TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

Creatures of Habit - Aug/Sep 2019

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Tennessee v. Meta
Case No. 23-1364-IV
PX-00041

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RESEARCH APPROACH

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Methodology

Field sites: L.A. USA / London UK

- **Stage 1) Mini- groups - Creative exercises**
- Using creative techniques to create an environment where four strangers could share insights about their mental health. The research was designed to build rapport, and used projective techniques (Lego) to get young people to describe mental health in a ‘safe' and detached way.
- Focus groups lasted 2 hours; covering representations of self, depictions of mental wellness & unwellness, the impact of social media on MH and what IG should do to support wellbeing online.

- **Stage 2) Follow up phone calls with 8x participants**
- Were designed to play back some of the findings with participants and gauge response after the sessions had ended. Sense-checking findings and pushing the insight further.

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Sample

- 5x groups in each territory, split across gender, age and ‘theme.
- 2x M 13-15 across markets, 2x M 16-18 across markets
- 2x F 13-15 across markets, 2x F 16-18 across markets
- Plus, 1x extra group in each market for no mental health issue (1x younger male in US, 1x older female in UK)
- Themes:
  - Body image, self-esteem, social pressure to be perfect, weight issues.
  - Negative mood, anxiety, feeling down, or a bit depressed.
  - Loneliness, isolation, unpopularity

Secondary criteria:

- Currently use at least one social media application
- Have used IG in the past month
- None to reject IG
- Screened for creative thinking and articulacy.

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TOPLINE HEADLINES

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- Instagram is an inevitable and unavoidable component of teens lives. Teens can't switch off from Instagram even if they want to.
- Instagram has become the ID card of this generation. It is the go-to tool for both measuring and gathering social prestige.
- Instagram sets the standards not only for how teens should look and act but also for how they should think and feel.
- Teens feel themselves to be at the forefront of new social behaviours to which there is no consensus on how to behave or cope. They sorely lack empathetic voices to whom they can turn for support.
- Teens talk of Instagram in terms of an 'addicts narrative' spending too much time indulging in a compulsive behaviour that they know is negative but feel powerless to resist.
- The pressure to 'be present and perfect' is a defining characteristic of the anxiety teens face around Instagram. This restricts both their ability to be emotionally honest and also to create space for themselves to switch off.
- Anxiety around what to post and the potential cost involved in posting the wrong thing means teens are switching from proactive to passive engagement with the platform.

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WELLBEING IN CONTEXT

What role does Instagram play in shaping emotional wellbeing and state of mind of young people more broadly?

In many ways, IG plays a positive role on MH.

Young people were quick to point out the positive role that IG plays in their personal and social lives.

'There are some great things about social media. Mostly that you can keep in touch and see things where you think "oh I'd like to try that' - UK Female

There are many aspects of the platform that make young people feel good:

- Getting social validation from likes, comments and followers
- Seeing 'trending' content that helps them be part of the crowd
- Watching or viewing content that expands their horizons, or arrests boredom
- Connecting with friends and family members
- Having an open record of the best parts of their lives
- Providing inspiration or stimulus to motivate them to be their best selves
- Source of role models and people to look up to
- Relatable content that helps them feel like they are not alone
- Memes and funny posts that lighten the mood
- Keeping up with news or issues around the world
- Being able to be nosey into other peoples lives

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- IG is the ultimate connector; acting as a platform to connect young people to their social circles and to trends within popular culture.
- By being connected, young people can seek out people and information that help them feel less alone and more part of a collective.
- This points to why memes are so popular, as they allow political or real life struggles to be turned into resonant, yet light-hearted in-jokes.

Without Instagram, teens would miss out on the key to their social world; the vital network to connect with each other.

IG is the connector & key to the social world.

Instagram is a central figure in the way that young people connect and relate to each other.

'We're all feeling so much like we have to fit in, that as soon as someone mentions an influencer, you're on Instagram looking them up and following them. If you didn't keep up with what's going on, you'd 1000% feel like you were missing out. It's just not possible.' - Female, UK

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Young people aren't using the platform constructively.

Constructive uses of the platform for mental wellbeing were hypothetical rather than practical.

'You end up scrolling through the explore page for hours. Like you get stuck down a rabbit hole. And then you think - what have I been doing with my time? It seems so wasteful' - UK, Female

- Young people were open to how IG could help them constructively explore and enrich their lives; but it's not something they necessarily immediately connect to IG themselves.
- But in reality, despite this potential, the content they consume is fairly standard
- For all the talk of communities of interest, everyone still follows Kylie Jenner and gets excited about the same trainers.
- Support for MH was mostly conceived of as having 'positive quotes' to lift the mood for the day. But, the positive role that IG could play in helping provide social purpose and expand interests was harder to draw out from conversations.

Helping young people understand and focus on the constructive role that Instagram can play in their lives is the key to helping them build resilience.

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- Instagram plays a significant role in how a young person feels about their day.
  - It could be a day where all your mates are liking your posts, leaving comments about how great you are, or a day where your supposed 'friends' are going out of their way to put you down and make you feel like crap.
- The boundary between social media and real life is blurred - and feelings and behaviours cross over between the two.
- Young peoples' sensitivity to content on Instagram creates a relationship between the platform and their daily state of mind - a mental connection that frames the platform in a positive or negative light.

Young people are aware that their daily experiences on IG plays a central role in their state of mind. Their feelings on that day dictate whether they view the platform and brand in a positive or negative light.

IG has the power to make or break your day.

IG plays a central role in teens' lives, and dictates how they feel about their day.

'I've had to stop myself looking at Instagram in the morning, because it has so much power to shape how I feel. So I just try to give myself the time to set my own day' - US, Female

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Feelings in the moment dictate how well you cope.

In-the-moment feelings determines resilience to cope with content they see online.

'When you're miserable you look at every comment on your profile and think that they comments are bad. You're feeling bad and so you think that people are giving you fake support, because you know your spotty and feeling fat' - UK Female

- Underlying emotional states play a key role in a young person's ability to deal with the content they see. If they are having a bad day, they know they are more vulnerable to what they see online.
- This was particularly true for social comparison. The more a young person is feeling bad, the more vulnerable they are to negatively comparing themselves to others.
- Some young people were able to recognise the impact of looking at IG on their feelings for the day, and had tried to stop themselves looking at their feed in order to protect themselves.
- Others' recognised that they were still compelled to look at Instagram, even if they knew it would make them feel bad.

Young people need help in seeing the value of creating balance in their use of social media. Knowing when you need to take a break, and what steps make you feel better is important.

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- As they vie for positions in the social hierarchy, young people are sensitively attuned to the words and actions of others; and relatively minor things (such as not getting a comment) can trigger off friendship ending processes.
- To deal with these social processes, teenagers have become the master scrutinisers of online behaviours.
- Things that adults would ordinarily overlook - such as not getting as many likes, or a seemingly unrelated comment - can kick off a whole set of reactions within the teen social world.
- Young people don't self harm or become anorexic over night; there is a build up of smaller things that can ladder up to more serious conditions.

This presents a challenge because the majority of harmful behaviours are not things that would be flagged.

Small things are just as bad as the big ones.

When thinking of mental health, it's easy to jump to big things. But it's small stuff that builds up on a daily basis that has the most harm.

'It builds up and there is a point where every person breaks. If you don't get help, you're going to have a mewl down' - UK female

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Teens are hooked despite how it makes them feel

Instagram is addictive, and time-spend on platform is having a negative impact on mental health

'Part of it [worst thing about IG] is just that it's just so addictive. Every time I pick up my phone it's the first thing I look at. At night when I should sleep, I just scroll through Explore' - UK, Male

- They have an addicts' narrative about their Instagram use - it can make them feel good, it can make them feel bad, they wish they could spend less time caring about it, but they can't help themselves.
- They recognise that without even thinking every time they pick up their phone, they automatically go to Instagram. They know they stay up later than they should and miss out on sleep to stay plugged in.
- But they also know that this isn't good for them or their mental health.
- At exam time, they recognise their lack of willpower and use apps to control their screen time and get away from social media.

Time-spend was one of the 'worst' aspects of teens' relationship to the platform. They were open to help reducing screen time, or making their experience more constructive.

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DEFINING MENTAL UN-WELLNESS

How do young people define themselves when they are down?

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Language around MH has clear gender lines.

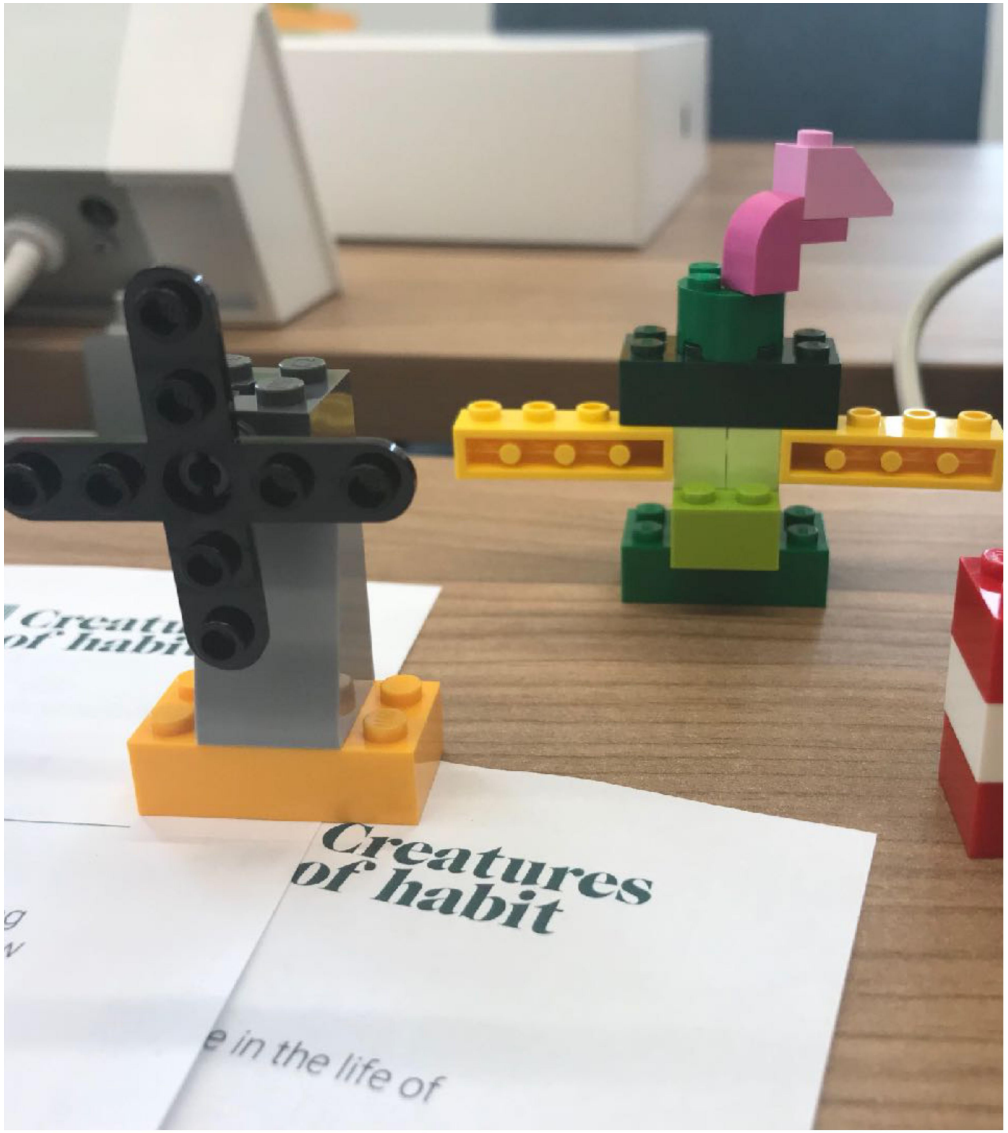
Girls and boys express emotions in different ways and experience different issues on the platform.

'Girls just try and do anything to get attention these days. Anything to get recognition. They'll fake posts. They'll buy followers, and all because they want to seem popular. It's sad really' - Male, US

- Girls are able to narrate their feelings with sophistication and are more attuned to the emotional realm.
  - However, they clearly struggled to articulate practical solutions.
  - Their coping strategies tend to involve shutting down or fighting back.
- Boys can articulate how they might act but not how they feel, and tend to revert to anger when they are unable to process what they are feeling.
  - Mental unwellness tends to have two obvious manifestations for boys; either in anger/ 'popping off', or in a complete retreat into themselves

Although many of the same issues affect boys and girls, their ways of expressing and processing emotions are different.

