May 2024

Phoning it in
Britons, smartphones and social meda

More in
Common

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About More in Common

More in Common is a think tank and research agency working to bridge the gap between policy makers and the public and helping people in Westminster to understand those voters who feel ignored or overlooked by those in power. Our British Seven segmentation provides a unique lens at understanding what the public think and why. We've published groundbreaking reports on a range of issues from climate and refugees to culture wars to crime. We are a full-service research agency offering polling and focus group research and are members of the British Polling Council.

This research was conducted in early May 2024. Full methodological information can be found at the end of the report..

Introduction

Britons are unhappy about their relationships with their smartphones and deeply concerned about the impact of social media and smartphones on children and young people. They worry they spend too much time glued to their phones and that social media is increasingly a force for bad in society - particularly for young people. Parents in the UK, even more so than other countries surveyed, say they are struggling to control their children's screen time.

This briefing brings together quantitative and qualitative research about what the public think about smartphones, social media and young people - and what they want the Government to do about it. Based on comprehensive polling across four countries (The UK, USA, France and Germany) it finds not only that Britons want our Government to go much further in regulating social media, but that they are also much more likely to support policies that restrict social media than people in the three other countries.

While parents and the wider public acknowledge that they have a key role to play, they do not feel able to act alone. The impetus needs to come from the Government - whether by implementing a digital age of adulthood as Emmanuel Macron has proposed for Europe, or keeping social media and smartphones out of schools.

This is not a partisan issue or a new front in the culture war. What is striking about attitudes to social media is that views on its harms and the need for action are consistent across those from very different ideological perspectives and backgrounds.

The clear message from the public is that Britons want and need the Government to help them take back control from social media.

The problem

Britons overwhelmingly view social media's impact on society as negative. 42 per cent say they would rather live in a world without social media, compared to 30 per cent who believe the world is better-off because social media exists. Asked to describe the impact of social media on society in a few words, the top responses from the public are "negative", "bad" and "dangerous".

Figure 1

Britons have a negative view of the impact of social media

When you think of social media's impact on society, what word comes to mind?

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Source: More in Common, May 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

In focus group conversations, people's starting point on social media is almost universally negative. Most people have a story about how they personally have struggled with their relationship with their phone, how they struggle to protect their children from the harms of social media, and broader concerns about the ways in which social media is driving society apart.

The overarching theme that emerges from these conversations is a **lack of control**. People feel that social media has taken away their ability to control how they spend their time and that they have no way of controlling what young people are seeing or being exposed to online. On a more abstract level, people worry that we have handed over control to a series of opaque algorithms that, while providing benefits through entertainment and connection, expose people to extreme, misleading or hateful information.
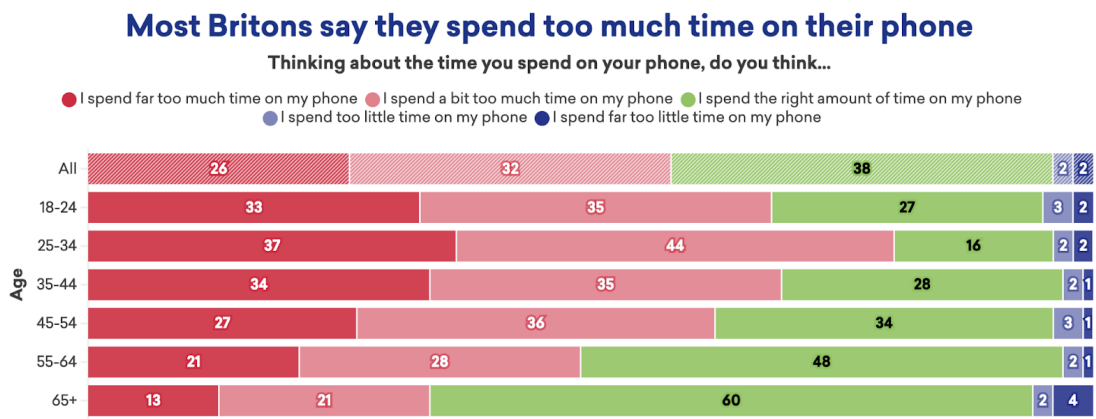
> *I am 45 and I'm a bit addicted to my smartphone. I've had to buy a little box off Amazon to lock it in at nighttime with a timer on because I'll just be watching TV and then I'm not even thinking and my hand just reaches for it for no reason. It's so weird. I don't think I'm the last person that can lecture a young person because I'm as bad as them.*
>
> **Emma, Beautician, Ilford**

