

The age of autopilot

Attention, intention and digital wellbeing



Foreword



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Digital technology creates highly ambivalent experiences, offering both significant benefits and risks, relaxation and stress, pleasure and anxiety. In this report, Virgin Media O2 has shown that despite growing awareness of the downsides of habitual and excessive device use, people struggle to successfully manage their time online. The reason for this is clearly expressed in Virgin Media O2’s pioneering study: we are not being intentional - controlled, conscious and purposeful - when interacting with technology, and this is significantly affecting our wellbeing.

Drawing on new data, the report boldly suggests that this isn’t just a question of people making unwise choices. What we perceive as choice about how we use our devices is undermined by the immersive nature of the technology. Modern digital environments make it easier for people to spend longer periods of time on screens. Subsequently, the widening gap between our intentions and our actions will not be resolved by individuals alone. Efforts to transform digital wellbeing require systemic change, including reshaping the environments within which we engage with technology.

We may know that we are using our phones for long periods of time, but perhaps how long exactly we prefer to downplay. Indeed, this research demonstrates that prior data on digital use has significantly underestimated daily device use. Understanding the reality of our online lives is the first step to having more control over how we engage with technology.

Of course, we use devices for work, play, and everything in between, making it tricky to establish where we might draw the line in terms of ‘controlled’ device use. Increasing pressure to be responsive to work obligations also makes persistent device use - phones at dinner, phones instead of dinner - a feature rather than an exception of contemporary work life. A combination of these factors can turn, for example, initially intentional work-related device use, into absent-minded flicking through applications.

Virgin Media O2’s study positions intentionality as a lens for digital wellbeing by establishing that higher levels of unconscious device use are more likely to result in both negative experiences online and a lower quality of life offline. The longer you scroll, the more likely you are to encounter content you don’t like. The familiar symptoms of protracted use like distractedness, drifting from tasks, and compromised engagement in the real world are also significantly changing who we are as people.

This report therefore calls for a deeper understanding of digital wellbeing - its impacts, its drivers, and the actions required to support it as the role of technology continues to evolve.

Great progress has already been made in pointing to digital harms experienced by children. Now we need to build on those gains to support society more broadly. This is not a problem that is just affecting a small portion of the population, but a large part of the general public for whom continuous engagement is becoming the norm.

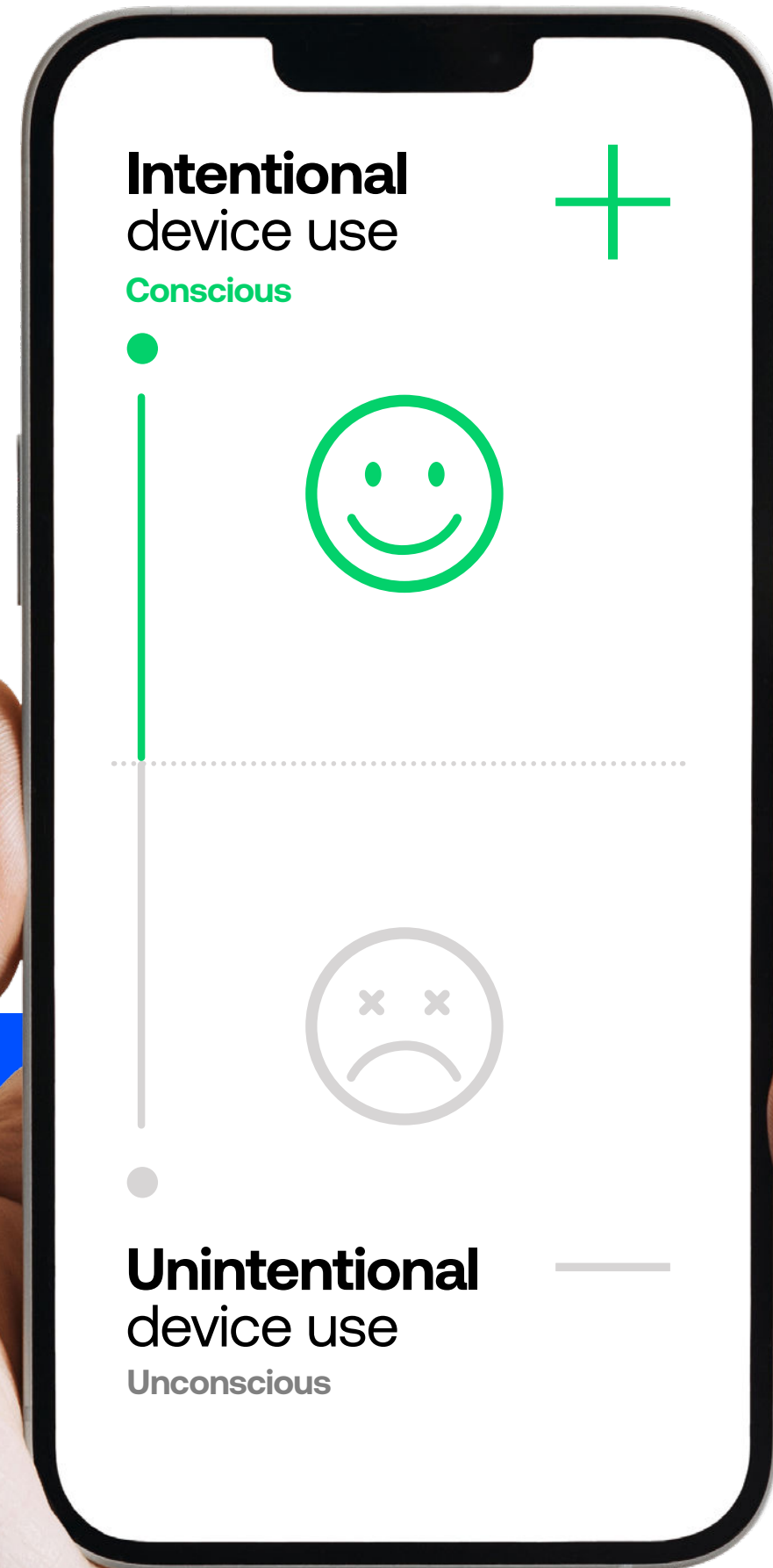
The other elephant in the room is generative AI, which has become foundational to the systems that get and keep us online. From conversational AI features to follow-up suggestion prompts that encourage continued interaction, generative AI’s ability to extend engagement, and the effects it has on user autonomy and wellbeing, are not yet well understood.