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The lego game

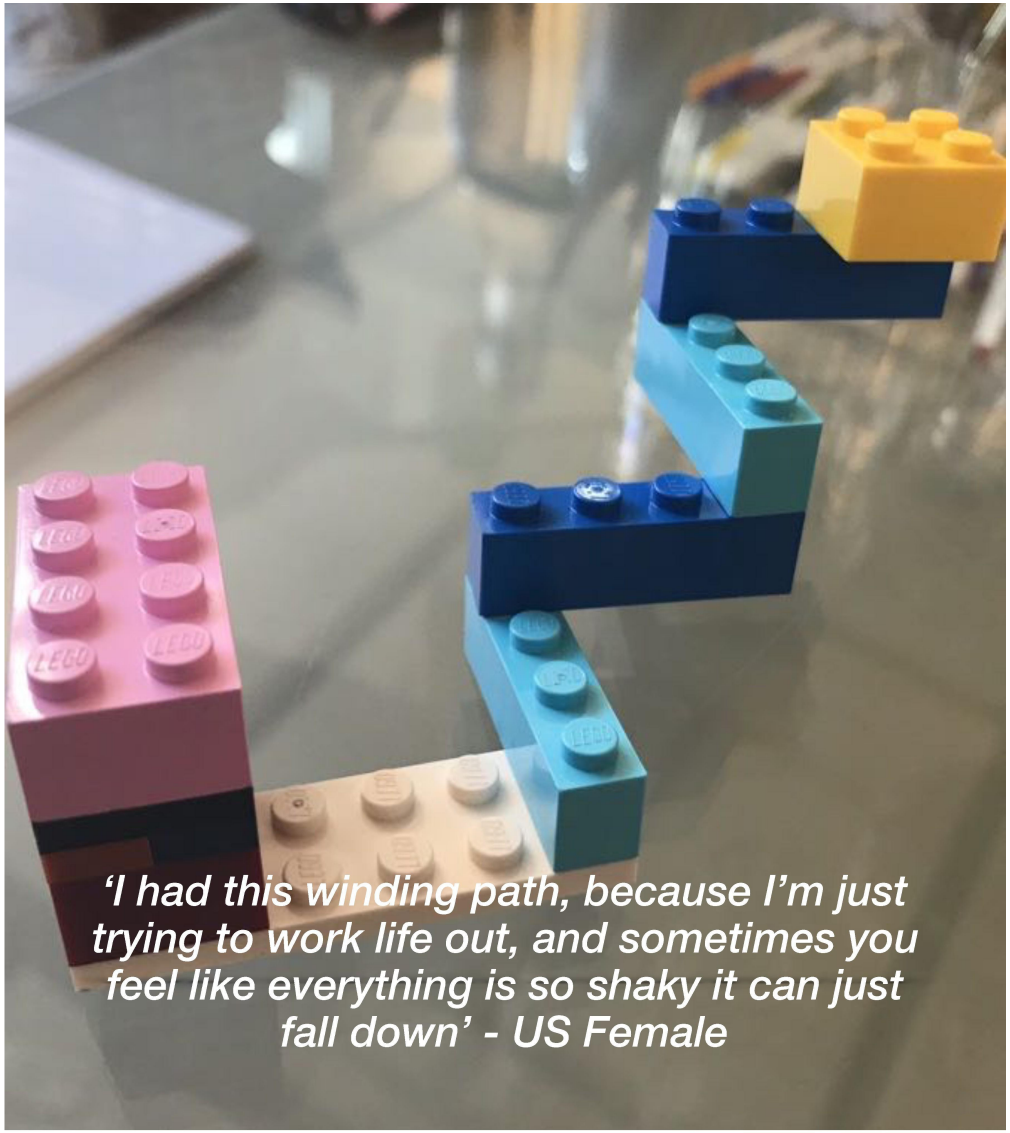
Mental un-wellness is…

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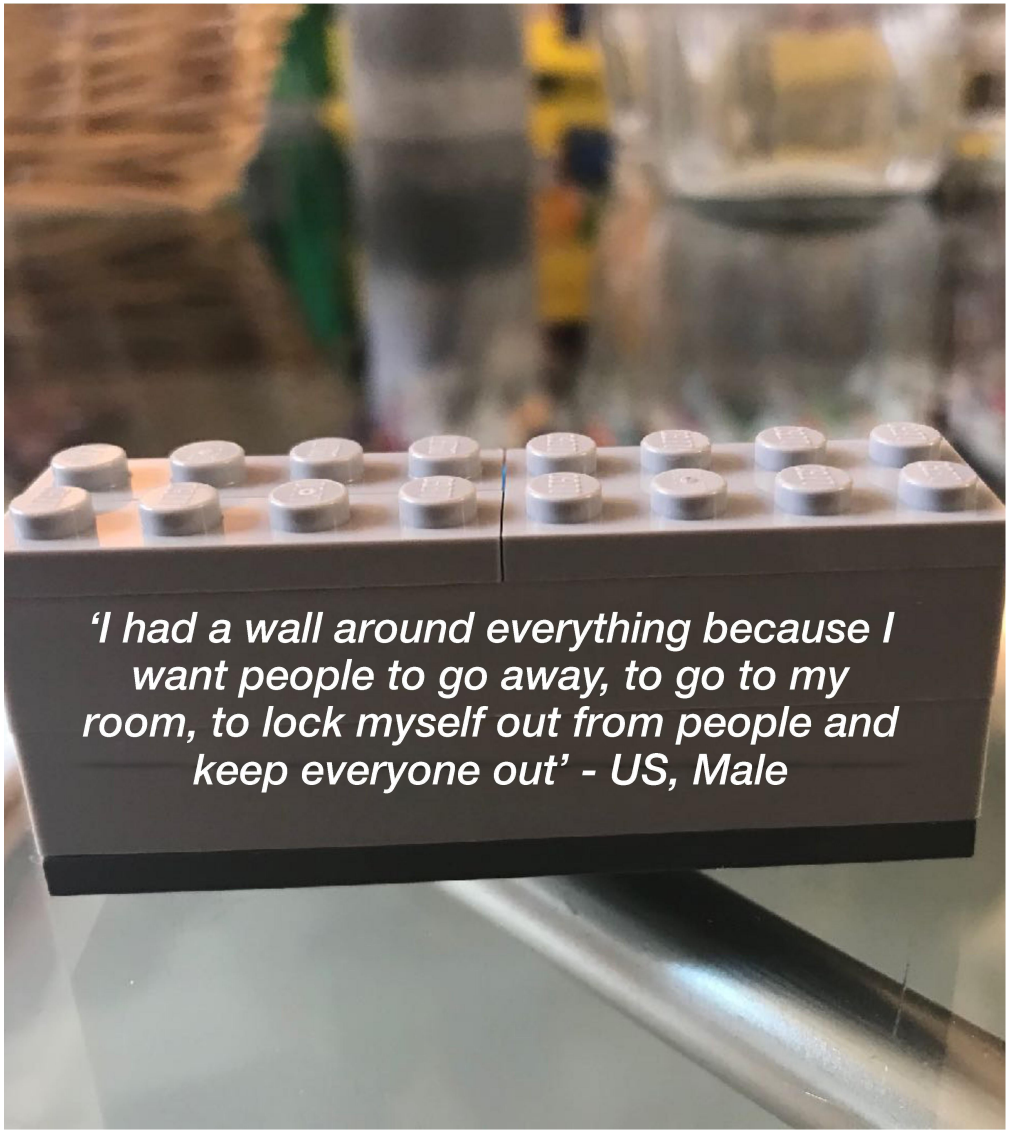
Steps and ladders.

Young peoples recognise that they are at the point in their life journey which is unstable & fraught with difficulty.

Winding and unstable paths that young people have to navigate to reach ‘adulthood’. They are on a journey and need to learn and grow from the challenges they face. Sometimes wellness and self-actualisation are out of reach. Sometimes the path feels so unstable it might break. There might be a window at the end of a painful process, where everything becomes clear



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Walls & Gates.

When in emotional turmoil young people tend to shut down and shut people out.

Putting up barriers, shutting people out, locking away your emotions, creating a safety in your own personal cocoon. They are dealing with a head-full of hormones, their emotions are in flux, and have all of this emotion bubbling up inside of them. It’s too much for anyone to handle, so they shut down into themselves to process.

They shut people out. And they create walls around themselves for self-protection.

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Dark & full of terrors.

Participants used dull and dark colours to describe how they feel or see themselves when mentally unwell.

Being mentally unwell is dull, grey, morose, apathetic. Full of angst and turmoil, they view other people around them as other to themselves; colourful, present, free and happy.

This was the antithesis to their self-representations, which were colourful. The idea that the feeling of dark emotion sweeps over you, and you have no control over how it colours your personality. For Boys, red for anger also featured heavily, showing their struggles to process emotions.



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Isolationist & cold.

Young people deliberately isolated themselves from friends and family even if they wanted attention and support.

When they feel bad, they seek space from others. But this leaves them feeling even more alone. They tell people to go away and leave them alone, but really this is in part a test, they really want some attention or support from those close to them. This leaves them with a sense of rejection. The unwell self is always at a distance to others; whether this is to dwell or process before self-soothing and reaching out to those around them.

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Circling & frenetic.

Wheels were used to represent circling or whirring thought processes that were hard to stop; or keeping busy to distract from problems.

The circling of unwanted thoughts that come cascading through your mind when you over think things. The whirring, overthinking knots that you tangle yourself into. They see themselves as over-thinkers, worriers, ‘cerebral’. Others try desperately to keep busy, to keep going, to find distractions that get them away from the things that bother them.



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Putting on a mask.

Young people put up a facade, to hide inner emotions from peers, and protect themselves.

They fear being vulnerable. They fear judgement of others. They fear being called out for being over emotional, or standing out. The important thing is to maintain neutrality, to hide your emotions and lock them away. To get to the ‘real me’, people have to be super close, super trusted.

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Heavy Baggage.

Young people feel mental un-wellness is often characterised by carrying the burden alone.

It feels heavy carrying all of the weight of your issues alone. But young people (particularly boys, and in the UK) felt that being open with their emotions was not appropriate, and that it was better to bottle things up until they pass. But avoiding their emotions, lead to them carrying the weight of the burden alone.



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Issues piling up.

Stress and anxiety keeps building up, making them feel like they are drowning under the weight.

All it takes is one bad day or thing to happen and then everything else weighs down on top of you making you feel even worse. Young people felt that it was never just one big thing that added up to them feeling bad, but lots of little things that got too much to handle.

As soon as they were stressed and anxious they recognised that they were much more reactive to other things in their day.

Potentially explosive.

The teen world is full of angst, drama and bad behaviour. Mental unwellness can also cause aggressive and challenging behaviours.

They 'saw red'. They couldn't keep a handle of it. It was a melting pot. Being a teenager is a complex time and people just don't know how to handle themselves yet. Both boys and girls in each territory described reacting to posts that made them feel a certain way, before calming down. And for some, feeling angry led to setting up exposure pages in their school to get their own back on someone who hurt them.



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MENTAL HEALTH ON IG

What impact does Instagram have on the mental health of young people?

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Young people are acutely aware that Instagram is bad for their mental health, yet are compelled to spend time on the app for fear of missing out on cultural and social trends.

They associate IG with:

- Intense pressure to conform to social stereotypes
- Pressure to match the money and body shapes of famous influencers
- Need for validation and likes from others
- Bullying, hate speech and friendship conflict
- Over-sexualisation of girls' bodies
- Inappropriate adverts that sell weight loss products.

Instagram is the worst platform for mental health.

Instagram is called out for being the most problematic social media platform for mental health. But it's also the most popular.

'Depression and anxiety are so much worse than before, and the only thing that's changed is social media.' - UK Female

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Teens blame generational MH issues on Instagram.

Constant comparison on IG is 'the reason' why there are higher levels of anxiety & depression in young people.

'The reason why our generation is so messed up and has higher anxiety and depression than our parents is because we have to deal with social media. Everyone feels like they have to be perfect' - UK, Female

- Social comparison and perfectionism are nothing new, but young people are dealing with this on an unprecedented scale.
- The proliferation of new and different ways to compare themselves to others, combined with constant access to means that there is no way to escape social comparison on IG.
- This was called out as being the number one reason why IG is worse than other platforms for MH. And, young people openly attribute their increased level of anxiety and depression to Instagram.

If young people are already calling this out, it won't take long before others' pick up on this too.

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In the UK Bullying and social comparison were cited as being the worst for MH.

- Examples of bullying, trolling and being ‘toxic’ were extreme in the UK.
- Teens wished that people would be nicer on the platform, and felt that this single element would greatly improve their experience on IG.

In the US, competition, and social pressure were cited as being the worst for MH.

- Young people in the US were much more keenly aware of the competition of Instagram; understanding that they needed to play a game or lose.
- This comes with it a pressure to put up a facade, hide emotion and present a ‘happy’ face.

