

Social media restriction pilots

Qualitative research with
13–17-year-olds in the UK



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: sohcorrespondence@dsit.gov.uk

Social media restriction pilots: Qualitative research with 13–17-year-olds in the UK

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1. Executive Summary

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) commissioned Savanta to run a qualitative study to explore the impact of social media restrictions on young people aged 13-17. The findings presented in this report are intended to contribute to the evidence base on children's experiences of social media restrictions. Any primary research, subsequent findings or recommendations do not represent government views or policy. The study included three separate types of social media restriction, these were: limiting usage to 15 minutes per day (Intervention 1), installing a no-access curfew for social media from 9pm-7am (Intervention 2) and complete removal of access by uninstalling social media apps (Intervention 3).

This study provides indicative, qualitative evidence based on a relatively small sample and self-reported experiences. It is not designed to establish causal effects or to produce findings that are statistically generalisable to the wider population and should be read as exploratory rather than conclusive.

Note: The Prime Minister's policy announcement of the social media ban on 15 June 2026 took place after the intervention period had closed. The majority of the post-intervention interviews (232) had been conducted by this date.

Key findings

Participants across the intervention groups reported a range of perceived benefits associated with social media restrictions, including improvements to wellbeing, sleep, and family life. Lasting impact appeared to be more likely where restrictions were supported by education and practical guidance and framed as a collective norm rather than an individual imposition.

Impacts of Social Media Restrictions

Participants consistently reported a range of perceived benefits associated with reduced social media use, most notably improvements in sleep, mood, concentration, study time, and family interaction. Young people frequently described going to bed earlier, feeling more rested, concentrating better in lessons and during revision, and feeling calmer with reduced stress. Participants often described these effects as cumulative, with improved sleep appearing, in their accounts, to support better daytime energy, focus, and emotional wellbeing. Across households, participants also reported increased in-person interaction and shared family time.

At the same time, participants described social and emotional trade-offs. For many young people, platforms such as Snapchat were central to peer communication, particularly through group chats, and several described restrictions as generating feelings of isolation and disconnection from friendships, plans, and everyday social exchanges, particularly as their peers were not experiencing the same restrictions. Participants also described notable emotional responses during the early stages of the intervention, including irritability, mood fluctuations, and increased household tension, with some parents likening the initial adjustment period to withdrawal. Some participants described the removal of social media as a source of relaxation or emotional regulation, while others said they responded by intensifying use before cut-off points or shifting their attention to other screens.

Compliance and Adaptation

However, compliance was far from total, with some families encountering workarounds, most commonly device-switching (using tablets, laptops, or old phones), parent-enabled exceptions, and time-shifting behaviour. Participants generally described friendships as maintained through

adaptation (texting, calling, meeting in person), and some reported a positive shift towards more face-to-face socialising.

Responses to the individual interventions

Each of the three interventions produced a distinct combination of reported benefits and drawbacks. The overnight curfew (Intervention 2) was reported as the most manageable to enforce among the three interventions and was linked to the most consistently reported sleep benefits; it was also the approach families were most likely to say they would continue voluntarily beyond the study period. However, because it restricted access only overnight, it left daytime and evening social media use largely unchanged, and many participants described simply shifting their usage earlier or later around the restricted window rather than reducing it overall.

Full app removal (Intervention 3) also had a high compliance rate and was associated with reported benefits for focus, concentration, and family time, with some participants describing a marked sense of calm once the adjustment period had passed. These reported gains came alongside the most pronounced social disruption of the three interventions, and participants widely described the approach as too restrictive to sustain in the long term.

The 15-minute daily limit (Intervention 1) had the lowest compliance rate and was most frequently described as impractical, particularly where it interrupted ongoing conversations or coincided with peer coordination. At the same time, participants most often associated this intervention with more deliberate, self-regulated use, describing more conscious budgeting of their time and, in some households, a shift toward offline activity such as family time and hobbies.

Workarounds were a feature of all three interventions, most commonly switching to messaging platforms or alternative devices, and participants described a broadly similar mood trajectory across all groups: initial frustration giving way to greater calm after the first week. Participants reported improvements in sleep and family life to some degree across all three approaches. Taken together with the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, these findings suggest each model involves a different trade-off between effectiveness, feasibility, and social cost as experienced by participants, rather than pointing to one clearly superior approach.

Intervention 1 15 min/app daily limit	Intervention 2 9pm–7am curfew	Intervention 3 Full app removal
Strengths • Prompted more deliberate, intentional use of apps • Sleep improvements reported by many • Focus and revision benefits widely noted • More family time and shared activities	Strengths • Strongest and most consistent sleep benefits of all three • Most manageable to enforce • Automated setup reduced ongoing parental burden • Family evenings more engaged and communicative	Strengths • Strongest distraction removal and focus benefits • High compliance when technically enforced • Clear lifestyle benefits once adjustment period passed

Intervention 1 15 min/app daily limit	Intervention 2 9pm–7am curfew	Intervention 3 Full app removal
Encouraged rationing and self-regulation skills	- Most accepted as fair and proportionate - Many families continued voluntarily after the study	- Effective short-term "reset" from habitual use - More in-person socialising and family time
Challenges 15-min cap widely seen as too short for real in-app conversation - Highest rate of non-adherence of the three groups - Generated most frequent parental negotiation and override requests - Strong initial emotional resistance; anger and distress common - Widespread workarounds via other devices and platforms - Low willingness to continue at this limit long-term	Challenges 9pm cut-off felt too early, especially at weekends - Some accidentally locked entire phone rather than social apps only - Front-loading and early-morning rebound use a common response - Interference with homework platforms and school coordination tools - Daytime social media use largely unchanged	Challenges - Most socially disruptive, greatest loss of peer contact - Withdrawal-like first week; most acute emotional distress - Heavy device-switching to laptops, browsers, old phones - Blocking revision tools (e.g. TikTok) counterproductive for some - Widely seen as too extreme for sustained long-term use

Key Considerations

The findings point to several implications for how any future intervention might be designed, supported, and communicated. Across all groups, participants were broadly supportive of some form of restriction, but the form, framing, and delivery mattered considerably.

Frame restrictions as collective, not individual

Perceptions of fairness were closely tied to universality. Young people were notably more supportive of restrictions that applied to everyone rather than being experienced as a personal imposition. Broader implementation would reduce the burden on individual families and create the level playing field participants felt was essential.

Design for age and autonomy

However, friction was apparent between the desire for restrictions that apply to the collective, and the need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Participants believed restrictions should be

sensitive to age and maturity, with greater autonomy afforded as young people get older. Measures introduced early, gradually, and collaboratively are more likely to be accepted than those imposed retrospectively on established habits.

Pair restrictions with education and support

Technical controls alone are insufficient. Parents called for practical guidance on implementation, with schools seen as a key delivery channel. An approach centred on safe and informed use, covering media literacy, privacy, algorithms, and AI-generated content, is likely to be more durable than enforcement-led approaches alone.

Invest in offline alternatives

Restrictions without substitutes risk generating boredom, resentment, and simple displacement to other screens. Access to structured offline activities, such as sports clubs, community spaces, after-school programmes, was a consistent factor for participants in successful adaptation, but access is unevenly distributed.

Enforcement requires system-level support

Technical restrictions are vulnerable to circumvention through other devices, VPNs, and peer access. Participants universally anticipated that household-level controls alone would not hold without platform-level or structural enforcement.

Co-design with young people

Restrictions imposed without young people's involvement risk provoking resistance and losing legitimacy. Where measures feel abrupt or disproportionate, circumvention is more likely. A collaborative approach, one that involves young people in the design process and explains the rationale clearly, was believed to be more likely to prove effective and more sustainable.

2. Introduction

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) commissioned Savanta to conduct a qualitative study examining the impact of social media restrictions on young people aged 13–17. The research was designed to generate robust, actionable evidence on the feasibility, implementation, and lived experience of three interventions intended to restrict social media use among 13–17-year-olds in England.

Existing evidence base

This study sits within a wider and still developing evidence base on social media use and adolescent wellbeing. A definitive causal relationship between social media use and harm to young people has not yet been established. However, converging lines of evidence increasingly suggest that time spent on social media is associated with small but consistent negative effects on population wellbeing in young people. Meta-analyses of the literature point in this direction (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Fassi et al., 2024), as does a systematic review and meta-analysis of screen-time and child health outcomes (Stiglic & Viner, 2019). Research into developmental timing adds further nuance, with evidence suggesting there are specific windows of sensitivity to social media during adolescence in which effects may be more pronounced (Orben, Przybylski, Blakemore et al., 2022).

Evidence specifically on the effects of social media restriction remains more limited. Emerging experimental work, including a large-scale naturalistic study of over 1.2 million social media interactions among Danish young people (Hansen, L. H. et al, 2026), offers early insights into what happens when digital habits are disrupted, though this body of work is still in its early stages. In the UK context, the government-commissioned review on the impact of smartphones and social media on children and young people (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025) provides an important policy reference point. The evidence base in this area is, however, growing rapidly. Forthcoming large-scale trials, including the IRL Trial, a school-based randomised controlled trial being led by Born in Bradford, are expected to provide substantially stronger evidence on the effects of reduced social media use on adolescent mental health.

Contribution of this study and interpretation of the findings

The current study provides qualitative insight into how young people and families experienced and responded to different forms of social media restriction, helping to illuminate the lived realities, perceived benefits, challenges and behavioural adaptations associated with these interventions. Across the report, findings are presented by intervention, with attention to how each intervention fared on its own terms, relative to the control group, and, where analytically useful, in comparison with other interventions. Comparisons between interventions are made selectively, focusing on areas where the evidence supports useful contrast rather than implying precise ranking or generalisable effect sizes. Interpretations distinguish between observed patterns, participant-reported experiences and theory-informed explanations. It is important to be clear about the methodological strengths and limitations of the research, and its intended use. This is a qualitative study, designed to explore experiences, perceptions and implementation challenges rather than to provide statistically representative estimates or definitive evidence of impact. The study involved a relatively small, self-selecting sample, and outcomes are based primarily on self-reported behaviours rather than independently verified usage data. For ethical, safeguarding, and practical reasons, direct monitoring of participants' digital activity was not undertaken.

Findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative and exploratory. Where the report draws comparisons or identifies patterns, these reflect the weight of qualitative evidence across interviews and should be read as such. The study is not intended to assess the effectiveness of any particular intervention or to establish causal relationships, but rather to identify themes, surface practical considerations and highlight areas for further investigation.

A further contextual limitation relates to the social conditions in which the interventions were experienced. Participating young people were restricting their social media use while their friends and classmates were not, likely amplifying feelings of social exclusion and fear of missing out in ways that would be less likely under a universal policy. Findings relating to peer disconnection should therefore be understood as reflecting the experience of being an exception within an otherwise unrestricted peer group, rather than the effects of restriction per se. A school- or population-level intervention would create a fundamentally different social context. The forthcoming Born in Bradford IRL Trial, which applies restrictions across entire school classes, is well placed to address this directly.

What this report covers

The report begins by describing how social media functioned in participants' lives prior to the intervention. It then examines what happened when each restriction was put into practice, covering compliance, behavioural adaptation, and the perceived effects on sleep, mood, focus, family life, and social connection. Subsequent sections explore the mechanisms that shaped whether restrictions worked or failed, how contextual factors such as family dynamics, peer norms, and access to offline alternatives influenced participants' experiences, and how responses varied across different types of young people and households. The report concludes with key takeaways from the interventions, including what the evidence does and does not support, and how any future intervention might best be designed, framed, and communicated.

Methodology

The research used a two-wave qualitative design, enabling direct before-and-after comparison at the individual level.

Pre-intervention: The Savanta research team conducted 309 online in-depth interviews (IDIs) with young people aged 13–17 and their parents/carers between 30th March 2026 and 1st May 2026.

Intervention: Participants were allocated across four groups based on preference: a control group, who made no changes to their social media use, and three intervention groups subject to varying levels of social media restriction during a one-month trial period (2nd–31st May 2026).

- Intervention 1 – Limiting usage of each app to 15 minutes per day
- Intervention 2 – Installing a no-access curfew for social media between 9pm-7am
- Intervention 3 – Complete removal of access by uninstalling social media apps

Participants were recruited without knowing which intervention they would be assigned to. After allocation, some participants who felt unable to adhere to the restrictions of their assigned intervention instead followed the rules of a different intervention for the duration of the trial period.

A key limitation is that some participants did not remain with their assigned intervention after allocation, which reduced the distinction between the study groups. This may have weakened the ability to identify the true effect of each intervention and suggests that some interventions were less feasible for participants to follow in practice.

The table below sets out exactly what was and wasn't included in the restrictions, since the app scope varied slightly by household discretion.

Category	Apps	Restriction
Core apps restricted (applied identically across all three interventions)	Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Reddit	These six platforms were subject to the assigned restriction (15-minute limit / 9pm–7am curfew / full removal) in every household.
Optional additions (restricted only if the family chose to)	e.g. Twitch, Kick, Discord	Families could extend the restriction to other social or content-sharing apps at their own discretion. Where these were blocked, this reflects a parental choice rather than the study design.
Never restricted (outside the intervention entirely)	WhatsApp, YouTube, iMessage, Google Classroom, Teams	These platforms were not part of the intervention under any circumstances. Where participants describe reduced access to these (e.g. via a blanket 'Screen Time' setting), this reflects an implementation error, not an intended restriction.

The intervention period included the half-term break, which may have influenced young people's experience of reduced phone use, with some parents noting both more downtime and more opportunities for outdoor socialising due to good weather.

Post-intervention: interviews were conducted with all participants between 1st and 26th June 2026.

All respondents were offered an incentive for their continued engagement with this study. Participants who did not complete their assigned intervention and completely disengaged from the study were not eligible for incentives linked to completion. All other incentives were offered regardless of compliance status. Full details of the incentive structure can be found in the methodological appendix.

Please see the Appendix for a full methodology.

3. Pre-Intervention Baseline: how does social media fit into young people's lives?

To make sense of how young people responded to restrictions, it helps first to understand what social media was doing for them and why stepping away from it was rarely straightforward.

What role did social media play in the lives of participants?

Social media was not experienced simply as an optional leisure activity but as a routine, taken-for-granted part of daily life, embedded in how young people communicate, socialise, learn, relax, and express themselves. It formed part of the broader social infrastructure through which they navigated relationships, identity, and everyday routines.

Participants' accounts also revealed complexity and ambivalence. A consistent pattern was that parents were more likely to emphasise harms and problematic patterns of use, while young people more commonly foregrounded the functional and socially embedded nature of their engagement. Both perspectives are explored in the sections that follow.

What needs were being met and what benefits did it provide?

Communication and Social Connection

A central benefit of social media was its capacity to facilitate ongoing communication and social connection. Participants described using platforms to maintain relationships through messaging, calls, group chats, and content exchange, extending interaction beyond school and into evenings and weekends. This continuous accessibility mattered not only for sustaining friendships and coordinating offline plans, but for feeling included in peer networks and maintaining a broader sense of belonging.