We urgently need new research on the effects of generative AI on digital wellbeing – distinct from concerns about smartphones or social media. To this end, I am thrilled to be leading a team of researchers at the University of Cambridge, philanthropically supported by Virgin Media O2, to conduct independent research that bridges the gap between established knowledge on social media harms and the comparatively under-examined engagement mechanisms of generative AI systems.

Today’s consumers have unprecedented opportunities to shape how technologies work for them – through prompting, filtering, personalisation settings, granular consent, and more – but only if these mechanisms are designed accessibly and reflect real user needs.

We are not using our devices in the way we intend. We may want to change patterns but can’t. It’s time to regain control and put the public in the driver’s seat when it comes to shaping technology.

Executive summary



Digital technology is embedded in almost every aspect of daily life, shaping how people work, learn, communicate, and spend their time. Enabled by widespread connectivity, digital technology accelerates productivity, expands access to information and services, and drives participation in society.

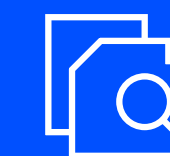
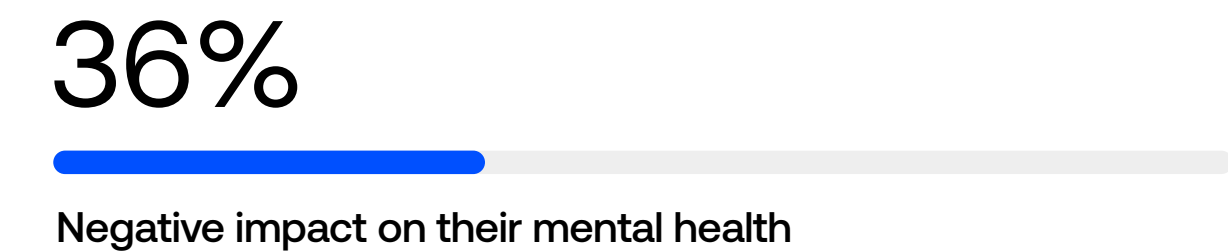
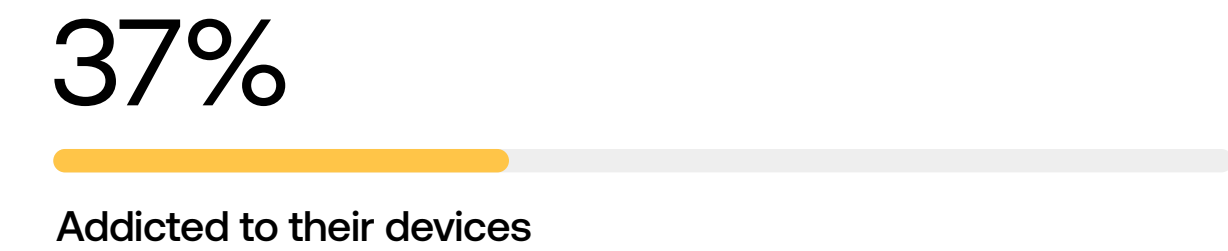
Yet, despite many positive factors, as digital technology becomes central to everyday life, its impact on wellbeing requires closer attention. To better understand this shift, Virgin Media O2 commissioned a year-long research programme which engaged more than 6,000 UK participants at its peak.

The research finds that while technology is deeply valued in society, almost three quarters (74%) of people report experiencing at least one negative effect, including impacts on sleep, focus and exposure to misleading information. Over a third (36%) reported a negative impact on their mental health and 37% said they're addicted to their devices.

For connectivity providers, whose services enable millions to access and engage with the digital world, this raises important questions about their role in shaping those experiences. The research defines digital wellbeing as the extent to which individuals feel in control of their digital lives. It combines large-scale national studies with deeper behavioural analysis to better understand the lived experience.

A clear pattern emerges: people's digital wellbeing is shaped by two interconnected factors – individual behaviours and the systems and environments that influence them.