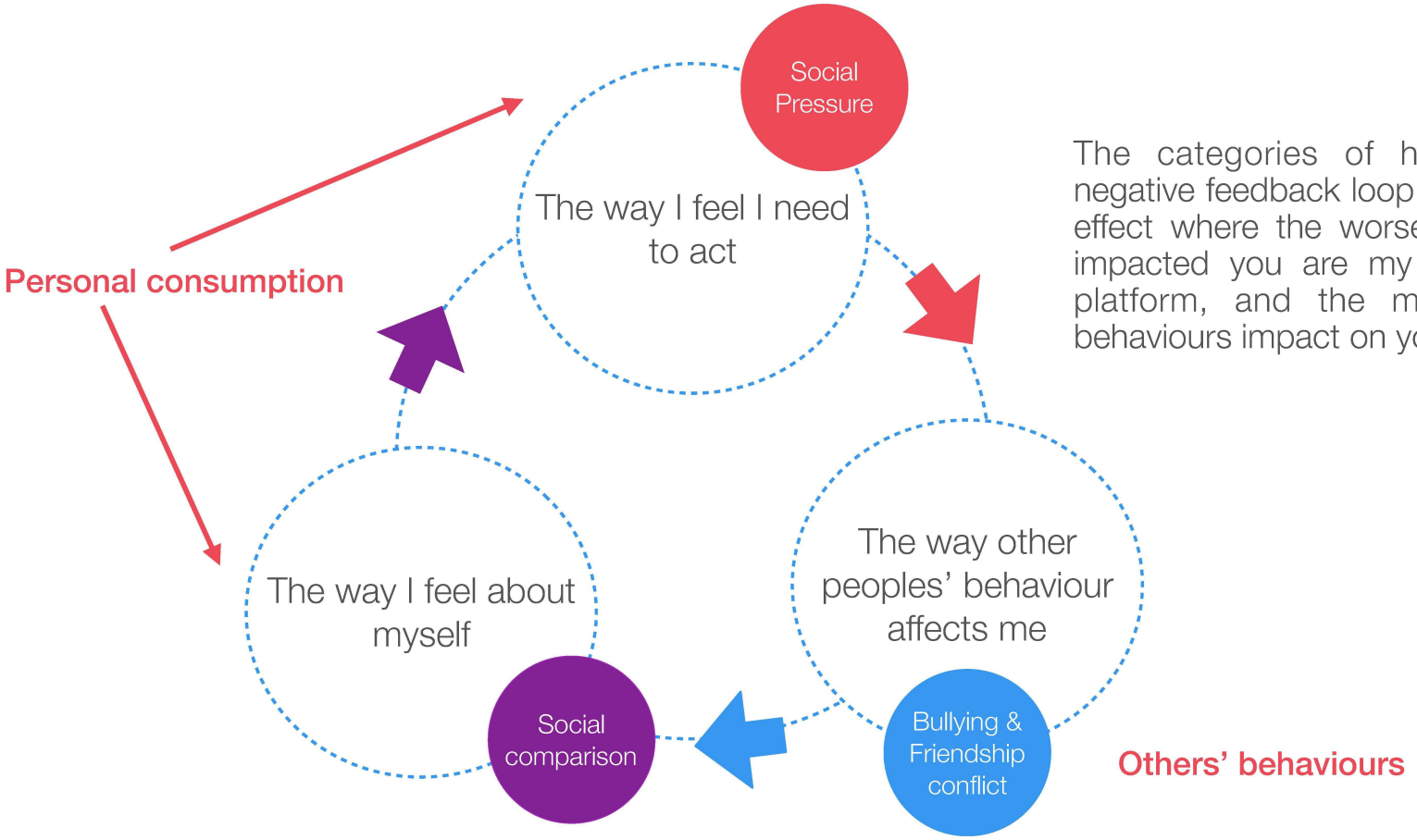
Small differences exist between UK/US.

The descriptions of the harm that IG can have on mental wellbeing were fairly similar in the UK and US.

Young people in the US and UK report similar struggles with IG. However, there were certain trends that were much more pronounced in different territories

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Harm on IG falls into three categories



The categories of harm operate as a negative feedback loop - creating a spiralling effect where the worse you feel, the more impacted you are my interaction with the platform, and the more other peoples' behaviours impact on you.

NB: bullying not covered in this report, see previous report.

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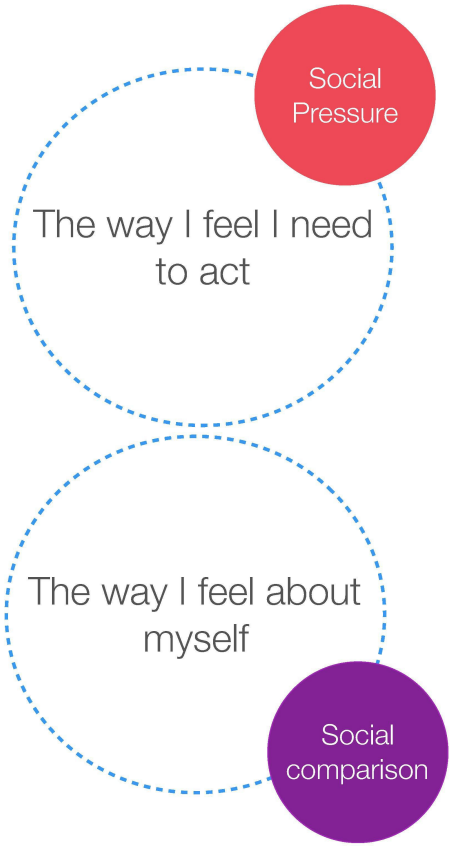
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Teens are their own worst enemy.

Although others' behaviours online can really hurt, the self-scrutiny and anxiety associated with personal consumption patterns is arguably more damaging to MH overall.



Lack of resilience or low sense of self exacerbates the impact that personal consumption patterns have on mental wellbeing.

Young people know that their own personal consumption patterns have a harmful impact on their self-esteem, but they don't adopt different patterns of behaviour.

In some cases, they can get addicted to things that make them feel bad. Obsessively looking at content of thin, gorgeous celebrities as a form of self-harm.

These habitual consumption patterns are much more insidious, but also highly damaging to self-esteem.

In the long term, constant self-critique and scrutiny will permanently shape the way a person views themselves in relation to others - heightening anxiety and likelihood of developing mental health conditions.

Triggers are much more personal and internal, and as such, much harder to track and monitor.

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Bullying is intense but time-limited.

Although others' behaviours online can really hurt in the moment, aside from in extreme cases friendship conflict tends to be short-lived and is time-bound to the teen years.



- Bullying and friendship conflict is the most overt and acutely painful thing that teens' can experience.
- It determines whether you feel included or excluded - which to teens is everything.
- Social media offers a treasure trove of ways that young people can be made to feel bad, and when in the midst of conflict, young people feel this very intensely.
- Though issues might be solved relatively quickly, shifting allegiances and shaky trust can damage young people's self-esteem if they feel their social position is being continually challenged.
- This type of harm is much more in line with patterns of behaviour known to most adults, but the extension of bullying and friendship conflict into every part of life is new. It's now in your bedroom as well as the school yard.
- Ultimately though, bullying and friendship conflict is time-limited. It's rare that dramas last forever, and young people quickly grow out of these behaviours as friendships become more firmly established.

The problem is that in the moment, there are very few mechanisms that young people can draw on when they face bullying online.

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Types of behaviour associated with categories of harm.

Social comparison hurts YPs self-esteem, heightening anxiety and insecurity

- Feeling you have to look a certain way, or comparing yourself to others
- Comparisons of followers and likes
- Having to match influencer level - i.e. professionalism of photos, body image & personality
- The popularity competition
- Perception & understanding that you're constantly scrutinised and judged

Social pressure stops ability to be open with support networks, and encourages the adoption of unhealthy habits

- Pressure to always be happy and not show 'weaknesses'
- Taking inspiration from posts as motivation to 'be a better self' - i.e. losing weight
- Pressure to be public about everything - e.g. pressure to have public account and show your life to strangers
- Intense scrutiny and pressure on posting relevant content

Bullying & Friendship conflict is consuming and makes YPs feel vulnerable, alone and hated

- People calling you names, being rude or disrespecting you
- Fomo and feeling left out; unfollows and not enough likes
- Public judgement and criticism
- 'Indirecting' & Exposure of confidential information to wider social group. E.g. secrets or drunk photos
- Gossip, and spreading drama

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'You can be playing a game online and everyone is being toxic. And sometimes that ok, but it can cross the line. Sometimes I get anonymous messages from people attacking me. I know it's a guy in my group who I don't quite get on with. But it can feel upsetting. That's why I prefer to spend time alone'

- Male, UK

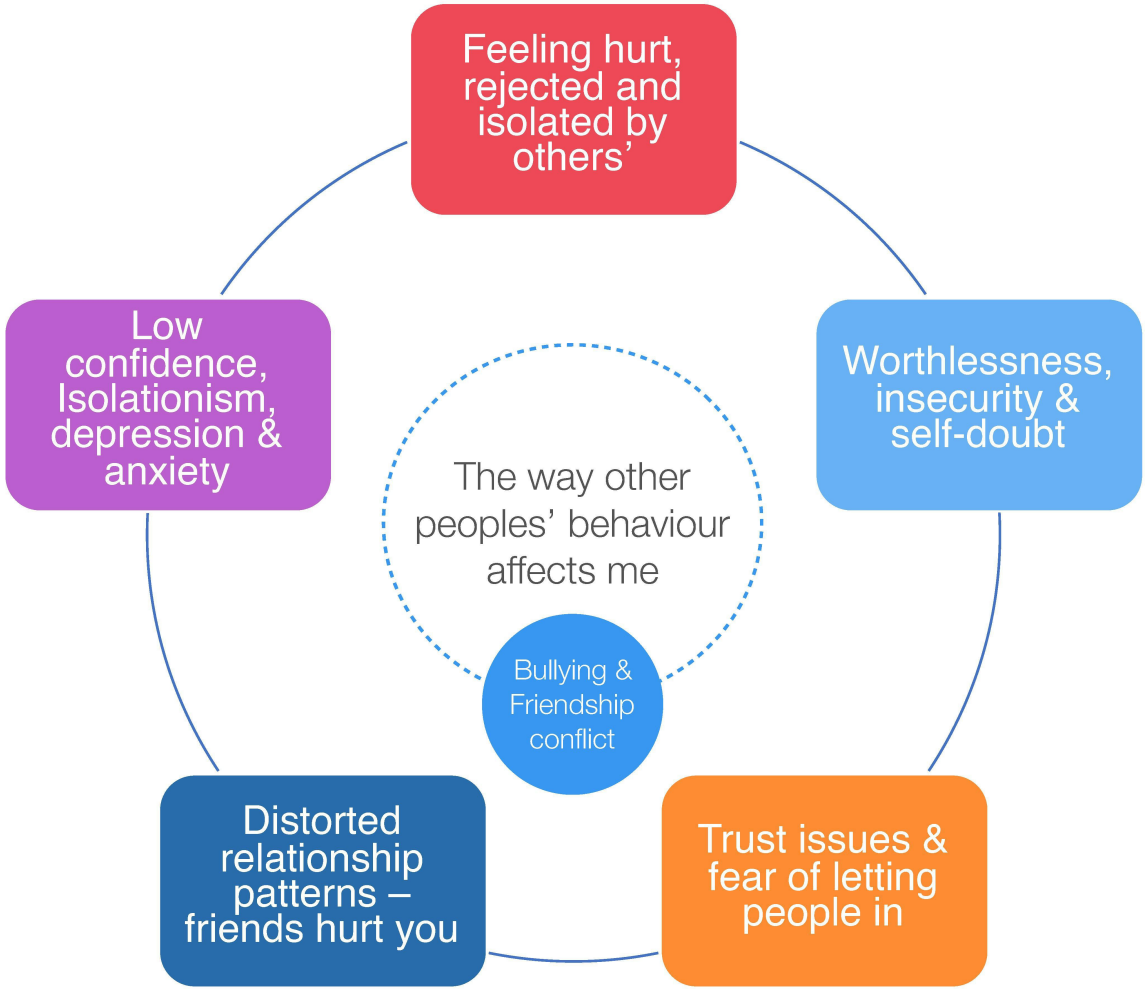
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Bullying and friendship conflict are a constant dramatic back-drop to teen life. But for some, it leaves lasting wounds that impact on relationships

Particularly amongst young girls and boys in the UK, bullying can often be more extreme or prolonged.

This means young people become used to slightly abusive patterns of behaviour from their friends; distorting their sense of trust and safety in the people around them.

This erosion of trust, impacts on self confidence and increases incidences of depression and isolationism.



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'You can't ever win on social media.

If you're Curvy- you're too busty. If you're skinny- you're too skinny. If you're bigger- you're too fat.

But it's clear you need boobs, a booty, to be thin, to be pretty.

It's endless, and you just end up feeling worthless and shitty about yourself.

I'm never going to have that body without surgery'

- Female, UK

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Social comparison creates a negative feed-back loop.

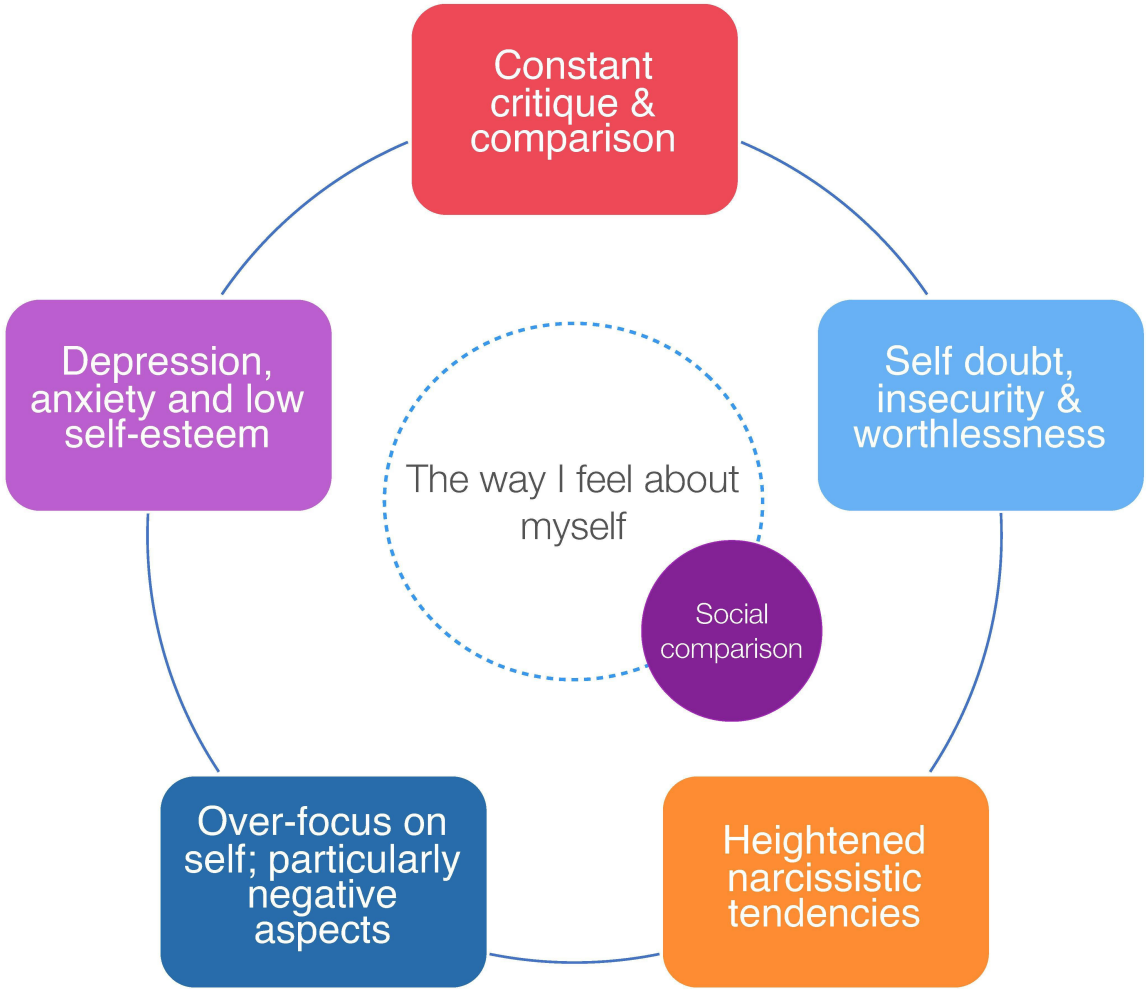
As young people increasingly compare themselves to others, their feelings of self-doubt grow.

