

2026

Happiness and
Social Media



World Happiness Report

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following reference: Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D.,
De Neve, J.-E., Aknin, L. B., & Wang, S. (Eds.). (2026).
World Happiness Report 2026.
University of Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre.

Full text and supporting documentation
can be downloaded from the website:
worldhappiness.report

ISBN 979-8-2513794-7-1

The *World Happiness Report* is a publication of the Wellbeing Research
Centre at the University of Oxford in partnership with Gallup, the UN
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Table of Contents

World Happiness Report 2026

1	Executive summary	3
	Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, De Neve, Aknin, and Wang	
2	International evidence on happiness and social media	13
	Helliwell, Aknin, Huang, Rojas, Wang, Guerra, and Danyluk	
3	Social media is harming adolescents at a scale large enough to cause changes at the population level.	67
	Haidt and Rausch	
4	Translating scientific evidence into effective policies for health and technology requires care	107
	Lloyd-Hurwitz and Przybylski	
5	Adolescent life satisfaction and social media use: gender differences in an international dataset	141
	Twenge, Diomino and Rio	
6	Social media, wasting time, and product traps.	161
	Sunstein	
7	Problematic social media use and adolescent wellbeing: the role of family socioeconomic status across 43 countries.	177
	Gracia, Fernandez-Urbano, Rubio-Cabañez, Celik, and Cineli	
8	Internet use, social media, and wellbeing: the role of trust, social connections, and emotional bonds	199
	Ozkok, Rosborough, and Malloy	
9	Social media use and wellbeing in the Middle East and North Africa	241
	Burger, Greyling, Rossouw, Sarracino, and Wu	

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Chapter 1

Executive summary

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doi.org/10.18724/whr-ewft-vq17

This version was last updated on 11 March 2026. Please see worldhappiness.report for the latest data.



Heavy users of social media are at risk, especially in English-speaking countries and Western Europe.

In North America and Western Europe, young people are much less happy than 15 years ago. Over the same period, social media use has greatly increased. Many people blame social media for this fall in happiness, but does this hypothesis stand the test of rigorous scientific analysis? What about the rest of the world, where young people's happiness has not declined relative to adults, even though social media is equally prevalent?

There has been much research on this topic. This report does not attempt a comprehensive synthesis of the academic literature – for that, we refer you to the studies listed at the end of this chapter.¹

Instead, we started by asking two leading critics of social media, Jonathan Haidt and Zach Rausch, to lay out their case (see [Chapter 3](#)).

They offer two main types of analysis. First, they report what young people, their parents, their teachers, and employees of social media companies have said about social media and adolescent wellbeing. The views they report are generally negative. Then they turn to the academic evidence, chiefly from the United States, for the causal impact of social media use on wellbeing, which they argue supports their case.

Once we had the outline of the Haidt and Rausch chapter, we issued a call for papers that could provide further perspective on these issues, including experiences in different parts of the world.

The PISA study of 15-year-olds in 47 countries shows that those who use social media for over seven hours a day have much lower wellbeing than those who use it for less than one hour. For girls in Western Europe, the difference is almost a full point (out of 10), almost twice that for girls elsewhere. For boys, the drop is almost half a point in Western Europe, and essentially zero in the other 35 countries (see [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 5](#)).

In a sample of US college students, the majority wish that social media platforms did not exist. They use them because others are using them, but they would prefer it if no one did (see [Chapter 6](#)).²

Outside the English-speaking world and Western Europe, the links between social media use and wellbeing are more positive, and they vary between platforms. Data from Latin America show that platforms with algorithmic feeds and featuring influencers are more likely to be negatively linked to life satisfaction than those that mainly facilitate communication (see [Chapter 2](#)).

In the Middle East and North Africa, youth wellbeing has not fallen despite heavy use of social media. This must have many causes. But there, too, heavy social media use is associated with higher levels of depression and stress. The most problematic platforms are those where the main use is passive, and the main material is visual (encouraging social comparisons) and often comes from influencers (see [Chapter 9](#)).

From all this, we conclude that heavy users of social media are at risk, especially in English-speaking countries and Western Europe. Does this mean that social media use fully explains the worrying decline in youth wellbeing in those regions? Of course not. The trends are caused by many factors, which differ between continents. However, the evidence in this report does suggest that heavy social media use, especially in some countries, provides an important part of the explanation.

This brings us to the policy debate. As [Chapter 4](#) points out, this requires the highest standards of synthesis. The authors show how major public reports on this issue have reached different conclusions and policy recommendations, despite examining similar research.