The majority of Britons (58 per cent) think they spend too much time on their phones - a number that is highest for 25-34 year-olds, but which is consistently high across working age adults. Even among those aged over 65, more than a third worry they spend too much time on their phone.

At the same time, 45 per cent of Britons say they don't go more than an hour without looking at their phones on a typical day, including 14 percent of adults who say they don't go more than 15 minutes without looking at their phone.

Figure 2

Most Britons say they spend too much time on their phone

Thinking about the time you spend on your phone, do you think...

● I spend far too much time on my phone   ● I spend a bit too much time on my phone   ● I spend the right amount of time on my phone
● I spend too little time on my phone   ● I spend far too little time on my phone

Age	I spend far too much	I spend a bit too much	I spend the right amount	I spend too little	I spend far too little
All	26	32	38	2	2
18-24	33	35	27	3	2
25-34	37	44	16	2	2
35-44	34	35	28	2	1
45-54	27	36	34	3	1
55-64	21	28	48	2	1
65+	13	21	60	2	4

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Source: More in Common, May 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

Even greater than concerns about personal use of smartphones and social media is concern for children. The public worry about a range of harms that social media and smartphones are exposing young people to - including online bullying, negative impacts on school performance, sleep and mental health, radicalisation and grooming by sexual predators.

Above all else, people express deep discomfort with the level of uncertainty and lack of knowledge they have surrounding teen social media use. They see young people using their phones more and more, and worry that we simply don't know what impact this will have on them throughout their lives. Reports on recent studies that make a direct link between social media and harm to young people have only heightened that concern.

Social media is poisonous. It's a poisonous, poisonous environment for children and I absolutely dread to think what it's doing to this generation of children because they are the guinea pigs ... the mental health crisis in 10 or 15 years is going to be so much worse than what it is now. And it's because of social media and it is a toxic environment.
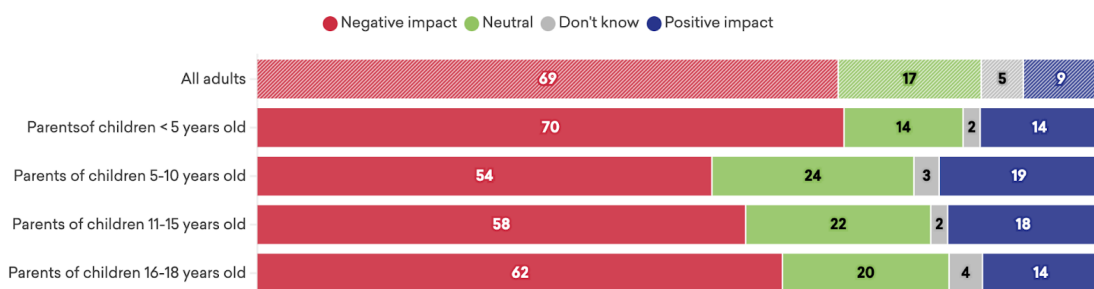
Erica, Business Manager, Louth

Over two thirds of the public (69 per cent) say that social media has a generally negative impact on children aged 15 and under, and only nine per cent say it has a positive impact. Concern is also high among parents of children of all ages.

Figure 3

Most Britons say social media has a negative impact on young people

Do you think social media has a positive or a negative impact on the lives of children aged under 15 overall?

● Negative impact ● Neutral ● Don't know ● Positive impact

	Negative impact	Neutral	Don't know	Positive impact
All adults	69	17	5	9
Parents of children < 5 years old	70	14	2	14
Parents of children 5-10 years old	54	24	3	19
Parents of children 11-15 years old	58	22	2	18
Parents of children 16-18 years old	62	20	4	14

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Source: More in Common, May 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

I've got teenage children and it's terrible: the minute they wake up, the phone's not left the side, they're walking around in the days, they're like zombies. He's watching TikTok videos while he is trying to make his breakfast and it's going all over the place. And I'm just really annoyed with the way kids are with them, to be honest with you. I think they're just dominating their lives and they can't live without them. But we grew up without them, so it's a different world for us.