Negative impacts of digital technology

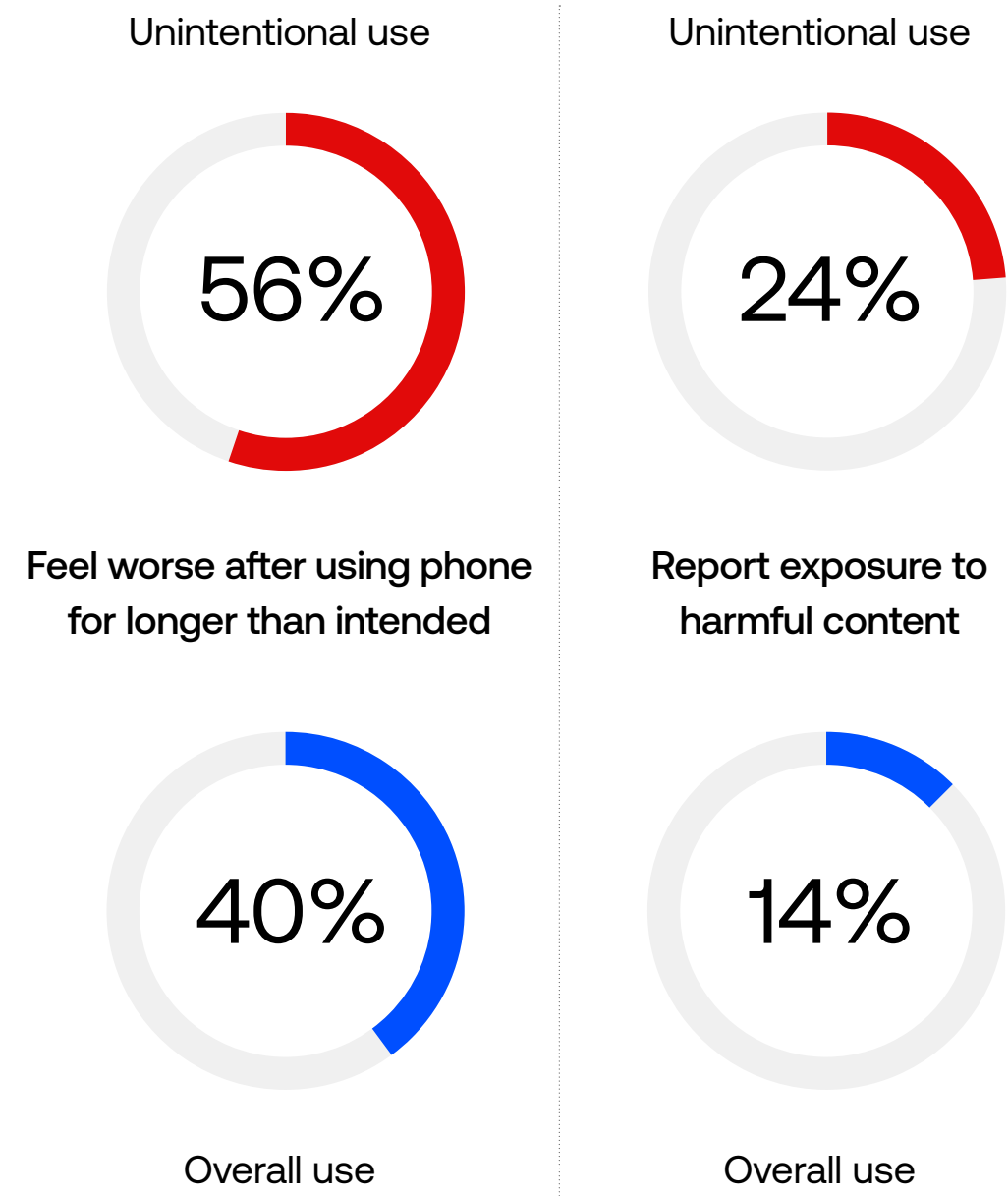


Research was conducted in three phases between December 2024 and March 2026, comprised of three nationally representative surveys of 1,004 18+, 2,039 18+, and 6,136 16+ respondents respectively with qualitative interviews and focus groups to track public attitudes, behaviours, and experiences relating to digital wellbeing and online safety across the UK. A full methodology can be found on page 14 of this report.

The behavioural analysis identifies unintentional device use as a key driver of poorer digital wellbeing outcomes. Those who spend more time on their devices without conscious intent are significantly more likely to report negative experiences.

Over half (56%) of the highly unintentional users say they feel worse after using their phone for longer than intended, compared to 40% overall. They are also more likely to report exposure to harmful or unpleasant content (24% vs 14%).

Unintentionality key driver of poor digital wellbeing



These findings show a clear relationship between unintentional use and poorer digital wellbeing outcomes, suggesting that how consciously people engage with their devices plays a key role in shaping their overall experience.

With people in the UK on track to spend 4.7 years of their waking lives using their phones unintentionally, unintentional use has become embedded in daily life.

The study introduces intentionality as a core behavioural lens – defined as the extent to which digital behaviour is conscious and within an individual’s control – and establishes a national Digital Intentionality Score as a benchmark for modern digital life. As of April 2026, the UK score stands at 63 out of 100 (where 100 represents complete control), supported by an individual tool to help people assess their own behaviours against the national average.

Encouragingly, awareness of digital habits is increasing, alongside a clear appetite to take more control. Almost two thirds (65%) report having taken steps to improve how they use technology. However, individual effort is not always enough, with 41% saying willpower alone cannot change behaviour. Improving digital wellbeing therefore requires a broader, system-wide approach.

Importantly, while much of the current debate focuses on children and young people, this research examines those aged 16 and over. This research shows unintentional and habitual use is a broader societal issue, with some of the highest levels seen among those aged 16-to-24 and adults aged 25–34.