This doubt and feeling of worthlessness heightens the degree of attention they give to these feeling.

In turn this over-focus on negative self-aspects leads to low mood.

Being in a low or vulnerable state of mind then means the young person is more vulnerable to the content they see online.

'It's a vicious cycle. You see content that encourages you to criticise yourself. But I rush to judge people as well. Standards are totally based on looks'-US female



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The game of IG is what makes it worth playing.

Social comparison

The size of your graph and number of likes encourages comparison as they are key metrics that display your popularity.

- IG become the ID card of this generation.
- It's how young people judge and criticise each other
- Your likes and followers determine how popular you are, and with that popularity how much you can get away with.
- Yet, despite how popular you might be within your immediate social sphere, there is always someone at the next level of influence who has more likes or followers than you. You can never win the game.
- Young people recognise that having likes and follower counts visible encourages them to seek to improve their ratio of followers, and post things explicitly because they will be liked.
- This encourages young people to post things that might not necessarily be for them, but for attention.

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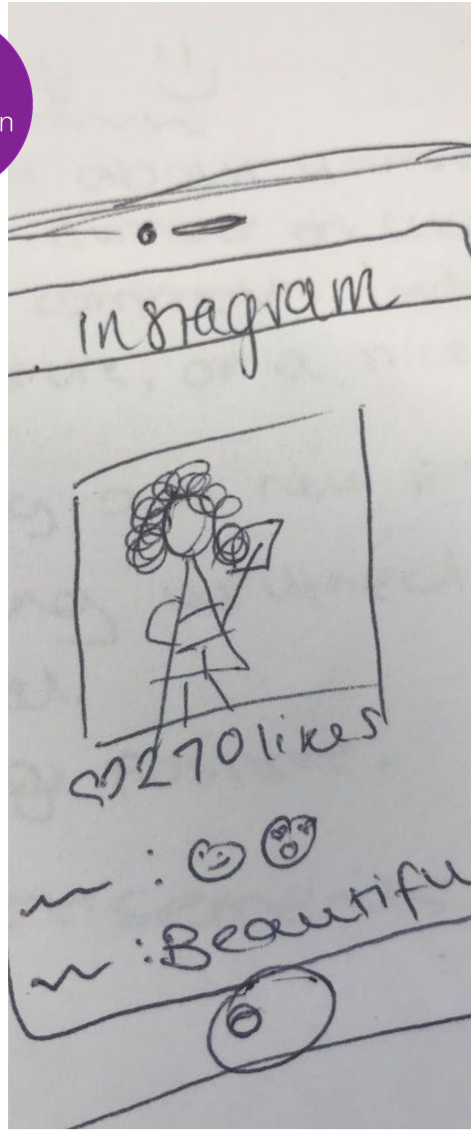
Blurring celeb & teen content heightens anxiety

Social comparison

Blurring professional and personal content dissolves the boundary between unreachable influencer and everyday teen content - increasing the pressure to reach unattainable standards.

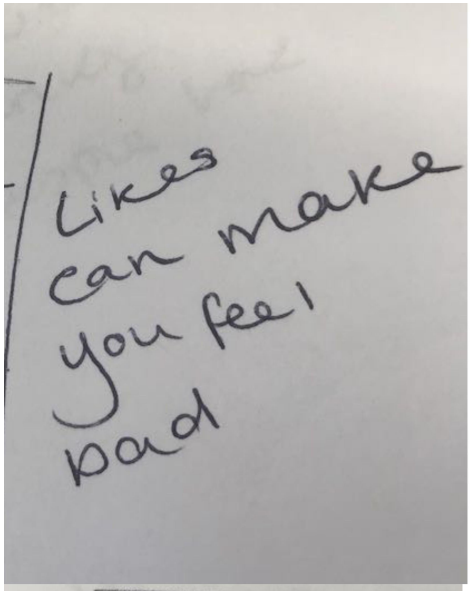
- Young people scroll through their feed and look at a picture of Kylie Jenner in her bikini, and then a picture of their friend and judge them in comparison - they know it's not fair, but it's just human nature to make that comparison.
- This increases the pressure young people feel at having to compete with people and lifestyles that are simply out of their reach.
- Some of the young men in L.A had turned their accounts into business accounts just to get analytics about their 'performance' on IG, and had begun to see themselves as their own personal brand. They directly attributed this to 'performance anxiety'.
- In the UK, young girls were acutely aware of 'skin for likes' and felt extremely pressured to post semi-nude photos on IG simply to get likes.

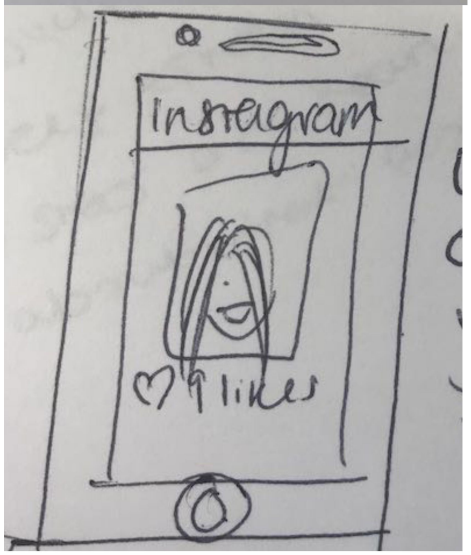
Instagram is a game of likes/followers and everyday teens are struggling to live up the performance of the influencers around them - adding to their sense of deficiency.



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‘You’re scrolling through and you see Kylie Jenner and her perfect body, and then someone scrolls through and they see me. I’m always going to be shit in comparison to that…boys in our year think that we should all look like that.’- Female, UK.





Teens are fighting a losing battle

Teens recognise that influencer content is staged, but they can't help but hold themselves to unrealistic standards.

- Young people understand that everyone 'puts on a front' on IG - carefully curating the imagery of their lives, and photoshopping images to enhance aesthetic effect.

- Yet, while they know this and accept it; they are also still impacted by the content that they are seeing. They cannot live up to or match the beauty, body shapes or amazing lives of those they follow on IG.
- But this doesn't stop them from trying to compete, in a battle they know they won't win.

'Everyone knows the score. The more you show the more you get likes… Skin for likes. I know girls at school who take pictures of themselves in their underwear. It's like, OK. It should be empowering, but it's not.. it makes me feel like that should be me. But I just don't have the confidence with my body' - Female, UK

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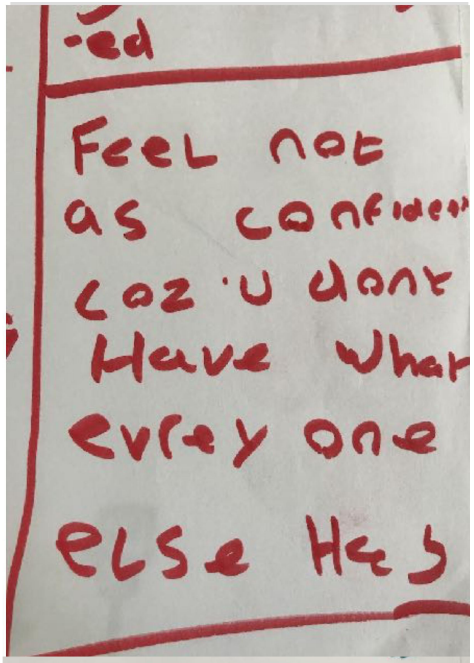
Social comparison

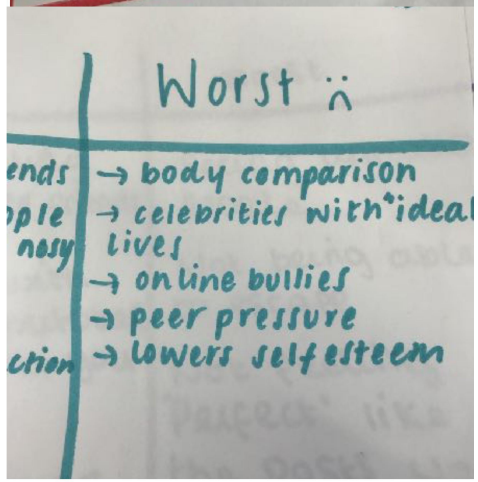
Constant comparison is eroding teens' self-worth

Young people directly attribute anxiety and low self-worth to the constant comparison to others' on social media.

- The sheer volume of points of comparison that young people are being exposed to, at a time in their lives when their sense of self is at its most fragile - is a new dimension to being a young person.
- More avenues than ever before have become open to social comparison: not only about you and your personality, but your body, your clothes, your lifestyle, your captions, your likes, your followers.
- They know other people are judging and criticising them, because they do it to other people.
- It means that they become tightly controlling over what they will and will not post online - expecting standards of themselves that are unrealistic.

Instagram brings the whole world to your fingertips and with it, the vectors for comparison become infinite and consuming. This is having a damaging effect on how young people view themselves.





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‘Scrolling through Instagram just always makes me feel like I’m not worthy.
You can just never match up to other people.
It makes you feel unwanted and lonely. Lonely in your view of yourself’ - Female, US

Social comparison is not gendered

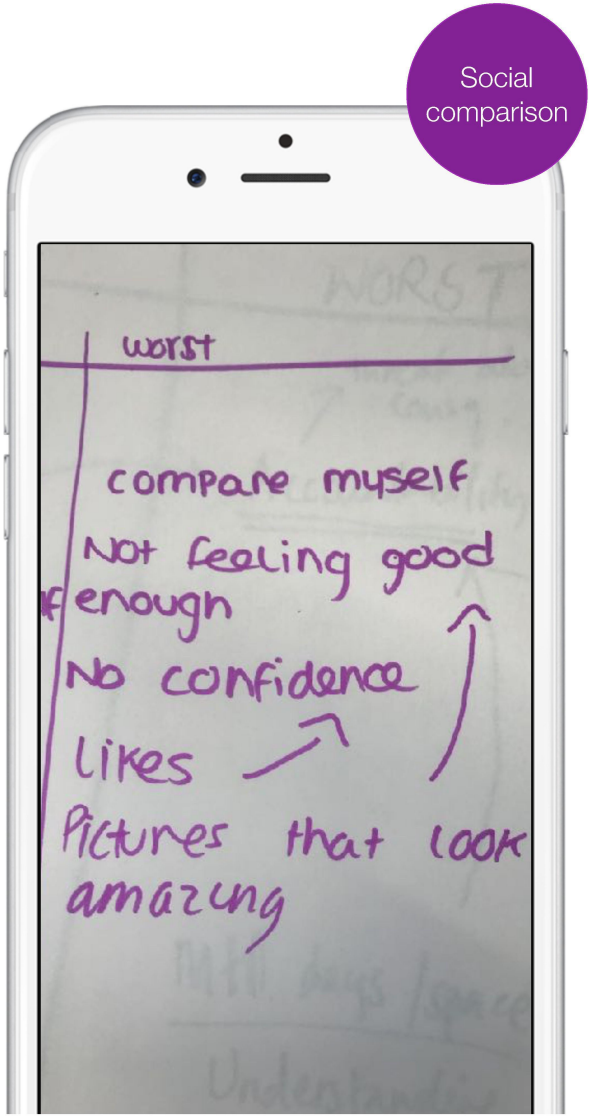
Although girls seem more obviously impacted by social comparison, boys just communicate comparison in a different language

Social comparison appears to be more closely related to body image and therefore naturally aligned to female anxieties. However, boys were just as likely to be affected by body image - particularly around having the right clothes, body shape or look as girls.

This is still much more of a taboo subject for men to talk about, so the language they tend to use is around having the right garb or enough money to buy things to fit in, rather than explicitly about body shape.

'Social comparison it brings your confidence down, guys who are built on the explore page. It's all about this image you're trying to create for yourself on social media…But you end up comparing yourself to people who have millions of pounds and are just totally out of reach. You think, I don't want to put my body up for judgement against that!' - Male, UK

'Yeah, you see everyone with these clothes that cost hundreds of dollars. And like, you do feel a pressure… you can't help but compare yourself… and like I try, I try to look my best, but who has that kind of money?' - Male, US.



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'One of the main pressures is the pressure to be present. To share things so publicly about your life constantly or feeling pressured to have a public account. It forces you into feeling like you have to look or behave a certain way. It's tiring.' **- Female, UK.**



'You can see weight loss images of influencers and ads about how you can lose weight, and you take it as motivation to go work on your body. It pushes you to be your best self.' **- Female, US.**

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Social pressure creates an environment where young people act upon unrealistic standards they set for themselves.