Mark, Teacher, Horncastle

This concern is not driven by technophobia. Britons are positive about smartphones in general, and will often explain how much easier their lives are now that they can access GPS directions, stay in touch with loved ones around the world, or learn new skills. But their specific concerns surround their impact on young people, who are still maturing into adulthood - and algorithmically-driven attention-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

This distinction is clear in the polling - 42 per cent say they would prefer to live in a world without social media, but only 20 percent of adults say they would prefer to live in a world without smartphones.

Figure 4

People would rather live in a world without social media, but are much more positive about smartphones in general
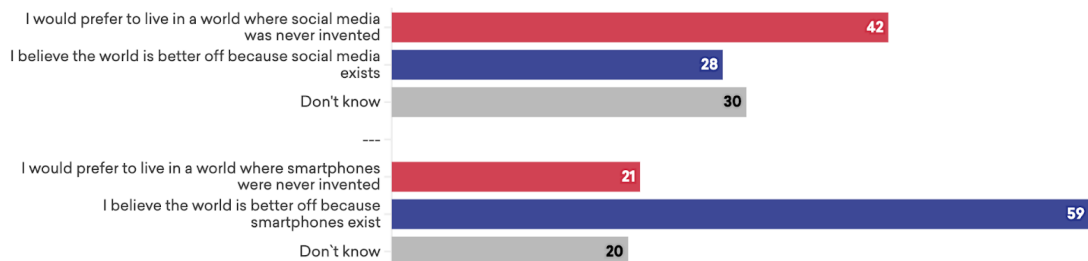
Source: More in Common, 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

The public also does not think that all social media apps pose the same harm. People overwhelmingly believe, for instance, that messaging services like WhatsApp and moderated video content channels such as YouTube are forces for good, whereas they are much more critical of Twitter/X, TikTok and Snapchat which they see as less regulated and which leave children more vulnerable to harm.

52 percent of the public describe WhatsApp as a "force for good" and 45 per cent say the same for YouTube. In contrast, only 25 per cent describe Instagram as a force for good, 18 per cent describe TikTok as a force for good, and 12 per cent describe Snapchat as a force for good.

People do then see some benefits of social media, but think the balance between benefits and costs is out of sync. Crucially they don't think that social media companies can be trusted to regulate themselves, and want the Government to support them in protecting people (and especially their children) from the most harmful and uncertain effects of social media.

What do Britons want to happen?
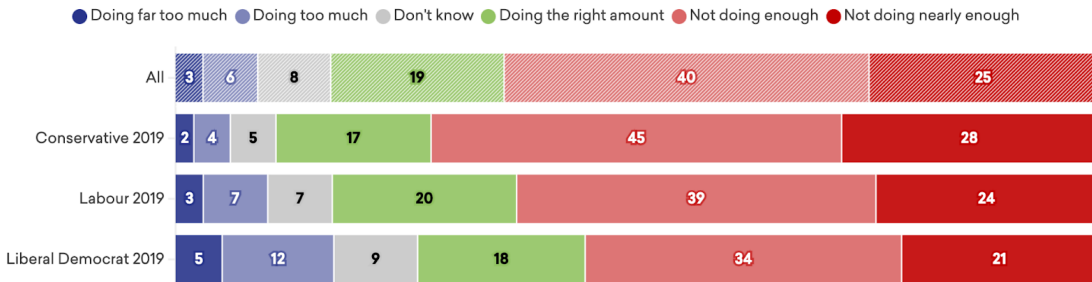
Britons from across the political spectrum want the Government to do more to regulate social media. The number of people saying the Government is "not doing enough" to regulate social media has risen from 61 per cent in 2021, to 65 per cent in 2024. This is in spite of new regulations already being introduced during that time such as the Online Safety Act. Clearly something is not working.