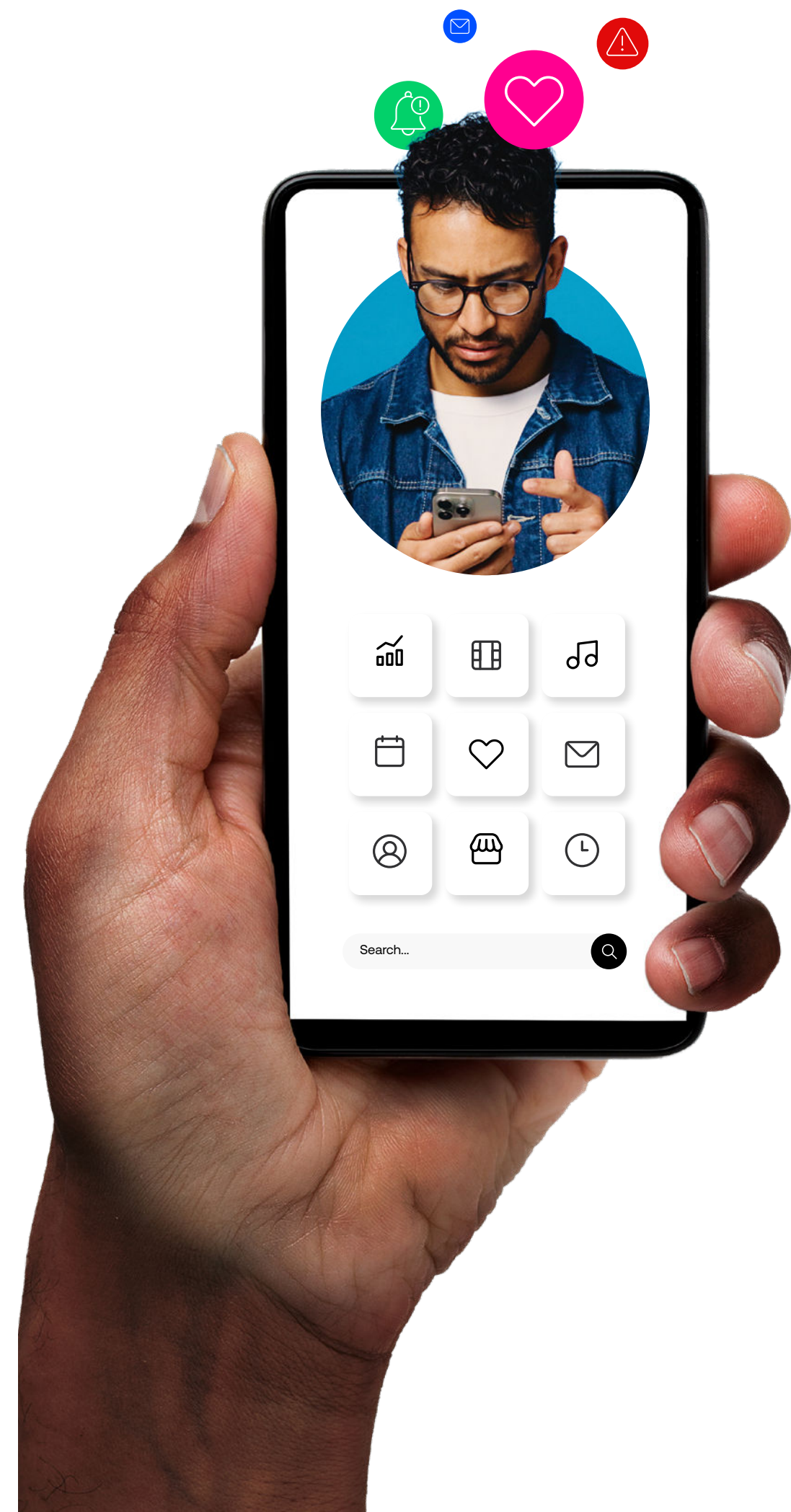
The evidence therefore suggests improving digital wellbeing is not simply a matter of individual effort, but of creating the right conditions for people to take greater control of their digital lives.

4.7 years

Unintentional phone use over waking life



The state of digital wellbeing in the UK



Digital technology now shapes the structure of everyday life in the UK. While early mobile phones enabled simpler, more task-specific interactions, today's smartphones support continuous engagement, woven throughout the day.

Beyond communication, smartphones now support a wide range of activities, from managing finances and accessing entertainment to tracking health and organising daily tasks. As a result, digital technology is not only widely used but deeply integrated into everyday life.

Digital technology is deeply valued by most people. Almost three in five (59%) say it has a positive impact on daily life, and over eight in ten (83%) use their smartphone frequently every day. It plays a central role in how life is organised and experienced. 67% use their devices to help manage their professional and personal lives, while more than half (57%) say much of their social life now takes place online. It is also increasingly used to support mental wellbeing, with 60% using digital tools to reduce stress.

Positive role of digital technology

83%

Use their smartphone frequently every day

67%

Use devices to manage personal and professional lives

60%

Use digital tools to reduce stress

59%

Positive impact on daily life

57%

Social life happens online

The impact of digital technologies on wellbeing

There is a growing body of research into the prevalence of technology in society and its impact on society's wellbeing. Much of the research focuses on young people, such as [Internet Matters](#)¹ who explore the role of platform design and young people's online experiences. This study builds upon this existing work and examines those aged 16 and over, highlighting the broader societal impacts of digital life.

The prevalence of digital technology is reflected in the amount of time people now spend online. Between 2018 and 2025, Ofcom found the average daily screen time on smartphones by adults has increased by [1 hour and 25 minutes, rising from 2 hours 3 minutes² to 3 hours 28 minutes³](#) in seven years. Ofcom found this increases to over 4 hours 30 per day across all personal (non-work) online devices. In December 2025, this study found that the average adult spends 4 hours 24 minutes online each day across their devices, with one third (33%) spend more than five hours per day.