All participants vocalised the pressure to look or act a certain way on Instagram as directly leading to hyper-scrutiny of their own actions.

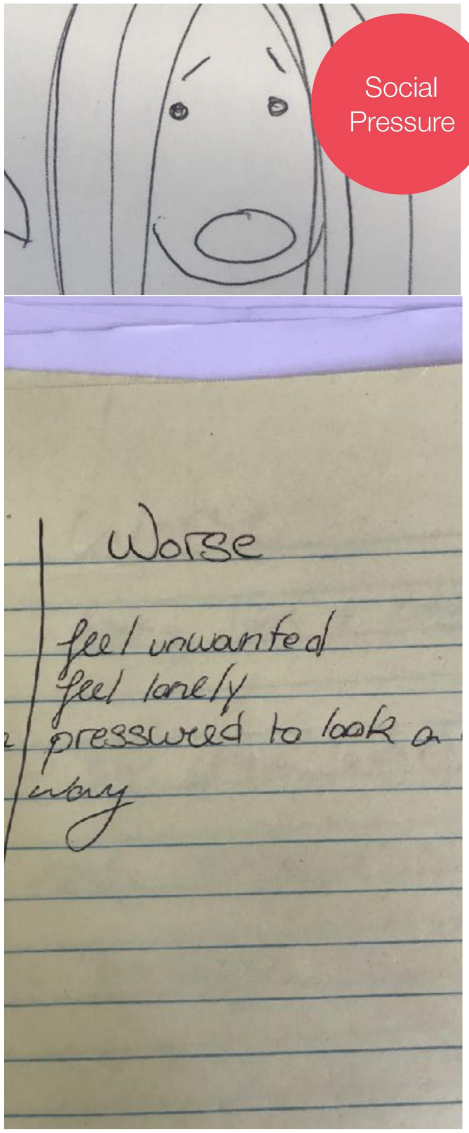
The more they worry about trying to live up to unrealistic standards, the more they fear being honest or authentic about who they are and how they are feeling.

Not only does this lead to them hiding or bottling up their emotions, but it also means that they put up a facade to protect themselves online.

This leads to obsessive control of what goes on social media, and often leads to negative attention seeking to get validation.

And increases the likelihood that young people display characteristics of social perfectionism, or, become isolated from their support networks.

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IG sets an emotional aesthetic that has to be met

Young people respond to visual stimulus on IG and play out behaviours they think are 'right' - even if it hides their true emotional self.

- Teens are being provided with visual cues about how they should feel and behave, and feel like they are failing and alone when they don't meet these standards.
- And this stops them from speaking to others about what is going on.
- In the US, all depictions of mental unwellness had happiness built into it, pointing to the pressure that young people feel to be happy.
- In the UK, young people felt that they actively had to cut out their colourful friends when in a bad place because they didn't want to reveal their inner emotional turmoil.

'I feel like the pressure to look a certain way is the worst. You end up dressing a certain way to please other people. But you end up faking who you are, or like trying to be something you're not. It just feels fake. It makes you feel like you can just be real with how you're feeling' - US Female

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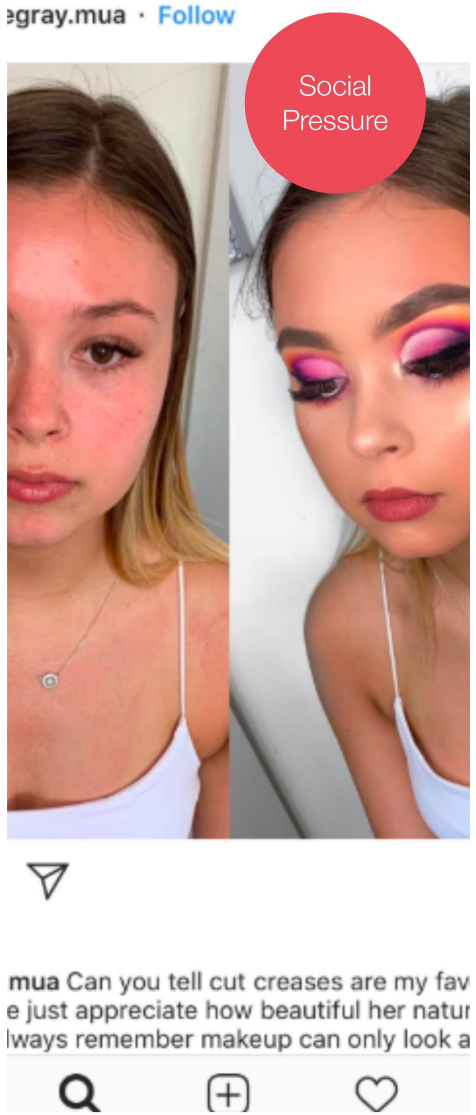
Pressure to be perfect changes behaviours online

Following behavioural cues online, young people act out feelings, opinions and behaviours they think are acceptable.

- This is more than just looking and comparing yourself to others.
- It's changing the way you behave, think and feel you fit in.
- Making young people highly vulnerable to prompts within their environment about how they should behave.
- Girls concerned with body image, all turned to cosmetic treatments or working out to 'make them feel better'.

Anxiety created through interaction with IG doesn't stay in their minds; it affects the practices and opinions of the young people.

'man, I just feel on the edge alot of the time. It's like you can be called out for anything you do. One wrong move. One wrong step. It's like you can buy a pair of sneakers you love, but the next day someone will burn you for it, and then you feel like you can't wear them again' - US male





Ads target insecurity & feeds unhealthy habits

Multiple teenagers called out ad targeting on Instagram for showing them weight loss products.

- Young people called out Instagram for targeting them with adverts on weight loss and body image- whether this is weight loss lollypops, juices, weight trainers or teeth whitening.
- This directly lead to some teens purchasing products such as detox teas, weight trainers, weight loss lollipops, or not eating properly to lose weight.
- Others took these adverts as 'inspiration' to lose weight and exercise more, they take away the message that they should be doing things differently to match the standards they see on images daily.
- This is highly damaging, and likely to tip vulnerable young people into disordered eating habits.

Targeting teens with weight-loss adverts should be prohibited. Advertising standards accept that young people are unable to critically appraise messages that sell them products.

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‘Self-esteem on IG is a problem. Flat stomach, bigger boobs, bigger bum. My friends started working out & not eating. A load of people tried out weight loss teas or waist trainers. Even teeth whitening. It all causes pressure’ - UK female

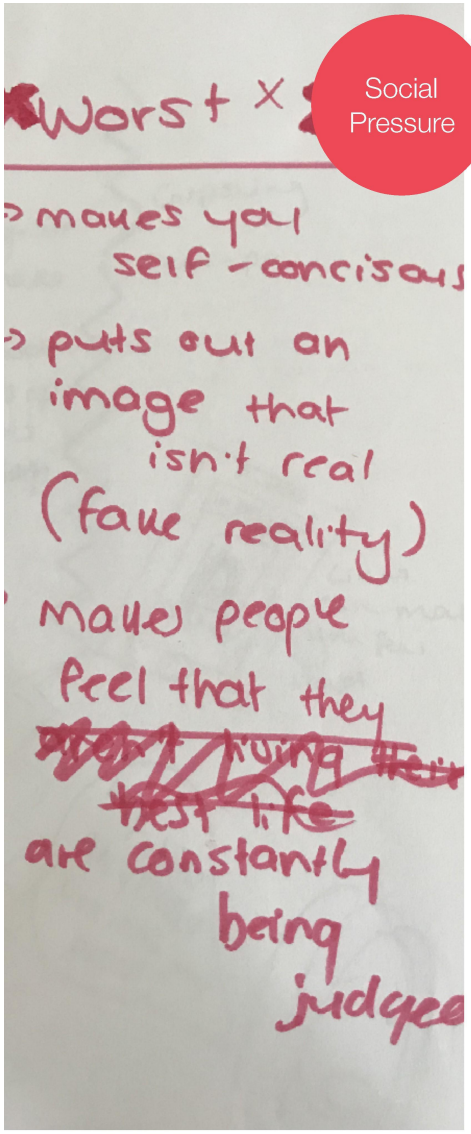
The pressure to be present is hard

The pressure to be present online, and public with their lives was an underlying narrative around mental health.

- Young people are forced to live their online lives more publicly than they might otherwise choose to in order to play the popularity game and get as many likes / followers as possible.
- This encourages a degree of openness and vulnerability about who they are as people - which leaves them open to censure and attack - particularly as they leave their accounts open to be followed by strangers.
- This makes the effort of having to think about what you are going to post, how much time you spend ruminating or obsessing over that post, super exhausting.
- The pressure to be constantly 'present' also means that young people today lack the space to switch off and shut down when they need to.
- In a lot of the descriptions of mental unwellness, young people spoke about having to pretend to be ok even when they are not.



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Pressure leads to attention seeking

Social pressure and need for validation increases problematic attention seeking which has the potential to change the way young people interact with others.

- Instagram creates an appetite for attention, which is never quite satisfied. Creating a pressure to find new ways to get the likes or validation they have become accustomed to.
- For some, this pressure leads to problematic attention seeking behaviours.
- Posting things on line, or being fake in order to gain popularity or get the attention they feel they are not getting.
- Some participants called out people they know for faking injury or illness to get attention. Or, being accused of being attention seeking when they felt that they had a valid 'excuse'.

'One girl said she broke her leg and a dick from her class kicked her cast and accused her of faking it' - UK female

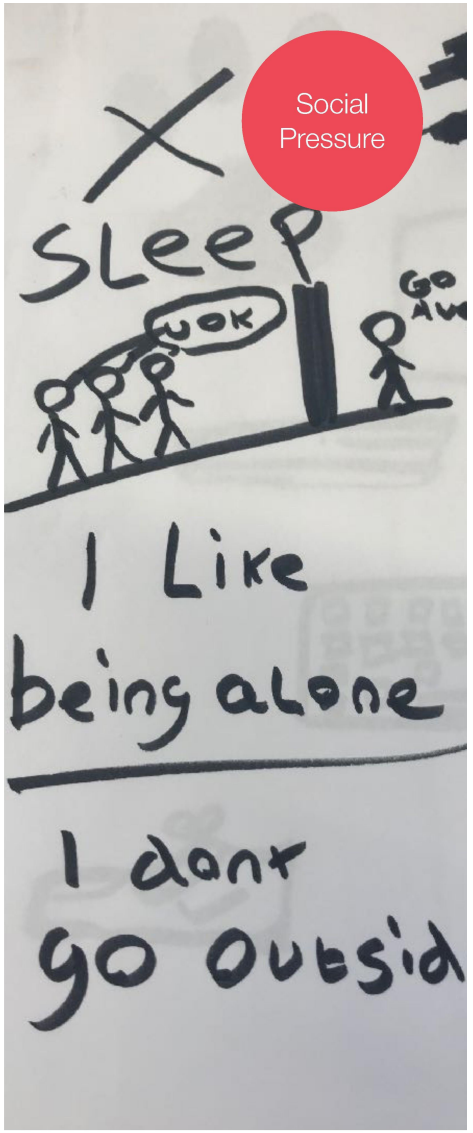
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As the pressure increases, activity decreases.

This risks recreating the content collapse that occurred on Facebook.

- Teens are beginning to self-censor and are posting less frequently. They directly attribute this behaviour to the pressure they feel when posting on Instagram
- The less they contribute to their own platforms, the more they are exposed to influencer and celebrity content-increasing rather than decreasing the volume of content that is most harmful to their sense of self-esteem.
- It's a spiral whereby inactivity increases the amount of curated content that makes you feel worst, which then reduces likelihood of posting.

Teens are already reporting reducing the amount they post from daily to monthly, and directly attributing this to the pressure they feel.



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‘I only post the perfect stuff, which isn’t my real life… I want my posts to be at the same level as the influencers. If it doesn't match theirs, I just feel shit. So until it is, I’m not going to post. I used to post all the time, now it’s barely once a month. ’
- UK Female

As humans we have underlying traits which social media exacerbates. Instagram doesn't cause these, but it enhances them. Growing up immersed in the social media world, young people are increasingly developing personality traits which are harmful to their wellbeing.

Narcissism - the increase of obsessive interest in, and admiration of the self.

Social perfectionism - heightening of unrealistic beliefs about expectation from others; increasing fear of failure or vulnerability. Reduced capacity to try and fail.

Negative attention seeking - increases need for validation from others through whatever means; increasing manipulative behaviours or heightened victimhood

Emotional shut down - Fearing that emotional disclosures are risky, bottling things up and not processing emotions.

IG is exacerbating negative social traits

On an everyday level, Instagram is a recipe for low level mental anxiety that unchecked can ladder up to something more serious

'It kind of makes you obsess over what you post… you want everything to be perfect. Its like, everything you've ever said or done in real life is there, and people see it forever' - US, male

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SUPPORT AND COPING STRATEGIES

How do young people define the support and coping strategies they need to support with their emotional wellbeing?

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- Wellbeing is a very adult concept and one that adults struggle for a lifetime to achieve.

- Young people have picked up on some basic language around wellbeing. But often they talk unconvincingly, saying what they think they are supposed to say rather than reporting what they actually do.

- When they speak about self-care they tend to revert to:

  - Beautifying treatments such as baths or facemasks
  - Taking time for the self; being alone, going out for a walk, exercising
  - Reaching out and talking to people - friends, family and surfacing the problem

Young people need help understanding wellbeing; and find out ways that they can look after their own mental health.

Teens lack the vocabulary to articulate wellbeing.

Young people have a weak mental concept of mental well-being and struggle to know how to make themselves feel better.

'We get taught sex health but there's nothing about mental health. I think we should be speaking more about mental health days. They're so necessary. ' - UK, Female

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Without any solutions, 'Coping' is seen as talking

Teens have been taught to talk about their issues, but this doesn't always work.

