



IS YOUR FEED SHAPING YOUR FEELINGS: THE REAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON WELLBEING.

Most people open their favourite apps without a second thought. Quick scroll in the morning, few swipes at lunch, last check before going to sleep. It feels harmless and automatic. But the shift in emotions that happens when we scroll is anything but accidental. Not only does social media reflect your mood but it slowly sculpts it.

The Comparison Loop

Although we know and tell ourselves that people only post their highlights, it's hard not to measure ourselves against them. Whether it's families, relationships, materialistic items, holidays, promotions it can make our own lives feel smaller. This comparison is linked to low self esteem, anxiety and the feel of being inadequate. The loop is... Scrolling, comparing, feeling 'less than', scroll again for distraction, the cycle repeats. The loop isn't weakness it's design.

The Emotions

From every swipe we go through a mixture of emotions from seeing these curated posts of joy, breaking news, announcements, bragging and chaos. This blend creates what psychologists call 'emotional contagion'. We absorb what we see so a feed full of anger raises our stress levels. A feed dull of perfection triggers comparison. A feed full of humour will lift us, in the moment.

Emotional contagion impacts mental health for example seeing negative content will make someone more vulnerable to depression. According to Wilkie et al, negative emotion transfer online can rapidly affect consumer behaviour. Which suggests that emotional contagion isn't interpersonal but it's systemic and shaped by how the platform is designed (Dean Charles Hugh Wilkie, 2025).

This is where algorithms come to play as they amplify what ever keeps us engaged and not what keeps us well. If you pause on flawless images, the platform presumes you want to view perfection. Before you know it, your feed becomes a mood machine you didn't design.

Cognitive Drain

Constant updates dimmer our attention. Notifications interrupt our attention and focus. Endless scrolling keeps the mind in a state of low-level alert. The mental clutter can leave us feeling overwhelmed, tired and restless.

According to Tretreault there's wide body evidence that points to the fact that heavy use on technology, internet and social media can have a debilitating affect on our neural processing, cognitive performance and behaviour. There's increasing evidence suggesting that our smart phones are not making us smart and are causing us more unhappiness.

Fun Fact: Smartphone users check their phones on average of 85 times a day and spend 5 hours of their day on their phones (Ph.D, 2026).

Dopamine Hit

Messages, likes, shares, streaks trigger tiny bursts of dopamine. It's something that feels good but they train the brain to want more. Overtime the lack of notifications can create a dip in mood, and the presence of them becomes a quick emotional fix. A reward system that keeps us coming back, even if we feel worse.

Sharma suggests that social media platforms 'tap into' our brain mesolimbic dopamine system which is a reward circuit and is highly effective in creating compulsive lasting behaviours by maximising dopamine release.

For those who are more irritable without their smart phone and those who tend to frequently check for updates are known as the 'digital phenotype'. This is the behavioural manifestation of an individuals unique neurobiological and psychological make up. An example of this is a person with high neuroticism and weak impulsive control might show a pattern of frequent brief checking more so when they are feeling stressed. This pattern indicates the individuals specific cognitive and emotional state and implies that the use of their social media signals their particular vulnerabilities to addiction (Sharma1, 2025).

On the Other Side

Social media isn't the enemy, it can be a lifeline especially for people who feel isolated offline. There's communities, creativity, learning and connection. It gives a voice to people who may go unheard, It can empower, inspire and comfort people. The real challenge is balancing the right amount of time spent on social media so that you can lead a healthy relationship online and in real life.

Building A Healthier Digital Relationship

Mute accounts that drain you. Set boundaries around how & when you scroll. Follow accounts and content that uplift, educate, or genuinely resonate with you. Take breaks without feeling guilty or that you are missing out. Become aware of how the content influences your emotions.

There's also some policies and guidance which can help regulate digital environments, especially for young people. There's features such as infinite scroll are being used to reduce compulsive use. There's stronger rules around age restrictions which require ID verification when setting up your online profile. Schools have started to bring in bans to mobile phones with some schools rolling out the use of phone pockets during school hours.

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TECH VS ZZZ'Z: HOW GADGETS ARE STEALING YOUR SLEEP.

A room mate who never leaves... Technology! Our gadgets are practically glued to us. They double as phones, alarms, banking, sneaking into bed with us and, smart watches tracking every step and breath we take. Unfortunately, it's also one thing that keep us awake at night.

Blue light?

A great tool to wake us up in the morning, keeping us alert through the day but not a good combination for winding down at night. The blue lights that our technology produce. The same light that supresses melatonin which is the hormone that tells our brain when it's time to sleep. So, scrolling through your socials at midnight tells your brain that it's daytime. Does this explain why you feel wide awake when you should feel sleepy?

