



## Children's Report Card: Social media and 21st century issues

March 2020

### Introduction

This report card is part of a set that present public health information on children and young people's health and wellbeing in the Glasgow City Region (GCR) across a range of indicators. The GCR comprises eight local authorities: Glasgow City<sup>a</sup>; East Dunbartonshire; West Dunbartonshire; Renfrewshire; East Renfrewshire; Inverclyde; North Lanarkshire; and South Lanarkshire.

This works builds on the previous [Glasgow Centre for Population Health \(GCPH\) children and young people's profiles](#), [ScotPHO children's profiles](#), and newer data sources. In particular the format of the summaries has drawn on the [Active Global Healthy Kids Alliance](#) work which has published Report Cards for Scotland in 2016 and 2018<sup>1</sup>. These provide an accurate and critical assessment of Scottish children's physical activity and health behaviours and outcomes as well as commenting on settings and influences on physical activity and health.

The report cards are the product of a working group led by the GCPH and supported by the Information Services Division (ISD), a division of National Services Scotland and part of NHS Scotland. Additional group members included Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and Glasgow City Council. The intention behind the report cards is to provide robust evidence and policy ideas to inform planning and future policy for children's services in the Glasgow City Region.

### Why are social media and 21st century issues important?

Social media can be defined as websites and online applications which enable users to create and share content and participate in networking. Examples include: Facebook; Instagram; Snapchat; Twitter; WhatsApp; TikTok; and YouTube. Social media has existed since the 1990s in the form of internet chat rooms although it took until the early years of the 21st century with the launch of MySpace and Facebook for social media to become mainstream<sup>2</sup>.

Today, there are over 4 billion users of social media globally<sup>3</sup> and nearly every person in the UK aged 16-24 years uses social media. Most children and young people have never had to 'learn' social media, instead they have been brought up in a generation where it pre-existed and have experienced each new platform in real time<sup>4</sup>. This is largely linked to a rapid increase in mobile phone ownership and access to the internet among young people. The (2020) Childwise study involving 2,167 5-16 year olds across the UK reported that 69% had their own mobile phone, increasing to 90% at secondary school; and the majority (71%) of internet use in his age group was via a mobile phone<sup>5</sup>. These findings emphasise that young people can now be in constant contact with one another and that online activity has become increasingly private<sup>2</sup>. Social media has also changed the way young people think about privacy and sharing personal information outside of their personal friendship networks<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>a</sup> Glasgow is the term used to refer to Glasgow City (the local authority).

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Overall, young people view social media as a positive influence in their lives<sup>7</sup>. Research found that young people use social media to fulfil critical adolescent developmental tasks such as developing their identity and aspirations, and peer engagement and during a time when peer support and approval is critical, social media can support these needs<sup>8</sup>. Yet despite being dubbed 'digital natives' many young people experience digital exclusion because they lack the resources or skills to access the internet, or safely navigate the online world<sup>9</sup>. Digital exclusion can arise from low income and affordability and is a concern particularly within rural areas and urban areas of high deprivation<sup>10-13</sup>. The (2020) Childwise study revealed that 94% of young people across the UK have access to a computer of some sort at home (i.e. tablet, laptop, desktop) and 86% have their own computer device at home<sup>5</sup>. In Scotland, the proportion of households with internet access has doubled between 2003 (42%) and 2017 (85%). Yet households in Scotland's most deprived areas continue to be less likely to have home internet access than households within less deprived areas. In 2017 the Scottish Household Survey reported that almost all (99%) households with an income over £40,000 per year had home internet access while only half (56%) of households with an income between £6-£10,000 per year had home internet access<sup>14</sup>. Digital exclusion has shown strong links with social exclusion and reduced long-term wellbeing and can disenfranchise young people in job searching and associated activities<sup>12,13,15</sup>. Digital skills are also linked with earning potential and employability and it is estimated that within 20 years 90% of all jobs will require digital skills<sup>9</sup>.

Glasgow City Council are making steps towards digital inclusion with a multi-million-pound IT project which will see every pupil from Primary 6 to Secondary 6 being given their own iPad to keep for use with their lessons<sup>16</sup>. All iPads will be tracked and managed by the council, and devices can be locked and erased remotely. While pupils will have access to the internet the devices will not enable access to social media or inappropriate sites<sup>17</sup>. This project will be rolled out across all schools by 2021 and is praised for transforming learning in and out of the classroom<sup>18</sup>; combatting digital exclusion; improving educational attainment and digital skills; and contributing towards closing the attainment gap<sup>17</sup>. The project is not without criticism, with some suggesting this could be an inappropriate allocation of resources and an unnecessary endorsement of a costly piece of technology<sup>19</sup>.

Despite the high value placed on digital skills and the fact that social media is now woven into the fabric of contemporary youth culture, there is emerging evidence of risks to health and wellbeing. Although research does indicate that the impact of social media is nuanced and dependent on the activities the user engages in and the characteristics of the user<sup>20</sup>.

We describe the positive and negative issues which arise from social media use among children and young people (aged 9+ years) in modern day middle- and high-income countries that have the potential to impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. The indicators included are: **excessive screen time and addiction; cyberbullying; poor body image; access to harmful content; fear of missing out; online gambling; sexting; exposure to body positivity content; political and social activism; building communities; social emotional support; and self-enforced digital detox.** The data used to create these indicators derive

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from a variety of sources including: the [British Youth Council](#); [Scottish Government](#) surveys and publications; peer-reviewed publications; and the [Scottish Youth Parliament](#).

The following section provides summary headlines on each indicator and the actions required to make progress. This is followed by the 'Where are we now?' section which provides more detail on each indicator and a traffic light assessment of progress. The final 'What can we do about it?' section discusses in more detail the approaches which can be used to make progress.