"On a Thursday or Friday night, they'd be planning their whole weekend. And it's mostly on Snapchat groups that they do this." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Entertainment and Wellbeing

Social media was also described as an important source of entertainment, enjoyment, and everyday emotional relief. However, these served different functions, and it is worth distinguishing between them.

Broader enjoyment and wellbeing referred to using social media for positive experience in a general, ongoing sense not in response to a specific emotional state. Participants described browsing entertaining or humorous content, finding inspiration for hobbies and interests, and engaging with creative or aspirational material. This use was typically framed as purposeful enjoyment which was fun, informative, or motivating and participants tended to feel positively about it.

"She really likes to use TikTok for more of a creative outlet, obviously as well as a bit of scrolling, but usually she's with friends and they're making short films or something interesting like that." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Emotional regulation, by contrast, referred to using social media specifically to shift or manage an internal emotional state typically when feeling stressed, anxious, upset, or overwhelmed.

Here, the goal was not enjoyment as such, but rather relief, escape, or distraction from acute distress. Several young people described this directly:

"If I'm upset and I go on TikTok... I'll watch funny things and it'll make me feel better". – Child, Age 14, Intervention 3: App Removal

This kind of use was often described as more compulsive and harder to step away from, typically involving passive immersive scrolling, and participants occasionally reflected that the short-term relief could come at the cost of longer-term wellbeing:

"When I start using it, or maybe during the session... it's enjoyable. But then after you use social media, I always find that I feel... really bad and... I wasted my time." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Social Media as a Tool for Schoolwork and Formal Learning

Social media played an, at times, essential role in participants' formal education. Many young people described using platforms, particularly YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, directly as revision and study aids, accessing subject-specific explanations, worked examples, and educational content they found more accessible than textbooks or teacher materials:

"I use YouTube and stuff... I watch videos to revise." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

"If I don't understand a topic, I will look for an answer on TikTok instead of YouTube because I know it'll be explained quicker." – Child, Age 17, Control

Equally significant was the use of social platforms for the logistics of schoolwork. Group chats on Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Discord were widely used to share revision notes, ask questions, coordinate homework, and circulate information about assignments:

"We'll send each other... our revision notes so we could all have a look and compare." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

For some young people, these channels were so embedded in their academic routines that the restriction interfered directly with schoolwork, for example, blocking YouTube links sent by teachers for revision.

It is worth noting that several participants drew a clear line between social media and formal schoolwork tools, saying they predominantly used school-specific apps (Teams, Google Classroom, Class Charts) or laptops for academic purposes, and did not rely on social media itself. This suggests the picture is mixed: social platforms are embedded in formal learning for a substantial minority, but by no means universally.

Informal Self-Directed Learning

Beyond schoolwork, social media was also understood as a source of informal, self-directed learning though this was a broader and more varied category. Participants described using platforms to pursue personal interests, develop practical skills, and explore topics they were curious about:

"But... basically every day I've used it, I've learned something. Through football or just general knowledge or whatever, I've learned something." – Child, Age 13, Control

A further dimension of informal learning was staying informed about the wider world. Many participants described social media as their primary route to current affairs, news, and social trends often in real time:

"When something's happening in the world, TikTok gets it first. For me, I see it first on TikTok... all the viruses... Ebola and Hantavirus, I saw that first on TikTok." – Child, Age 14, Control

At the same time, participants were themselves often candid about the limits of this learning framing. Many acknowledged that much of their time was spent in more passive consumption.

How did young people define 'social media'?

Before turning to which platforms were used most, it is worth noting that participants' understandings of social media were varied, contested, and often revealing. Rather than treating "social media" as a self-evident category, many participants actively drew distinctions between platforms, between functions, and between what they felt deserved to be restricted and what did not.

The most consistent pattern was a functional split between communication and content. Many participants felt that messaging apps should not be classified in the same way as browsing or content-consumption platforms. Snapchat was frequently argued to be exempt as it was understood by many as primarily a communication tool rather than a content-consumption form of social media.

Though not included in the restricted apps for the interventions, WhatsApp was commonly mentioned but similarly treated by most as a messaging service rather than a social media platform though there were some differences between parents and children around how WhatsApp is used. For most parent participants, WhatsApp was straightforwardly a communication tool associated with family contact and practical logistics, and therefore distinct from the platforms they were concerned about. Many parents assumed it could serve as a natural substitute for restricted apps, expecting children to move peer communication there instead. Child participants often saw this differently. WhatsApp carried a generational awkwardness and required phone numbers that many didn't have for peers and felt more associated with parents and older relatives than with peer socialising, which some parents were surprised by.

"I don't have many people's numbers, so it [WhatsApp] was very limited compared to Snapchat." – Child, Age 14, Intervention 3: App Removal

TikTok attracted the least ambiguity as it was widely and spontaneously cited as the archetypal 'social media' app and the clearest example of addictive, time-consuming scrolling:

"TikTok specifically, because I feel... with TikTok... you're just scrolling, scrolling, scrolling for hours." – Child, Age 17, Control

YouTube, while also not included in the restricted list for the interventions, occupied a contested position when understanding how social media is defined. Many excluded it as a 'video search engine' that they felt was more purposeful and controllable than scrolling platforms, while others, particularly when Shorts were involved, felt it behaved exactly like TikTok. Several participants made a further distinction within video platforms between short-form algorithmically-fed content (Reels, Shorts, Spotlight), which they associated with mindless scrolling, and longer-form intentional viewing, which felt more acceptable and purposeful.

"YouTube's in that weird grey area because it always gets referred to as social media... is it? I'm finding old footage of bands I like playing gigs, I'm not commenting on anything." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

A smaller group, predominantly parents, framed their definitions more by risk and design affordances than by platform name i.e. defining social media as anything involving anonymous contact, algorithmic feeds, or the ability to connect without a phone number:

"Things where anonymous people have the ability to contact you, those are the things where I consider to be social media." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

These distinctions matter for interpretation: when participants pushed back against restrictions or reported them as unfair, it was often because they interpreted the restriction to include platforms they did not consider to be 'social media' in the problematic sense which were most commonly Snapchat, WhatsApp, and YouTube. WhatsApp and YouTube were not outlined as restricted apps for the Interventions, but were optional at parents' discretion

Which platforms/functions mattered most?

Dominant Platforms and User Preferences

Within this landscape, usage was concentrated around a relatively small number of platforms. Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram were consistently identified as the most prominent, while YouTube and WhatsApp also played significant roles. Platform preference was patterned according to function: Snapchat was the primary direct communication tool for most young people, TikTok and Instagram with browsing and video-based entertainment, and YouTube with both entertainment and more purposeful learning. WhatsApp was important for peer and family communication, while Facebook was generally regarded as less relevant and more strongly associated with older age groups:

Young people did not use all platforms equally or interchangeably. Rather than gravitating toward whichever app was most popular, they made deliberate choices about which platform to use and when, selecting Snapchat to message friends, TikTok to unwind, YouTube to find something specific, and WhatsApp to coordinate with family. Each platform had a clear role, and young people were generally consistent about which they turned to for what.

Video Consumption and Entertainment

One of the most salient functions across platforms was video consumption. Participants described extensive use of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube for reels, short-form clips, longer videos, and binge-watching, indicating that visual content occupied a central place in digital engagement. Video was used primarily for entertainment and casual browsing, but it also intersected with learning, particularly on YouTube and, to some extent, TikTok.

The prominence of video-based engagement points to the importance of visual, fast-paced, and easily consumable content in young people's digital lives. TikTok in particular was frequently characterised as highly absorbing, underscoring the extent to which short-form video shaped patterns of attention and routine use.

Communication and Social Connectivity

Snapchat was the dominant communication platform for most young people, functioning less as a social media app in the conventional sense and more as the primary infrastructure of peer

social life. Group chats, direct messaging, and streaks made it the default channel through which friendships were maintained and plans were made. WhatsApp played a similar role for family communication and, to a lesser extent, peer contact, though its relevance varied, with many young people finding it socially awkward with peers and more associated with parents and older relatives. Discord served a more situational function, used mainly alongside gaming for voice or text chat. Instagram, meanwhile, supported a more ambient form of connection, allowing participants to remain aware of peers' activities without the need for constant direct contact.

What harms, pressures or problematic patterns of use are most salient?

A unifying theme across accounts was the relationship between platform design, loss of control, and the displacement of other activities. Addictive design, unintended time consumption, and disrupted sleep are best understood as a connected chain: the algorithmic and structural features built into platforms make it difficult to disengage, causing time to accumulate beyond what users intend, which in turn displaces sleep, homework, and other activities requiring sustained attention. Many participants described recognising this dynamic without feeling able to break it.

Addictive Design and Distraction

At the root of many problematic patterns was participants' recognition that platform design actively works against self-regulation. Features such as algorithmically personalised feeds, endless scrolling, and persistent notifications were widely identified as the mechanisms that make social media hard to put down, not simply because the content is enjoyable, but because the systems are engineered to maximise continued engagement. Others described how content is pushed rather than chosen and notifications added another layer pulling users back repeatedly.

"I think it's the algorithm. I think... having a multi-billion-dollar company trying to find the videos that'll keep you engaged the most and constantly feeding you a stream of those." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

This was closely connected to experiences of distraction and diminished motivation, particularly in relation to schoolwork. Participants described notifications cutting into revision and found it difficult to resist. Young people also noted that existing platform 'wellbeing' features, such as screen time limits, were largely ineffective which indicates a tension between users' sense of autonomy and the attention-capturing design built into platforms.

"I really do have a time limit, but every time it comes up, I just press ignore. So, whenever I'd be doomscrolling and the time limit did come up, for the first few days, I was like, yeah, I'll stop. But then after a while, I kind of forgot about it and just kept pressing ignore." – Child, Age 13, Intervention 3: App Removal

Excessive Time Consumption

A recurring consequence of this design was the unintentional prolongation of use. From the perspective of young people, what began as a brief interaction often extended into lengthy periods of scrolling, messaging, or browsing, with time passing largely unnoticed. This was especially pronounced on TikTok.

"I would be scrolling, scrolling, scrolling, and then I'd think, okay, but now I've just wasted two hours." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Young people often recognised this as unproductive but also suggested that the rewarding and habitual nature of platform engagement made it difficult to stop, whilst habitual morning checking was commonly described too.

"I'd wake up and I would check my phone on Snapchat... that's probably my worst habit." – Child, Age 17, Intervention 3: App Removal

Parents expressed this concern more forcefully, framing prolonged use as directly disruptive to everyday functioning. They described social media as encroaching on routines, educational responsibilities, rest, and, in some cases, basic self-care. From this perspective, the concern was not solely the amount of time spent online, but the extent to which digital engagement displaced other activities considered healthier, more constructive, or more developmentally beneficial.

Sleep Disruption

Closely linked to excessive use was sleep disruption. Both young people and parents described late-night scrolling, prolonged video viewing, and device use immediately before bed as contributing to delayed sleep, reduced sleep duration, and poorer sleep quality. In some accounts, social media use extended well into the early hours, while parents observed the physical presence of devices disrupting sleep even after young people had ostensibly gone to bed.

"I hear that phone buzzing, you know, at 2 in the night and often it's under her pillow." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

These patterns were reinforced by the accessibility and immersive nature of devices, which made disengagement difficult once use had begun. Children and parents alike suggested that limiting access to phones at night could reduce these effects, indicating an awareness that sleep disruption was linked specifically to phone use.

Peer Pressure and Social Connectivity

The social nature of these platforms could itself generate pressure. Participants described a sense of obligation to remain available, responsive, and socially present, driven by peer expectations, ongoing messaging, and frequent notifications. This could create distraction during homework or other activities and extend interpersonal demands into late-night hours.

Constant connectivity also intensified fear of missing out, exposed some young people to negative peer interactions, and reduced opportunities for respite from the pressures of adolescent social life. In this respect, the features that made social media valuable for connection can also be invasive and emotionally demanding, particularly for those relying on platforms for emotional regulation, for whom restriction could feel like losing a coping mechanism precisely when peer stress was highest.

Offline activities impact on social media use

When describing how social media fits into their lives, young people with hobbies, sport, creative outlets, social plans, and engaged family routines said they had less time in the day for it. This appeared to reflect not an active decision to disengage, but simply fewer opportunities to go online during the day. Social media tended to fill spare moments, such as commutes and other short periods of unstructured time, including just before bed, while structured activities took up much of their free time. Family led offline routines played a similar role: where parents organised

walks and outings, or set aside phone free time, young people were more likely to develop habits that drew them away from social media.

"When I'm playing golf, I'll... be off my phone for three hours." – Child, Age 13 Intervention 1: Daily Limit

"When we go for a two-hour walk, her phone will be at home." – Parent, Control

Use of parental controls prior to the intervention

Households' prior experience with parental controls and existing device routines shaped how participants approached their assigned intervention. Where some form of evening or bedtime phone rule already existed, families tended to experience their restriction less as a new imposition and more as a formalisation of an existing routine, making the transition feel more manageable from the outset. Where no such prior routine existed, participants more often anticipated the restriction as a sharper and more unfamiliar departure from normal household practice, with correspondingly greater apprehension going into the trial period.

4. What happened when different interventions were put into practice?

How feasible were the interventions in practice, and what patterns of change were observed during the intervention period?

Across all three interventions, implementation typically began with a short period of disruption, followed in many households by partial adaptation. Feasibility depended less on the principle of restriction than on whether the model fitted everyday family life, communication needs, and the practical realities of multi-device use. Compared with the Control group, where social media habits were more likely to continue unchecked unless shaped by external factors such as exams or holidays, the intervention groups showed clearer evidence of active behavioural adjustment. Each intervention changed different things, and each came with a trade-off: Intervention 1 (daily limit) encouraged more deliberate use but generated frequent negotiation; Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was the easiest to absorb into routine and showed the clearest sleep-related effects, though it left daytime use largely untouched; and Intervention 3 (app removal) produced the largest reduction in social media use and the clearest gains in focus and family time, but also the greatest social and emotional strain.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

Intervention 1, based on a 15-minute daily limit per app, often generated the strongest sense of friction in day-to-day use. Initial responses commonly included irritation, anger, and repeated requests for extensions, especially where young people felt the limit interrupted ordinary communication rather than only recreational scrolling.

"Day 1... I was mainly just annoyed at how short the time was." - Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Although some families found setup manageable, particularly if they were already familiar with Apple Screen Time or Google Family Link, others described it as cumbersome to maintain in practice. The main difficulty was not simply switching the controls on but managing the repeated negotiations they triggered: resetting limits, granting extra time, and remembering to reapply restrictions after exceptions.

"Sometimes I would forget... oh, sugar, I forgot to put that control back on." - Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

A defining feature of this intervention was the extent to which families modified it during use. Many raised the allowance, exempted certain apps, added evening curfews, or relaxed the limit for homework and revision. This often made the intervention more workable, but it also meant implementation was less standardised than intended. For some households, the 15-minute cap was judged unrealistic from the outset and was only partially implemented or abandoned early.