In December 2025, the Australian government increased the age limit for ten social media platforms from 13 to 16.³ Other countries, including Denmark, France, and Spain, are planning similar regulation.⁴ We hope that the evidence in this volume will help policy-makers in their assessment of such policies.

In the sections that follow, we present summaries of each chapter in the report.

Chapter 2

International evidence on happiness and social media

Trends in global happiness

- Nordic countries lead the happiness rankings once again. Finland is still in a group of one at the top, followed by a group of three: Iceland, Denmark, and Costa Rica. Sweden and Norway complete the top six, followed by the Netherlands, Israel, Luxembourg, and Switzerland to round out the top ten. Costa Rica's rise to 4th marks the highest ever ranking for a Latin American country.
- Looking at changes in happiness from the 2006–2010 base period to 2023–2025, nearly twice as many countries have had significant gains (79) than significant losses (41), among the 136 countries ranked.
- Within that period, most of the 21 countries that have gained a point or more on the 0–10 life evaluation scale are in Central and Eastern Europe, reflecting the convergence in European happiness levels that has been clear for more than a decade. Most of the eight countries with drops of more than one point are in or near zones of major conflict.
- In general, most Western industrial countries are now less happy than they were between 2005 and 2010. Fifteen of them have had significant drops, compared to four with significant increases.
- In a ranking of happiness changes for under-25s, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (the NANZ region) rank between 122 and 133 in the list of 136 countries.
- In eight of the ten global regions shown in Figure 2.2 (covering roughly 90% of the world's population), those in the youngest age group have higher life evaluations now than in 2006–2010, either in absolute terms or relative to those over 25. Youth wellbeing has only fallen in the NANZ countries and Western Europe, both absolutely and relative to adults.
- Negative emotions are becoming more common in all global regions. They are less frequent for the young, except for NANZ, where the increases, relative to other regions, were in sadness. Worry rose more broadly for the young, while the frequency of anger fell everywhere, for young and old alike.
- Positive emotions continue to be twice as frequent as negative emotions. In all regions, they are higher for those born recently than for their elders, except for NANZ, where that gap has closed in recent years.

Happiness and social media

- Life satisfaction is highest at low rates of social media use and lower at higher rates of use, according to data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) covering seven internet activities for 15-year-old students in 47 countries (but not the NANZ countries, unfortunately).
- Internet activities fall into two groups. Communications, news, learning, and content creation are associated with higher life satisfaction. Social media, gaming, and browsing for fun are associated with lower life evaluations.
- All internet activities are associated with lower life satisfaction at very high rates of use, especially for girls and for those in the UK and Ireland, the two English-speaking countries in PISA.
- Data from Latin America reveal that the type of platform is crucial. Platforms designed to facilitate social connections show a clear positive association with happiness, whereas those driven by algorithmically curated content tend to demonstrate a negative association at high rates of use.
- When combined, the PISA and Gallup data show significantly higher youth wellbeing in countries that spend more time using the internet for communication, and insignificantly lower youth wellbeing in countries with higher average hours of social media use. Latin American countries combine high levels

of social media use with high youth wellbeing, while English-speaking countries show lower youth wellbeing than their fairly typical patterns of internet use can explain.

- The prevalence and use patterns for social media are similar in all countries, but their links to life evaluations are stronger in English-speaking countries and Western Europe. These differences do not account for the large drops in youth wellbeing in these countries, however. Much, no doubt, depends on how social media is used and the broader social and economic context.
- When school belonging goes from low (10th percentile) to high (90th percentile), the life satisfaction gains for girls in the UK and Ireland are four times greater than social media use going from high (90th percentile) to low (10th percentile). In PISA's 47-country global sample, the belonging effect is six times larger. This should be relevant when policy options are being considered.

Chapter 3

Social media is harming adolescents at a scale large enough to cause changes at the population level

- Is social media use reasonably safe for children and adolescents? We call this the “product safety question”, and we present seven lines of evidence showing that the answer is no.
- The evidence of harm is found in: 1) surveys of young people; 2) surveys of parents, teachers, and clinicians; 3) contents from corporate documents; 4) findings from cross-sectional studies; 5) findings from longitudinal studies; 6) findings from social media reduction experiments; and 7) findings from natural experiments.
- We show there is now overwhelming evidence of severe and widespread direct harms (such as cyberbullying and sextortion), and compelling evidence of troubling indirect harms (such as depression). Furthermore, we show that the harms and risks to individual users are

so diverse and vast in scope that they justify the view that social media is causing harm at a population level.