### **Red Amber Green (RAG) traffic light system**

Each summary employs a 'Red Amber Green (RAG)' traffic light system to provide a sense of where the data indicate that good progress is being made in population health terms (Green); where there is cause for concern (Amber); and where there is more serious cause for concern (Red). A green light does not imply that further progress cannot be made, but rather indicates that positive progress has been made.

Assessments of progress on an issue – as 'red', 'amber' or 'green' – are based on author judgements and are clearly subjective, albeit based on robust available evidence.

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### Glossary and definitions

**Body positivity:** Loving yourself and body regardless of appearance, and cultural or social norms.

**Body neutrality:** Accepting yourself and body regardless of appearance, and cultural or social norms.

**Children and young people:** Defined in this report as those aged from 9 years up to and including University age (typically 18-24 years).

**Cyberbullying:** Bullying which takes place over social media.

**Digital detox:** A period of time when an individual stops using digital devices and/or social media.

**Digital exclusion:** The inability to access online services and/or digital technology.

**Fear of missing out (FOMO):** A form of anxiety centred on a concern that rewarding experiences are happening elsewhere and to other people.

**Followers/Friends:** Individuals who subscribe to (i.e. 'follow' or 'are friends with') another social media account and thus have access to its content.

**Photo manipulation techniques:** Digital software which transforms or alters an image. Examples include Photoshop and Instagram filters.

**Likes/Loves:** Individuals with a social media account can 'like' or 'love' content published by another social media account.

**Parents:** Defined in this report as the primary care giver. e.g. biological parent, stepparent, adoptive parent, foster parent, legal guardian etc.

**Photo sharing platforms:** Social media sites where the primary content shared is a photograph although accompanying text can feature alongside. Examples include Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest.

**Sexting:** The sharing of naked or semi-naked images or videos, or sexually explicit messages via social media. Also known as 'nudes' or 'sexts'.

**Social media influencers:** Individuals with social media accounts who have high numbers of followers/friends and a purportedly 'aspirational lifestyle'. Subsequently they are considered to have influence over their followers/friends.

**Social media:** Websites and online applications which enable users to create and share content and participate in networking. Examples include: Facebook; Instagram; Snapchat; Twitter; WhatsApp; TikTok; and YouTube.

**Twitter chats:** Public conversations organised around a specific topic on Twitter. These moderated discussions take place at a predetermined time and all Twitter users can join in.

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### Headlines

Digital skills are becoming an increasingly important component of children and young people's educational development and social media is a component of contemporary youth culture in the 21st century. Some aspects of social media are proving to have a largely positive impact on health and wellbeing, while other aspects pose a considerable risk.

Traffic light	Indicator	Recommended actions
	<p><b>Excessive screen time and internet addiction</b>            Almost half (48%) of Glasgow secondary school pupils spend more than 8 hours per day on screen-based activities at the weekend: this is considered extreme screen time. Social media is described as more addictive than alcohol or cigarettes and is estimated to affect approximately 5% of all adolescents in the UK.</p>	<p>Comprehensive, statutory education should be introduced to the national curriculum focusing on the safe use of social media and how to avoid the potential risks.</p> <p>Educators should provide opportunities for offline schoolwork and homework to reduce online activity and screen time.</p> <p>Funding should be increased for out-of-school, educational, community, and sporting activities to reduce participation in online activities.</p>
	<p><b>Cyberbullying</b>            Cyberbullying among 9-16 year olds in the UK has risen from 8%-12% in the period 2010-2014. Among Glasgow secondary school pupils, the experience of bullying is gendered: girls (25%) are more likely to be bullied compared with boys (17%), and girls are more likely to be emotionally affected by bullying compared with boys.</p>	<p>Funding should be increased for youth work sector, out-of-school, educational, community, and sporting activities to reduce participation in online activities.</p> <p>School counsellors should be rolled out across all secondary schools in Scotland to provide young people with immediate access to mental health support.</p> <p>Adequate resources should be developed to improve parental digital literacy and equip them with the knowledge on how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.</p>

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	<p><b>Poor body image</b> Social media increases exposure to un-representative and unrealistic body images dominating the media which can result in poor body image. In Scotland, 55% of girls and 28% of boys aged 15 years old described themselves as 'too fat'. Research highlights it is now the norm for young people to be unhappy with their bodies and the age at which they are becoming unhappy is lowering.</p>	<p>The Government should introduce a regulatory framework which subjects social media companies to a formal legal duty of care to their users.</p> <p>Social media platforms should highlight when photos have been digitally altered or have had filters applied.</p> <p>The NHS should be working in partnership with social media platforms to apply quality standards to any health information published on social media platforms.</p>
	<p><b>Access to harmful content</b> Access to harmful content among young people is a concern. Of 11-16 year olds across Europe, 11% report seeing websites where people discuss ways of hurting themselves and 6% have seen pro-suicide websites.</p>	<p>The Government should introduce a regulatory framework which subjects social media companies to a formal legal duty of care to their users.</p> <p>Social media companies should engage meaningfully with the government to agree minimum standards across the industry in relation to content moderation and removal, to protect young people from inappropriate content.</p>
	<p><b>Fear of missing out</b> Linked with a fear of missing out, 86% of adolescents in the UK sleep with their mobile phones under their pillow or in their hand, and 1-in-5 young people aged 12-15 years reported waking up in the night to check messages on social media.</p>	<p>The Government, education, and any organisation with a responsibility for children and young people should engage in meaningful sharing of power with children and young people, including co-designing solutions and resources.</p> <p>Adequate resources should be developed to improve parental digital literacy and equip them with knowledge of how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.</p> <p>Social media companies should track social media usage and provide users with pop-up warnings when they breach a set level of usage deemed potentially harmful.</p>