The intervention changed behaviour chiefly by making use more deliberate and budgeted. Young people described rationing their minutes, prioritising messaging over scrolling, and becoming more selective about when and why they opened apps. In that sense, the intervention often increased awareness and self-monitoring. However, it also created ongoing tension because access could end in the middle of conversations, videos, or plans, making the restriction feel intrusive throughout the day rather than confined to a particular window.

This was especially difficult where Snapchat or Instagram were central to peer coordination. Some participants described feeling excluded or “last to know” when friends continued interacting on platforms they could access only briefly. Communication needs also drove many of the workarounds observed in this group: shifting to WhatsApp, iMessage, or Messenger; borrowing other people’s phones; or accessing apps via browsers and laptops.

Alongside this, there was widespread substitution rather than full reduction. Where social media time fell, young people often moved to YouTube, television, gaming, or Netflix, meaning overall screen time did not necessarily decline. This was also one reason why sleep improvements, though often reported, were not universal: in some households, late-night social media was replaced by other screens rather than by earlier sleep. In this respect, Intervention 1 (daily limit) did not eliminate digital engagement so much as redirect it; a useful comparison with the Control group, where digital routines also remained embedded in daily life but without the same degree of conscious budgeting.

At the same time, Intervention 1 (daily limit) was associated with several perceived benefits. Participants often described improved focus, especially during periods of GCSEs, mocks, or A-level revision, as well as more time spent in shared family spaces or on offline activities such as reading, walking, and gardening.

For many, the key value of this intervention was not the specific 15-minute limit but the way it made social media use feel bounded and more conscious. By the end of the month, many households had concluded that the principle was useful, but that a more flexible version would be more sustainable.

“After... the first... two weeks, it became more..., normal.” - Child, Age 14, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Intervention 2, based on a 9pm to 7am curfew, was generally the most straightforward to implement and the easiest to integrate into existing routines. It could be delivered through iOS Downtime, Google Family Link, phone hand-in, or household Wi-Fi rules, and it often aligned well with pre-existing bedtime expectations. Compared with both Intervention 1 (daily limit) and the Control group, it required less day-to-day negotiation: unlike the control condition, it imposed a clear external boundary, but unlike the daily cap, it did so in a way that did not repeatedly interrupt daytime use.

That said, implementation was not uniformly smooth. Difficulties arose where settings accidentally blocked more than intended, including alarms, homework tools, or transport-related functions, or where mixed-device households made configuration less intuitive. Even so, participants generally viewed these as manageable practical issues rather than evidence that the intervention itself was inherently unworkable.

A distinctive pattern in this group was time-shifting. Many young people concentrated their use before the 9pm cut-off and checked messages again in the morning, meaning the intervention often redistributed social media use rather than substantially reducing it overall.

“5 minutes to 9, it'd obviously give me a warning, and then at 9 it told me and then obviously when I went on, all my apps would be... grey.” - Child, Age 15, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

However, this redistribution mattered because the intervention directly targeted the time window most associated with problematic use. As a result, Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) produced the clearest and most consistent sleep-related changes in the study. This stands in contrast to the Control group, where late-night scrolling and morning tiredness were often described but were less likely to be altered in the absence of a formal restriction. Participants frequently described falling asleep more quickly, going to bed earlier, waking more easily, and feeling less tired the next day.

"I definitely got a bit more sleep because I wasn't like, oh, just watch a few more videos and then end up... an hour later still watching whatever." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

"Not having my phone from 9 o'clock has helped me go to sleep at a reasonable time." – Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

"You think only 10 minutes has passed and it's been an hour." – Child, Age 17, Control

This was also the intervention in which emotional adjustment appeared least disruptive over time. Initial boredom and irritation were common, but because daytime and early evening access remained intact, participants generally retained enough social contact for the restriction to feel manageable.

"So, the first day I was very bored without it... I couldn't see what my friends were doing, and I was... very fed up." – Child, Age 17, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Even where young people disliked the curfew, the social costs tended to be narrower than in the other groups, largely because communication and routine contact with peers could still continue throughout most of the day. The main frustrations were around missed late-night group chat activity, event planning, or the sense of having to "rush" before the cut-off. Older teenagers were more likely to see the 9pm rule as infantilising, particularly on weekends or during holidays.

Some participants persisted with workarounds such as using tablets, laptops, spare phones, or override functions, and some parents found it difficult to re-establish the rule consistently after exceptions for travel, sleepovers, or special events.

"She started using the family tablet, and I think she started using her spare phone as well." - Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Even so, the curfew format offered a distinct combination of advantages and limitations. It changed a clearly defined period of use, was easier for parents to enforce, and generated benefits that participants could easily recognise and link to the restriction itself. At the same time, because it left daytime and early-evening use untouched, it did less than Intervention 1 (daily limit) or Intervention 3 (app removal) to address habitual use during the parts of the day when it was most likely to occur.

Intervention 3: Removal of Social Media Apps

Intervention 3, involving the deletion or full blocking of social media apps, was the most comprehensive restriction and therefore the one most likely to produce a clear reduction in social media use. In practical terms, it was often structurally robust on the main device: once apps were removed and reinstallation was blocked through Family Link or Apple Screen Time PINs, there was less room for day-to-day negotiation than in Intervention 1 (daily limit) and less ambiguity about the rule than in Intervention 2 (overnight curfew).

That same clarity, however, intensified the social and emotional costs. Of the three interventions, this one most sharply disrupted routine peer contact, especially where Snapchat was central to friendship maintenance and daily coordination. While families were able to preserve WhatsApp or iMessage as exceptions, the removal of Snapchat was repeatedly described as the hardest element to absorb because it functioned not only as a media platform but as a default channel for everyday social life.

Initial adjustment was often difficult and could be highly emotionally charged. Parents described arguments, agitation, boredom, and distress during the first week, and the burden of enforcement was especially visible where young people sought out workarounds and parents responded with additional controls.

"For the first week he was horrendous, but then after a week he was all right." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

Because reactivation on the primary phone was harder, workarounds in this group were often more elaborate than elsewhere. Young people used laptops, tablets, older phones, or browser access; parents responded by removing spare devices, relocating laptops into communal spaces, or changing PINs. In some households, this became an escalating cycle of restriction and circumvention. As in the other interventions, removing social media did not always reduce overall screen engagement.

"I expected that removing those apps would mean less time on her phone and it didn't. It just transferred to other places." – Parent, Intervention 3: App removal

Despite this, Intervention 3 produced some of the clearest reports of broader lifestyle substitution. Participants described spending more time reading, drawing, listening to music, exercising, revising, or being physically present with family. The intervention also appeared to create a stronger separation between study and distraction than the other models, although this was complicated where school communication or revision resources depended on Discord, Instagram, or group chats.

The emotional pattern in this group was the most polarised. For some, the intervention remained socially painful throughout because it removed an important route into friendship life. For others, once the initial period passed, it brought a marked sense of relief, calm, and mental quiet.

"I feel a lot calmer because I just don't need to worry about all this stuff that's happening online." – Child, Age 13, Intervention 3: App Removal

Sleep, mood, and focus often improved, but these gains were not universal and were shaped by household context. Where no-phone bedroom rules already existed, sleep improvements were less striking; where revision demands were high, exam pressure sometimes reinforced the effects of the intervention but also made attribution more difficult. As a result, Intervention 3 (app removal) produced some of the strongest positive accounts in the study, but also some of the clearest evidence of social strain and limits to long-term acceptability.

Conclusion

The interventions differed less in whether they "worked" than in what kind of workability they offered, with each achieving a different combination of benefits and costs. Relative to the Control group, all three showed that behavioural change was more likely with a clear external boundary than with awareness alone.

Intervention 1 (daily limit) encouraged more deliberate, self-regulated use, but generated repeated negotiation and was hard to sustain in its original form. Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was easiest to routinise and produced the most consistent sleep gains but left daytime and evening use largely unchanged. Intervention 3 (app removal) achieved the greatest reduction in access and the clearest gains in focus and family time, but at the highest social and emotional cost, and was the intervention families were least likely to want to keep as designed.

When asked how Intervention 3 (app removal) could be redesigned to be more effective, participants converged on several consistent themes. The most common suggestion was replacing the total ban with time-based limits, such as daily caps, per-app timers, or bedtime curfews, which were seen as more sustainable and fairer than all-or-nothing removal. Closely related was a preference for gradual, phased reduction rather than an immediate cold-turkey ban, with several participants describing a step-down approach as more likely to achieve lasting behaviour change without triggering the sharp resistance the total ban produced.

Three cross-cutting patterns were clear. First, the initial few days to a week was the main adjustment period. Second, multi-device access consistently weakened phone-based restrictions, so reduced social media use did not always mean reduced screen time. Third, restrictions were most acceptable when adapted to communication needs, school demands, and family routines rather than applied rigidly.

What changes, if any, did participants report in their behaviours and experiences during the intervention period?

Participants most often reported changes in sleep, focus, family interaction, emotional state, and the way they used digital media, rather than a simple reduction in total screen exposure. Compared with the Control group, where participation sometimes increased awareness of the level of social media use but only occasionally prompted self-initiated changes, the intervention groups showed more consistent evidence of behavioural adjustment. A common pattern across the study was substitution: when social media use fell, time often shifted to messaging, television, gaming, YouTube, or school-related device use instead.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

Intervention 1 most often changed behaviour by making social media use feel scarce and therefore more deliberate. Young people described budgeting their limited time, choosing messaging over passive scrolling, and becoming more aware of how quickly small amounts of use accumulated. This often sharpened self-regulation in a way not reported by the Control group, but it also made the intervention highly visible throughout the day.

Participants reported some improvement in focus and study discipline, particularly during revision periods, because the cap created a clearer boundary between schoolwork and distraction. In some cases, social media became a reward after studying rather than a constant background presence. However, the intervention could also become distracting in itself when young people were preoccupied by the timer or frustrated by access ending mid-task.

The emotional and social effects in this group were often tied to interrupted communication. Because the cap applied at any time of day, it could cut across peer contact, group chats, and planning in a way that felt more socially disruptive than an evening-only curfew.

"I was fuming. I missed out on so much in... my friends' world, in my family world, and stuff like that." – Child, Age 14, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Some households also described increased family interaction and more offline activity.

"We did quite a lot of gardening and... going walking the dog and stuff together." – Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Sleep improved for some, especially where the cap reduced evening scrolling, but these effects were uneven because some participants simply replaced social media with television, gaming, or other screens.

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Intervention 2 produced the most consistent changes in sleep and evening routine. By removing access during the hours when participants were most likely to continue scrolling into the night, it often led to earlier sleep, faster sleep onset, and better next-day alertness.

"Not having my phone from 9 o'clock has helped me go to sleep at a reasonable time." – Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

These changes stand out particularly when compared with the Control group, where late-night scrolling and associated tiredness were frequently described but were less often disrupted by self-imposed rules. Young people often described little change to daytime use, which means the intervention *primarily shifted use out of the night rather than reducing it across the whole day*.

"I'm just not using it at night, that's it really." – Child, Age 13, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

That shift still mattered because it changed what evenings looked like. Participants described more television, reading, shared family time, and calmer winding down before bed. Emotional effects were often indirect: better sleep supported greater calm, less overstimulation, and better concentration the next day.

The social costs in this group were narrower than elsewhere. Participants could still communicate throughout most of the day, so frustration tended to centre on late-night group chats or the rush to finish conversations before 9pm, rather than sustained daytime exclusion.

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

Intervention 3 produced the largest reduction in social media use and, in many cases, the strongest sense of a break in habitual checking. For some participants, this made the phone feel less central to daily life. However, it did not necessarily reduce overall screen time, because social media was often replaced by other digital activities.

"It's just kind of a different media that he's looking at." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

This group showed some of the clearest examples of substitution into offline activity, including reading, drawing, exercise, music, and revision. The intervention also created a sharper separation between study and distraction than the other models, which some participants felt helped concentration and productivity.

Emotionally, responses were the most mixed. The initial phase could be intense, with boredom, agitation, and strong fear of missing out, especially where social media had been central to peer contact.

"She was very afraid. Like, it's going to be really, really hard. What am I going to do?... But after a couple of days, it just sort of settled." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

For some, this gave way to a clear sense of relief and calm once the early adjustment period had passed. For others, the social cost remained high throughout, especially where the removal of certain apps sharply reduced contact with friends. Sleep and focus often improved, but not universally, and household context remained important: where phones were already removed at night, the additional sleep benefit was smaller.

Conclusion

The main behavioural change across the interventions was not simple abstinence, but a reorganisation of digital life. Social media use often fell, yet overall screen engagement frequently persisted through messaging, entertainment, gaming, or school-related tasks. By contrast, the Control group suggests that awareness alone could prompt reflection but was less likely to produce sustained change without an external structure.

The interventions differed in the kinds of change they most clearly produced. Intervention 1 (daily limit) encouraged more deliberate, budgeted use, but also generated frustration through repeated interruption. Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) most reliably improved sleep and evening routine by targeting late-night use directly, though it left daytime use largely unaffected. Intervention 3 (app removal) reduced social media use most sharply and produced some of the strongest reports of improved calm and focus, but also the greatest variation in emotional and social outcomes.

What barriers or enablers shaped uptake and adherence?

Uptake and adherence were shaped by the interaction of technical design, family dynamics, behavioural resistance, and everyday context. Across the study, adherence was strongest where restrictions were simple to implement, consistently enforced, and supported by agreement between caregivers. Adherence in the intervention groups depended on whether formal boundaries could be made workable in practice. It weakened where settings were difficult to maintain, alternative devices were readily available, or repeated negotiation exhausted parents over time.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

In Intervention 1, adherence was most affected by the fact that the restriction required ongoing active management. Technically, many parents could set it up without major difficulty, especially if they already knew Screen Time or Family Link, but sustaining it was more demanding. Problems included confusing account settings, forgotten PINs, misapplied limits, and the need to manage multiple children across devices. In some households, the 15-minute cap was accidentally applied across all apps collectively, making the rule far stricter than intended.

Behaviourally, this intervention produced strong early resistance because the limit was experienced repeatedly across the day. That made the rule salient in a way that some families found exhausting. In contrast, Control group families often described the same underlying pull of social media but without the same repeated moments of confrontation caused by Intervention 1's boundary. Within Intervention 1 (daily limit), complaints often centred on fairness, social coordination, and interrupted communication, especially where certain apps or group chats were integral to peer life. Adherence improved where young people began to budget their time more deliberately, or where the restricted time was replaced with reading, hobbies, exercise, or revision.

Flexibility was a major enabler. Families were more able to sustain the intervention when they tailored it by app, raised the cap, or used curfews overnight while preserving communication tools. The more rigidly the original 15-minute design was applied, the more likely it was to be judged unrealistic. Exam periods could operate in either direction: they sometimes made adherence easier by increasing motivation to study, but they could also require relaxation where social media supported group coordination or access to revision materials.

Family-level consistency mattered greatly. Intervention 1 (daily limit) worked best where parents framed it as supportive, enforced it reliably, and presented a united position. It weakened where caregivers were tired, busy, or inconsistent, or where too much of the burden was placed on parental memory rather than automatic controls.