I have one friend who I really trust. There are some people that post how they're feeling bad but I would never do that because it's risky, you just get hate. It seems like they're attention seeking. - UK female

- Young people have heard the lesson loud and clear that you should talk about your problems rather than let them fester.
- But in reality, it's hard to talk about things -particularly when everything feels complicated and messy, and the ups and downs are daily.

- Because of the frequency of their emotional problems, teens often don't want to talk about them.

- They don't want to talk to their social network because they don't want to stand out.They don't want to burden people with their struggles, or be called out for being over-emotional.

- They might talk to a few very close friends or siblings but friendships are changing all the time. Your BFF one day can be your enemy the next, talking about your MH with your close friend can still leave you vulnerable to having your emotional world weaponised against you.

Disclosure is a risky business and teens need to think carefully about who they can trust.

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- All of the protective functions online - such as speaking to friends, or reporting content, or blocking someone - can be used against them.

- Allegiances shift, there are moles everywhere - and it's difficult to know who to trust, particularly on social media where anyone can 'fake their personality'.

- Blocking or unfollowing someone could mean that you can't see when you're being made fun of, or ignite a bigger issue.

The practical tools that young people can use to protect themselves don't work.

Protective features can also be weapons.

Protective functions on social media don't make sense to young people as they can easily be weaponised against them.

Blocking people makes it worse. If you block one account, then they know and other people still follow. You have to block all of them - UK, Male

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Parents can't relate and don't know how to help.

Parents are diminishing very real mental health struggles, leaving their children to fend for themselves.

'Talking to your family doesn't help because they can't understand and don't get what you need. How are you going to tell the people who literally gave you life that you don't want it anymore?' - UK, Female

- Parents don't understand and tend to belittle or diminish their children's experiences because they don't see it as fundamentally different to what they experienced as teens themselves.
- This leaves young people to deal with some of the most acute challenges to mental wellbeing that society is facing, alone.
- Trusted authority figures -parents, teachers or counsellors (and in some cases even older siblings) - tend either to trivialise or dramatise online issues because they don't get the emotional terrain in which teens' operate.

- **These figures will either:**
  - diminish or trivialise issues they view as being trifling; such as not getting likes from a 'friend';
  - heighten issues by reporting bullying to the school or escalating an issue;
  - or just woefully misunderstand the intense pressure that young people feel by living their social lives out on social media.

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- Teachers or school lessons on social media are perceived as out of touch, cheesy and ignorable.
- Counsellors are often mistrusted not to escalate issues when they are revealed; and also still come with a stigma of having a ‘MH’ condition.
- Parent’s don’t understand and put it down to being a teenager; dismissing their child when they come to them for support

They have no trusted advisors to turn to.

As young people feel increasingly misunderstood, traditional figures in their lives stop being a source of advice and support

'Even people who are 30 don't really get it. The experience is so different. And it's frustrating because everyone says that that’s what young people always say. But it’s really hard’ - UK, Female

They shoulder the burden of their MH themselves.

Teens have taken the lack of meaningful support as a sign that they should help themselves.

'Instagram shouldn't need to do any of this. It's not their fault that you're looking at a picture and getting upset about it. It's your fault. All those problems you're having… you can only blame yourself' - US, Male

- Teens are shouldering the burden of new social issues that adults struggle to cope with themselves. This means there is a lack of widely understood coping strategies.
- Young people have filled the void with their own self-made ones. As such all of their coping strategies are incredibly self-directed.
- They tend to articulate the need to do things alone, such as going to their rooms, trying to self-talk in order to take things less seriously and move on from it.
- This reinforces the feeling that they are alone in their struggles.

They need more people speaking to them who get their struggle and understand what they are going through; who will listen to their stories and provide understanding where adults in their lives are unable.

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- Older siblings or YouTubers their age consistently came up as examples of people they would like to offer real advice.
- It was important to have people who understood the nature of their struggles and in a language that fits their experience, rather than having to explain what basic jargon means - ‘i.e. indirecting’.
- They want a space to chat about things without having to bring it up themselves.

They want support from people who 'get it’.

Young people want an older person who has been through what they have been through to talk to.

It would be great to have something deeper, like a documentary with real people and real stories in real settings.. like this one. Just getting people together to speak about Instagram. That would help’ - US, Female

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The lego game

How to rebalance when you're down…

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Finding solace alone

Teens turn inwards when trying to rebalance their mental wellbeing; processing emotions before reaching out.

Living up to the true teenage cliche of locking themselves in their room, for most young people the bed and bedroom were the place they wanted to retreat to alone when they were in the midst of struggles.

The central importance of maintaining a sense of neutrality and not showing your emotions meant that taking yourself away to work out how you were feeling about something was an important way of finding mental equilibrium.



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Self-talk & positivity

As teens navigate their complex emotional environment alone, they rely on self-talk to help them find resilience.

Young people were clear about the sheer volume of small things they see on a day to day basis online which could tip them into having a bad day. In the face of this onslaught, they have learned to try to talk themselves into a more positive mindset.

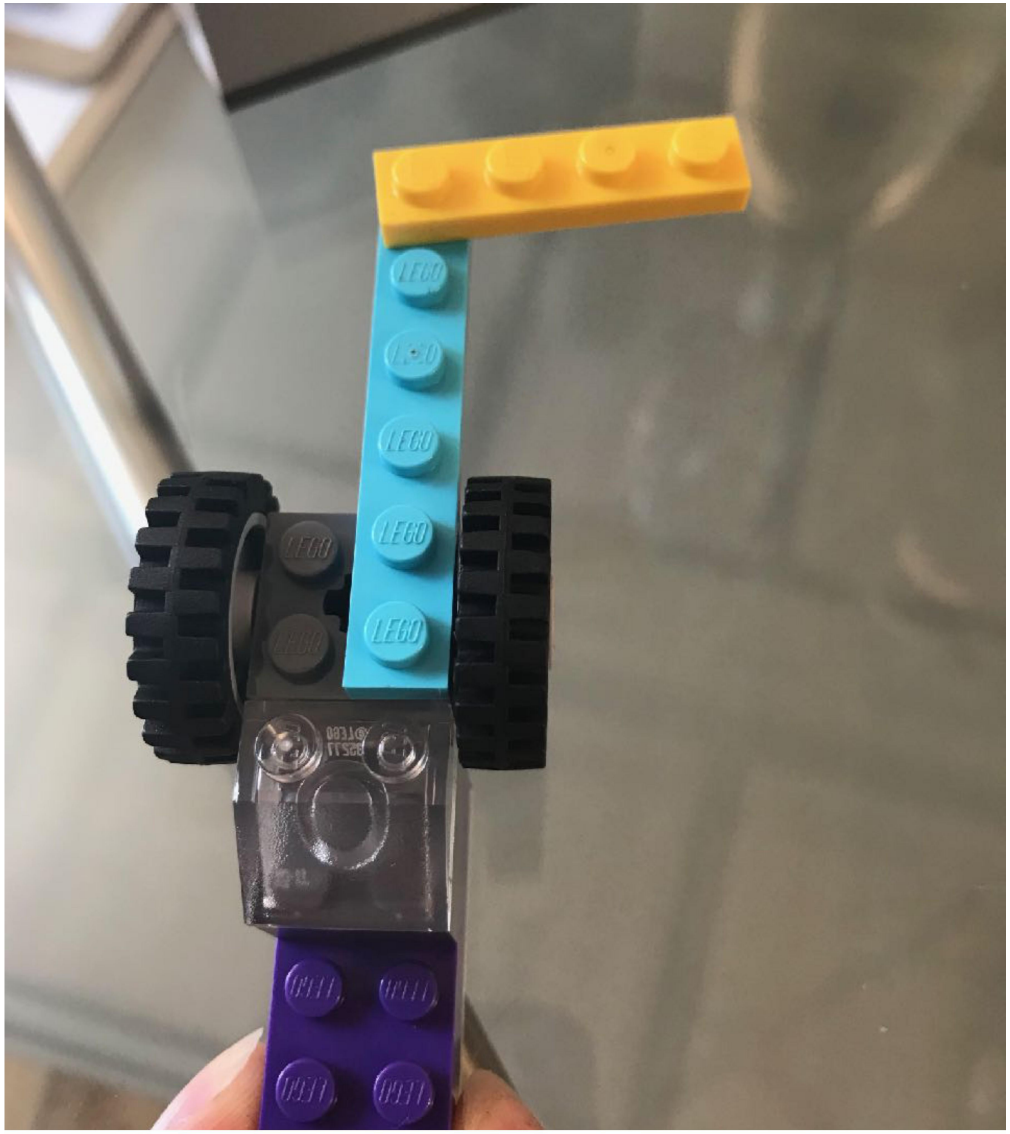
When those thoughts about your worth start creeping in, you have the power over your own mind to let them affect you or not. Trouble is, that is easier said than done.

Doing activities

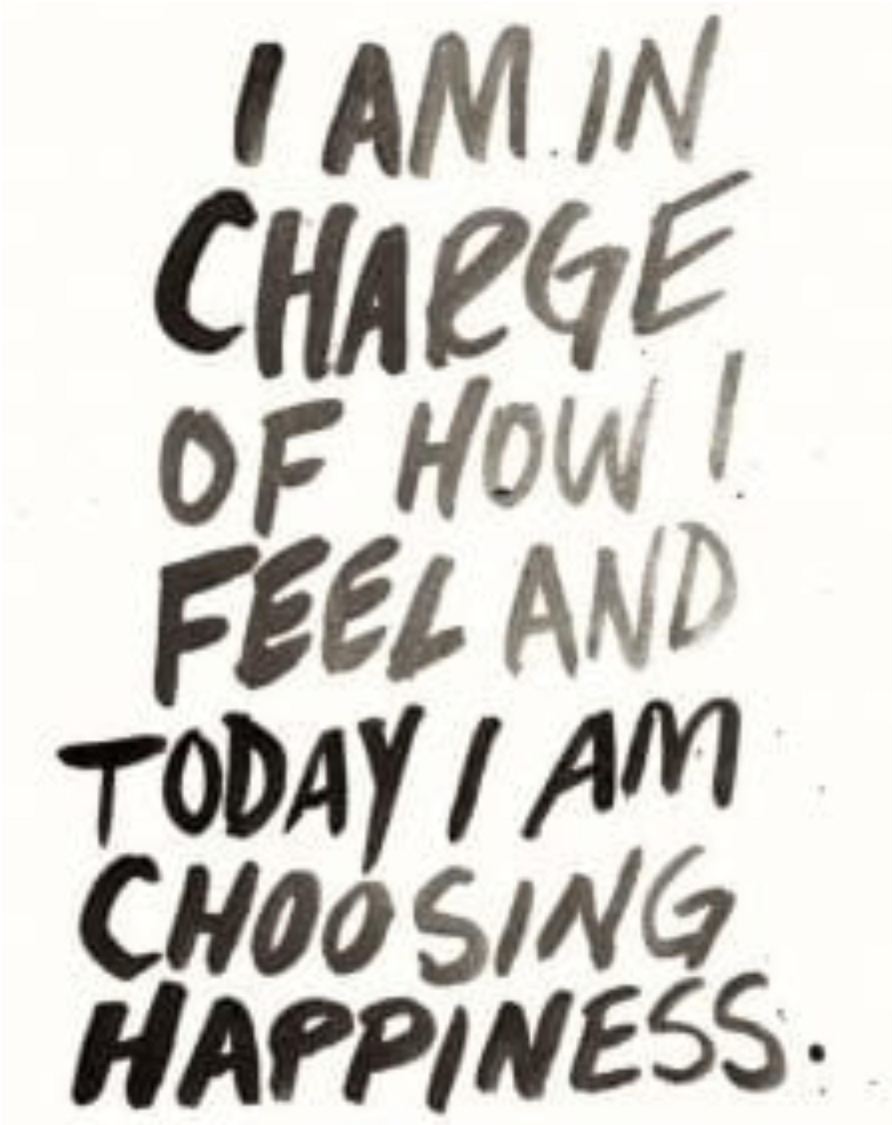
Being active helps take your mind off your problems- whether through taking a walk, doing some sport or cosmetics.

Though perhaps more in theory than in practice, young people had bought into the messaging that exercise and doing things for yourself are ways to make yourself feel better.

Particularly in the US, the idea of going outside for a walk or to workout was felt to have beneficial impact on wellbeing. For others, keeping busy was about burying their issues and keeping distracted until the pain passes.



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Seeking positivity

Above all else, looking for positive quotes or funny memes was a way that young people sought to make themselves feel better.

Quotes and memes help young people feel less alone in their struggles. It shows that the way they are feeling is shared by a broad section of the population.

While memes help lighten the tone of suffering and are an easy way to share emotional truths without sharing personal vulnerability - they offer a route to connect with peers around a challenge the young person is facing.

Quotes reinforce the self-talk that young people rely on to get through the day.

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Spending time

Being young is about hanging out with friends. But in moments of crisis, your family can provide comfort that no one else can.