- We further argue that when these lines of evidence are considered alongside the timing, scope, and cross-national trends in adolescent wellbeing and mental health, they can help answer a second question: was the rapid adoption of always-available social media by adolescents in the early 2010s a substantial contributor to the population-level increases in mental illness that emerged by the mid 2010s in many Western nations? We call this the “historical trends question”. We draw on our findings about the vast scale of harm uncovered while answering the product safety question to argue that the answer to the historical trends question is “yes”.

Chapter 4

Translating scientific evidence into effective policies for health and technology requires care

- Professional science organisations that have examined social media and adolescent mental health have reached different conclusions and policy recommendations, despite examining similar research. Given their substantial influence on policy and public understanding, it is important to investigate their evidence synthesis practices.
- Our analysis of three high-profile reports on social media and adolescent mental health finds that they cited broadly similar types of research, yet showed little overlap (<1%) in their sources.
- We also found considerable variation in how the reports synthesise, communicate, and simplify evidence, including differences in citation accuracy, contextual detail, limitation acknowledgement, and conclusion strength.
- The stakes of getting these syntheses right are substantial. Poor synthesis quality risks developing policies which may be ineffective

or cause unintended harm, and may contribute to the erosion of public trust in scientific institutions more broadly.

- When communicating the state of a complex scientific field, it is crucial to be honest about shortcomings and uncertainties, and to maximise fidelity to the underlying research. As scientists committed to rigorous, transparent, and replicable approaches to understanding complex phenomena, we have a responsibility to consistently uphold standards that justify claims to scientific authority and to identify opportunities for improving practices within our community.

Chapter 5

Adolescent life satisfaction and social media use: gender differences in an international dataset

- Although many studies have documented links between heavy social media use and poor mental health, fewer studies have explored associations with positive wellbeing, especially in international datasets.
- In 2022, the OECD's PISA survey, conducted in 47 countries, asked over 270,000 15- to 16-year-olds how many hours a day they spent using social media and how satisfied they were with their lives.
- Among girls, mean life satisfaction was highest among light users of social media (less than an hour a day) and declined with further hours of use. Among boys, this pattern held only in Western Europe and English-speaking countries.
- The mean differences obscure a notable pattern, especially among boys. Compared to light users, a larger percentage of the heaviest users (7+ hours a day) had both the highest level of life satisfaction (10) and the lowest levels (0-4). The same was true for non-users of social media, with higher levels of both very high and low life satisfaction.
- Thus, there is more variation in life satisfaction among non-users and heavy users of social media compared to light or moderate users. Among girls in most regions, non-users of

social media were the most likely to report complete satisfaction with their lives, although in some regions, heavy users were also more likely to report complete satisfaction than moderate users.

Chapter 6

Social media, wasting time, and product traps

- Three empirical studies raise serious doubts about whether social media use makes people happy, with implications for valuation, choice, and wellbeing. The central conclusion is that many people use social media because other people use social media. If social media use were somehow reduced or even stopped, many people would be better off, and they are aware of that fact.
- The first study finds that people are willing to pay far less to use social media platforms than they would demand to stop using them. The fact that people would pay little or nothing to use such platforms raises the possibility that many think they are wasting time when doing so.
- The second study finds that people lose welfare from using Facebook. Even after experiencing a happier month without Facebook, however, they would demand a significant amount of money to stop using the platform for an additional month. The fact that people are more anxious and depressed when using Facebook provides strong cautionary notes about the idea that such use increases wellbeing.
- The third (and, in important ways, the most revealing) study finds that while many young people would demand a significant amount of money to stop using Instagram and TikTok, they would also be willing to pay to eliminate those platforms from their community. Social media platforms impose a “negative non-user externality”, i.e., they impose a cost on people who do not use them.
- A reasonable conclusion is that if social media platforms did not exist, many users would be better off.

Chapter 7

Problematic social media use and adolescent wellbeing: the role of family socioeconomic status across 43 countries

- For adolescents, Problematic Social Media Use (PSMU) is associated with more psychological complaints and lower life evaluation in all 43 countries we examined. These associations are most pronounced in Anglo-Celtic countries and least problematic in the Caucasus-Black Sea region.
- Globally, the relationship between PSMU and lower wellbeing is stronger among adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than among their higher-status peers.
- Socioeconomic differences in the relationship between PSMU and adolescent wellbeing are stronger for life evaluation than for psychological complaints.
- Socioeconomic gradients for life evaluation are consistent across Anglo-Celtic, Caucasus-Black Sea, Central-Eastern, Nordic, and Western European countries, but are weak in Mediterranean countries. For psychological complaints, only the Anglo-Celtic region shows socioeconomic gradients.
- Between 2018 and 2022, the negative association between PSMU and adolescent wellbeing intensified. This increase occurred across all socioeconomic groups and in most of the regions examined.

