experience to support others with similar difficulties: A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.together-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/11/usingpersexperience.pdf>
52. Wong, C. Merchant, R. Moreno, M. 2014. Using social media to engage adolescents and young adults with their health. *Healthc (Amst)*. 2014 Dec; 2(4): 220–224. doi:10.1016/j.hjdsi.2014.10.005
53. Sampasa-Kanyinga, H. Lewis, R. 2015. Frequent use of social networking sites is associated with poor psychological functioning among children and adolescents *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. July 2015, 18(7): 380-385. doi:10.1089/cyber.2015.0055.
54. Househ M. 2013. The use of social media in healthcare: organizational, clinical, and patient perspectives. *Stud Health Technol Inform.* 2013;183:244–248
55. Farnan JM, Snyder SL, Worster BK, et al. Online medical professionalism: patient and public relationships: policy statement from the American College of Physicians and the Federation of State Medical Boards. *Ann Intern Med.* 2013;158(8):620–62
56. Fergie, G. Hilton, S. Hunt, K. 2015. Young adults' experiences of seeking online information about diabetes and mental health in the age of social media. *Health Expectations*. Volume 19, Issue 6, December 2016 Pages 1324–1335 DOI: 10.1111/hex.12430
57. Hanley, T. 2017. Young people, social media and the internet: Part of the problem and the solution? [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/posts/2017/02/youngpeople-socialmedia/>



58. Lenhart, A. 2015. Chapter 4: Social media and friendships. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/chapter-4-social-media-and-friendships/>
59. Hampton, K. Goulet, L. Rainie, L. Purcell, K. 2011. Social networking sites and our lives. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/06/16/social-networking-sites-and-our-lives/>
60. Russel, S. Fish, J. 2016. Mental health in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. *Annu Rev Clin Psychol.* 2016 Mar 28; 12: 465–487. Published online 2016 Jan 14. doi:10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-021815-093153
61. Lloyd, A. 2014. Social media, help or hindrance: What role does social media play in young people’s mental health? *Psychiatria Danubina*, 2014; Vol. 26, Suppl. 1, pp 340–346 Medicinska naklada - Zagreb, Croatia.
62. University of Minnesota – Introduction to psychology. 6.3 Adolescents: Developing independence and identity. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://open.lib.umn.edu/intropsyc/chapter/6-3-adolescence-developing-independence-and-identity/>
63. Orehek, E. Human, L. 2017. Self-Expression on Social Media: Do Tweets Present Accurate and Positive Portraits of Impulsivity, Self-Esteem, and Attachment Style? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2017, Vol. 43(1) 60–70. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0146167216675332>
64. Sainsbury, M. Benton, T. Social networking: A way to re-engage young people with politics? [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/projects/cels-cit/CIVTA3.pdf>
65. See ref. 58
66. Lee, S. 2009. Online communication and adolescent social ties: Who benefits more from internet use? *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*. Volume 14, Issue 3. April 2009. Pages 509–531 DOI: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01451.x
67. Seidman, G. 2015. How Facebook affects our relationships. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201505/how-facebook-affects-our-relationships>
68. Aye Mind. Toolkit. [Accessed Apr 17] Available from: <http://ayemind.com/toolkit/>



Royal Society for Public Health,  
John Snow House,  
59 Mansell Street, London, E1 8AN  
[www.rsph.org.uk](http://www.rsph.org.uk)



For more information, please contact  
Matt Keracher - [mkeracher@rsph.org.uk](mailto:mkeracher@rsph.org.uk)