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	<p><b>Online gambling</b> In the UK, 1-in-10 young people aged 11-16 years follow gambling companies on social media. Online gambling among Glasgow secondary pupils is higher among boys (2.5%) than girls (0.4%).</p>	<p>The Government should introduce a regulatory framework which subjects social media companies to a formal legal duty of care to their users.</p> <p>Social media companies should improve age-related restrictions for accessing social media and gambling-related content.</p> <p>Social media companies should track social media usage and provide users with pop-up warnings when they breach a set level of usage deemed potentially harmful.</p> <p>Adequate resources should be developed to improve parental digital literacy and equip parents with knowledge of how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.</p>
	<p><b>'Sexting'</b> Almost two thirds (60%) of young people have engaged in 'sexting' which is illegal for under-18s in the UK. Sexting is highly gendered. UK research highlights boys are typically the recipients and are more likely to force or coerce girls into sending 'sexts'. Girls are likely to experience higher scrutiny and internalise negativity from sexting. Under-16 year olds who engage in sexting are at risk of sexual exploitation, harassment, and abuse.</p>	<p>Schools should introduce participative educational initiatives to encourage open and frank discussions.</p> <p>Educators should be provided with adequate training to equip them with the confidence and resources to explore social media risks and support young people.</p> <p>Adequate resources should be developed to improve parental digital literacy and equip parents with knowledge of how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.</p> <p>School counsellors should be rolled out across all secondary schools in Scotland to provide young people with immediate access to mental health support.</p>
	<p><b>Body positivity</b> In the UK, 63% of young people follow social media accounts which promote body positivity. Body positivity content challenges dominant narrow images of beauty and redefines what beauty means.</p>	<p>Social media platforms should highlight when photos have been digitally altered or have had filters applied (e.g. an icon, watermark, or text).</p> <p>The NHS should be working in partnership with social media platforms to apply quality standards to health information published on social media platforms.</p>

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	<p><b>Social-political activism</b> Half a million young people in the UK are engaging with social-political groups via social media. Social media can give young people a voice in socio-political matters they might be excluded from through conventional channels.</p>	<p>To reduce digital exclusion, free Wi-Fi and digital access made available through schools, public libraries and leisure facilities.</p> <p>Funding for the youth work sector should be increased.</p> <p>Engagement in meaningful sharing of power with young people is needed, including co-designing solutions and resources.</p>
	<p><b>Building communities</b> Over 90% of young people use social media to connect with existing friends every day. Social media has the potential to enable young people to build communities of like-minded people, which is linked with reduced loneliness and isolation.</p>	<p>To reduce digital exclusion, free Wi-Fi and digital access should be extended and available through schools, public libraries and leisure facilities.</p> <p>Adequate resources should be developed to improve parental digital literacy and equip parents with knowledge of how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.</p> <p>Comprehensive, statutory education should be introduced to the national curriculum focusing on the safe use of social media and how to avoid the potential risks.</p>
	<p><b>Social-emotional support</b> Social media can provide access to social emotional support. Of all contact with Childline, 78% is via email or chat, and 59% of Childsmile counselling is done online. Help seeking for mental health problems is shown to be a positive element of social media.</p>	<p>Organisations with a responsibility to children and young people should provide online communication channels as standard.</p> <p>To reduce digital exclusion, free Wi-Fi and digital access should be extended and available through schools, public libraries and leisure facilities.</p> <p>Adequate resources should be developed to improve parental digital literacy and equip parents with knowledge of how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.</p>

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	<p><b>Digital detox</b> In the UK, 71% of 11-18 year olds have engaged with a digital detox and 63% wouldn't mind if social media didn't exist.</p>	<p>Comprehensive, statutory education should be introduced to the national curriculum focusing on the safe use of social media and how to avoid potential risks.</p> <p>Educators should provide opportunities for offline schoolwork and homework to reduce online activity and screen time.</p> <p>Funding should be increased for the youth work sector, out-of-school, educational, community, and sporting activities to reduce participation in online activity.</p>
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### Where are we now?

#### Excessive screen time and internet addiction

 **AMBER: Rates of screen-based activities among young people in Glasgow are considered extreme and are linked to socio-emotional problems. We need to increase efforts to reduce excessive screen time and internet addiction by introducing comprehensive education to the national curriculum focusing on the safe use of social media and how to avoid risks; encouraging educators to increase periods of offline school and homework; and increase funding for offline activities.**

In 2020, Childwise reported that 5-16 year olds spend on average 3.3 hours per day on their mobile phones engaging in 'non-call'<sup>b</sup> activities, and social media activities accounted for the highest proportion (63%) of mobile phone usage<sup>5</sup>. Mobile phone usage was found to fluctuate with age with 13-15 year olds reportedly spending on average, 3.8 hours per day on non-call activities<sup>5</sup>. Such levels of activity are categorised as moderate use but are more than double activity levels reportedly spent by adults<sup>5,6</sup>.

Among Glasgow secondary school pupils, one third (34%) reported spending more than eight hours per day on screen-based activities<sup>c</sup> on school days, and almost half (48%) spent more than eight hours per day on screen-based activities at the weekend<sup>21</sup>: such levels of online activity are considered extreme use<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>b</sup> Non-call activities are categorised as: texting, internet, games, downloading apps, taking pictures and videos, social media, using Bluetooth, using navigational tools, health and fitness tracking, and VR<sup>95</sup>.

<sup>c</sup> Screen-based activities included: gaming; watching TV; gambling; homework; shopping; YouTube; video/audio calling; and social media.

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Internet or screen-time addiction is often described as a difficulty or reduced desirability to switch off and engage with the 'real world' and has been likened to an impulse control disorder not dissimilar to compulsive gambling<sup>22</sup>. Social media has been described as more addictive than alcohol and cigarettes, and social media addiction is estimated to affect approximately 5% of adolescents in the UK<sup>23</sup>. However, there is currently no clinical diagnosis for social media addiction<sup>3</sup> and establishing whether a young person has an addiction can be difficult, particularly when the internet is perceived to be an intrinsic aspect of young people's lives today.