Figure 5

Support for social media regulation spans political divides in the UK

What is your view of the regulation of social media platforms, like Facebook, TikTok and YouTube? Is the government…

● Doing far too much ● Doing too much ● Don't know ● Doing the right amount ● Not doing enough ● Not doing nearly enough

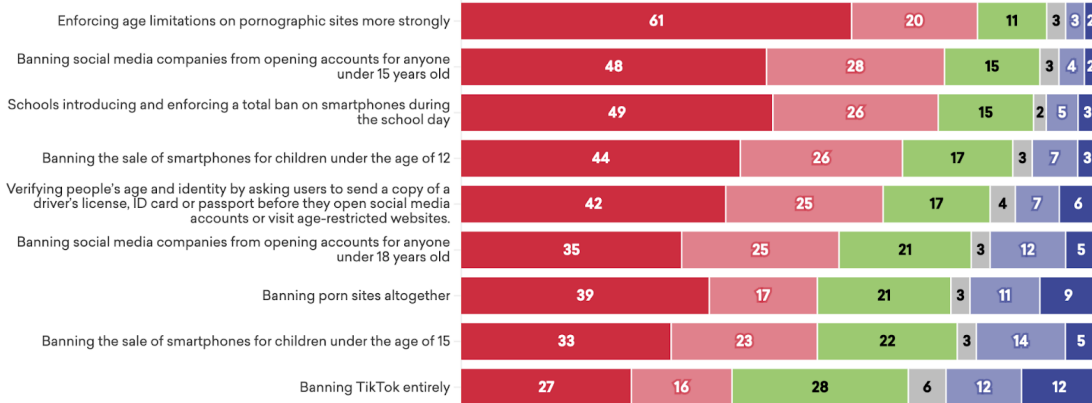|	Far too much	Too much	Don't know	Right amount	Not enough	Not nearly enough
All	3	6	8	19	40	25
Conservative 2019	2	4	5	17	45	28
Labour 2019	3	7	7	20	39	24
Liberal Democrat 2019	5	12	9	18	34	21

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Source: More in Common, May 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

What specific action would the public like to see? Presented with nine potential proposals for regulation each receives more support than opposition, with most commanding clear majority support.

Figure 6

Strong support for a range of measures on internet safety

● Strongly support ● Support ● Neither support nor oppose ● Don't know ● Oppose ● Strongly oppose

	Strongly support	Support	Neither support nor oppose	Don't know	Oppose	Strongly oppose
Enforcing age limitations on pornographic sites more strongly	61	20	11	3	3	2
Banning social media companies from opening accounts for anyone under 15 years old	48	28	15	3	4	2
Schools introducing and enforcing a total ban on smartphones during the school day	49	26	15	2	5	3
Banning the sale of smartphones for children under the age of 12	44	26	17	3	7	3
Verifying people's age and identity by asking users to send a copy of a driver's license, ID card or passport before they open social media accounts or visit age-restricted websites.	42	25	17	4	7	6
Banning social media companies from opening accounts for anyone under 18 years old	35	25	21	3	12	5
Banning porn sites altogether	39	17	21	3	11	9
Banning the sale of smartphones for children under the age of 15	33	23	22	3	14	5
Banning TikTok entirely	27	16	28	6	12	12

More in Common

Source: More in Common, May 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

Top of the list is stronger age restrictions on pornographic sites - with 81 per cent support and only 4 per cent opposition. Notably, this policy is supported by 86 per cent of women and 77 per cent of men.

On social media regulation, the most popular proposition is that the Government should ban social media companies from allowing anyone under the age of 15 to open an account. Almost half (48 per cent) of the public "strongly support" this policy, and a further 28 per cent "support" it. Only six per cent oppose the policy. Many would go even further. With 60 per cent of the public supporting a ban on social media accounts for anyone under 18 years of age.