Chapter 8

Internet use, social media, and wellbeing: the role of trust, social connections, and emotional bonds

- Previous studies from the *World Happiness Report* highlight the importance of trust and social connections for wellbeing. This chapter explores how the rise of internet and social media use has affected wellbeing directly, and also indirectly by altering trust, social connections, and emotional bonds.

- We use four rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS), covering 30 countries over the years 2016 to 2024, to investigate the impact of internet use upon wellbeing. In order to measure the total impact of internet use, we instrument it by M-Lab data on local internet speed. The instrumental variable results reveal a significant negative coefficient on internet use that is not visible in standard OLS estimations.
- The estimated relationship between internet use and wellbeing varies sharply across generations, genders, and regions. It is strongly negative for Gen Z, moderately negative for Millennials, near zero for Gen X, and slightly positive for Baby Boomers. The generational gradient reflects both greater increases in internet use among younger cohorts (exposure) and more negative estimated coefficients for those same cohorts (susceptibility).
- The social and emotional foundations of wellbeing have deteriorated most for younger Europeans, especially in Western Europe. Declines in interpersonal trust, institutional trust, perceived social activity, and social meeting frequency are largest for Gen Z and Millennial women. In contrast, older cohorts show more resilience, supported by rising attachment to country and, in many Central and Eastern European countries, improved feelings of safety.
- Perceived social activity (“compared to others your age”) has fallen everywhere and is among the strongest predictors of wellbeing losses.
- Internet use is associated with several drivers of wellbeing, including trust, perceived social activity, and social connection. Interaction terms reveal that internet use can be positive for individuals with high interpersonal trust or strong attachments to their countries. However, those who report being highly socially active experience more negative effects, consistent with substitution or displacement of offline connections.
- The digital environment matters: the effect of internet use on wellbeing depends on how common social media use is within an individual’s demographic peer group. Internet

use is beneficial when peer-group exposure is low, but becomes increasingly harmful as social media use becomes more widespread among one's peers.

- Generational differences in wellbeing are widening over time. Older adults benefit from stable trust, rising attachment, improved safety, and moderate digital use, while younger adults face the erosion of these foundations in highly saturated digital ecosystems.

Chapter 9

Social media use and wellbeing in the Middle East and North Africa

- Social media use in the Middle East and North Africa is among the highest in the world, although considerable differences appear among countries. Heavy use is more common than in other regions: between 20% and 40% of users reported more than five hours of use in 2023–2024.
- Social media use is heavier among certain social groups. Gen Z, men, single individuals, less religious and more affluent respondents, as well as those with higher education, are much more likely to be heavy users.
- On average, heavy social media use (more than five hours per day) is associated with lower wellbeing. Heavy users are significantly more likely to report higher stress and depressive symptoms, and believe they are worse off than their parents, compared with non- or moderate users.
- The impact of heavy social media use on wellbeing depends on how it is used. Engaging with multiple platforms, relying on social media as a primary news source, and following influencers are associated with higher stress, increased depressive symptoms, and more negative comparisons with parents' quality of life.

Acknowledgements

The editors are deeply grateful to our contributing authors and expert reviewers this year. Their time, insights, and expertise have shaped a series of excellent chapters that together make up the most substantial *World Happiness Report* to date.

We give special thanks to our publishing partner, Gallup. They kindly provide early access to the World Poll data that underpins our global happiness ranking and supports our analysis on happiness and social media around the world. We also thank our partners – Ajinomoto, Bloom Wellbeing Fund, Blue Zones, Fondazione Ernesto Illy, and Glico – for their generous support to cover the costs of research assistance, production, and dissemination.

Finally, we recognise the dedication and skill of the WHR production team – Barry Grimes, Leoni Boyle, Charlotte Day, Jonathan Whitney, Ryan Swaney, and Stislow Design – who do so much work behind the scenes to bring the report to life and spread its message around the world.

Endnotes

- 1 For comprehensive evidence reviews, see [APA \(2023\)](#), [HHS \(2023\)](#), [Lee and Žarnić \(2024\)](#), [NASEM \(2024\)](#), and [Orben et al. \(2025\)](#). For a comparison of their findings and recommendations, see [Chapter 4](#) of this report.
- 2 If this is correct, individual wellbeing depends not only on an individual's use of social media but also on others' use of social media. This relationship deserves more investigation.
- 3 The ten age-restricted platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X (Twitter), and YouTube. Non age-restricted platforms include Discord, GitHub, Google Classroom, LEGO Play, Messenger, Pinterest, Roblox, Steam and Steam Chat, WhatsApp, and YouTube Kids. See <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions>
- 4 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media_age_verification_laws_by_country

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