1. Internet Matters (2026) Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World: Year Five Index Report 2026. London: Internet Matters. Available at: <https://www.internetmatters.org/>

2. Ofcom (2019) Online Nation: 2019 report. London: Ofcom. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2019/online-nation-report.pdf?v=323938>

3. Ofcom (2025) Online Nation: Report 2025. London: Ofcom. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2025/online-nations-report-2025.pdf?v=409837>

73%

Consider digital wellbeing important to their mental health

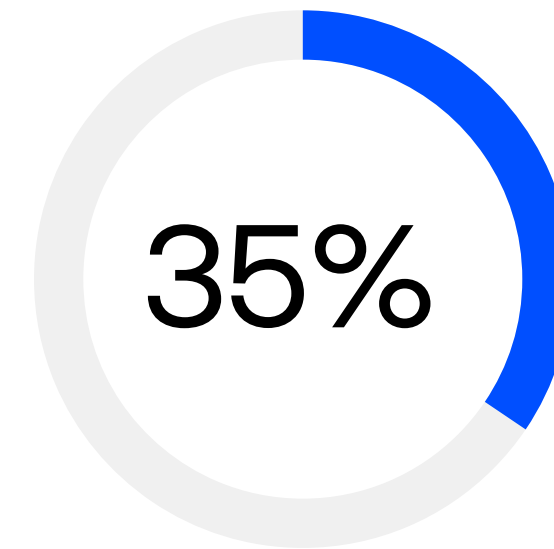
As time spent online has increased, so too has awareness of its impact. The study finds 73% consider digital wellbeing important to their overall mental health, while 35% report feeling concerned about it. Two thirds of people (66%) say they regularly think about how they use their devices, with 45% doing so at least weekly.

Alongside this, there is growing evidence that digital habits are affecting how people feel day to day. Almost three quarters (74%) of respondents say they have experienced at least one negative effect associated with their phone use.

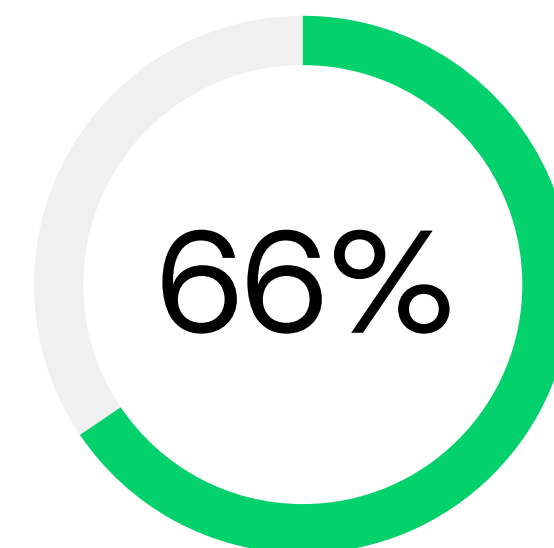
Of these, half (50%) say they are not fully present due to phone use, while 40% report feeling worse after extended use. Common impacts include reduced sleep (33%), feeling they spend too much time on their devices (30%) and exposure to misleading information (20%).

For some, these effects are more pronounced. More than a third (37%) report feeling addicted to their phone, while 36% believe their mental health has been negatively affected, and 17% say they feel anxious when without their device. In addition, 50% say they often realise they were not fully present in a real-life moment – like spending time with loved ones or enjoying live music – because they were on their phone.

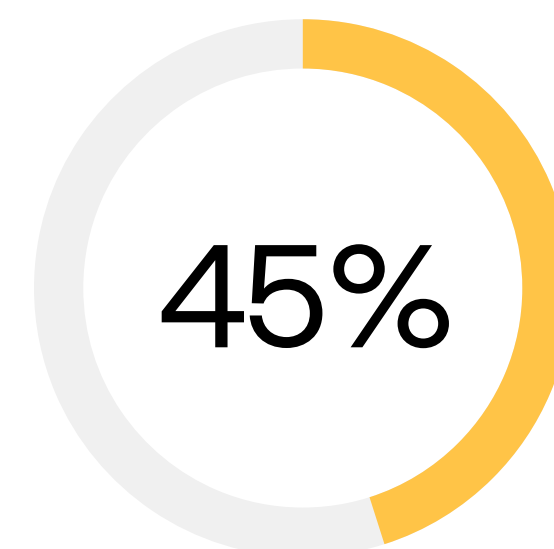
Awareness of digital impact is increasing



Concerned about device use



Think about how they are using their devices



Think about device use weekly

Negative impacts of digital technology

74%

Experienced at least one negative effect with phone use

50%

Not fully present due to phone use

40%

Feel worse after extended phone use

33%

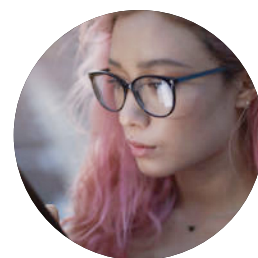
Report reduced sleep

30%

Feel they spend too much time on devices

20%

Exposure to misleading information



A desire to better control digital use

Despite these challenges, there is a clear desire to improve. Many people report wanting to adjust how they use their devices, rather than step away from them entirely.

Common areas of focus include reducing time spent scrolling (31%), limiting use before bed (27%) and reducing frequent checking (27%). Others want to avoid losing track of time (24%), limit morning use (23%) and reduce multitasking across applications (23%).