Research highlights there is a dose-response relationship between social media and mental health where each additional hour of viewing increases the likelihood of experiencing socio-emotional problems<sup>6</sup>. However, criticism remains, particularly regarding the poor evidence base surrounding internet or social media addiction and the direction of causality has been questioned<sup>20,24</sup>. For example, there are suggestions that people with poor social skills are particularly prone to internet or screen addiction due to their preference for online social interaction<sup>25</sup>.

### Cyberbullying



**AMBER: Instances of cyberbullying are increasing, and the longer young people spend online the higher their chance of being bullied. We need to increase efforts to reduce opportunities for cyberbullying by increasing funding for offline activities; and reduce the impact of cyberbullying by improving access to mental health support and providing adequate resources to parents and educators to support young people.**

The proportion of young people in the UK aged 9-16 years who report experiencing cyberbullying has risen from 8% to 12% in the period 2010-2014<sup>d,26</sup>. This increase was linked to an 'online disinhibition effect' where young people are more likely to share personal information or display more intense behaviour than they would offline which can create increased opportunities for bullying<sup>27</sup>. There is also a relationship between the amount of time spent online and instances of bullying with higher instances of bullying reported among extreme internet users compared with moderate internet users<sup>27</sup>.

With 16% of Glasgow secondary school pupils reporting that they were bullied at school within the last year (2014-2015)<sup>e</sup> compared with 8% who reported being bullied online<sup>21</sup>, it could be suggested that cyberbullying is not as prevalent as face-to-face bullying. Yet there is evidence to suggest that cyberbullying and offline bullying are part of the same problem because young people use both internet and face-to-face communication to bully others therefore each form of bullying cannot be addressed in isolation<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>d</sup> Updated data is not available for this report.

<sup>e</sup> These findings are derived from the most recent (2014-15) Glasgow City school's health and wellbeing survey publication.

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Among Glasgow secondary school pupils, the experience of bullying is gendered: girls (25%) are more likely to be bullied than boys (17%), and girls are more likely to be emotionally affected by bullying compared with boys<sup>21</sup>. Evidence highlighting the negative impact of bullying on young people's health and wellbeing includes: reduced confidence or self-esteem; low academic performance; feelings of loneliness; and changes to sleeping and eating patterns. There are also robust associations between cyberbullying and depression, anxiety, suicide and self-harm<sup>23,28</sup>.

### Poor body image



**AMBER: Exposure to unrepresentative and unachievable body images on social media is linked to poor body image and self-esteem. We need to increase efforts to address poor perceptions of body image arising from social media use by subjecting social media companies to a legal duty of care to users and highlighting when images have been digitally altered; and applying quality standards to online health information.**

The negative impact of social media typically focuses on cyberbullying. Yet young people in Scotland report that a bigger problem is peer pressure arising from social media and its relationship to body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and poor body-image<sup>3,23,29</sup>.

A prominent cause of this relationship is thought to be the use of photo manipulation techniques<sup>f</sup> which allow users to alter their image on photo-sharing platforms<sup>6</sup>. Social media increases young people's exposure to idealised, un-representative, and often unachievable body images which not only dominate the media and beauty industry, but which are also subjected to manipulation techniques<sup>30</sup>. Exposure to these images, even when young people are aware the images have been manipulated, can perpetuate unrealistic expectations causing a detrimental impact on self-esteem and body image<sup>3,23,31</sup>. A dose response relationship has been identified where increased exposure to social media increases the likelihood of body image concerns and dieting behaviour<sup>32</sup>.

In Scotland, adolescent girls have a poorer perception of their looks compared with boys and the gender gap in perceived looks is now at its widest since 1990. In a Scottish survey, over half (55%) of girls aged 15 years old described themselves as being too fat, compared with only one quarter (28%) of boys of the same age<sup>31</sup>. Research from the British Youth Council highlights that it is now the norm for young people to be unhappy with how their bodies look and function, and the age at which young people are becoming unhappy with the way they look is dropping<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>f</sup> Examples include filters available on the social media platform or Photoshop.

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While poor body image is not a mental health problem there is evidence to suggest it can predict depression, anxiety, and eating disorders; and is linked to risk behaviours such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, and unsafe sexual practices<sup>32</sup>. Those who suffer from poor body image at an early age are also likely to carry these concerns into adulthood<sup>32</sup>.

### Access to harmful content



**RED: Social media use increases young people's exposure to harmful content which is linked with risk and harmful behaviours. We need immediate action to reduce young people's access to harmful content by applying minimum standards across social media platforms to content moderation, improving age-related restrictions, and enforcing a legal duty of care on social media companies.**

It is common for children and young people to rely on the number of 'likes/loves' and 'followers/friends' a social media account holds to determine the credibility of information and which types of health-related content they should act upon<sup>29</sup>. Some have suggested that 'likes/loves' and 'followers/friends' are an indicator of social standing among children and young people today and can have a direct impact on their emotional wellbeing<sup>33</sup>. This presents a risk to young people as social media can contain unreliable or unhealthy information largely because anyone can create content and there is relatively little regulation or quality control<sup>20,29</sup>.

Individuals with social media accounts who have a high number of followers/friends, and subsequently a wide reach, are termed 'social media influencers'. The more followers/friends an individual has on social media, the higher their potential to earn rewards (i.e. free products or money by endorsing brands on their social media accounts<sup>34,35</sup>. Individuals, including celebrities, who engage in this form of brand endorsement are termed social media influencers because their wide reach and purported 'aspirational lifestyle' are seen to be influential among their followers/friends, particularly over their followers' buying behaviour. In recent years social media influencers have been criticised for capitalising on endorsing products which promote unhealthy behaviours. Most notable examples include the so-called 'detox products' which contain natural laxatives and claim to promote weight loss<sup>36</sup>. From 2019 all social media users are required to comply with consumer protection law and advertising codes enforced by the Advertising Standards Authority. This means that all individuals are required to disclose explicitly when they have been rewarded for endorsing a brand or product<sup>37</sup>. This law is designed to discourage social media users from covertly advertising products and misleading followers using the regulations governing traditional modes of marketing<sup>38,39</sup>.