> *I do think that social media is possibly one of the worst things that could have ever happened for young people specifically purely because of the comparisons and stuff. And I'm 22, so I've seen the evolution very quickly how quickly things have changed. And if banning is doable, I would suggest it. I would actually be all for it because although it connects us, it also drives us apart.*
>
> **Patrick, Security Guard, Ilford**

But many people question how a ban could be made to work in practice and would want to be reassured that such a ban could be enforceable . However people see a ban on social media accounts for young teenagers as an obvious measure to protect young people. Having seen ID verification work in other, more regulated, internet services (such as online banking) the public believe it must be possible when it comes to social media.
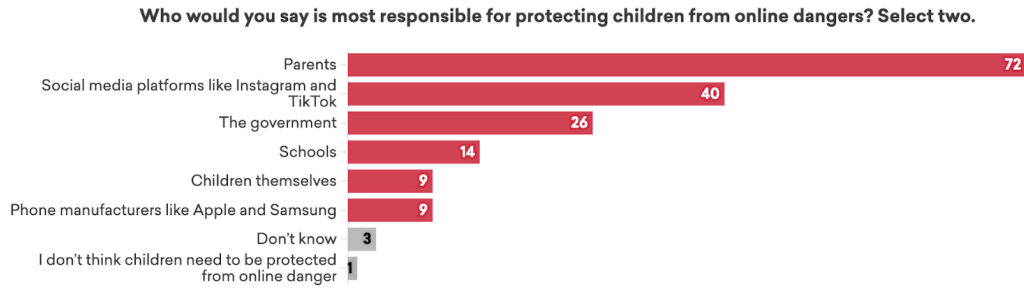
> *They can police things when they choose to. You can't sign up to a mobile banking app without a passport and stuff. If they made it a policy where you couldn't set up a Twitter or Instagram account or any of these things without putting in a full log of your information, you couldn't have bots.*
>
> **Craig, Sales Assistant, Ilford**

There is very little libertarian resistance to the idea of regulating social media and protecting children from harm. That is not to say the public believe it is solely the Government's responsibility - in fact, they are three times more likely to say that parents are responsible for keeping children safe than the Government. And parents themselves are more likely to think this than the population as a whole.

Figure 7

Britons think parents are most responsible for protecting children from online safety

Who would you say is most responsible for protecting children from online dangers? Select two.

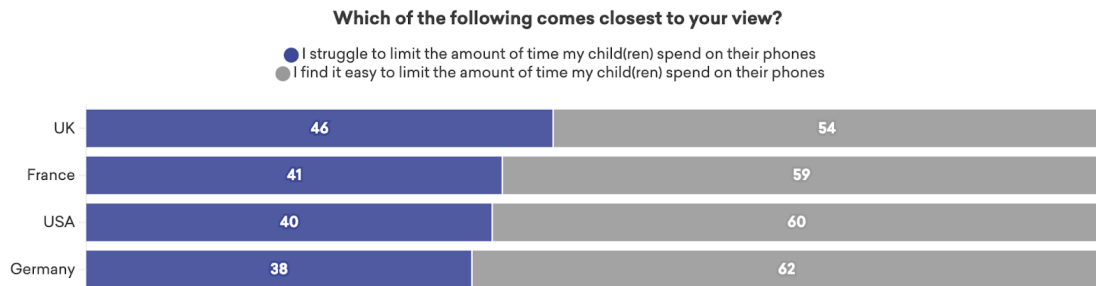|	
Parents	72
Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok	40
The government	26
Schools	14
Children themselves	9
Phone manufacturers like Apple and Samsung	9
Don't know	3
I don't think children need to be protected from online danger	1

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Source: More in Common, 2024 • N = 2,008 GB adults

But the public also have a clear view of the role that they want the Government to play in protecting children from online harms. 46 per cent of parents in the UK say they struggle to limit the amount of time their children spend on their phones - more than in France, Germany and the United States. A significant number of parents do not feel able to act alone

Figure 8

British parents struggle the most with limiting the amount of time their children spend on their phones

Which of the following comes closest to your view?

● I struggle to limit the amount of time my child(ren) spend on their phones
● I find it easy to limit the amount of time my child(ren) spend on their phones

	Struggle	Easy
UK	46	54
France	41	59
USA	40	60
Germany	38	62

More in Common

Source: More in Common, May 2024

When parents do try to limit the amount of time their children spend on their phones, they are faced with competing concerns about the impact on their children's social lives, where there is increasing pressure to be online. This is just one example of why individual parenting can't solve the problem - collective action is needed to break social pressure.