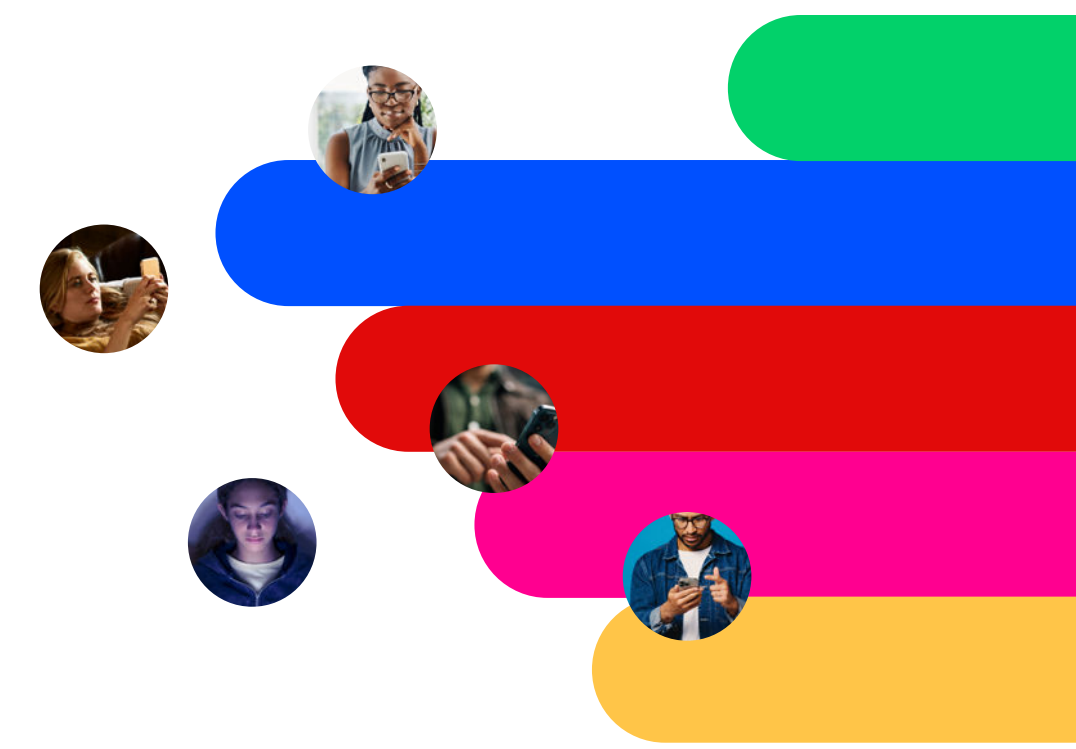
Further, the habits people want to change vary by age, with younger groups more likely to report frequent checking, scrolling and difficulty disengaging. Differences also emerge by gender, with women more likely to report spending longer online than intended.

The habits people want to adjust

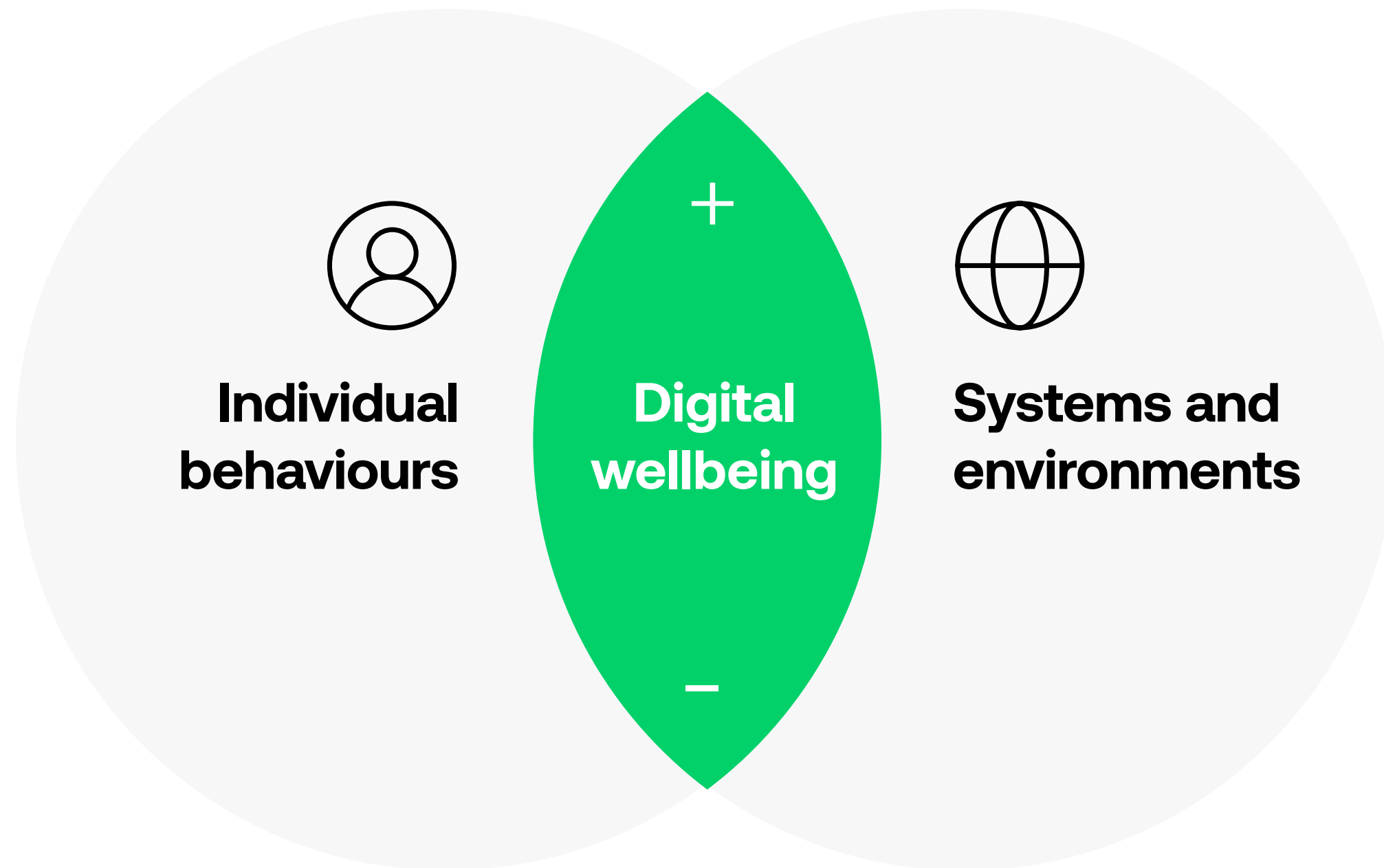
	Age breakdown						Gender breakdown	
	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65+	Men	Women
Scrolling online for longer than they meant to	26%	33%	34%	38%	31%	21%	27%	34%
Doomscrolling online e.g. scrolling longer than intended	34%	30%	28%	20%	14%	5%	20%	22%
Checking their phone without thinking about it	27%	30%	33%	30%	23%	16%	24%	29%
Reaching for their phone when they wake up in the morning	25%	31%	28%	24%	21%	7%	20%	25%
Using their phone just before going to sleep	30%	30%	35%	28%	30%	10%	24%	29%
Getting distracted by their phone from work or conversations	24%	28%	23%	18%	10%	5%	19%	17%
Losing track of time while using social media or apps	26%	29%	27%	28%	22%	12%	21%	27%