According to Harvard Health, blue wavelengths disrupt the circadian rhythm which makes it harder to fall asleep, or it means that when you are asleep, you sleep for less. In other words, disrupts your sleep in different ways. The blue light signals to your brain that it's daytime (Harvard Health Publishing, 2026).

Nightmare Notifications

Even when we aren't using our devices, they are using us. The screen lighting up, the buzzing, pings, flashes will pull you out of your sleep cycles. Even if you only glance at the screen, that is enough to trick your brain that it's time to wake up for the day.

According to Murdock et al night-time notifications, compulsive phone checking and high technology use are significantly associated with disrupted sleep. This includes the quality, duration and disturbances on your sleep (Murdock Et Al, 2019).

Notifications while using a screen in bed raises the risk of insomnia. Studies have found that 1 extra hour of screentime before bed increases the risk of insomnia by 59% while bedtime screen use reduces sleep by 24 minutes. These studies have focused on screentime however, the main driver is notifications as they are what's pulling us into our phones. Are you guilty of hearing/seeing a notification and saying to yourself 'just going to check' and next thing you know you have been sat scrolling on your phone for sometime (Gillham, 2026).

'Just Scrolling'

Apps are designed to keep us engaged, interested and in the loop of 'just scrolling' for hours on end. These features take your attention trick your brain into wanting 'just one more reel, just one more scroll'.

Endless scrolling through socials also known as 'doom scrolling' is also linked to poor quality of sleep however has a psychological pull linked to FoMo (Fear of Missing Out) and nomophobia (Anxiety from not being around your phone) These factors relate to the psychological pull to keep scrolling, even without purpose (Camadan, 2026).

According to Sarkar, scrolling at night increases psychological fatigue. Their research suggests that scrolling before bed drains cognitive and emotional resources and makes people feel more exhausted the following day (Sarkar, 2026).

Technology that Tracks Sleep

Controversial, I know. After reading, hearing all about how technology impacts our sleep even when we aren't using them. Now to think that we can use technology to track our sleep. Good or Bad? Let's find out...

Many of us track our sleep. We wake up and go straight to check our sleep score which creates anxiety and a cycle of stress which makes falling asleep a lot harder. This is called orthosomnia where we become so obsessed with perfect sleep that we lose sleep.

As we know, sleep trackers can help us be aware and accountable for our sleep which is a good thing as it will help us increase our sleep and the quality. They can support behaviour change by giving users feedback which can encourage healthier routines. They can support with early detection of sleep issues such as insomnia, cardiac rhythm disorders and anxiety related sleep disturbances.

However, the bad links in with the good. As we have learnt above that we can be affected by orthosomnia which is where we become fixated on our sleep that it causes anxiety and disrupts our sleep. Sleep trackers can increase stress, frustration, self-criticism, increased anxiety oversleep due to sleep scores especially those who are natural worriers or strive to be perfect. There's also a link to the 10-year health plan where questions are being asked on who will own the data, how it will be stored and whether it could be used by insurers or employers.

England have added sleep tracking to their policy when publishing their 10-year health plan for England 2025. They reference the role of digital tools which include sleep trackers in preventative healthcare. They plan to use sleep tracking as part of 'proactive, community-based care' to empower individuals to monitor sleep patterns and detect issues earlier (The Sleep Charity, 2026).

Do you think it's time to remind that sleepless roommate that your nights belong to you?

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ALGORITHM ANTICS: WHEN THE CODE STARTS CALLING THE SHOTS.

The silent listener. The observant friend that we all have when we own a smart device. Ever noticed your adds, news feed changes after a conversation with someone? Me too! Let's take a look at why this is happening.

Invisible Gatekeepers...

Yes, we are living in a world where something in the background of our devices is narrating what we see & hear. Deciding which posts go viral, which channels/creators get buried and which stories reach us. Somewhere along the way from personalised playlists and your phone reminding you of an appointment, algorithms slowly slipped into the driver's seat. A feature that once started in the background making things run smoother, faster and more convenient but now have become the main event and come across as being over enthusiastic performers of our daily routines.

Any app that you now open will be deciding what you watch, suggesting who you should follow/add as a friend, what you should buy, and what deserves your attention. Yes, it can be efficient and helpful but one wrong click or if you stay on something for too long, it shifts your news feed even more. Algorithms insist that they know you better than you know yourself and sometimes they are far from the truth but will keep showing you the content.

Some of us can laugh at algorithms as we notice what they are doing however, others are using them to short list people for interviews, and other important decisions. This is where things get difficult as it's based on human data, human assumptions, and human blind spots rather than transparency, accountability, fairness and human interaction.

Still, there is something fascinating about living the algorithmic age. Observing a new kind of force emerge in a very subtle but persistent way by blending themselves into everyday life. The question isn't about whether algorithms will shape our choices because they already are. It's about how much say we want to keep for ourselves.