Due to the difficulty with which material can be censored or suppressed online, extreme views and harmful content can be shared relatively freely. Online communities such as those that are pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia are well publicised examples of extreme communities which encourage eating disorders as 'lifestyle choices'. These communities not only trivialise and

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normalise serious mental health problems but can also encourage young people to engage in harmful and potentially fatal eating behaviours<sup>20,40</sup>. Young people in the UK have reported developing obsessive or addictive monitoring behaviours, engaging with extreme diets and exercises, and experiencing heightened levels of body dissatisfaction after accessing harmful content from social media<sup>40</sup>.

In a European survey of 11-16 year olds, 11% reported seeing websites where people discuss ways of hurting themselves and 6% had seen pro-suicide websites<sup>6</sup>. These are worrying trends given that in Scotland, 14% of 15-16 year olds reported at least one episode of self-harm during their lifetime<sup>27</sup> and suicide among young men aged 15-24 years is increasing<sup>41</sup>.

In 2019, following pressure from the UK government and health professionals, Instagram announced it will be censoring images of self-harm, including pictures of healed scars. While some agreed with the decision for fears it would otherwise glamourise self-harm<sup>42</sup>, this decision has notably come under attack from young people claiming that censoring images of their healed self-harm scars would be a form of body shaming since many of these images are focused on recovery and hope<sup>43,44</sup>.

It is difficult to tease apart how exposure to harmful content or products can influence young people, but research suggests they are not wholly equipped to separate fiction from reality. For example, coverage of suicide in the media has been shown to have a positive link with rates of suicide among young people<sup>45,46</sup>. Conversely there is evidence to suggest that social media plays an important role in normalising unusual or rare behaviours<sup>47</sup> and extreme online communities offer more than just reinforcement of harmful behaviours and instead can be safe, positive places for children and young people<sup>48</sup>. There is also the danger that by blaming social media for young people's behaviour diverts attention from the true root causes of the problem.

### Fear of missing out



**AMBER: Fear of missing out ('FOMO') arises from a compulsivity to constantly check social media and is linked with anxiety and poor sleep behaviours. We need to increase efforts to address FOMO arising from social media use by co-designing solutions with young people and by providing adequate resources to parents to support young people.**

Unless deactivated, social media often involves incoming alerts throughout the day. This has been known to create considerable pressure to be available 24/7 and can lead to a compulsivity to constantly check social media throughout the day and night to keep updated on what's going on<sup>49</sup>. The resulting compulsive checking of social media for 'fear of missing out' ('FOMO') has come to the fore as a relatively new psychological phenomenon with multi-faceted implications for young people's health and wellbeing<sup>49,50</sup>.

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It is reported that young people experience anxiety when their access to social media is restricted, and young people report feelings of stress and guilt when they cannot respond to a message immediately or participate in online conversations regularly<sup>49,51</sup>. For example, Childwise highlighted that almost half (44%) of 5-16 year olds in the UK felt uncomfortable without a mobile phone signal, and 42% were 'constantly worried' about their phone running out of charge<sup>5</sup>. This pressure to be constantly available, coupled with viewing 'highlight reels' of other people's lives on social media platforms, can result in feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and distress<sup>23,50,52</sup>.

A study of young people in Wales aged 12-15 years highlighted that 1-in-5 woke up in the night to check messages on social media; and that young people who woke in the night to check social media were three times more likely to be tired at school the following day than their classmates who did not use social media at night<sup>53</sup>. Furthermore, exposure to LED lights, as found on mobile phones and tablets, before sleep can interfere with the natural processes in the brain which also trigger feelings of sleepiness. Consequently, it can take longer for young people to fall asleep<sup>54</sup>.

A Scottish survey of 467 secondary school pupils highlighted that 86% of 11-17 year olds slept with their mobile phones under their pillow or in their hand<sup>29</sup>. As the age of mobile phone ownership decreases so we see higher numbers of younger children also engaging in this behaviour<sup>5</sup>. Childwise reported that in 2020, 57% of 9-16 year olds in the UK admitted 'I always sleep with mobile phone beside my bed'<sup>5</sup>. It is possible to conclude that young people may struggle to relax at night because they physically and mentally cannot switch off and this can have a cyclical causal relationship with their mental wellbeing<sup>3,29,55</sup>.

### Online gambling



**RED: Online gambling is increasing among pre-adolescents which places them at increased harm from problem gambling in adulthood. Immediate action is required to reduce opportunities for online gambling by introducing a legal duty of care on social media companies and improving age-related restrictions. Action to reduce the risk of harm from online gambling is required by providing pop-up warnings on gambling sites about risk and support.**

National data shows that young people are exposed to gambling via social media. In a Gambling Commission survey of 11-16 year olds in the UK, 10% reported they actively followed gambling companies on social media<sup>56</sup>.

On average young people will gamble for the first time at age 12 years<sup>57</sup>. Across the UK gambling is more prevalent among young people than smoking cigarettes (5%) and using drugs (3%) but is less prevalent than drinking alcohol (16%)<sup>57</sup>. Among Glasgow secondary school pupils there was a higher prevalence of online gambling among young men (2.5%) than young women (0.4%)<sup>21</sup>.

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Less than 1% of 11-16 year olds in the UK were classified as 'problem' gamblers: similar to the rates seen among adults<sup>57</sup>.

Too little is known about young online gamblers and the risk of harm. Evidence indicates that problem gambling behaviour may be connected to other antisocial and risk-taking behaviours, particularly among young men<sup>58</sup>. Problem gamblers aged 10-14 years in Scotland were significantly more likely to gamble as a way of escaping depression or anxiety than other gambling groups. Young people with problem gambling were also significantly more likely to admit difficulties with schoolwork and difficulties with other pupils than all the other gambling groups<sup>59</sup>. While young people may have a high rate of 'natural recovery' from gambling problems, early-age and risky gambling may increase the likelihood of problem gambling in adulthood<sup>60</sup>.