Growing awareness of digital wellbeing is also reflected in wider public and policy debate. Issues such as online safety, misinformation, harms from artificial intelligence, platform design, data use and privacy are receiving increasing attention from policymakers, researchers and civil society organisations. These discussions reflect a growing recognition that digital experiences are shaped not only by individual behaviour, but by the systems and structures that underpin them.

In summary, while digital technology remains an integral and valued part of modern life in the UK, its growing presence is accompanied by increasingly complex patterns of use and a widening range of impacts. For many, the benefits of connectivity are clear, but so too are the challenges in maintaining focus, balance and wellbeing in an always-on environment.



The factors shaping digital wellbeing



Analysis of the research points to two interconnected forces shaping digital wellbeing in the UK: individual patterns of behaviour, and the systems people engage with. Patterns observed across the study suggest that differences in how people use technology – particularly the extent to which that use is conscious or unintentional – are closely linked to how digital life is experienced day to day.

Human behaviour is shaped by habit and social context. Small, repeated actions – such as checking a notification or opening an app – can quickly become automatic over time. [Behavioural science](#)⁴ shows that these habits are reinforced through cues and rewards, making them difficult to interrupt once established.

Behaviour is also shaped by the people around us. When frequent phone use becomes normalised, it can shape the habits of others, with 73% of people influenced by the behaviour they see around them. This is reflected within households and across generations. [Ofcom data](#)⁵ shows while a third (33%) of online 8-to-17-year-olds believe their screen time is too high, more than half (52%) of those children also think their parents spend too much time on their devices.

4. Mendelsohn, A.I. (2019) 'Creatures of Habit: The Neuroscience of Habit and Purposeful Behavior', Biological Psychiatry. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2019.03.978>

5. Ofcom (2025) Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report. London: Ofcom. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2025/childrens-media-literacy-report-2025.pdf>

Behaviour is shaped by the people around us

73%

Influenced by the behaviour they see around them

52%

8-17 year olds think parents spend too much time on devices

33%

8-17 year olds believe their screen time is too high

While these behaviours develop at the individual level, they are shaped and reinforced by the digital environments people engage with. The digital systems that people are engaging with, such as social media platforms, are designed to be intuitive, responsive and engaging. Features such as personalised feeds, notifications and seamless navigation reduce friction and encourage continued use, shaping how, when and how often people engage.

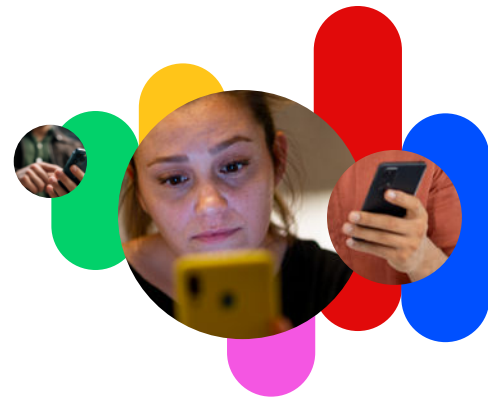
These two factors do not operate independently. The findings show that individual behaviour and system design interact to shape everyday digital experiences, helping to explain why some patterns of use are linked to poorer wellbeing outcomes than others. In practice, this means digital wellbeing is shaped not only by individual choices, but by the environments in which those choices are made.

Unintentional use is now the defining behaviour

Analysis of the research reveals a clear relationship between digital wellbeing outcomes and levels of unintentional phone use. Those experiencing the most negative effects from their digital habits consistently report higher levels of unintentional engagement, suggesting that how people use their devices plays a critical role in shaping their overall experience.

1 hour
26 minutes

Unintentional phone use each day



In this context, unintentional use refers to time spent on devices without a clear purpose or conscious decision. This might include checking a phone without thinking, drifting between apps, going online for one thing and finding yourself doing something else entirely, or staying online longer than intended. While these behaviours may seem small in isolation, they accumulate over time and form a significant part of daily digital life.