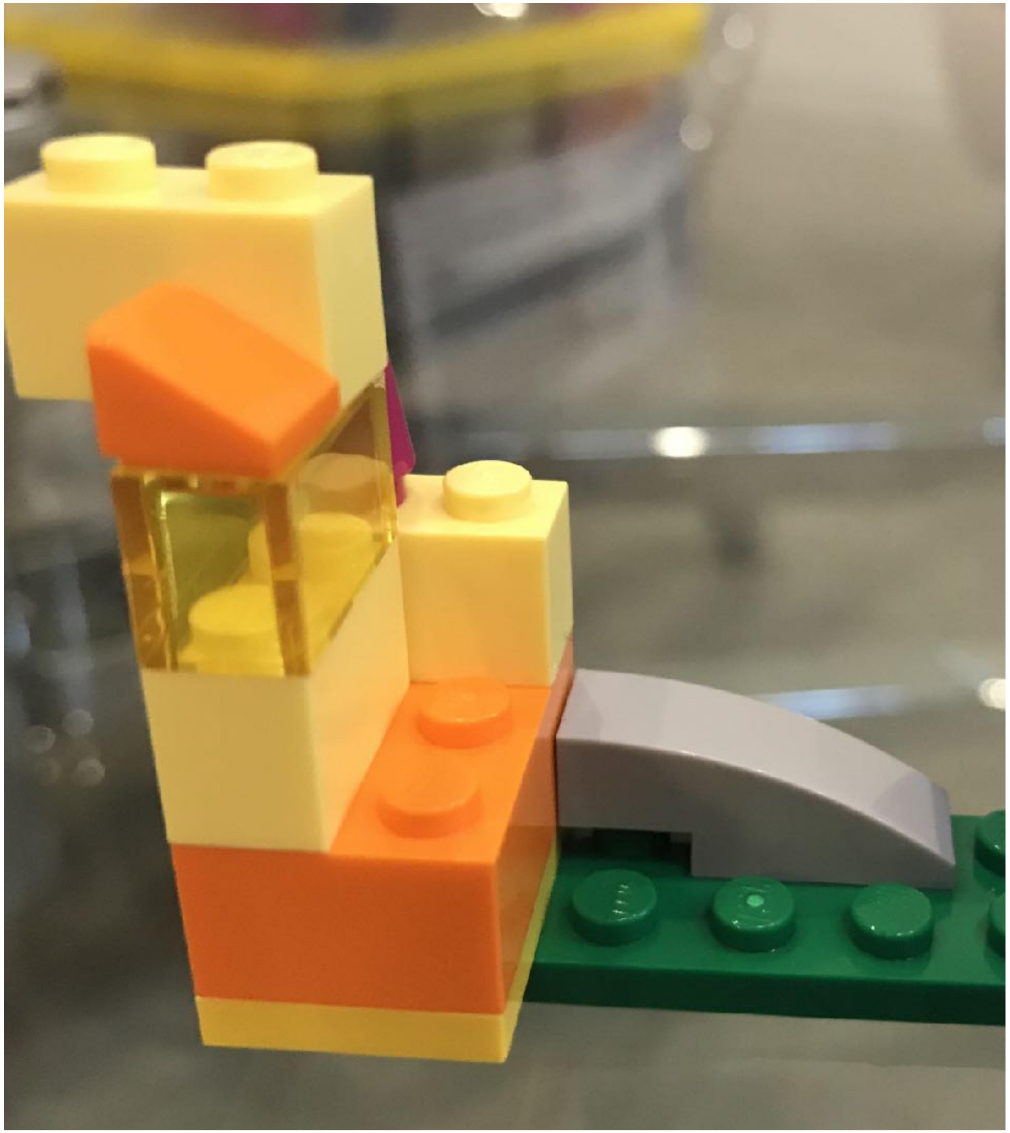
Spending time with close friends and family helped young people get out of their state of mind, and have fun and comfort in trusted relationships.

While this was not always possible in the thick of feeling down, once young people feel that they can emerge from their bedrooms, spending time with friends and family was one of the top things that might make them feel better.

Even when they're stroppy teens, no one can give you a cuddle like your mum.



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Talking it out

Participants all had one close people they could be honest with - allowing them to speak through their issues in a safe place.

Participants recognised the benefit of talking through their issues rather than bottling them up. But to do this in practice is not necessarily easy. People don't want to be seen as over-emotional or creating drama, they also don't want to overburden people. So they are being very selective about who they reveal their inner emotional world to. When they do choose to speak to someone, usually after a period of processing, it will be a close confidant. A friend they can rely on for support who isn't part of the day to day drama

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Ignoring it

More often than not, young people just try and ignore the issue and move on.

With few tools in their arsenal to deal with the issues they are facing, young people just try and move on as best they can by ignoring the issues around them.

This doesn't always work, but in the day to day it helps them go on with school and other things they need to do.



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Resilience is not fuelling a negative narrative.

Teens with no MH issues take things less personally, giving attention in the story of their struggles.

'I put a ladder because there's a way out.. you just have to work out what the steps are.. and you can then learn from your experience for the next time. It's just life at the end of the day, it has its ups and downs' - UK, Female

- In teens who don't code as having mental health struggles, mental unwellness is seen as a natural part of the rhythm of life - rather than a great experience of unwellness that needs to be understood.
- They were more able to understand that life has its ups and downs and take the experience of both lightly.
- Those who coded as having mental health struggles, were far more likely to have created a narrative out of their struggles - in some way giving credence to, and heightening the pain they feel on account of their past experiences.
- Resilience is not taking things too personally, knowing your limits and when you need to take a step back, and leaning on close friends and loved ones when you're in need for support.
- The ups and downs of life, were seen as a normal part of life that needed to be learned from; and depictions of unwellness often had steps or windows or light at the end of the tunnel.

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WHAT INSTRAGRAM SHOULD DO

What do young people think Instagram should do to support their mental health?

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Be a voice for young people

Helping create a conversation about the novelty of these struggles will help parents, teachers and other advisors listen more to youth experience.

- Being cut off from an adult support network is the possibly the worst thing for youth mental health.
- All teens are prone to think that the world misunderstands them, but it is important that the adults in their lives are aware of where their experiences might be different.
- Helping adults and trusted advisors learn how to support young people is important.
- Having fun, creative and engaging workshops or lessons could provide a platform for shared conversation, and help young people learn those around them.

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- Giving people the language around a concept helps them understand their own experiences better.
- In Sierra Leone, there was no word for depression or PTSD. But after the war, many people struggled with a darkness. Providing a language helps people understand what they are going through, and access support to get better.
- Young people have some language around emotional turmoil, but they have a weak mental concept of mental wellbeing and what coping strategies to 'balance'.
- Help them explore their own needs and solutions by providing a guiding framework.

Provide a vocab & framework

Young people need to be given a vocabulary that help them understand mental concepts around wellbeing

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Enhance their control

Young people have clear and consistent ideas about what feature-led developments they would like to see on the platform.

- Young people want to maintain their independence and find things that work for them.
- They know what functions exist to protect them already, and will use them if necessary.
- What IG offers less of, is active control and personalisation of their online experience.
- Features that enable them to curate and personalise will help them creative a platform which works for them
- They want more control over their explore feed - with the ability to choose and select different themes which are more attuned to their wellbeing
- There was also a desire for filtering the feed or explore pages based on their mood -i.e. being protected from content they find harmful when in a bad headspace

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- The reason influencers and you tubers were initially so popular is because they offered everyday people to have their say and put thoughts and feelings out there into the world.
- Young people loved this as it made them feel less alone.
- As this sector has become more professionalised, the resonance of these voices is being diluted.
- Young people want to see and hear voices of people like them that makes them feel less alone.
- Instagram can play a role in creating spaces for this content to be shown, or creating spaces where these conversations can happen.

Make them feel less alone.

Young people want to see people like them talk about real issues they are facing.

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Make Explore more personal.

Explore is the centre of the endless possibilities that Instagram can ignite. Yet all too often it is full with repetitive posts that don't feed your heart and soul.

Imagine a page that young people could curate to explore their interests, learn and develop. What if it were a constructive, cool place rather than a place to scroll through when bored?

Young people wanted more opportunity to personalise their Explore page. Being able to choose different Explore themes depending on preference for that day.

How might we enable young people to customise and personalise their Explore page to have an experience which is more enriching?

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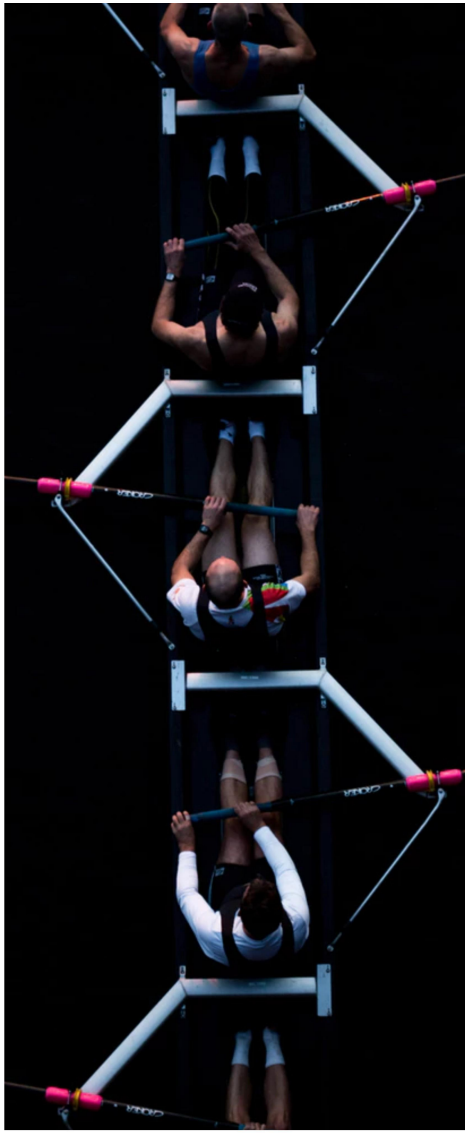
Reduce visible competition.

Instagram is all about the likes and followers, but this is at the heart of social comparison and the pressure young people feel.

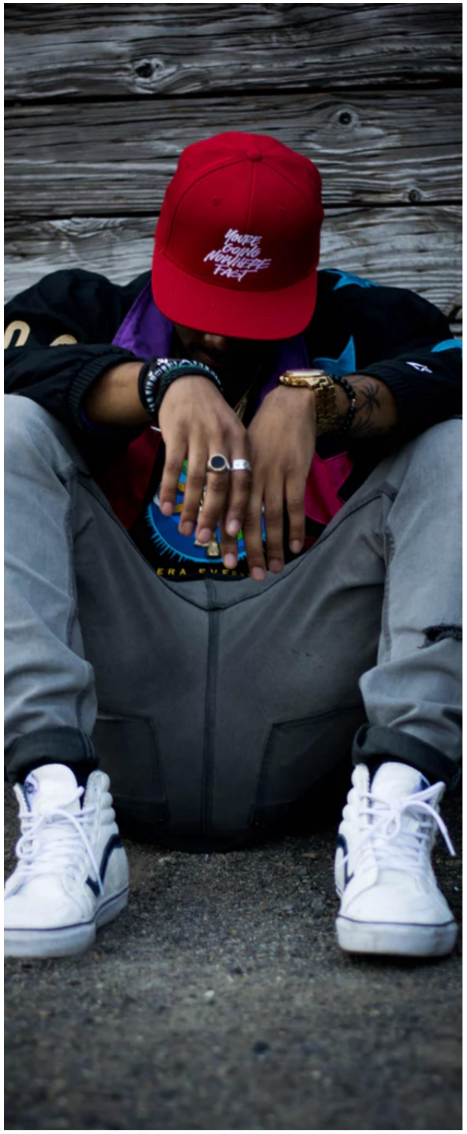
Taking away likes could be a way of reducing the pressure they feel, but it might also take away some essence of what it is to be on Instagram.

But, imagine a space where young people had the choice over whether they showed their like or follower count, or whether they had comments on images they post.

How might we reduce visible competition on Instagram without taking away the positivity people feel through receiving validation from others?



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Feed my Mood.

Just like content, emotions and feeling are fleeting and subject to constant change. One day you're looking at Instagram, getting loads of likes and feeling top of the world. The next, your period has hit, you're feeling like crap and even the happy posts of your best friends make you shout out in jealousy and self-loathing. And even emotion aside, people aren't uniform. We have to feed different parts of our selves at different times. One day it could be a gritty documentary about poverty, the next watching the Oscars. That's life.

Imagine a space where you could tailor your experience on Instagram to make space for the mood or flavour of the day.

How might we create an experience on Instagram that can be tailored daily according to mood and preference?

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Hold me to account.

Social media offers a dizzying array of ways that people can be mean online. It's detatched, anonymous. You don't have to try and say the things to peoples' face. In other words, there are no consequences to your bad actions - a recipe for bad behaviour from nice enough people.

But what would it take to create better behaviours and relationships online?

In a world without consequence how might we encourage positive digital citizenship?



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Empathy is everything.

Being a young person is tough. Their frontal lobes are reforming, they have an onslaught of hormones, they're trying to learn who they are as people. And on top of all of this, they are dealing with all of this online - where opportunities for comparison, bullying and vulnerable exposure are rife.

On top of this, the older people around them tell them to just get over it. That its nothing new. How about we give them a break and make them feel like we are on their side?

How might Instagram offer young people the sense that there is a network of people around them who 'get it' and can empathise with their plight?