> *My kids didn't have a smartphone in primary school and they got bullied. Both of them got bullied for not having a smartphone in year six at primary school.*

Erica, Business Manager, Louth

> *I started to switch the internet off at night because I woke up at night once and it was two o'clock in the morning and I could hear my daughter and it was a school night and she was 15. She's doing GCSEs this year and she was still on FaceTime to her boyfriend. So I said, so 10 o'clock it goes off now and that's it. And it's a bit annoying for me because I sometimes stay up after 10 o'clock and I'd like to do stuff, but I just feel that it's important that we can get a grip on this because it's got out of control for me. Like I say, the minute they wake up and my son's got his phone on TikTok and he's getting dressed and he's got it on the side of his bed while he is getting dressed, he's not concentrating on what he's doing. And I feel that there's a lot of diagnosis coming out of autism and ADHD and I'm sure they're all related to the way these young people operate with the phones because they're not concentrating, they're not in the moment, they're just following a screen around.*

Mark, Teacher, Horncastle

Put another way, parents take responsibility for protecting their children, but see social media access as a collective action problem, and they need the Government to step in to help break the social contagion and network effects that pressure young people to spend more time online.

And while protecting children is the public's priority, they would also like to see more done to tackle the polarising effects of social media and clamp down on hate speech.

> *For me it's social media companies, Facebook, Meta or Instagram, all these massive corporations and they have a massive responsibility. Now they might not have known it at the inception of their company, but they're polarising people so much by showing them content because their main thing as a company is to keep a person on the phone as long as possible. So when negative stuff begins to happen, the Government should step in and fine these companies and fine them heavily and give that fine back into education for social media and that type of stuff. The companies have a massive responsibility, but it's up to the Government to force those companies to make these changes and monitor them better.*

Adam, IT Engineer, Louth

> *I think we've got to put more onus on the organisations that run these sites than if they really tried hard, they could stop all of that kind of hate speech and they could identify who's doing that. You wouldn't do that in a public place. You shouldn't be allowed to do that on a social media site. I think banning it will make it more appealing to young people. It's like getting into a film that you shouldn't have got into when I was a kid.*

Tony, IT Engineer, Ilford

In sum, Britons want clear government action to tackle the harms of social media, starting with protecting children. Whether it is a complete ban on social media for young people, or better enforcing school bans on smartphones, these age related restrictions are top of the public's list of priorities for helping parents to take back the control they have lost with the emergence of social media.

How do Britons' views compare to those in other countries?

Not only has support for regulating social media in Britain risen since 2021, Britons are among the most likely to support strict regulations on social media of any of the four countries surveyed.

Figure 9

Support for regulating social media has increased since 2021 in the UK, France and Germany

What is your view of the regulation of social media platforms, like Facebook, TikTok and YouTube? Is the government doing too much or not enough?

Total selecting that the government is doing NOT ENOUGH to regulate social media
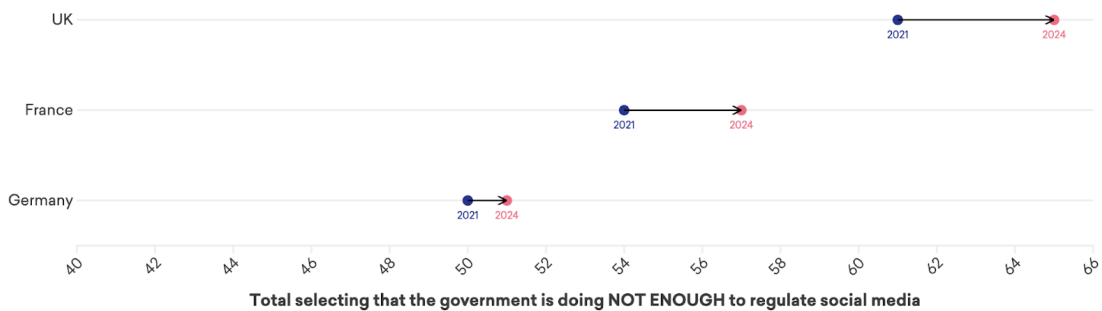
Source: More in Common, December 2021 and May 2024 • Total scores calculated by adding "Not enough" answers to "Not nearly enough" answers
Question not asked in the US in 2021

This starts with the fact Britons are the least happy with their relationships with their phones. For example, 58 per cent of Britons say they spend too much time on their phones, compared with 47 per cent of people in Germany. Britons are also the group who go for the shortest time without checking their phones.