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Intervention 2 was generally easier to adopt because the restriction was simple, bounded, and largely automatic. This reduced the daily management burden and meant that adherence depended less on repeated in-the-moment decisions. Relative to the Control group, this was significant: participants often already recognised late-night use as problematic, but without an external structure they rarely altered it consistently. Technically, the main barriers were misconfiguration, overbroad settings, and account vulnerabilities, especially where young people could access parental accounts or where mixed-device households resulted in complicated setup.

The biggest structural weakness was, again, multi-device access. Once the phone was restricted, some young people simply moved to tablets, laptops, Chromebooks, or spare phones. The intervention was therefore most effective when supported by broader household norms rather than by phone settings alone.

Behaviourally, adherence was helped by the fact that the curfew preserved daytime use. Because young people did not feel cut off all day, resistance was usually less acute than in Intervention 1 (daily limit). A key adaptation was habit formation: after one to two weeks, many families described the rule as routine. However, time-shifting also meant that adherence did not always imply reduced motivation to use social media; in some cases, use became more concentrated at the edges of the curfew.

Customisation remained important, particularly by age and context. Parents often made bounded exceptions for sleepovers, travel, or urgent communication without abandoning the broader rule. The model was generally seen as more suitable for younger participants than for older, for whom a 9pm cut-off could feel too early. Weekends, holidays, and half-term were the main pressure points because the absence of routine made the restriction feel more intrusive.

Family dynamics were comparatively favourable in this group because the intervention was easier to explain and easier to defend. Parents could point to the study as external justification, which reduced personal conflict. Adherence was weaker where parents forgot to reinstate settings after exceptions, where safety concerns required repeated flexibility, or where alternative devices made the curfew easy to bypass.

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

Intervention 3 benefited from being the most technically robust on the primary device. Deleting apps and blocking reinstallation often created a strong barrier and reduced the need for repeated negotiation. Families already familiar with device controls generally found the practical steps manageable.

Its main weakness was not the phone setup itself, but the effort required to secure the wider digital environment. As in the other groups, young people could turn to laptops, tablets, older phones, browser access, or secondary accounts. Parents often responded with further restrictions, such as moving devices into communal rooms or confiscating spares, but this significantly increased the labour of enforcement.

Behaviourally, this intervention generated the strongest early resistance because it removed access most completely. Fear of missing out, especially linked to Snapchat, was a major barrier to adherence. Even so, many young people adapted within days or weeks, particularly where they found substitutes in revision, hobbies, reading, or sport. The intervention's time-limited design also helped some households tolerate a level of strictness they would not otherwise have attempted.

Customisation was central to whether this intervention felt workable. Full deletion was often accepted as a one-month experiment, but rarely as a realistic long-term model. Although not restricted as part of this study, families flagged that messaging apps are essential exception for safety, family contact, and practical coordination and should not be included in a long-term restriction. Households were most likely to sustain the intervention when they could distinguish between recreational and functional use or permit tightly bounded exceptions for specific situations.

Because Intervention 3 (app removal) imposed the heaviest social restriction, it was also the most dependent on aligned parental enforcement between both parents. Where caregivers were united, adherence was stronger; where the intervention generated prolonged arguments, secrecy, or exhaustion, it became a wider family burden. Exam timing sometimes acted as an enabler by giving the restriction a clear purpose, but it could also complicate adherence where learning resources or school coordination relied on restricted platforms.

Conclusion

Across the three interventions, adherence was strongest when technical controls, family agreement, and everyday routines reinforced one another. Comparison with the Control group suggests that concern about social media use was often present even without intervention, but that concern alone rarely produced durable change. The interventions did not fail primarily because families disagreed with the idea of limits; rather, they weakened when the burden of enforcing those limits became too high relative to the perceived benefits.

A small number of recurring factors mattered across all groups:

- multi-device access consistently created bypass routes
- the first week was the critical test of whether adaptation would take hold
- parental consistency was a stronger predictor of adherence than motivation alone
- flexibility improved workability when it was bounded and purposeful, but undermined adherence when it became ad hoc or difficult to re-establish

Overall, the findings suggest that the most sustainable interventions were those that combined clarity, automation, and limited customisation, while still preserving essential communication and fitting the realities of family life.

Intervention adherence variations

Overall, adherence varied by intervention format, but across all three interventions it was most often undermined by the social importance of phones and the strain of enforcing restrictions.

Across all interventions, the same broad themes appeared repeatedly. Social disconnection was the most consistent barrier for both parents and children, though children tended to express this more in terms of missing out or being cut off from friends, while parents focused more on the feasibility of enforcement whilst their peers, not involved in the study, maintained connection.

Family conflict and exam pressures also cut across all groups, making adherence harder regardless of intervention type. Children were generally described the restrictions as unfair, emotionally difficult, or boring, while parents more often framed non-adherence in terms of sustainability, household stress, and choosing which battles were worth pursuing.

"I couldn't persuade him to not have any social media for a whole month. He was like, I'm not doing that." – Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

"It's just not worth the arguments for me when I'm at work and I'm getting messages." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

What trade-offs and unintended consequences emerged?

The interventions generated several practical trade-offs and unintended consequences. In some cases, restrictions interfered with peer coordination, study routines, or access to digital tools used for homework and revision, making them harder to justify during exam periods or school holidays. Adaptation was more common than direct circumvention, with many participants shifting the timing, channel, or pattern of communication rather than simply bypassing restrictions. Workaround behaviour was nevertheless mixed, varying according to the strength of technical controls, the wider digital environment, and whether circumvention seemed worth the effort. Temporary exceptions were often treated as a necessary part of implementation to accommodate specific social, educational, or family circumstances.

Educational Disruption

Cross-intervention themes

Across all three intervention types, educational disruption emerged as a recurring unintended consequence where restrictions affected study practices, school communication, or access to revision resources. A key caveat, however, is that platforms such as YouTube, Discord, Google Classroom, and Teams were not part of the intended restricted-app lists. Where these platforms were blocked, this appears to have reflected difficulties in implementing the restrictions accurately, most likely linked to variation in parental digital confidence when setting them up.

With that caveat in mind, participants' accounts still suggest that the practical effects could be significant. Restrictions sometimes disrupted access to revision content, study-related communication, and school systems, particularly during exam periods when digital platforms were more central to learning and revision. In these cases, the issue was not simply that young people lost access to social media for leisure, but that errors or over-broad settings sometimes extended the restriction into educational domains.

Participants and parents repeatedly described situations in which rules had to be adjusted when educational needs became pressing, whether through temporary lifting of controls, extra time, or

reinstating access to particular apps. This indicates that the practical legitimacy of the restriction could weaken when implementation errors interfered with study.

"My exams are right around the corner and you're just taking it away already." – Child, Age 17, Intervention 3: App Removal

"He said that he needed to use TikTok for his revising, so we did have to but that was two weeks into the experiment." – Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

These accounts suggest that educational disruption was, in some cases, a constraint on both feasibility and acceptability.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

A defining feature of Intervention 1 was that the time limit operated without regard to the nature or timing of the activity underway when access expired. As a result, educational uses of the phone could be interrupted at the point of engagement, including revision videos, peer discussion, and school-related checking. The central issue was therefore not simply reduced access, but the way in which a fixed cap disrupted tasks that depended on continuity. The 15-minute limit was often poorly matched to the length of educational content, particularly where participants were using videos as part of revision. The same pattern applied to revision calls and homework-related exchanges, where the time limit could interrupt communication before it had run its course.

"He was already stressed. He's like, I need to see the video. It timed out." – Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

"Some of my friends would have a group call... revising. I couldn't do that." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Participants also described adapting to the restriction by avoiding longer videos altogether, which in practice altered the type of revision content they engaged with.

"I'll watch half of it today, half of it tomorrow. But most of the time I was like, I'll wait till this intervention's over and I'll watch shorter videos instead." – Child, Age 13, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

In Intervention 2, the curfew imposed a fixed endpoint on the evening, requiring school-related phone use to be completed before 9pm. This did not necessarily prevent educational activity altogether, but it did reorganise it around a non-negotiable deadline. Revision, school communication, and homework-related checking therefore had to be either completed in advance or deferred.

"I could do bits of my online homework right before 9 and then do my written homework right after 9." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

The curfew also constrained communication with peers about tests, homework, and revision, particularly where clarification was needed in the evening. Therefore, a distinctive adaptation in this group was the concentration of communication into the period before 9pm, which compressed both social and school-related activity into a narrower time window.

"I would probably use it a little bit more in the time that I could because then I knew I wouldn't be able to have it later on, so I try and get all the conversations out the way." – Child, Age 13, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

For some, the curfew also eliminated the period of informal phone use that would otherwise have followed homework or revision post-9pm. However, others acknowledged the positive impact this had on their ability to wind down in the evenings after completing revision or homework as their phone was no longer an option.

"Instead of revising, then finishing, and then being on her phone for another couple of hours, she was kind of like, oh well, I'll get myself ready for bed then." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

During exam periods, the complete removal of selected apps was experienced not simply as a reduction in leisure-oriented use, but as the loss of communication channels through which revision-related interaction, information sharing, and peer coordination ordinarily took place. The timing of the intervention made these effects especially difficult for some participants to accept. For some participants, Snapchat functioned as the main route for contacting classmates, including about revision and exams. Complete removal also meant that participants could miss videos or updates circulated for revision purposes, creating information gaps that only became visible later. Its removal therefore had practical as well as social consequences.

"I only use Snapchat to message people, so it just made messaging my mates a lot harder, and especially with revision and exams going on." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 3: App Removal

Participants also described TikTok as a source of short-form revision content, particularly for quick recap and subject-specific support, so its absence was notable for some in Intervention 3.

"So... TikTok 5-minute recap of all the topics you need in chemistry." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 3: App Removal

In some cases, families reinstated access to apps because they were judged necessary for communication or study, indicating a practical limit to how far complete removal could be sustained. Both young people and parents sometimes described the timing of complete removal as excessively disruptive in the context of imminent exams.

"She managed about a week, and then slowly they either got unblocked or reinstalled because she felt she needed them." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

School Holiday Impact

Cross-Intervention Themes

The costs of restriction also became more pronounced during school holidays, when the absence of school-based routine altered both the practical and social context of implementation. Without the structure of the school day, participants often had more unoccupied time and fewer opportunities for in-person contact with peers, which could make restrictions feel more intrusive and more isolating. In this context, social media was often described not simply as a source of distraction, but as a more central channel for maintaining

contact, coordinating plans, and alleviating boredom. As a result, restrictions that may have felt manageable during term time could become harder to sustain or justify during holiday periods.

However, where holidays involved trips, outdoor activities, sport, or in-person socialising, restrictions were often experienced as less impactful because social media became less central to everyday life. The data therefore suggest that the key differentiating factor was not the holiday period itself, but the extent to which it involved meaningful offline activity.

Although most parents maintained the restrictions during half term and holidays, often supported by automated controls or commitment to the study, a notable minority relaxed or suspended them, typically because holiday “free time” made limits feel unfair, specific events made enforcement impractical, or school-term rules no longer aligned with holiday routines.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

The most common complaint was that 15 minutes was simply not enough during unstructured holiday time. Without school providing daily face-to-face contact, teens relied on Snapchat and other social apps to organise plans, and the cap cut that off sharply.

“In the half term, that's what I used to message people to see if they wanted to come out. So, I was pretty bored at home because I couldn't message them.” – Child, Age 16, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

The 9pm–7am curfew in Intervention 2 was put under its most acute pressure during half term by the collision of later bedtimes, holiday social events, and the absence of school routine. Teens naturally stayed up later, making the cut-off feel more abrupt and harder to accept. The restriction's effectiveness was therefore partly contingent on school-term structure existing in the first place.

“Half term was harder because she was not on the bedtime routine.” – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

The most distinctive feature of the total ban during holidays was the depth of social disconnection it created. Because all social media platforms were removed, not just capped or time-restricted, teens had no fallback channel for group coordination during a period when school's daily face-to-face contact was also absent. The all-or-nothing nature of the ban meant the gap between a busy holiday and a quiet one was felt more sharply than in Intervention 1 (daily limit) or Intervention 2 (overnight curfew).

“I was feeling chronically out of the loop all the time.” - Child, Age 16, Intervention 3: App Removal

“It was difficult trying to communicate with friends, especially in... periods like the holidays when you can't easily meet who you want to.” – Child, Age 16, Intervention 3: App Removal

A theme unique to Intervention 3 was how dependent the removal's tolerability was on WhatsApp and iMessage remaining available. Many participants said explicitly that the total ban was only manageable because basic messaging was preserved, and that removing it would have made holidays feel unworkable. This is also important to interpret in light of the study design, where WhatsApp or iMessage were not restricted. Those that did restrict these apps did so

through parents' own choices rather than the study instructions, which explicitly allowed basic messaging to remain available.

5. Through what mechanisms did change appear to happen – or not happen?

What features of the interventions appeared to shape participants' experiences and responses?

Participants' accounts suggest that change depended on how far the interventions disrupted habitual social media use, limited opportunities for circumvention, and enabled new routines to form. Effects were shaped especially by impacts on peer communication, the practical strength of the restriction, and whether perceived benefits emerged quickly enough to sustain adherence.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

Impact on Communication

The impact on peer communication was particularly pronounced. Many teenagers felt that 15 minutes was insufficient to sustain ordinary conversations, resulting in strong feelings of fear of missing out or exclusion, and social frustration during the early weeks. A common adaptation was channel-switching to WhatsApp, text, or phone calls, although these alternatives were often unsatisfactory where friendship groups remained concentrated on restricted platforms. For a smaller number, the social costs prompted workarounds, rule-breaking, or early discontinuation.

"I just can't do this, I'm gonna lose my friendships." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Design

A recurring issue specific to Intervention 1 concerned misunderstandings about what exactly was being restricted. Some families implemented a total daily cap of 15 minutes across all apps, rather than a 15-minute limit per app, without realising that this differed from the intended design. This intensified the intervention substantially and, in some cases, magnified frustration.

Even where implemented as intended, many participants regarded 15 minutes per app as too restrictive for conversational use, particularly where messaging and coordination were spread across multiple platforms.

"I felt so unable to do anything... I'd lost my whole lifeline of my phone." – Child, Age 17, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Many therefore called for greater flexibility, either through reallocating time across apps or distinguishing between messaging and entertainment-focused platforms. Control participants expressed similar concerns, suggesting that scepticism about proportionality extended beyond those who directly experienced the intervention.

Duration

The one-month duration was generally viewed as tolerable, and relatively few participants raised it as a major concern in itself. As elsewhere in the study, adaptation often occurred within the first one to two weeks, and the known end point eased the initial adjustment period. Control group reflections supported this interpretation: many were sceptical that a month-long per-app cap would be sustainable beyond a short trial.

"It was definitely easier knowing that... I had... an end date as well." — Child, Age 15,
Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Reflections from the Control group offer a useful comparison. Many were sceptical that a month-long per-app cap would be sustainable beyond a short trial. This reinforces the view that the format of Intervention 1 (daily limit) was perceived, both inside and outside the intervention, as difficult to maintain over the longer term.