According to Shoemaker & Vos, they have expanded on Kurt Lewin (1947) theory around gatekeeping. Lewin based this theory around editors and journalists deciding which information reaches the public. Shoemaker & Vos have now added to this by extending the theory to digital systems and interoperate that algorithms perform the same function but at a larger scale and without transparency (Pamela J. Shoemaker, 2009).

Teaching Young People How to Outsmart the Feed

The young people today are growing up in a world where social media never sleeps. It refreshes, scrolls, recommends, nudges and shapes what they see long before they've had a chance to decide what they want to see. And for many, this is a natural part of life and a friendly guide which offers endless amounts of entertainment. But... under the convenience there's a powerful system that is designed to draw people in and capture their attention, influence behaviour, and quietly steer choices, thoughts & beliefs.

Outsmarting the feed isn't about banning technology or social media. It's about giving young people the information and tools to recognise when the feed is serving their interests, well-being & mental health and when it's serving someone else's.

Understand & Awareness

This is the first step when outsmarting the feed. Knowing that algorithms curate content based on past behaviour and not personal growth. If you watch a video based on cooking, suddenly your feed becomes a digital cook book. If you pause on an animal video, the feed assumes you want to see more animals. Teaching young people that feed is reactive and not reflective will help them to see that it's a system and not a mirror.

As we know, as youth workers, we are informal educators who empower young people to make positive decisions and changes to their lifestyle. We understand the importance of providing young people with information for them to make their own informed choices. Hart backs this point with his ladder of participation and argues that young people should be involved in decisions that affect them and not just consulted.

This is also backed by the UNCRC with article 17 which is the child's right to reliable information from a variety of sources (UNICEF, 2026).

Creating a Digital Diet

Just like food has on our overall health & well-being, the online world has the same impact. Creating a balance between these will have a positive impact on us. Encourage young people to follow people and accounts that inspire, educate and uplift them will help create their feed. Actively searching for content outside of their usual bubble will teach the algorithm to broaden rather than narrow their world.

Curiosity

Practice this by asking simple questions like.. Who made this? Why am I seeing this content? What does this content want to make me feel or do?

These questions will help young people realise that not everything we see online is real. It will build resilience and turn passive scrolling into active thinking.

When young people understand the mechanics behind the feed, they gain power to be able to protect their wellbeing, express themselves authentically, and build healthier relationships within digital space they use. This is the heart of digital empowerment.

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HOW OLD IS TOO OLD? AUSTRALIA'S SURPRISING PHONE - AGE DEBATE.

What started as a few school policies and parent-led campaigns has spread into a full-blown cultural debate involving educators, psychologists, tech experts, and families who are all trying to navigate a digital world that is growing and evolving quicker than childhood itself.

Say What!?

The Australian Government have banned social media for under 16 year olds. This affects their already existing accounts and prevents them from creating a new account. They are saying that this ban will reduce social media's features which encourage young people to spend more time on their phones and harm their mental health & wellbeing.

According to the BBC, a study was done in 2025 and found that 96% of young people aged 10-15 used social media. 7 out of 10 of those young people were exposed to harmful content which included misogynistic and violent material as well as other content which promoted eating disorders and suicide. 1 in 7 young people also experienced grooming type behaviour from adults or older children, and over half had been a victim of cyberbullying (Livingstone, 2026).

The government used these three criteria's to assess whether a site would be banned or not for those aged 16 & under.

- The site's sole purpose is to enable online social interaction between 2 or more users.
- If it allows users to interact with some or all users; and
- if it allows users to post material.

For example, YouTube Kids, Google classroom & WhatsApp have not been identified as a risk due to their features not meeting the above criteria.

Under 16's are also able to view most content which are online if the platform doesn't require an account to be able to access & view the content.

How does this look?

According to Livingstone, children and parents are not being punished for infringing the ban. However, social media companies are facing the fines which are up to \$49.5m (£25M) if they are discovered for serious or repeated breaches to the new rules. Firms must take "reasonable steps" to keep kids off their platforms. These steps include government ID's, face or voice recognition or age interference which analyses online behaviour and interactions to estimate a person's age.

According to Meta, they blocked approximately 550,000 accounts during the first 5 days of the ban. Snapchat users use bank accounts, photo ID or selfies for verification (Livingstone, 2026).

The Critics' Lens

What about the data protection? There are raised concerns around the large scale of collection and storage of people's personal information in order for them to access these social media platforms. Like other countries, Australia has had high profile data breaches where sensitive information was stolen and published or sold.

However, the government insists that the legislation incorporates strong protections with personal data. It is said that data is only collected to verify the age of people and then must be "subsequently destroyed", with serious penalties for breaches (Livingstone, 2026).