Figure 10

Britons are least happy with the amount of time they spend on their phone

Thinking about the time you spend on your phone, do you think...

● I spend far too much time on my phone ● I spend a bit too much time on my phone ● I spend the right amount of time on my phone
● I spend too little time on my phone ● I spend far too little time on my phone

UK	26	32	38	2	2
France	27	31	36	4	3
USA	23	27	41	5	4
Germany	19	28	45	4	4

Thinking about a normal day, how long do you usually go without looking at your phone?

● Less than 15 minutes ● More than 15 minutes but less than every hour ● Around 1-2 hours ● More than 2 hours but not all day ● All day

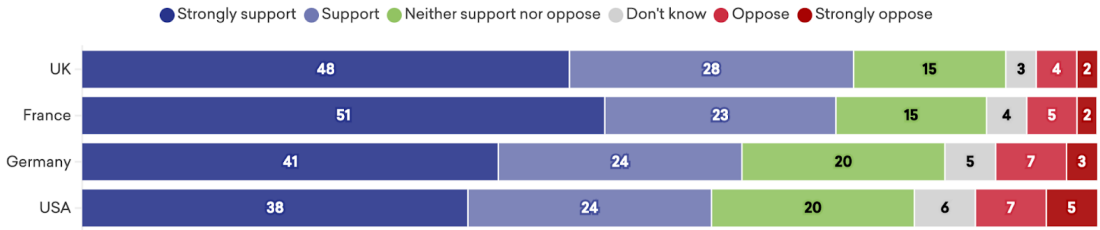|					
UK	14	30	27	25	4
USA	18	23	27	25	7
France	10	19	28	38	6
Germany	9	16	26	38	11

More in Common

Source: More in Common, May 2024

Similarly, 46 per cent of British parents report struggling to limit the amount of time their children spend on their phones, compared to 38 percent of German parents.

These struggles inform Briton's strong support for policies to regulate social media in the UK. For example, 76 per cent of Britons support a ban on social media for children under the age of 15, compared to 62 per cent of Americans.

Figure 11

Britons are most likely to support banning social media for under 15 year olds

To what extent do you support or oppose these policies? [Banning social media companies from opening accounts for anyone under 15 years old]

● Strongly support ● Support ● Neither support nor oppose ● Don't know ● Oppose ● Strongly oppose

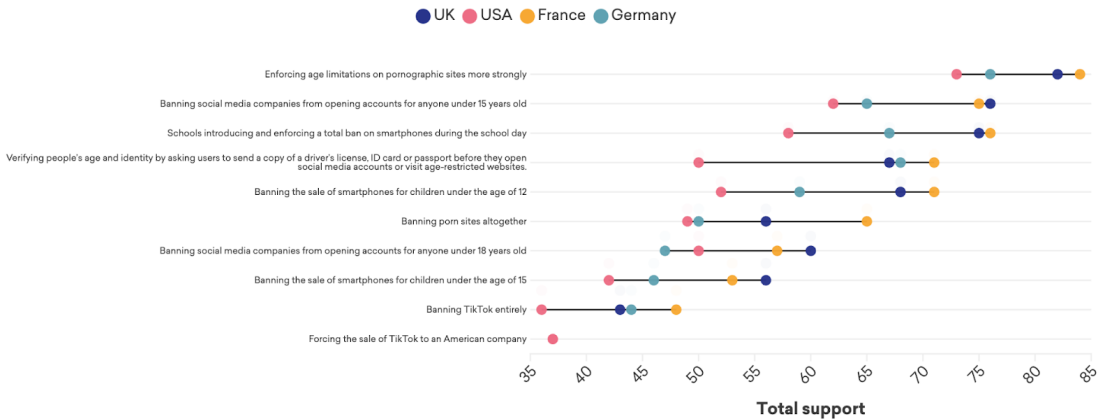|	Strongly support	Support	Neither support nor oppose	Don't know	Oppose	Strongly oppose
UK	48	28	15	3	4	2
France	51	23	15	4	5	2
Germany	41	24	20	5	7	3
USA	38	24	20	6	7	5