Motivation

Workarounds were present throughout Intervention 1 (daily limit) and were closely related to the technical robustness of implementation. Many participants who initially attempted to circumvent the restrictions described doing so less over time, either because they got used to the intervention or because alternative channels met essential communication needs. Practical flexibility, including negotiated exceptions for exams, family events, or specific social situations, also helped families preserve the broader structure of the intervention.

"He was more compliant because he knew it was a research process." — Parent,
Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Timing

The principal source of disruption in Intervention 2 was interference with late-evening peer communication. For many, the 9pm cut-off arrived just as social activity was increasing. Acceptability was therefore closely tied to timing, and many participants suggested that a later threshold, such as 10-10.30pm, would have felt more workable. Informing friends in advance was also often described as an important strategy for managing expectations.

"From 9, 10, 11, that's when I'd be talking to my friends a lot." — Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Evenings were widely described by Control participants as the peak period for social media use. When asked to reflect on curfew timing, Control participants broadly endorsed an evening cut-off as reasonable in principle, with 9pm emerging as the most commonly cited anchor point. Some, particularly older teens, preferred 10pm or 10:30pm, viewing 9pm as slightly early for their routines, while a smaller group felt an earlier cut-off of around 8pm would better support sleep and wind-down. Across both groups, a recurring preference was for the timing to be age-appropriate and flexible rather than fixed, with weekends and individual circumstances seen as warranting different rules.

Design

Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was often seen as fairer than all-day limits because it preserved access during the school day and early evening. Nevertheless, many participants called for greater nuance, including later cut-offs, weekend flexibility, or exceptions for school-related functions.

A recurring frustration was that the restriction sometimes blocked non-social apps or, in some cases, locked the entire phone rather than social media alone. Workarounds through laptops, tablets, or old phones were also common.

"I felt tortured." — Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

This is notable because the curfew format was the most widely endorsed in principle across the dataset, highlighting the difference between endorsing a rule conceptually and adapting to it in practice.

Duration

As with Intervention 1 (daily limit), the one-month duration was rarely treated as problematic in itself. One factor that appeared to support adherence was the ability to externalise the rule, with the curfew framed as a study requirement rather than a parental decision.

"Maybe if it was a long-term thing, there may have been more of an issue, knowing that it's forever, but knowing that it's only a month always helps, doesn't it." — Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Control group reflections suggested a similar logic: nightly curfews were often seen as potentially sustainable, but only with gradual introduction and periodic review.

Motivation

The externalisation of the rule was especially important in Intervention 2 (overnight curfew), often reducing household conflict by shifting authority away from the parent-child relationship and onto the study. Practical flexibility also helped sustain engagement for some. As participants began to notice benefits, particularly improvements in sleep, mood, and household atmosphere, motivation to continue often increased, even if intentions to revert afterwards remained common. A partial parallel exists in the Control group, where teens reported moments of spontaneous self-awareness about their own use by recognising the time sink of scrolling and occasionally acting on it, although these moments were typically self-initiated rather than produced by a consistent external structure.

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

Timing

In Intervention 3, app removal, especially of Snapchat, often prompted families either to use alternative messaging channels more heavily or to turn to channels not previously used for this purpose, such as WhatsApp or iMessage. Some also used limited access windows before or after school for practical coordination. Even with these adaptations, being the only young person in a friendship group without access remained a major source of difficulty. Uncertainty about which apps counted as social media further complicated implementation. Control participants anticipated similar difficulties, suggesting that the social costs of removing specific communication platforms were widely recognised in advance.

"You don't understand, Mum, that's not how we communicate. Everybody uses Snapchat, that's how we talk to each other." — Child, Age 16, Intervention 3: App Removal

Design

The dominant design in Intervention 3 was app deletion, often reinforced by blocking the App Store or Play Store to prevent reinstallation. This created the strongest technical boundary of the three interventions, but access frequently migrated to other devices. It was also the design most often characterised as excessive, particularly for older teenagers, with many expressing a preference for more gradual reduction or time-limited restriction. Control participants reached similar conclusions, often anticipating circumvention rather than genuine behavioural change.

Duration

Participants in Intervention 3 (app removal) were more likely than those in the other arms to call for a graduated approach rather than abrupt one-month removal, suggesting that step-down models may have felt more proportionate and sustainable. A small number of households nevertheless chose to continue restrictions beyond the study period, particularly where exam preparation or perceived benefits provided a rationale for doing so. This suggests that while abrupt removal was widely experienced as too severe, the underlying rationale for restriction could remain persuasive once the initial disruption had passed.

"A month of kind of no access... it just didn't seem worth it at all. It just seemed pretty draconian really." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

Motivation

Motivation in Intervention 3 (app removal) was tested most directly by the perceived harshness of the design, device migration, and the social cost of being the only restricted member of a peer group. Where families were able to maintain strong technical controls, adherence tended to be higher, although workarounds remained common. As in the other intervention arms, growing awareness of benefits supported continued engagement for some, even though intentions to resume use afterwards were widespread. Similar benefits appeared in the Control group, but were more often associated with self-directed, partial reductions than with full removal. This suggests that at least some of the benefits attributed to Intervention 3 (app removal) may be achievable through less disruptive forms of restriction.

"Since I don't have the app, it helps. I can just focus more freely and think for a lot longer, and this makes me get more work done." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 3: App Removal

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings indicate that participants' experiences were shaped less by any single intervention feature than by the interaction between restriction design, social context, and family support. Across all three interventions, several themes recurred: loss of peer communication as the main source of friction; technical robustness in determining whether restrictions could be circumvented; whether the restriction became easier to manage over time; and exam timing in shaping acceptability and adherence.

Each intervention generated a distinct balance of benefits and costs. Intervention 1 (daily limit) was often experienced as too restrictive for communication-heavy use, despite allowing some continued access, though it was also the format most associated with encouraging deliberate, self-regulated use. Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was the most acceptable in principle and the easiest to integrate into household routines, but this was helped by the fact that it left daytime use largely undisturbed; it remained disruptive when it coincided with peak social hours. Intervention 3 (app removal) generated the strongest reactions, combining the clearest benefits for some participants, including the sharpest gains in focus and family time, with the greatest perceived social and emotional costs.

The comparison with the Control group is also instructive. In many cases, hypothetical concerns raised by control participants closely matched the practical difficulties encountered by intervention participants, particularly in relation to peer communication, timing, and the risk of circumvention. This strengthens confidence that the tensions identified here were not merely artefacts of participation but reflected broader features of how young people experience imposed restrictions on social media use.

To what extent did contextual factors appear to influence participants' experiences?

Participants' experiences varied according to the conditions surrounding implementation. They were generally easier to sustain where peer communication did not rely heavily on platforms such as Snapchat, where credible alternatives existed both for staying in touch and filling time, and where family routines and existing parental boundaries supported consistent enforcement. Practical household factors also shaped what was feasible, including device availability, parental presence, and sibling dynamics. In some cases, the exam period reinforced compliance by naturally reducing both the opportunity and desire to scroll; where unstructured time was greater and offline alternatives were limited, restrictions tended to feel more disruptive.

Across all of this, the attitudes and motivations of both parents and young people mattered: where children understood the rationale for the rule and parents took a consistent approach to boundaries, restrictions were more likely to be maintained over the month. These factors did not determine outcomes outright, but they did consistently shape them and should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings that follow.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

Alternative means of social contact

In Intervention 1, many young people described learning to allocate their limited app time strategically around communication priorities, reserving available minutes for coordinating plans or responding to important messages rather than browsing. This adaptation was often constrained, however, by the social organisation of peer networks. Where friends were not active on alternative platforms, or where young people did not have one another's phone numbers, switching channels was experienced as awkward, slower, or socially "uncool". Under these conditions, alternative forms of contact only partly reduced the disruption created by the restriction.

The role of social media in everyday peer interaction

The per-app time limit produced a distinctive form of disruption by interrupting interaction mid-conversation. Young people described reaching their limit during ongoing exchanges, being unable to sustain ordinary communication within a 15-minute window, and then having to manage the social awkwardness associated with an apparently unexplained lack of response. The intervention therefore disrupted not only access to social media, but also the continuity and reciprocity expected in everyday peer interaction.

The availability of offline alternatives

Adaptation appeared easier where young people already had structured offline activities in place before the intervention, such as sports clubs, music practice, or Scouts. In such cases, time was already organised around routines that did not depend on phone use, which seemed to reduce the salience of the restriction. Where unstructured time was greater and appealing offline alternatives were fewer, the intervention was more likely to be experienced as disruptive.

Existing family routines and parental capacity to enforce

Some parents entered the study already operating varying forms of social media control, for example, app timers, monitoring tools, phone-free zones at meals or bedtime. Therefore, meaning the 15-minute cap was a recalibration of an existing practice rather than an entirely new one. For these families, the technical and conversational groundwork had already been laid,

reducing the friction of implementation. Where parents had a track record of setting and holding boundaries, the cap tended to be enforced more consistently and with less negotiation. Teens in these households were already accustomed to limits, which reduced pushback.

"We would have had it at about 45 minutes, and we adjusted it down to 15." – Parent,
Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Even in households comfortable with setting rules, many found the specific threshold of 15 minutes a significant jump from their usual boundaries which commonly sat at 30 minutes to two hours. This created a tension between willingness to enforce and belief in the rule's fairness.

"Going even from kind of 2 hours down to 15 minutes is a big jump" – Parent, Intervention 1:
Daily Limit

Families where no effective prior limits had been established were the most likely to find the 15-minute cap unworkable, with some reporting that enforcement attempts triggered significant conflict or collapsed entirely.

"We tried for about... one day and it just became a massive meltdown." – Parent,
Intervention 3: App Removal

Overall, the degree to which pre-existing family rules eased or complicated management of the 15-minute cap in Intervention 1 was one of the clearest differentiators in adherence outcomes. Families with established digital boundaries had a head start, but even they found the specific strictness of 15 minutes a step beyond their norm. Families without prior rules reportedly faced a steeper climb, and in some cases the cap proved simply incompatible with their existing household dynamic.

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Alternative means of social contact

In Intervention 2, a common adaptation involved front-loading social contact before the 9pm cut-off and then catching up on missed messages the following morning. This enabled some young people to preserve continuity in their peer relationships, although it often displaced rather than removed the pressure to remain connected. Several participants described a strong urge to check their phone as soon as the restriction ended. For some, gaming and console-based voice chat provided an additional route for social interaction during curfew hours, allowing real-time communication to continue even when social media apps were unavailable.

The role of social media in everyday peer interaction

The curfew format concentrated exclusion in the evening, which participants described as a peak period for peer-group messaging. As a result, some young people woke to a backlog of missed conversations that had taken place while they were offline.

The availability of offline alternatives

Compared with the other interventions, the curfew often aligned more naturally with existing evening routines. Many participants described shifting towards reading, quieter leisure activities, or earlier sleep, and some experienced this change as restorative rather than simply restrictive. Because access remained available during the day, these alternatives were often more acceptable than in interventions that involved all-day limits or complete app removal.

Existing family routines and parental capacity to enforce

The single most common pattern in Intervention 2 was that the 9pm cut-off mapped closely to bedtime phone rules many families already had in place. Where parents had previously required phones to be left downstairs, handed in at bedtime, or had already set automated curfews via Family Link or Screen Time, the study's rule required minimal adjustment.

This alignment gave Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) a structural advantage over Intervention 1, where the 15-minute cap more often represented a sharp departure from prior norms, the curfew's time-based logic was closer to how many households already thought about evening phone use.

Where no bedtime phone boundaries had existed or had lapsed over time, the 9pm curfew landed very differently. The absence of a relational precedent for night-time phone rules left these parents without the authority or habit to hold the boundary confidently, a dynamic also visible in Intervention 1 (daily limit), but particularly acute here given the curfew's direct intrusion into previously unregulated evening time. Particularly for those who had previously used their phone as part of a wind-down ritual or to fill the gap between lying down and falling asleep.

"I could have forced it on him, but I just, I just thought it's just not worth the earache really... I'm... picking my battles with things really." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

The curfew format was however well suited to automated implementation, and many parents described it as operating largely in the background once the initial setup had been completed. This reduced the need for repeated day-to-day enforcement. Several parents also highlighted the value of the study framing in lowering conflict, since presenting the rule as a research requirement rather than a solely parental decision made it easier to maintain.

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

Alternative means of social contact

In Intervention 3, app removal altered peer communication more fundamentally. Many young people found that their effective contact lists were embedded within Snapchat itself, making it difficult to reconstruct social channels once the app had been removed. Some families responded by permitting brief access before or after school to facilitate practical coordination without restoring unrestricted use. Even where such arrangements were introduced, they only partially resolved the disruption associated with losing the platform through which many friendships were ordinarily maintained.

The role of social media in everyday peer interaction

In this intervention, exclusion was more extensive and more visible to peers. Young people described embarrassment, the need to explain their absence, or efforts to conceal the restriction by telling friends they were grounded. The consequences extended beyond online communication itself, since social media also functioned as a practical means of organising offline interaction. Removing access therefore required young people to renegotiate not only how they communicated, but also how they remained socially present within their friendship groups.

The availability of offline alternatives

Offline alternatives did not always provide an effective substitute. Where non-screen activities were limited or unattractive, participants often migrated to other devices, including tablets, laptops, and older phones, rather than moving away from screen-based activity altogether. This pattern was especially evident in Intervention 3 because the restriction on the primary phone was the most comprehensive. A smaller number of participants described more positive substitutions, including shared viewing and family time.

"We did watch a lot of movies, and we watched TV series together, and we've been able to get through more of those than we would have if I was able to kind of drift away." – Child, Age 13, Intervention 3: App Removal

Existing family routines and parental capacity to enforce

The majority of Intervention 3 parents were those already using parental controls, Family Link, app approval systems, bedroom phone bans, or bedtime shutdowns, for whom the total ban felt like a logical extension of existing practice. This mirrors patterns in Intervention 1 (daily limit) and Intervention 2 (overnight curfew), but was arguably more pronounced in Intervention 3 (app removal), because parents already comfortable exercising control were better placed to sustain a total ban than a nuanced cap or timed curfew. A partial restriction requires ongoing calibration; a total ban, once established, requires vigilance.

"We already had Family Link on the phone as well, so it's quite easy." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

It is also important to note that some families initially assigned to Intervention 3 felt that this level of restriction would not be enforceable and had already moved away from a total ban; those who remained may therefore have been comparatively more willing or better prepared to sustain strict enforcement.

A distinct feature of Intervention 3 (app removal), less evident in the other groups, was the number of parents who supported the ban not simply as a research commitment but as an expression of strongly held beliefs about social media's harms to children. For these families, prior attitudes provided not only practical infrastructure but also ideological motivation, making enforcement feel principled rather than reluctant.

"Social media does nothing but damage children." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

Even in households with established controls, the total ban created new circumvention challenges, especially around secondary devices such as laptops, old iPads, and browser-based access. Some families responded by confiscating additional devices, but this significantly increased the burden of enforcement. Several parents questioned whether this level of household management was realistic without broader platform- or policy-level support.