The Worldwide Impact

Parents in the UK have now been flooding MPS with demands to ban social media. They have described it as a 'tidal wave' of letters from parents to ban social media for young people under the age of 16. To be exact... 235,000 letters have been wrote. This has led to the UK government announcing that they are going to "consult" on whether they should impose a ban.

The parents have told MP's that their children are being bullied beyond the classroom while others are being shown pornography and and violent content by school peers.

Daisy Greenwell, the mum who is charging at making a change. She started by creating a WhatsApp group called "Smartphone Free Childhood" (SFC). This group has since exploded and has led to regional SFC splinter groups across the country and had made national headlines.

Greenwell tells us that it is difficult for families, parents and kids to negotiate platforms which are so addictive. She goes on to say that there is so much harmful content on there and stuff that we wouldn't show kids/young people in real life (Greenwell, 2026).

BBC have created a survey where a quarter of 13-18-year-olds have confessed that they use their phoned for around 5.5 hours a day on a typical day. That is 35 hours a week which for most is their full-time job.

Greenwell argues that social media is removing what kids should be doing, which she thinks is being together face to face and playing sport, reading, listening to music. She also believes that the addictiveness of these platforms have sucked this away from children (Adams, 2026).

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POCKET PANIC: YOUNG PEOPLE VS THE RISE OF THE PHONE POUCH

A wave of sealed pockets is sweeping through the schools. The humble phone pouch has become the new symbol of adults in panic mode over screens. To some it's a safety measure but to others it's a digital straight jacket. For young people it's a new challenge, a tug of war with teachers over lack of trust, and what it means to grow up connected.

The Big Question... Why?

What started as a phone pouch for concerts to help people be present and watch through their eyes rather through their screens has now spread to schools in the hope that young people look up more, build relationships with their teachers & peers face to face, pay more attention during lessons as they don't have the temptation for a sneaky check under the table.

How does this look...

Young people are handed a pouch which has their name on it which makes it identifiable. They put their phone in it and keep it on them for the day. However, they need to use a special device to unlock the pouch and access their phones.

According to Leader, the aim is to stop the reflex response of young people reaching for their phones. She goes on to say that any school who signs up with Yondr gets an education programme with the pouches. She explains that this is their secret source as they support schools from the beginning. This includes teacher training, parent comms as well as creating a policy of how to make it work, along with addressing pushbacks from parents, students and staff to help them understand that it's a positive step rather than a punitive measure.

Leader goes on to say that millions of young people have benefitted from a phone-free education with Yondr which is working in all 50 US states, 27 countries and hundreds of schools across Europe and now the UK. Scotland have now made contact and are starting their journey with Yondr.

What is Data Telling us?

An independent researcher has found that academic success rates have increased by up to 6.27% in the US. Meanwhile, there has been a decrease in monthly behavioural referrals by an average of 44%. 74% of teachers have agreed that young people have been more attentive in class while 77% of teachers noticed a reduction in classroom disruptions caused by phones.

Benefits?

Lizzie Hacking and ex-teacher speaks on her experience with Yondr when it was introduced to the school where she worked. Hacking states that they seen benefits overnight and she explains that the school became so loud but not in a bad way but because everyone was engaging. She goes on to say that friendship groups expanded with older kids putting aside their credit to play tag and engaging in terrible attempts at flirting. She explained the changes as things that used to happen and no one realised them slipping away until they reappeared.

Teachers have voiced that they have gone into the teaching profession to educate young people however with phones in place they feel that this is taken away as they are spending their time reminding young people to put their phones in their bag. Yondr is taking this stress away from teachers and allowing them to be teachers again.

Another teacher explains that Yondr is giving young people the childhood that we didn't realise we were lucky to have (Kernan, 2026).

The Pushback...

Parents of Ceredigion have mixed emotions around the phone pockets with some saying that it's a positive move and others saying that they are struggling to understand due to the fact that their children are expected to use an app to access their timetable, their dinner money and homework.

Another parent has explained that she understands the importance of young people staying off social media however she views phones as a safety measure for her children. She also feels that this allows parents to get hold of the young people when they need to. She goes on to say that she would rather spend a few hours monitoring her child's phone than worrying daily about their safety until they arrive home.

The evidence is there that reducing early access to smartphones can support wellbeing, safety and positive social relationships from Wyn Thomas, Ceredigion's cabinet member for schools. She then goes on to express that they are proud to work with families and schools across the county to create an environment where children can grow, learn and thrive without the pressure of rapidly changing technology (Mackrill, 2026).

In the end, the rise of the pocket pouch isn't really about fabric or school rules, it's about how we choose to understand and trust young people in a world where and at an age where connection is part of their identity. There are real benefits in creating moments of focus, calm, and face-to-face interactions, just as there are real risks in shutting young people out of their digital spaces where friendships, culture, and belonging now live. The challenge isn't picking a side, but listening closely to the voices caught in the middle... The Young People.

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