### 'Sexting'



**RED: Sexting among young people aged under 18 years is illegal in the UK, and is an indicator of risk of sexual exploitation, harassment, and abuse. Immediate action is required to address the risks of non-consensual under-age sexting behaviour by introducing participative educational initiatives; providing adequate training and resources for parents and educators; and improving access to mental health support.**

'Sexting' (also known as sending 'sexts' or 'nudes') is the sharing of naked or semi-naked images or videos, or sexually explicit messages via social media. Currently in the UK anyone under the age of 18 years who engages in sexting, even when it is consensual from both individuals, is doing so illegally<sup>61</sup>. Sexting among young people is a relatively new phenomenon due to the increasing proliferation of smartphones. Yet due to a lack of literature, particularly in a UK setting, the impact of sexting on health and wellbeing is unclear. There are links between sexting and risk-taking behaviours however there has been criticism surrounding the weak evidence to link sexting with poor mental health<sup>62,63</sup>.

A 2017 review (of literature primarily from the USA) found prevalence of sexting among young people ranged from less than 1% to 60%<sup>64</sup>. There is limited data surrounding sexting behaviour of young people, particularly aged under 12 years. Although a USA study reported that less than 1% of young people aged 10-11 years engaged with sexting in the period 2010-11<sup>65</sup>. However, it is likely that this figure has increased given the proliferation of smartphones among young people since then<sup>62</sup>.

A small UK study of children aged 13-15 years identified that sexting was a highly gendered issue in which boys were typically the recipients and were more likely to force or coerce girls into sending them 'nudes'<sup>66</sup>. In this study young girls highlighted that their sexting behaviour was subject to greater scrutiny and judgement, while boys' behaviour was deemed silly or cool; young girls were also more likely to internalise negativity arising from sexting compared with

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boys. Although an earlier international literature review (largely of data from the USA) found no significant gender differences in the experience of sexting<sup>62</sup>. Educational campaigns surrounding sex education (including sexting) have also been criticised for being highly gendered and victimising young women. A highly publicised example is the Australian sexting educational video [Megan's Story](#)<sup>67</sup>.

Sexting behaviour increases with age and there is evidence to suggest that consensual sexting over the age of legal sexual consent (16 years in the UK) is a sign of normal adolescent experimentation and risk-taking, related to exploration of sexual identity<sup>62,66</sup>. Some have argued that a lack of understanding surrounding sexting behaviour has led to blurred lines between where atypical adolescent experimentation ends and where sexual exploitation begins<sup>66,68</sup>. Some have criticised the current UK legal framework for not considering the sexual agency of 16- and 17-year olds<sup>62,67</sup> in relation to sexting. There are calls for sexting not to be viewed as uniformly harmful and deviant, and instead for the contextual variances (i.e. age, relationship status, consent) in which sexting occurs to be acknowledged and for the legal and policy framework to be adjusted accordingly<sup>62,65,67</sup>.

In contrast, sexting in the context of: coercion; blackmail; without consent; and among children and young people under the age of consent is an indicator of risk of sexual exploitation, harassment or abuse<sup>62,66</sup>. As relationships among children under 16 years are often more transient, young people are more vulnerable to non-consensual sharing of sexts and sexual exploitation<sup>62</sup>.

### Body positivity



**GREEN: Body positivity campaigns on social media challenge dominant norms surrounding beauty and are linked with improved body image and mood. We need to continue efforts to promote body positivity via social media by highlighting when photos have been digitally altered, applying quality standards to health information, and enforcing minimum standards to content moderation across social media platforms.**

Body positivity, also known as 'BoPo', campaigns on social media have been successful in challenging the dominant narrow image of beauty and redefining what beauty means. These campaigns have had a high profile across social media platforms in recent years<sup>69</sup> and two-thirds (63%) of young people in the UK reported they follow social media accounts which promote body positivity<sup>32</sup>. For young people whose appearance is not reflected by their physical 'offline' community (e.g. people with alopecia, weight issues, vitiligo, disabilities) their online community can reflect these differences, provide a sense of belonging and acceptance, and serve to normalise differences. Furthermore, the fact that social media algorithms are designed to show the user more of the content they like or follow, further serves to reinforce the user's norm<sup>70</sup>.

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Recent analysis of body positive content on Instagram included: selfies of women proudly displaying their 'belly rolls' (i.e. excess weight around the middle) and cellulite; comparisons of 'real' versus edited photos of bodies to raise awareness of filters and Photoshop use; self-compassion quotes; and images focusing on body functionality (i.e. what bodies can do rather than what they look like)<sup>71</sup>; and an Australian study of women aged 18-30 years highlighted that exposure to such content resulted in improved body image and mood<sup>72</sup>.

In recent years the 'body neutrality' movement has gained attention and has shifted the focus away from the body positive concept of self-love. Individuals are instead encouraged to make peace with their bodies and transfer their focus elsewhere<sup>73</sup>. This body neutrality movement has also shone a light on how the body positive movement has shifted over time to alienate the very marginalised and minority groups who created it: "now in order to be body positive you have to be acceptably fat – size 16 and under, or White, or very pretty. It's not a movement that I feel represents me anymore"<sup>73,74</sup>.

### Political, social activism



**GREEN: Social media gives young people a voice in social political matters they might otherwise be excluded from via conventional channels. We need to continue efforts to encourage young people to engage in social political activism by: improving digital access; increasing funding for the youth work sector, out of school, educational and community activities; and encourage decision-makers and educators to engage in power sharing with young people.**

If harnessed successfully social media can be a powerful tool in affecting change within social, political and legal systems<sup>75</sup>. In recent years social media has driven a revolution in participation in political and social activism among young people. Across the UK around half a million young people are engaging with social political groups via social media and many believe that social media is essential for driving change<sup>24,76</sup>. Social media has been praised for giving young people a voice in matters from which they might previously have been excluded through conventional channels<sup>52</sup>.