More in Common

Source: More in Common, May 2024

In fact, across a range of policies tested (particularly those including a ban), support was often higher in Britain than in any of the other countries.

Figure 12

Strong support for a range of policies, such as banning social media accounts for those under 15

Some governments have proposed the following measures. Do you support or oppose these?

● UK ● USA ● France ● Germany

Enforcing age limitations on pornographic sites more strongly
Banning social media companies from opening accounts for anyone under 15 years old
Schools introducing and enforcing a total ban on smartphones during the school day
Verifying people's age and identity by asking users to send a copy of a driver's license, ID card or passport before they open social media accounts or visit age-restricted websites.
Banning the sale of smartphones for children under the age of 12
Banning porn sites altogether
Banning social media companies from opening accounts for anyone under 18 years old
Banning the sale of smartphones for children under the age of 15
Banning TikTok entirely
Forcing the sale of TikTok to an American company

Total support

More in Common

Source: More in Common, May 2024

That Britons are more likely to support government regulation than other countries is not in of itself a reason for action. But the strong support for tighter regulations on social media in the UK, combined with Britons' unique discomfort with our own social media use and emerging evidence on the harms to young people, presents a strong case for bold government intervention.

Recommendations

The British public are not, nor should they be expected to be, policy experts. They cannot provide the answers on the precise mechanisms through which the harms of social media should be regulated, or be expected to fully weigh the pros and cons of each specific policy proposal. But there is deep and broad support from the public for further and tougher action to regulate social media. It is clear that the status quo, particularly around young people's use of social media, falls far short of the expectations of the public.

This report provides a starting point for how to better meet public expectations and to help Britain take back control from social media. In thinking about government action, policy-makers should consider how they can:

- **Start with the most popular policies –** There is significant support for a range of regulations and restrictions on social media in the UK, but action on children's social media is number one. That should start by following France's lead with a ban on social media companies opening accounts for under-15 year-olds. Similarly, properly enforcing and resourcing a national ban on smartphones in schools (for instance through the provision of phone lockers) would go a long way towards reassuring the public that the Government is taking online harms seriously.

- **Support parents to take back control –** Parents accept responsibility for protecting their children from online harm. But there is only so much they can do alone, given social pressures on young people to be online are so strong. Good government policy should make it easier for parents to protect their children by breaking some of the network effects that keep young people online.

- **Hold technology companies to account –** The public think that the Government has handed too much control over to big technology companies. Increased scrutiny and visible action on their algorithms and business practices is needed to restore public trust that attention is being paid to harms caused by social media. Insisting on proper age verification is another important step towards doing this.

- **Remember that not all technology is equal –** The public are not technophobes. Britons are not naturally resistant to new technologies, and want to keep the benefits of their smartphones. They also don't see all communications apps as equally harmful. Instead, they support specific, targeted action on social media apps built on attention-based algorithmically-driven feeds and young people. The Government should work with smartphone manufacturers to explore the potential for introducing new phone models for under 15s that do not have access to social media.

Methodology

Polling was conducted in-house by More in Common who are members of the British Polling Council

Fieldwork dates
29th April - 2nd May 2024

Interview method
Online survey

Populations effectively sampled
USA adults, GB adults, France adults, Germany adults

Sample size
Approximately 2,000 adults in each country

Sampling and weighting method
The data is sampled from an online panel using quotas for age/sex, education level, and region. Data is then weighted on age/sex, education level, region, and past election vote. In the USA, a quota is also set for sampling on ethnicity, and samples in the UK and USA are weighted on ethnicity.

Focus groups in the UK took place on in Ilford on 29th April and Louth and Horncastle on 8th May.

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