"I think for children that have been used to social media already, yeah, then I think it would be really difficult for parents to be able to remove it themselves without support." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

Families who had never established meaningful social media boundaries were the most likely to struggle with, or eventually abandon, the total ban, particularly when arguments escalated, schoolwork created legitimate exemptions, or parental presence was inconsistent. This pattern was visible across all three intervention groups, but its consequences were most acute in Intervention 3 because the total ban offered no middle ground.

Conclusion

Across all three interventions, contextual conditions shaped whether restrictions felt manageable, disruptive, or socially costly. Alternative communication channels could be helpful, but they were not always socially equivalent to the platforms being restricted. This was especially apparent in relation to Snapchat, which operated for many participants as a key infrastructure of everyday peer connection. The availability of offline alternatives also influenced how disruptive restrictions felt, particularly where structured activities already occupied time that might otherwise have been spent online. At the same time, displacement to other screen-based activities remained a common immediate response when attractive non-screen options were limited. Enforcement was easier to sustain where household routines aligned with the intervention, controls could be automated, and repeated negotiation was limited. Device migration and uneven parental capacity emerged across all three groups, indicating that the effects of home-based restrictions were strongly conditioned by the circumstances of implementation.

How did participants experience the interventions in terms of consent and autonomy?

Acceptance was strongest when restrictions were experienced as temporary, purposeful, and open to some degree of input. Resistance was more pronounced where rules were felt to be imposed, poorly explained, or inflexible, leaving young people with little influence over how the intervention operated.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

Temporary Framing and Informed Participation

The known end date was a key factor in sustaining compliance in Intervention 1, with the one-month timeframe making a demanding restriction feel more tolerable. The research framing also gave the intervention external legitimacy, enabling parents to present it as something other than a matter of personal preference. In many households, exam timing strengthened acceptance by linking the restriction to a clear and immediate purpose. This acceptance was not universal, however. Some participants described themselves as “counting down” to the end of the intervention, suggesting that compliance was sometimes contingent on its temporary nature rather than on any deeper attitudinal shift.

“It was definitely easier knowing that I had an end date as well, knowing that it would end at some point. So, it made it a bit easier to push through.” – Child, Age 17, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Autonomy and Self-Regulation

Many in Intervention 1 (daily limit) described developing routines within the imposed limits, including rationing their time and prioritising specific forms of use. This created a limited but meaningful sense of agency within an externally set framework. Over the course of the month, some participants moved from an initial experience of frustration towards a greater awareness of their own habits and a more reflective form of self-regulation.

“Within seconds, well, you think you're only on the phone for seconds, but then it blocked me and I was like, whoa, I've been on there 15 minutes already.” – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Resistance and Negotiation

Negotiation in Intervention 1 was most often triggered by social communication. Participants described being cut off mid-conversation, while parents reported frequent requests for extra minutes or exceptions. The intervention therefore generated sustained day-to-day parental involvement in managing resistance and deciding when, if ever, the rule could be flexed.

"I got a lot of spamming. 'Please, Mum, please, Mum, please, Mum, Mum, hello, hello, hello, more time, more time, more time.'" – Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Family Engagement and Decision-Making

Some families described relatively collaborative approaches, including sitting together to configure the controls or framing the restriction as a shared agreement. In most cases, however, parents retained control over the core parameters of the intervention. Young people's influence was therefore usually reactive, taking the form of requesting extensions or negotiating exceptions rather than helping to shape the rule itself.

"I think it just definitely needs to be a compromise between who's setting the rule and who's being affected by it. Something in the middle so you're both equally happy with it." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Temporary Framing and Informed Participation

As in the other groups, the temporary and research-based framing was an important factor in securing and sustaining acceptance in Intervention 2. Several parents emphasised that the rule was easier to maintain when it could be presented as part of the study rather than as a purely parental imposition.

"So, he was more compliant because he knew it was a research process and because it was a part-time show and we're looking at it and it's not our real life." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Autonomy and Self-Regulation

Many participants described the curfew becoming habitual over time, gradually embedding itself into evening routines. Several also reported a new awareness of how much time social media had previously occupied, and some introduced their own additional limits beyond the formal study requirements. In several households, parents also reflected on their own device use and made corresponding changes, suggesting that behavioural adjustment could extend beyond the adolescent and take a more shared form.

"I made my own kind of routine so it wouldn't... annoy me that much." – Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Resistance and Negotiation

Resistance in Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was more often directed towards the timing of the curfew than towards the principle of restriction itself. Many young people asked for a later cut-off, and some parents allowed greater flexibility at weekends. Negotiation was therefore present, but it was often contained within relatively modest adjustments rather than direct rejection of the intervention.

"That first weekend was hellish, like, just, 'I can't.'" — Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Family Engagement and Decision-Making

Decision-making in Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was still predominantly parent-led, with young people more often informed of the arrangement than involved in designing it. Although many participants expressed a preference for co-designed or age-appropriate rules, young people's influence in practice usually remained limited.

"If you want to put a time limit, just ask the person... I think you should ask them so they could choose a time limit." — Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

Temporary Framing and Informed Participation

The temporary and research-based framing appeared especially important in Intervention 3, where the restriction was most extensive and often most difficult to accept. Several young people described the month as a personal challenge, and some expressed pride in having completed it. Acceptance nonetheless appeared more fragile in this group. One source of difficulty was miscommunication about what the restriction would actually involve, with some young people reporting a mismatch between what they thought they had agreed to and what was ultimately implemented. This appeared to weaken both trust and willingness to engage.

"It's because she knew that it was for a limited time, that's why she agreed to it." — Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

Autonomy and Self-Regulation

The tension between external control and self-directed engagement was most pronounced in Intervention 3 because app removal offered the least scope for moderation within the rule. Young people often described the intervention as extreme or unfair. Even so, some participants reported that the month prompted reflection on their habits and on the extent to which they relied on social media. In these accounts, externally imposed restriction sometimes acted as a scaffold for more internal forms of regulation, even where the intervention itself remained uncomfortable.

"It taught me that I don't really need social media as much as I've been on it." — Child, Age 17, Intervention 3: App Removal

Resistance and Negotiation

Initial resistance in Intervention 3 was often the strongest across all groups, with participants referring to annoyance, anger, and unfairness, particularly in relation to peers who remained unrestricted. Families also reported that resistance often subsided after the first week, once workaround attempts had either been identified or abandoned. These workarounds included alternative devices, browser access, and borrowed phones, and were often framed by young people less as simple rule-breaking than as attempts to maintain necessary social contact.

"Why am I doing this... and my friends don't have to do it?" — Child, Age 17, Intervention 3: App Removal

Family Engagement and Decision-Making

Co-design was least evident in Intervention 3 because the all-or-nothing nature of app removal left little room for tailoring. Several young people described feeling misled about what the restriction would entail, which intensified the sense that the intervention had been imposed rather than developed with them. Many participants accepted the principle of some restriction, especially when it was presented as temporary and purposeful, but consistently preferred a more gradual or phased approach.

"Going from all to nothing was a bit extreme." — Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

Conclusion

Across all three interventions, acceptance was most strongly supported by a credible temporary timeframe, a rationale that extended beyond parental preference, and some degree of adolescent agency within the experience of the rule. The study framing and exam period often gave restrictions a legitimacy that helped families sustain them despite ongoing resistance.

Autonomy emerged as a consistent theme across the findings. More positive experiences were usually associated with some sense of self-direction, whether through adapting routines, negotiating specific elements of the rule, or understanding the reason for it clearly. Resistance took different forms across the interventions: Intervention 1 (daily limit) generated the most persistent daily negotiation, Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) prompted bargaining over timing, and Intervention 3 (app removal) produced the sharpest initial opposition alongside clearer adaptation in some families once early workarounds had been addressed. Family decision-making remained predominantly parent-led throughout. Young people's voice was most often expressed through reaction rather than through advance involvement in rule design, and many participants explicitly preferred more co-constructed arrangements over which they could feel a genuine sense of ownership.

6. How did the effectiveness of different approaches vary across groups?

Participants' accounts suggest that different elements of the interventions worked differently for different participants and in different circumstances. Variation reflected both demographic criteria, such as age, baseline social media use, neurodivergence or mental health needs, and levels of parental digital confidence, and circumstantial criteria, including household routines, family dynamics, timing, and access to alternative activities.

Demographic criteria

Age and stage

Age shaped how participants experienced the interventions. Older adolescents were more likely to describe restrictions as socially disruptive or as conflicting with expectations of autonomy and privacy, while younger participants often seemed easier to redirect towards alternative activities. In some cases, parents described a deliberate shift with older teens away from technical control and towards dialogue, negotiated boundaries, and trust-based approaches.

Differences by intervention type were visible within this pattern. In Intervention 2, the evening curfew was often seen as a more proportionate fit for older adolescents than more restrictive approaches, although some still felt that a 9pm cut-off came too early for their social lives. In Intervention 3, full app removal was more likely to be experienced by older teens as disproportionate or overly controlling, particularly where social media was bound up with peer communication. In Intervention 1, the short per-app time limit could also feel impractical for older participants where social interaction depended on sustained access to a small number of key apps.

Overall, age appeared to shape both the perceived legitimacy of restrictions and the extent to which different intervention formats fitted participants' everyday social lives.

Baseline social media use and type of use

Participants' prior patterns of phone and social media use played an important role in shaping how the interventions were experienced. Those with lower baseline engagement were generally more likely to describe the intervention as manageable, whereas heavier users were more likely to anticipate difficulty, experience the restriction as disruptive, or describe the reduction in access as a shock to their routine.

This pattern was visible across all three intervention groups, though it played out somewhat differently depending on the intervention design. In Intervention 1, heavier users were more likely to find the 15-minute per-app limit abrupt and difficult to absorb, while lighter users often described it as having relatively little impact. In Intervention 2, participants whose use was concentrated in the late evening felt the 9pm cut-off most acutely, while those whose evening use was already limited often described minimal change. In Intervention 3 (app removal), heavier users often experienced the first week as the most difficult but were also among those most likely to report clearer benefits once the adjustment period had passed.

A consistent nuance across groups was that the impact of restriction depended not only on how much social media participants used, but what they used it for. Those using social media primarily for passive entertainment were often able to substitute this more easily. By contrast,

participants whose use centred on peer communication and coordination were more likely to experience restrictions as socially disruptive, regardless of overall usage level. This was particularly relevant in Intervention 1, where a short daily allowance could feel disproportionately restrictive for participants relying on one main communication platform, and in Intervention 3, where app removal could interrupt everyday contact more completely.

Overall, baseline use shaped both the degree of initial disruption and the likelihood that participants perceived the intervention as either manageable or meaningful.

Neurodivergence, mental health needs, and other individual circumstances

For some participants, individual needs and circumstances appeared to shape how manageable the restrictions felt. Several families pointed to neurodivergence, mental health needs, or unusual social circumstances, for example homeschooling or recent school transitions, as factors that made standard restriction designs harder to sustain without modification.

In these accounts, phones and social media sometimes served functions beyond entertainment, including emotional regulation, distraction, routine, or social connection on manageable terms. Where this was the case, restrictions could feel more difficult, more distressing, or less proportionate than for other participants.

"I struggle a lot with my mental health and having my phone, to me, that's a means of escape from... the reality of... my mind, if that makes sense. And my mind's more so active at night. So having my means of escape basically taken away from me, it, it was just completely unfair because I didn't really have... a way to distract myself." – Child, Age 17, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Differences by intervention type were again visible. In Intervention 2 (overnight curfew), evening restrictions could feel especially difficult where participants relied on phones at night for distraction or emotional management. In Intervention 3, more comprehensive removal of access could feel particularly abrupt where social media formed part of routine, coping, or controlled social contact. In Intervention 1 (daily limit), although the restriction was less absolute, repeated moments of cut-off could still be experienced as disruptive where participants depended on continuity of contact.

These cases were not consistent across the whole sample, but they suggest that individual needs could shape both the emotional impact of the interventions and how proportionate or manageable they felt.

Parental digital confidence

Levels of parental digital confidence also appeared to shape how interventions were experienced in practice. Families with prior experience of using parental control tools, or with a technically confident adult in the household, were often better placed to set up, monitor, and maintain restrictions over time. For these families, the practical burden of implementation was generally lower.

By contrast, families with lower digital confidence were more likely to rely on their child, another family member, or online searches to configure settings. Some defaulted to simpler approaches such as deleting apps, switching off the Wi-Fi router, or physically collecting devices rather than using the intended tools. In these households, interventions that relied on more detailed setup or ongoing maintenance could become more burdensome and more difficult to sustain consistently.

This mattered somewhat differently across the three intervention types. In Intervention 1 (daily limit), lower digital confidence could make it harder to set the intended per-app limits accurately, contributing to confusion between per-app and total daily limits and increasing the need for ongoing adjustment. In Intervention 2, the scheduled curfew format was often experienced as the easiest to automate once correctly set up, though device-specific issues could still create friction. In Intervention 3 (app removal), initial setup was often relatively simple, but maintaining the restriction could become more demanding where parents also needed to manage alternative devices, downloads, or workaround routes.

Overall, parental digital confidence shaped not only technical implementation, but how manageable the intervention felt in day-to-day family life.

Circumstantial criteria

Timing and everyday context

Patterns of change depended in part on when and in what circumstances the interventions were experienced. Weekday routines, including school attendance, homework, and family mealtimes, often provided a structure within which restrictions sat relatively comfortably. By contrast, weekends, school holidays, and half-term were more consistently described as difficult, as the removal of routine created longer stretches of unoccupied time that had previously been filled by phone use.

This pattern was visible across all three intervention groups, although different interventions were affected in different ways. In Intervention 2, the curfew often sat relatively comfortably within school-night routines but became harder to sustain during holidays or socially active periods when late-evening communication felt more important. In Intervention 1 (daily limit), participants often found that the per-app cap was especially restrictive after school or in the evening, when they wanted to unwind or catch up with friends. In Intervention 3 (app removal), practical and social difficulties were more likely to arise at moments where access felt necessary for coordination, plans, or specific social interactions, particularly during less structured periods.

The exam period was another important contextual factor. Many participants described the interventions as easier to sustain during revision periods, partly because schoolwork provided a competing focus and partly because peer social activity was reduced. At the same time, this made it harder to separate the effects of the intervention itself from wider exam-related changes in behaviour and routine.

Overall, timing and everyday context shaped both the ease of implementing restrictions and the extent to which participants felt their absence.

Availability of alternatives and opportunities for substitution

The interventions generally appeared easier to absorb where participants had acceptable alternatives to fill the gap left by restricted social media use. Reading, revision, exercise, outdoor activity, creative hobbies, and spending time with family all supported adjustment by helping normalise the restriction within everyday routines.

"I started drawing a lot again, and I started reading as well. I started reading a lot more." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 3: App Removal

"Because my sister's swimming's quite early in the morning on Saturdays, so then I'd wake up and I'd go there, and then with the walks, I would do it because of revision, but then also because I don't have my phone, I've got nothing else to do... I might as well go on a walk." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

However, the presence of alternatives did not always mean a move away from screens altogether. Across all groups, the most common substitute was other screen-based activity, including streaming, television, gaming, and use of other devices. This often reduced social media use without substantially reducing total screen time.