Young people's involvement in social political activism via social media has been integral to spreading the word and encouraging involvement with numerous campaigns such as [March for Our Lives](#), [Black Lives Matter](#), and the [Women's March](#). The 2016 Boston school walk-out, where over 2,000 students staged a walk-out of classes and marched through the city to protest proposed school budget cuts, is one example of how young people are using social media to find their political voice and organise largescale activism<sup>77,78</sup>. While the worldwide environmental activism inspired by the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg's solitary school strike every Friday outside a Swedish Government building is largely attributed to her clever harnessing of social media to spur students around the world to act to halt climate change. Greta Thunberg's campaign

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is thought to be one of the most successful to date whereby thousands of students have staged strikes in over 100 countries<sup>8</sup>. It has been suggested that youth-driven activism derives results, and it is possible that this level of activism and engagement among young people may not exist without social media to gather people together globally in support of one cause<sup>79</sup>.

### Building communities



**GREEN: Social media was designed to facilitate socialising regardless of distance and can reduce isolation among young people. We need to continue efforts to encourage young people to engage with social media to develop and maintain communities and friendships by increasing digital access and improving parents' and educators' digital literacy to understand the benefits of social media.**

The primary purpose of social media is to allow people to socialise regardless of the distance between them. A consistent finding is that young people use social media to develop and maintain friendships. Nearly two-thirds of young people report that they make new friends through social media and over 90% use social media to connect with their existing friendship groups every day. Young people also report that social media helps them to understand their friends' feelings and enable them to feel more connected to friends<sup>80</sup>.

As previously evidenced, the community aspect of social media has come under attack for the negative impact it can have on young people's lives. For example, exposing children and young people to extreme communities and harmful content. However online communities enable children and young people to create a safe network with like-minded people. For the socially anxious, access to these groups can mitigate feelings of distress or anxiety they may encounter through 'real world' engagement<sup>3,7</sup>. For young people who struggle to make social connections in the physical world, social media can offer an alternative and reduce isolation and feelings of loneliness<sup>3</sup>.

### Social-emotional support



**GREEN: Social media can be a valuable source of support and information and can encourage help-seeking behaviours. We need to continue efforts to encourage young people to engage with social media for social-emotional support by increasing digital access and ensuring that online support is made available as standard.**

Social media can be a valuable source of information and support for young people, particularly those with mental health problems or who find it difficult to access services<sup>3</sup>. Help-seeking for mental health problems was shown to be a positive element of social media on young people's lives, particularly when delays in referral for mental health support can create distress in the short term and lead to poor long-term outcomes<sup>7</sup>.

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The majority (78%) of young people contacting [Childline](#)<sup>9</sup> in the UK now do so via email or online chat, and more than half (59%) of counselling takes place online rather than speaking over the telephone<sup>6</sup>. Various support organisations have also made the shift from crisis telephone hotlines to online and text-based support services<sup>81,82</sup>. Twitter 'chats' are another example of how organisations can engage with and support young people via social media. For example, the organisation Eating Disorder Hope runs weekly Twitter chats whereby users can discuss eating disorder related pro-recovery topics directly with other users and the organisation<sup>83</sup>.

It is evidenced that the personal nature of sharing experiences online can provide others with practical coping strategies, improve health literacy, prompt individuals to access appropriate health services, and enable individuals to make better health choices<sup>52</sup>. A literature review of online support groups found there was a high level of information exchange and self-disclosure, and users reported they were more likely to discuss problems which they do not typically discuss face-to-face<sup>20</sup>. Some suggest that online suicide prevention may also be effective, and that social media provides an opportunity to identify and support those at risk<sup>2</sup>.

Contrary to previous evidence, social media was also found to have a positive impact on young people's self-esteem because it acts as a platform for young people to present positive versions of themselves. Many social media platforms serve as an outlet for creative self-expression<sup>24</sup>. Young people can share photography, film, writing, illustrations; and other users can offer comments and feedback which can have a profound benefit on building confidence and self-esteem<sup>84,85</sup>. Furthermore, body positivity content on social media can have a positive impact on young people who are struggling with eating disorders and provide them with a safe and supportive virtual community<sup>83</sup>.

Research suggests that young people in care can benefit from the social-emotional support gained via social media networks<sup>86</sup>. Social media is shown to provide young people in care with opportunities to create and maintain a healthy relationship with their birth family<sup>h</sup>, make new connections, and ease the transition between placements<sup>i</sup> and adult independence<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Childline, established in 1986 in the UK, is a free and confidential counselling service available to anyone aged under 19 years.

<sup>h</sup> Birth families are defined as birth parents, biological siblings, and other biological family members. Birth families are distinct from adoptive or foster families, and the 'family' in residential care homes<sup>89</sup>.

<sup>i</sup> From age 16 years young people in care will leave care and transition into adult independence. Depending on their date of birth, some young people are eligible for continued care up to age 21 years and aftercare support up to age 26 years<sup>90</sup>.

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### Self-enforced digital detox



**AMBER:** Many young people are recognising the negative impact social media can have on their health and wellbeing and are engaging in periods of self-enforced 'digital detox'. We need to increase efforts to encourage young people to participate in digital detoxing by educating young people on the safe use of social media; encouraging educators to endorse offline schoolwork and homework; and by increasing funding for the youth work sector and offline activities.

Many young people recognise the negative impact that long periods spent online or on social media can have on their health and wellbeing. Consequently, there are increasing numbers of young people making the decision to reduce their time online. A UK survey of nearly 5,000 pupils aged 11-18 years revealed that almost three quarters (71%) of young people have taken a break from social media and would do so again, and almost two-thirds (63%) wouldn't mind if social media did not exist<sup>87</sup>.