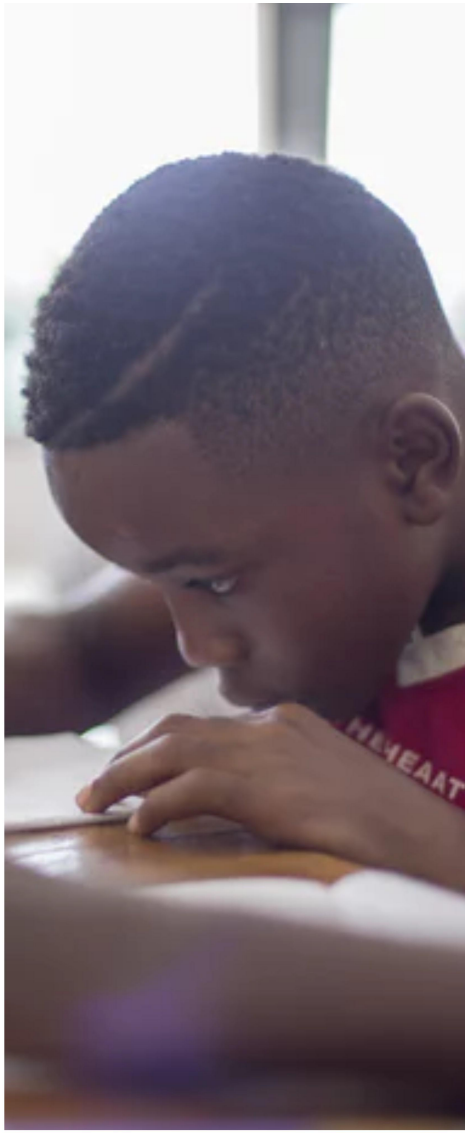
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Wellbeing takes work.

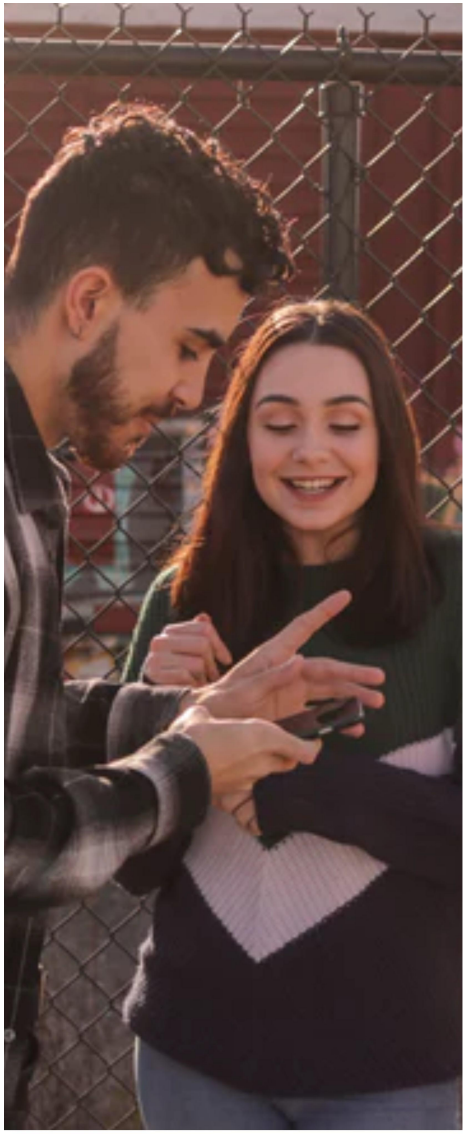
Balance, looking after yourself and mental wellbeing are not easy things to understand. Even if you understand it theoretically, it's hard, and takes a life time of ups and downs to even know how to go about looking out for yourself. But wellbeing is a global buzzword. And with it, comes with a long list of ingredients that could add up to a more balanced self.

Teens can't afford to meet the wellbeing culture around them. They need free and easy things they can do themselves.

How might we make wellbeing culture speak to young people and offer them practical ways to feel better?



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Real teens, real talk.

Probably since the dawn of time, teenagers have felt that the older generation didn't "get it". And teens are all about their friends. They'll listen to their friends in a way that they won't to their parents.

Imagine a setting where young people sit down and get real about what it's like to live out a life on Instagram. They could talk in their own language and make content appropriate for them.

How could Instagram create content which gives real teens the space to have real talk about their daily struggles?

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Clock me, I'm hooked.

We all have times when we look up and realise we've just wasted the last hour aimlessly scrolling through social media. While that's ok for the most part, if this starts eating in to our much needed sleeping time, this could start to have an impact on the way we feel about our daily lives. And young people are already sleep deprived.

Young people feel pressured to be present online, but they often don't need to be.

How might we help young people create more boundaries for themselves around their social media use?



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The anonymous friend.

Young people don't trust that helplines are really anonymous, so they simply don't call.

They're worried that if they say something about how they're feeling, it might give power to people around them to escape an issue they would rather they kept to themselves. But people need to feel safe to reach out and talk.

Imagine a phone booth you could say anything in the world to, who could speak back and reassure you everything was going to be fine. That would feel like a safe space to chat.

How can we assure young people that the support they can access is truly anonymous?

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Think about Visual Diet.

We are what we eat - both physically and visually. Think about what you chose to consume on social media. You can fill both your mind and body with crap and you will feel equally awful. Or you can choose to enrich, expand and broaden your horizon.

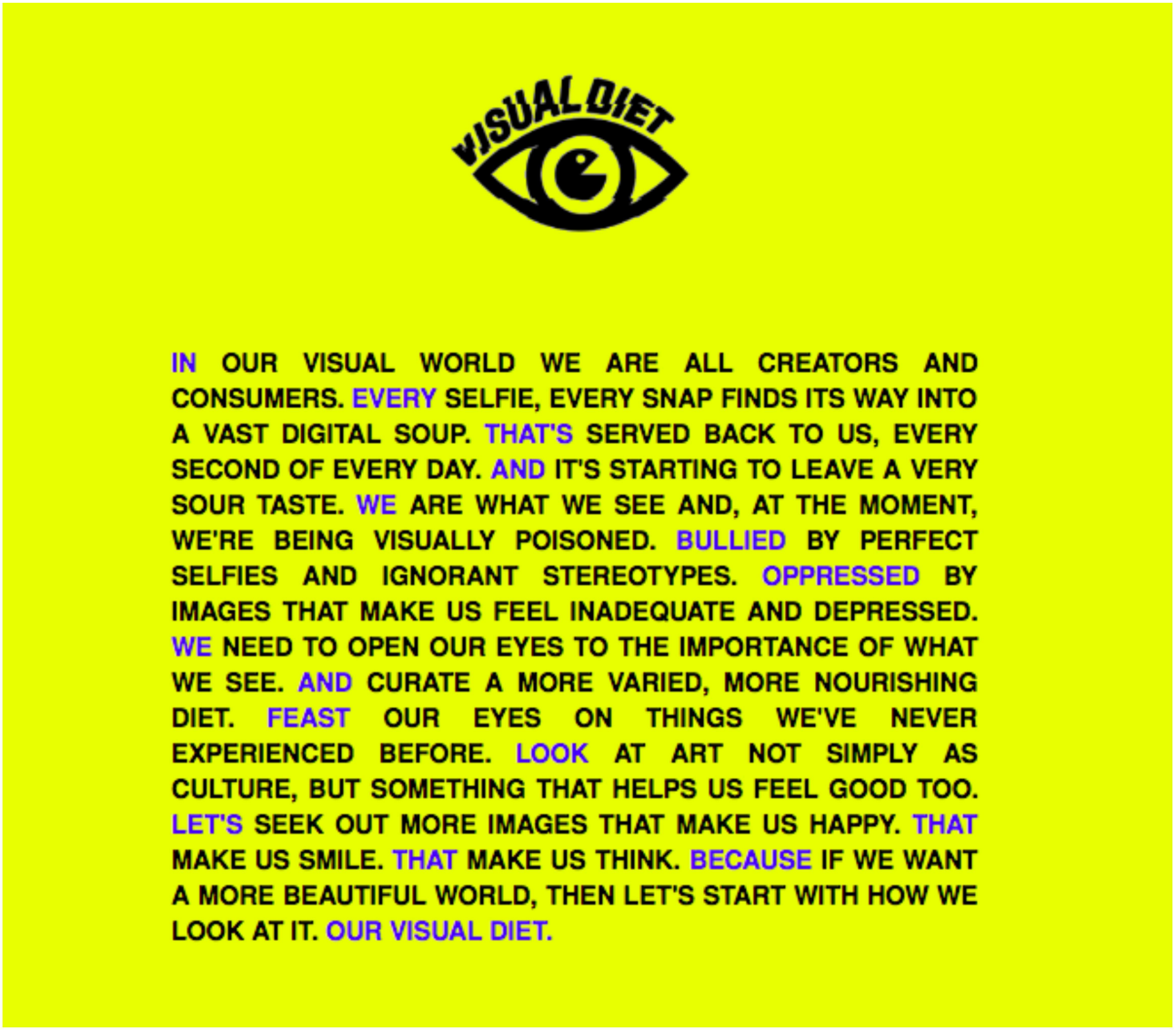
Why not seek out things which make you feel better about yourself and more productive, than things which you know make you feel bad?

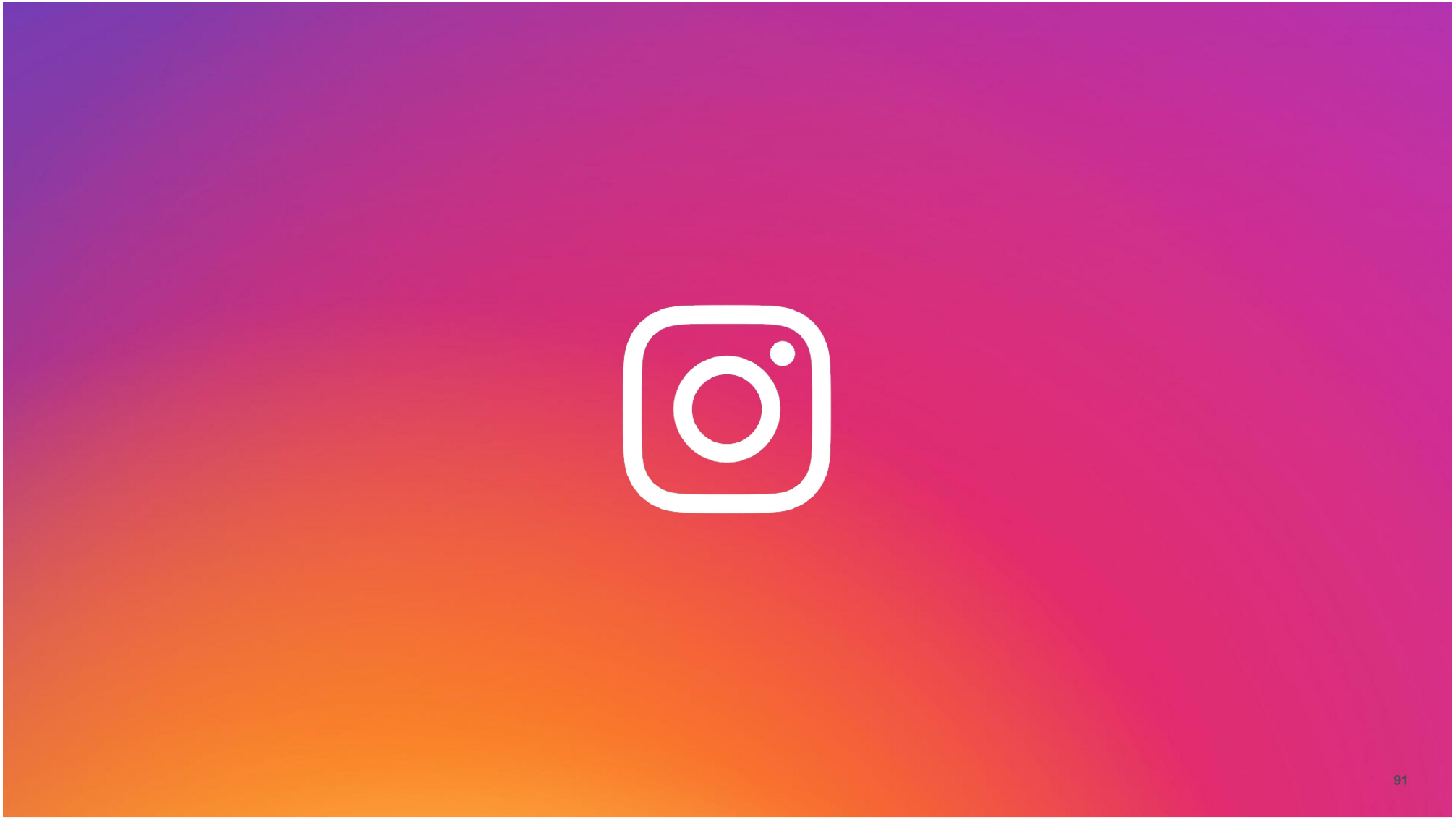
There's no point in martyring yourself to harmful content. You are in control of your own destiny.

How might we help young people create more boundaries for themselves around their social media use?



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VISUAL DIET
IN OUR VISUAL WORLD WE ARE ALL CREATORS AND CONSUMERS. EVERY SELFIE, EVERY SNAP FINDS ITS WAY INTO A VAST DIGITAL SOUP. THAT'S SERVED BACK TO US, EVERY SECOND OF EVERY DAY. AND IT'S STARTING TO LEAVE A VERY SOUR TASTE. WE ARE WHAT WE SEE AND, AT THE MOMENT, WE'RE BEING VISUALLY POISONED. BULLIED BY PERFECT SELFIES AND IGNORANT STEREOTYPES. OPPRESSED BY IMAGES THAT MAKE US FEEL INADEQUATE AND DEPRESSED. WE NEED TO OPEN OUR EYES TO THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE SEE. AND CURATE A MORE VARIED, MORE NOURISHING DIET. FEAST OUR EYES ON THINGS WE'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE. LOOK AT ART NOT SIMPLY AS CULTURE, BUT SOMETHING THAT HELPS US FEEL GOOD TOO. LET'S SEEK OUT MORE IMAGES THAT MAKE US HAPPY. THAT MAKE US SMILE. THAT MAKE US THINK. BECAUSE IF WE WANT A MORE BEAUTIFUL WORLD, THEN LET'S START WITH HOW WE LOOK AT IT. OUR VISUAL DIET.



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