Different interventions interacted with substitution in different ways. In Intervention 2, restricted evening access often led to more television and gaming after the cut-off or compressed social media use before the cut-off. In Intervention 3 (app removal), substitution into other devices was particularly common where laptops, tablets, or browsers remained available. In Intervention 1 (daily limit), some participants responded by rationing their limited minutes more strategically, while others shifted attention towards other digital or offline activities once their allowance had been used.

Overall, the availability and quality of alternatives appeared to shape how disruptive restrictions felt and whether changes in social media access translated into broader changes in routine.

Clarity of rules and practical implementation

Workability also depended on how clearly the intervention rules were understood and how easy they were to implement in practice. Across all three groups, a finite and clearly communicated endpoint often made restrictions easier to sustain, helping families frame the intervention as temporary and reducing the scope for ongoing negotiation. Many participants also described a similar adjustment curve in which the first one to two weeks were the least workable, with routines becoming easier to sustain over time.

Clarity and implementation operated differently across the intervention types. In Intervention 2, the fixed curfew format was often experienced as relatively clear and easy to understand, particularly because automation reduced the need for repeated parental decisions. In Intervention 3, app deletion and app store blocking also created a clear boundary, though maintaining that boundary could become more complex where other devices or routes of access remained available. In Intervention 1, the per-app time limit was more prone to ambiguity in practice, particularly where families confused per-app limits with total daily limits or found override prompts difficult to manage consistently.

In some cases, interventions expected to be technically difficult proved easier to apply than anticipated. In others, lengthy instructions, device-specific differences, or ongoing maintenance created friction. Across all three groups, many families found initial setup manageable, but longer-term implementation depended more on how much active management was required afterwards, including override requests, temporary exceptions, technical corrections, and dealing with workaround attempts.

Overall, clarity of rules and ease of implementation appeared to shape how sustainable restrictions were in everyday family life.

Conclusion

Participants' accounts suggest that experiences of the interventions varied considerably across the sample. Differences were shaped both by demographic criteria, including age, baseline use,

individual needs, and parental digital confidence and by circumstantial criteria, including household norms, timing, family dynamics, access to alternatives, and the practical demands of implementation.

Overall, the findings suggest that the same intervention could be experienced very differently depending on who was involved and the context in which it was introduced. Variation in experience was therefore shaped not only by intervention design, but by the interaction between intervention features, participant characteristics, and family circumstances.

What did participants want to keep, and what would they change?

Most families wanted to retain some form of restriction after the study, but few wanted to continue the interventions exactly as designed. Preferences depended largely on which model they had experienced and how workable it had proved in everyday life. This is notable when set against the Control group, where participants often recognised the downsides of current habits but were less likely to describe a clear, sustained model for change in the absence of a tested intervention.

Intervention 1: 15-minute daily limit per app

Families in Intervention 1 typically wanted to keep the principle of a limit, but not the original 15-minute cap. Most regarded that threshold as too restrictive for ordinary communication and social life, particularly when messaging and recreational platforms were treated in the same way. This aligns with a broader pattern also visible in the Control group where participants often accepted the need for boundaries.

The most common proposal was a higher daily allowance, often between 30 and 120 minutes, or a shift to a simpler overnight curfew. Many participants felt the intervention had been useful in exposing how much time was being spent online, but that its original form was too rigid to sustain. The benefits motivating continued limits were consistent, including better sleep, improved mood and behaviour, greater focus on schoolwork, and more family time. However, parents also raised doubts about long-term feasibility, and many felt the rules were more likely to work if introduced as a negotiated agreement rather than a top-down imposition. Looking ahead, most wanted a modified rather than discontinued approach, for example targeting scrolling apps like TikTok while preserving communication channels.

"We can't just suddenly take it all away." – Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Intervention 2: 9pm to 7am social media curfew

Intervention 2 prompted the strongest willingness to continue. Many families had already maintained a version of the curfew after the study ended, suggesting that it was the most transferable into normal household life.

Most did not want to abandon it, but to soften it slightly: later cut-offs, more weekend flexibility, and standing exceptions for messaging were common suggestions. Its appeal lay in the fact that it was easy to understand, easy to enforce, and still allowed normal daytime peer contact. In comparative terms, it came closest to resolving a tension that was also visible in the Control group: the desire to reduce harmful or excessive use without undermining everyday communication.

"I'll probably stick to it now-ish. Not... exactly 9 o'clock but... between 9 and 10." – Child, Age 17, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Intervention 3: Removal of social media apps

Families in Intervention 3 were least likely to want to preserve the intervention unchanged. Most saw full deletion or blocking as effective for a short-term reset, but too socially restrictive for long-term use.

The strongest preference was for a modified version that retained some boundaries while restoring essential communication. Messaging exceptions were especially important. Many parents also emphasised the importance of distinguishing between different types of apps. Messaging services, especially Snapchat, were often seen as necessary for school coordination and social contact, whereas TikTok and Instagram were more likely to be identified as platforms that should remain restricted.

"I could not completely shut down Snapchat because she needed it to be able to communicate with her friend to walk to school and to let me and her dad know about being picked up." – Parent, Intervention 3: App Removal

For many in this group, the intervention's value lay in resetting expectations and proving that a different relationship with social media was possible, rather than in preserving a total ban. Future intentions were mixed: while many planned to keep some limits and had developed new offline habits, others were candid about expecting a quick rebound.

"Now all I want to do is just go outside in the park and just be outside." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 3: App Removal

Conclusion

Across all three interventions, families were more inclined to retain the benefits of restriction than the original designs themselves. The Control group is a useful comparator: recognising the problem did not automatically produce a solution, whereas direct experience helped families identify a workable boundary.

Each intervention pointed to a different sustainable model. Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) was easiest to continue largely unchanged, though this partly reflects that it required little change to daytime habits to begin with. Intervention 1 (daily limit) was usually seen as needing relaxation, typically a higher allowance or a shift to a curfew. Intervention 3 (app removal) was most often reframed as a short-term reset rather than a permanent arrangement, though some households felt it had lasting value in shifting expectations about everyday use.

Parents also reflected on their own digital habits, with some reporting greater awareness of their own screen use and an intention to monitor their child's phone use more closely in future. Several noted that the context of everyday life would shape how any rules were applied, with stricter limits during term time or exam periods and more flexibility during holidays. Young people reported a similar overall pattern but placed more emphasis on the social costs of restriction. Some expected their use to return to previous levels once the study ended, or doubted restrictions would work at all. As with parents, these accounts suggest that lasting change may require support beyond the household.

7. Conclusions

What can be taken from this evidence?

The findings point to several key considerations for how restrictions might be designed, supported, and communicated in practice. Participants' accounts suggest that any future approach is likely to be more workable where it is realistic, enforceable, and sensitive to variation in age, family context, and implementation capacity.

Standardised Regulation

A central theme was that participants believed externally set and consistently applied rules may be more workable and equitable than leaving restrictions to individual families. Participants across all intervention groups suggested that broader, government- or school-led approaches could reduce parental burden, lessen household conflict, and avoid inequalities that arise when implementation depends on parental confidence, time, or willingness to enforce limits. There was also consistent agreement among participants that platforms and tech companies should bear a share of responsibility, with parental controls alone regarded as insufficient. However, participants' accounts also indicate that such measures would need to be credible, enforceable, and supported by actors beyond parents alone.

Parent and child perspectives converged on the view that universally applied rules were more acceptable than household-by-household variation, with both groups recognising that restrictions felt fairer when they could not be attributed to any single family's decision. Parents, however, were considerably more consistent in their endorsement of external regulation, valuing it primarily as a means of reducing the relational and enforcement burden at home, as one parent put it:

"It is really helpful to have an external rule; it is really helpful to take the role of policing this away from parents, so it doesn't have to create stress in our relationship and in our home" – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Whereas young people's views on who should set and enforce the rule were more divided. Some preferred their parents to retain this role, valuing the flexibility to negotiate specific exceptions within an agreed overall boundary, while others felt that government-level rules would command stronger compliance by creating a level playing field across peer groups.

Pairing with Viable Offline Alternatives

The evidence suggests that the effectiveness and acceptability of social media restrictions depend, in part, on whether young people have access to meaningful offline alternatives. Across all groups, participants argued that restrictions imposed without substitutes risk generating boredom, resentment, and simple displacement to other screens rather than producing genuine reductions in problematic use.

"You can't take something away and not have something to replace it." – Parent, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Where structured offline activities were already in place, such as sports teams, after-school clubs, or programmes like Duke of Edinburgh, participants reported that compliance was considerably easier, and the restriction felt less like deprivation. Several participants went further, calling explicitly for investment in local youth infrastructure, such as clubs, community

centres, and accessible "third spaces". A recurring concern, however, was that access to such alternatives is unevenly distributed, with cost, rurality, and transport cited as barriers that could make restrictions considerably harder to sustain for some families than others.

Investment in offline provision should therefore be treated, based on participants' accounts, not as peripheral to social media restriction, but as an integral component of any strategy that aims to be equitable and sustainable in practice.

Consistent Enforcement and Structural Support

Enforcement scepticism was consistent across all four groups, with participants universally anticipating that bans and time limits would be circumvented through VPNs, false age declarations, and secondary devices unless underpinned by robust system-level mechanisms. All groups agreed that the effectiveness of the restrictions depends on the strength of its enforcement infrastructure rather than individual or household compliance alone.

Participants generally agreed that enforcement needed to sit above the level of the individual household, though there was some variation in what they saw as the most credible mechanism for this. Intervention 3 (app removal) participants, drawing on their own experience of restriction and circumvention during the trial, were among those most likely to link enforcement to investment in offline alternatives, arguing that restrictions unsupported by meaningful substitutes risked displacing rather than reducing problematic use.

Parent and child perspectives overlapped in recognising enforcement as the central practical challenge but differed in how they experienced it. Parents consistently highlighted that household enforcement was substantial and, without structural support, unsustainable over time, with many reporting that parental control tools were difficult to access, inconsistent across devices, and poorly communicated. Young people approached the question from the other side, candidly acknowledging their own capacity to circumvent controls and arguing that restrictions were only meaningful if technically difficult to bypass.

"There's no point in banning it because we're going to find a way to bypass it anyway." –
Child, Age 14, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Together, these perspectives reinforce the same conclusion from different vantage points: that, in participants' view, enforcement credibility, not simply rule-setting, is a primary consideration in the design of any restriction.

Clear Communication and Accessible Guidance

Across all intervention groups, participants converged on the view that clear communication was essential to the legitimacy and workability of any restriction, with rules experienced as considerably more acceptable when their rationale was explained rather than simply asserted. The importance of directing communication at both parents and young people, rather than assuming either group possessed sufficient knowledge or understanding, was consistently raised.

Where groups differed was primarily in the emphasis of this point with Control participants focusing on the need to communicate the *why* as well as the *what*, arguing that explanations of benefit should not be taken for granted, while Intervention 1 (daily limit) participants were more specific in calling for structured training and practical guidance aimed at parents with limited technical confidence. Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) and Intervention 3 (app removal) participants, drawing on direct experience of living under restrictions, placed the greatest weight

on communication as a determinant of perceived fairness with both groups highlighting that rules imposed without adequate preparation or consultation felt considerably less legitimate than those arrived at collaboratively.

"I think it would be much easier to understand if they didn't just say, 'Because I say so.'" – Child, Age 13, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Parent and child perspectives overlapped in valuing clear and accessible communication but differed in what they felt was missing. Parents frequently reported feeling underprepared to implement restrictions effectively, citing limited awareness of available tools and uncertainty about proportionate approaches, and called for broader public-facing campaigns and institutional guidance to address this gap. Young people's communication needs were distinct: rather than practical guidance, they placed particular value on being consulted and having rules explained in terms they found credible and fair. Many expressed that restrictions felt more acceptable when the process was participatory rather than imposed suggesting that for young people, the manner of communication mattered as much as its content.

These perspectives suggest that any communication strategy would need to operate on two levels simultaneously: equipping parents with the practical knowledge to implement restrictions confidently, while ensuring young people feel informed, respected, and genuinely involved in the process.

Age-Appropriate and Graduated Restrictions

The evidence does not support a uniform, one-size-fits-all model. Across all four groups, participants consistently argued that restrictions should be sensitive to age, maturity, and family context, with the strongest limits applied to younger children and autonomy increasing incrementally over time. The intervention groups brought particular specificity to this argument: Intervention 1 (daily limit) participants raised concern about the disproportionality of blanket bans for older teenagers, especially in the context of GCSE and educational use, while Intervention 2 (overnight curfew) participants identified age-appropriateness as the single most commonly invoked criterion of fairness. Intervention 3 (app removal) participants captured the prevailing sentiment most plainly, noting that a restriction reasonable for a 13-year-old could feel "draconian" when applied to a 17-year-old. Control participants, without direct implementation experience, similarly critiqued blanket approaches and proposed platform-level "teen modes" or staged access schemes as more proportionate alternatives.

Parent and child perspectives were broadly aligned on graduated restriction, though each emphasised different aspects. Parents' views were shaped by their child's developmental stage, with many arguing that rules appropriate in early secondary school were neither fair nor feasible as young people approached independence and favouring a model in which limits were set firmly at first device access and relaxed as maturity developed. Young people endorsed this logic from their own vantage point, stressing self-regulation as the desired long-term outcome.

"If you're younger, you should have less time, and then as you get older, it should kind of increase." - Child, Age 15, Intervention 1: Daily Limit

Many preferred approaches that progressively built autonomy rather than sustaining external control indefinitely, suggesting that the credibility of any graduated model depends on young people seeing a clear pathway towards greater independence.

Evidence-Based and Early Intervention Strategies

Participants emphasised the importance of grounding any future approach in robust research, communicating the evidence clearly, and considering implementation earlier in young people's lives rather than only once patterns of use are firmly established. Participants' accounts suggest that the most promising approach is likely to combine early prevention, proportionate restriction, and ongoing evaluation, rather than relying on abrupt or purely reactive measures.

As one of the parents suggested:

"If it was implemented from when she was younger, the restrictions, then it'd be easier to follow through without the aggriness and without the arguments." – Parent, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

A sentiment echoed widely across the data, with many noting that rules introduced at the point a child first accesses a device are simply more likely to be accepted as normal. Some young people went further, expressing frustration at retrospective attempts to limit access, underscoring the perceived unfairness of imposing restrictions once use is already embedded in daily life:

"We literally grew up with social media, so why take it away from us now? If they wanted to do that, they should have done it... when we were growing up." – Child, Age 16, Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew

Many young people also advocated for a staged, age-graduated approach rather than blanket rules, one in which access and time allowances expand incrementally as they mature and develop self-regulation skills. Feeling it would be unfair to have the same rules as people much younger than them, without the accrued experience in managing their use of social media.

The findings suggest that the most promising approach is likely to combine early prevention, proportionate restriction, and ongoing evaluation, rather than relying on abrupt or purely reactive measures.