In the UK there has been a drop in social media interest in the last two years among 18-24 year olds and many young people are reportedly shunning social media completely due to the negative influence it has on their lives<sup>4</sup>. These so-called 'digital detoxers' are leaving or reducing their time on social media to spend more time with their friends and family, take part in offline activities, and focus on their health<sup>88</sup>.

There is also emerging evidence to suggest a change in the type of social media platform that young people now engage with. While young people do continue to have 'broadcast' social media accounts (i.e. Facebook and Twitter where the user posts public content) they are becoming increasingly inactive on these platforms. Instead young people are moving towards private communication-based platforms, such as Snapchat and Facebook Messenger, where they solely chat with their peer groups<sup>91</sup>.

### What can we do about it?

As social media is embedded in young people's lives there is recognition that by supporting young people to safely navigate social media it is possible to safeguard their health and wellbeing. To achieve this, the authors recommend the following actions from the UK and Scottish Government, schools, health and wellbeing organisations, social media platforms, and wider research groups.

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### UK and Scottish Government

- A regulatory framework should be introduced which subjects social media companies to a formal legal duty of care to their users. This would ensure technology and application designers, and social media platforms are acting ethically and not placing young people at risk by providing access to harmful content.
- There should be appreciation of and action on the root causes of poor mental health in children and young people, including inequalities in resources and power.
- A national mental health training programme should be made available to any organisation who has a responsibility for young people. This should be modularised from low-level, general mental health awareness training to high-level crisis management and suicide prevention. This ought to be renewed every three years and given the same status as First Aid training.
- There should be reconsideration of the legal and policy framework surrounding sexting to recognise the potential for sexual agency of 16- and 17 year olds; and reconsideration of the legal implications for consensual sexting among people over the age of sexual consent (16 years).
- Comprehensive, participatory, statutory education should be introduced to the national curriculum focusing on the safe use of social media and how to avoid the potential risks<sup>i</sup>. This should have equal footing to all other subjects.
- Adequate training should be provided to educators to equip them with the confidence and resources to explore social media risks in the classroom and provide support to children and young people.
- Adequate resources should be developed to improve the digital literacy of parents and equip them with knowledge of how to maximise the benefits and limit the risks of social media to their children.
- There should be evaluation of any new school-based technology which increases screen time among children and young people, focusing on the impact on health and wellbeing.
- Funding for out-of-school, educational, community, and sporting activities should be increased to reduce participation in online activity and screen time.
- Funding for the youth work sector should be increased. This is shown to give young people a voice, build confidence and self-esteem, and provides access to non-formal education<sup>68,92</sup>.
- Governments should engage in meaningful sharing of power with children and young people, including co-designing solutions and resources.
- Free Wi-Fi and digital access should be extended through schools, public libraries and leisure facilities, and improve internet access, particularly within rural areas and areas of deprivation, to reduce digital exclusion<sup>94,95</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> With funding from the Scottish Government and part of their Mental Health Strategy (2017-27), the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children's Parliament is working to develop a new national resource containing advice on the healthy use of social media and screen time. The resource, which is scheduled to be completed by April 2020, will be produced by children and young people<sup>93</sup>.

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### Schools

- School counsellors have the potential to bridge the gap between long waiting times for mental health support and to identify young people at risk of mental health crisis. School counsellors should be made available in all secondary schools in Scotland on a daily drop-in basis and not just for scheduled appointments.
- Educators should engage in meaningful sharing of power with children and young people as standard, including co-designing solutions and resources, and involving young people in delivering educational initiatives.
- Educators should provide opportunities for offline schoolwork and homework to reduce online activity and screen time.
- Schools should consider the delivery and context of educational initiatives focusing on sex and sexting. This includes working with LGBTQI+ specific groups, such as LGBT Youth, to create an inclusive curriculum<sup>96,97</sup>. Education should avoid victimising young people and avoid emphasising abstinence of sexual behaviours, instead focusing on wider relationship issues such as consent, gender, body image, and sexual harassment<sup>66</sup>. Research indicates this would encourage open and frank discussions, and challenge (rather than reproduce) gender double standards<sup>66</sup>. Young people's embarrassment and concerns surrounding sex education may be alleviated if delivered by external trained experts rather than their everyday teachers<sup>66</sup>.
- Lessons focusing on the safe use of social media should be participative and interactive rather than didactic; and should focus on a personal and relational communicative approach which gives attention to young people's experiences.
- Adequate training and support should be made available for education staff to openly discuss and support students with difficult topics.

### Health and wellbeing organisations

- Health and wellbeing organisations with a responsibility to children and young people should provide online support (i.e. social media, Skype, email) as standard.
- The NHS should be working in partnership with social media platforms to apply quality standards to health information published on social media platforms. This would let the user know whether an account is providing trustworthy information.

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### Social media platforms

- Social media companies should develop technology to identify young people on social media who could be suffering from mental health conditions, to provide them with discreet information about where they can seek support.
- Age-related restrictions for accessing social media, particularly gambling-related content, should be improved.
- Social media usage should be tracked, and users provided with pop-up warnings when they breach a set level of usage deemed potentially harmful. Links could provide information on social media addiction.
- Social media platforms should highlight when photos have been digitally altered or have had filters applied. For example, an icon, watermark, or message.
- Social media companies should engage meaningfully with the UK and Scottish Government to agree minimum standards across the industry in relation to content moderation and removal, to protect young people from inappropriate content.

### Research

- Robust longitudinal research is necessary to fully understand and strengthen the evidence base surrounding the positive and negative impacts of social media on young people's health and wellbeing. This ought to include larger cohorts of young people in different contexts, from various backgrounds and cultures, socioeconomic status, and with varied learning needs.
- Further UK-based research into the prevalence and contextual variation of sexting behaviour among children and young people is required. This ought to explore sexual agency, consent, gender differences, risks, and impact on mental health.

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