What can't be concluded from this evidence?

At the same time, the findings place clear limits on what can reasonably be inferred. In particular, the evidence does not support strong assumptions about uniform impact, easy implementation, or the long-term sustainability of restrictions without wider support.

Unclear Measurable Impact

Uniform causal outcomes cannot be inferred from this evidence alone. Some young people reported little noticeable change in their time use, schoolwork, or day-to-day behaviour during the intervention period, indicating that restrictions do not necessarily produce immediate or measurable improvements. A significant contextual factor shaping this picture is the degree to which families already had established rules or controls in place prior to the study. For many households, the intervention represented a consolidation or formalisation of existing practice rather than a meaningful departure from it, with a substantial number reporting little change. This pattern was particularly evident among Intervention 2 participants, where overnight curfews frequently aligned with bedtime routines and phone hand-in practices already operating in the household, leading many to describe the restriction as feeling "normal" or marginal in its impact.

These patterns suggest that the measurable impact of any given restriction is likely to depend considerably on the baseline from which a household is starting, and that a uniform effect should not be assumed across families with different prior levels of regulation.

Enforcement and Sustainability Challenges

It should not be assumed that introducing restrictions in isolation will be effective. The evidence points to substantial challenges around sustained enforcement, uneven implementation, and long-term adherence, particularly where responsibility falls heavily on parents or institutions without adequate support. This means the findings do not support approaches that overlook the practical demands of maintaining restrictions over time.

Which approaches appear proportionate considering the observed benefits, risks and trade-offs?

Participants' accounts suggest that proportionality depends less on whether restrictions were imposed at all than on how far they were seen as reasonable, balanced, and justified in context. Perceptions of fairness appeared to be shaped by the intensity of the restriction, the extent of retained access, and the degree to which young people's age and circumstances were considered.

Implementation Strategy

Participants' accounts reveal a tension between the benefits of clearly bounded rules and the need for proportionate flexibility. Participants reported that fixed, technically enforced restrictions reduced day-to-day negotiation and household conflict, since the rule removed parental discretion from the moment of enforcement: where limits were automatic and consistent, children were, according to parents, less likely to repeatedly test boundaries or seek extensions. Systems that allowed parental overrides or time-extension requests, by contrast, were frequently described as difficult to maintain in practice, with parents admitting they would grant additional time under pressure, which they felt undermined the restriction's credibility over time.

At the same time, participants drew a clear distinction between rules they saw as firm and those they saw as disproportionate: highly restrictive models, particularly the 15-minute per-app cap, were widely described as excessively rigid, practically disruptive, and harder to sustain than more moderate limits.

Participants' comments suggest a way of reconciling this apparent tension: rather than favouring rules that could be negotiated moment-to-moment, participants tended to favour a fixed and reliable baseline, such as a nightly curfew or daily allowance, that could be calibrated by age, context, or occasion at the point of design, rather than continuously renegotiated at the point of enforcement. Participants also perceived restrictions as fairer where they were framed as study-related or self-directed rather than purely parental, suggesting that, in participants' accounts, implementation success depends not only on the design of the rule itself, but on whether it preserves a sense of legitimacy, proportionality, and agency.

Balanced Restriction and Gradual Reduction

Participants generally described moderate, calibrated restrictions as more sustainable, in their experience, than abrupt or highly stringent limits. Many suggested that retaining some access would better balance excessive use against the practical need for social interaction and routine communication. Participants also suggested that proportionality could be strengthened through gradual reduction over time, limited flexibility for exceptional circumstances, and a longer intervention period to test whether reported benefits were sustained.

Where are blanket approaches particularly risky or difficult to justify based on this evidence?

The findings suggest that blanket approaches may be particularly difficult to justify where they fail to account for variation in age, context, and the social functions of phone use. Participants' accounts indicate that highly uniform restrictions risk generating unintended harms, resistance, and relational strain, especially where they are experienced as disproportionate. These impacts may also have been felt more acutely where children were the only ones among their peers undertaking the intervention, potentially heightening feelings of difference, unfairness, or social disconnection.

Unintended Negative Consequences and Circumvention

Participants suggested that highly restrictive approaches could increase boredom, stress, sleep difficulties, and feelings of social disconnection, particularly where digital access served important social or self-regulatory functions. Participants also anticipated that such measures were likely to prompt workaround behaviours, including the use of alternative platforms, VPNs, or repeated requests for exemptions, which they felt could undermine both the effectiveness and monitorability of the restriction. These accounts suggest that abrupt, universal prohibitions may be experienced as less workable than more proportionate models that reduce harm without triggering high levels of resistance or evasive behaviour.

Age-Specific Fairness and Autonomy

Perceived fairness was strongly shaped by young people's age, maturity, and expectations of autonomy. Blanket restrictions were widely seen as especially difficult to justify for older young people, who were often viewed as both more capable of self-regulation and less receptive to externally imposed controls. Participants suggested that, at this stage, highly restrictive measures could feel draconian, undermine trust, and conflict with young people's growing independence, particularly where they were introduced retrospectively rather than established earlier as part of normal family practice. These accounts imply that age-based restrictions are unlikely to be experienced as proportionate unless they are sensitive to developmental maturity and allow scope for adolescent agency.

Erosion of Trust and Relationship Dynamics

Blanket restrictions were seen as carrying relational risks, particularly where they were introduced retrospectively or imposed without young people's input. Participants suggested that such measures could undermine trust, autonomy, and young people's sense of agency, especially among older teenagers who were viewed as increasingly capable of self-regulation and less accepting of parental control. These tensions appeared likely to intensify as young people approached greater independence, leading some parents to prioritise trust-based relationships over sustained enforcement. Restrictions were therefore regarded as more acceptable where they were introduced earlier, explained clearly, and embedded consistently within normal family practice rather than imposed abruptly at a later stage.

How should any intervention be framed or communicated?

Participants' accounts suggest that framing and communication are likely to play an important role in shaping how acceptable and workable any intervention appears. Approaches seemed more likely to gain support where they were presented clearly, proportionately, and in ways that emphasised practical benefits rather than punishment or alarm.

Positive and Supportive Framing

Participants' accounts suggest interventions are seen as more acceptable when framed as supportive, constructive, and beneficial, rather than punitive or alarmist. Participants suggested that communication should emphasise what the intervention enables, such as better sleep, improved focus, or more time for other valued activities, while also encouraging practical alternatives to social media use. Participants felt that positioning the measure as a way of restoring balance, rather than removing something essential, could help reduce resistance and feelings of loss.

Clarity and Directness

Participants also suggested that interventions should be communicated in clear, simple, and unambiguous terms. Approaches described as highly explicit and easy to understand appeared easier to follow than those involving lengthy guidance, vague rules, or ongoing negotiation. Clear framing around what is being restricted, when, and for what purpose therefore seems important for reducing confusion, limiting dispute, and supporting consistent implementation.

Evidence-Based and Proportionate Messaging

Finally, participants' accounts imply that communication should be grounded in credible evidence while also conveying a sense of proportionality. Participants suggested that messaging explaining the potential harms of excessive social media use may help legitimise intervention but felt this would be most effective when paired with reassurance that the aim is not total prohibition, but a reasonable reduction that protects sleep, study, and wellbeing without unnecessarily undermining autonomy or social connection.

Appendix: Methodology

This appendix sets out the methodology for the two-wave qualitative evaluation of social media restrictions among young people aged 13 to 17, commissioned by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), spanning approximately three months from March to June 2026.

Overview

Savanta conducted online in-depth interviews (IDIs) via Microsoft Teams across 309 households in the UK between 30th March and 1st May 2026 (Wave 1), each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Each interview included the young person and their parent or guardian in separate discussion sections. Participants were allocated across four groups: a control group who made no changes to their social media use, and three intervention groups subject to increasing levels of restriction during a one-month trial period (2nd to 31st May 2026). During Wave 2, 307 interviews were conducted with the same participants between 1st and 30th June 2026. Wherever possible, the same moderator conducted both waves to maintain rapport and continuity.

Pre-Task

Prior to their Wave 1 interview, all participant households completed a short online pre-task survey (approximately three to five minutes), with separate sections for the parent or guardian and the young person. Topics covered current social media habits, platforms used, device arrangements, and existing screen time rules. Moderators used responses to personalise each Wave 1 interview from the outset.

Recruitment and Group Allocation

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through Roots Research, a specialist qualitative recruitment agency and established Savanta supplier. Their panel was used to target parents with a child aged 13 to 17, generating over 800 applications. Recruitment was conducted via the parent or guardian, who applied on behalf of their household. Consent and safeguarding obligations applied to both the young person and their parent or guardian throughout, in line with the MRS Code of Conduct. All participation was voluntary.

Group Allocation

Interventions were allocated based on respondents' preferences. At the start of each recruitment call, all four study groups were explained in full. Once participants had a clear understanding of what each intervention involved, they were assigned to the group they felt most comfortable with. Each household then received tailored written instructions covering exactly what was required of them during the trial period.

Discussion Guide Coverage

Each interview comprised a 20-minute discussion with the parent or guardian and a 35-minute discussion with the young person. Wave 2 used separate question sets for the control and intervention groups.

Wave 1 (Pre-Intervention)

Topics explored social media use and family context before any restrictions. With parents: their child's usage patterns and platforms, perceived impacts on mood, sleep, friendships and schoolwork, and current management approaches. With young people: daily habits, positive and negative aspects of their online experience, wellbeing and self-perception, and views on parental rules.

Wave 2 (Post-Intervention)

Topics explored experiences following the trial period. With intervention group parents: how the restriction was set up, compliance and barriers, observed changes in behaviour, mood, sleep and social life, and views on fairness. With intervention group young people: reactions to the restriction, changes to daily use, perceived impacts on mood, sleep, friendships and offline activity, and what makes restrictions feel fair. Control group participants reflected on any changes to their social media use and shared views on restrictions in principle.

Research Design and Interventions

Restrictions were applied by parents or guardians using device-level parental controls, supported by written guidance from Savanta. The core platforms in scope across all intervention groups were Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, and Reddit. Families could also extend restrictions to other apps used for social or content-sharing purposes, such as Twitch, Kick, and Discord.

Control Group

Participants made no changes to their social media use during the trial period, providing a baseline for comparison with the three intervention groups.

Intervention 1: 15-Minute Per-App Daily Limit

Parents set a daily cap of 15 minutes per app via Screen Time (iPhone and iPad, with parent-only passcode) or Digital Wellbeing and Google Family Link (Android).

Intervention 2: Overnight Curfew, 9pm to 7am

Parents blocked access to all social media apps between 9pm and 7am daily via Screen Time Downtime (iPhone and iPad, Block at Downtime enabled, parent-only passcode) or Bedtime Mode in Digital Wellbeing (Android).

Intervention 3: Complete Removal of Social Media Apps

Parents uninstalled all social media apps and blocked reinstallation via Screen Time Content and Privacy Restrictions (iPhone and iPad) or Google Family Link parental approval for new installations (Android).

Protocol Integrity and Compliance

The study relies on parental implementation of device controls rather than remote monitoring, so full compliance cannot be independently verified. Some participants confirmed did not complete their assigned intervention, and a small number applied more stringent restrictions than those assigned. All such cases have been identified and addressed in the analysis.

Respondent Summary

Wave 2 fieldwork closed on 29th June 2026. The study aimed to re-interview all 309 Wave 1 participants at Wave 2. In total, 307 Wave 2 interviews were completed (99% of the Wave 1 sample). The table below reflects the final position at close of fieldwork.

Group	W1 Recruited	W1 Completed	W2 Target	W2 Completed
Intervention 1: 15 min per app limit	76	76	76	75 of 76 (99%)
Intervention 2: Overnight curfew	81	81	81	81 of 81 (100%)
Intervention 3: Full app removal	74	74	74	73 of 74 (99%)
Control	78	78	78	78 of 78 (100%)
Total	309	309	309	307 of 309 (99%)

Intervention Adherence

Intervention	Completely adhered	Mostly adhered, adapted slightly	Did not adhere
Intervention 1: 15 min per app limit	32	28	15
Intervention 2: Overnight curfew	53	23	5
Intervention 3: Full app removal	51	19	3
Total	136	70	23

Sampling and Quota Framework

Participants were recruited against a structured quota framework. Four priority underrepresented groups were given targeted quotas, marked with a dagger (†) below. Full quota detail by group and age band is provided in a separate appendix.

Quota Dimension	Age Band	Target	W1 Achieved	W2 Achieved
Age: 13 to 15	13 to 15	200	200	198
Age: 16 to 17	16 to 17	100	109	109
Gender: Female	All	150	154	153
Gender: Male	All	150	153	152
Non-binary	All	—	2	2
Rural location †	All	60	31	31
Ethnic minority †	All	88	75	75
Education deprivation † ‡	All	60	185	183
Low income †	All	88	55	55
Region: England	All	—	286	284
Region: Scotland	All	—	10	10
Region: Wales	All	—	7	7
Region: Northern Ireland	All	—	6	6

† Priority underrepresented group with targeted quota.

‡ Education deprivation measured via Free School Meals eligibility (primary) and area-level deprivation index (secondary).

Incentivisation

Payment	Amount
Wave 1 interview	£30
Wave 2 interview	£50

Payment	Amount
Completion bonus (both waves and intervention)	£20
Total (full participation)	£100

Participants who did not complete their assigned intervention and completely disengaged from the study were not eligible for the £20 completion bonus. All other payments are due regardless of compliance status.

Fieldwork Timeline

Milestone	Start Date	End Date	Status
Pre-task survey (participants)	March 2026	March 2026	Complete
Wave 1 IDIs	30 March 2026	1 May 2026	Complete
Intervention trial period	2 May 2026	31 May 2026	Complete
Wave 2 IDIs	1 June 2026	30 June 2026	Complete
Wave 2 majority target		15 June 2026	Complete

Considerations & Limitations

Potential trial participation effect

Participants' awareness that they were taking part in a trial may itself have influenced behaviour and reporting, independent of the intervention assigned. This trial participation effect should be considered when interpreting observed changes, particularly where findings rely on self-report or where differences are small.

A further limitation is that participants were typically experiencing the intervention individually, and may have been the only person in their friendship group, class or wider peer environment subject to that restriction; this may have intensified effects such as exclusion or self-consciousness, meaning these experiences may not map directly onto how the same measures would operate if introduced more universally.

Potential impact of media coverage

Given the high level of current public and media attention surrounding social media use among young people, participants may have been more sensitised to the topic than might otherwise be the case, which could have influenced both how they reflected on their experiences and how they reported their attitudes or behaviours. This context may also have increased the likelihood

of social desirability bias, with participants potentially framing their responses in ways that aligned with perceived social norms or expectations.

Social Media Ban Policy Announcement

Of the 307 Wave 2 interviews completed, 75 were conducted on or after the social media ban announcement on 15th June 2026. Savanta captured any reported new or changed perceptions following the policy announcement in those interviews conducted after this date, as well as paying attention to any shifts in sentiment seen in interviews conducted before and after 15th June.

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