Across the UK, the average person spends four hours daily on their smartphone and more than a third (36%) of smartphone use is described as unintentional. In total, people in the UK are on track to spend 4.7 years of their waking lives using their phones unintentionally, equivalent to around one hour and 26 minutes each day, in addition to time spent online for a specific purpose. This reflects how deeply embedded unintentional use has become within everyday routines, particularly among those aged 16-24 and 45-54.

Unintentional phone use (Estimated)

Age breakdown						Gender	
16 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65 +	Men	Women
44%	40%	39%	42%	32%	26%	34%	38%

The impact of unintentional use

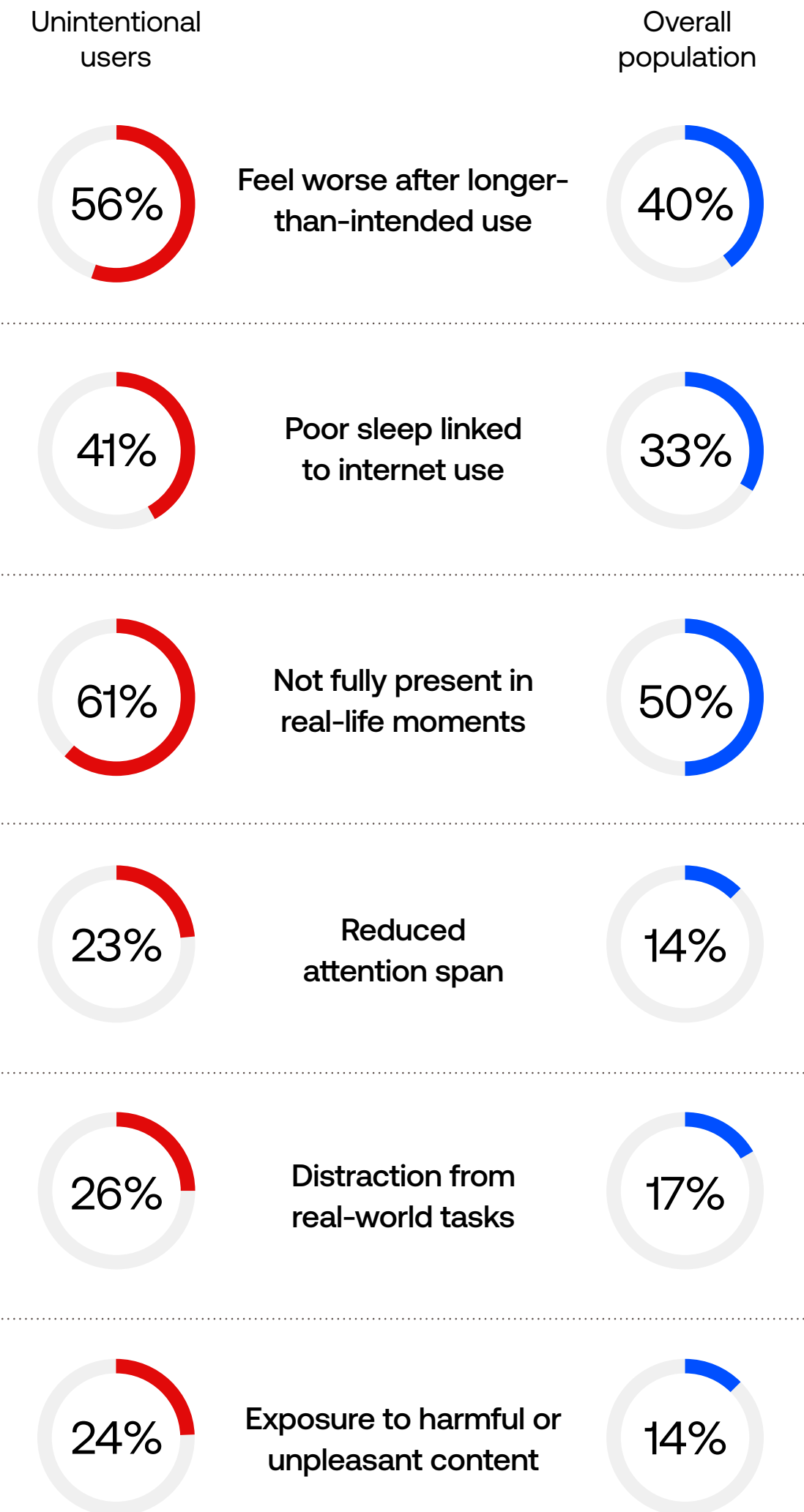
The impacts of unintentional use are significant. Among those with the highest levels of unintentional use, more than half (56%) report feeling worse after using their phone for longer than intended, compared to 40% of the wider population. They are also more likely to experience disruption to daily life, with 41% reporting poor sleep linked to phone or internet use (vs 33% overall), and 61% saying they often realise they were not fully present in real-life moments because they were on their phone (vs 50%).

Across the past 12 months, this group has also reported higher levels of reduced attention span (23% vs 14%), distraction from real-world tasks (26% vs 17%), and exposure to harmful or unpleasant content online (24% vs 14%).

Despite the extent of these patterns, there is a clear appetite to change. Many people recognise the impact of their digital habits and want to take greater control. Among those most affected, 55% say they would welcome tools or support to help them manage their phone use, while only 13% say they would be happy continuing with their current behaviour.

These findings suggest that unintentional use of digital devices is not a marginal behaviour, but a defining feature of how digital life is experienced today, and a key factor in understanding the challenges shaping digital wellbeing in the UK.

Unintentional users vs overall population



System-level influences on digital wellbeing

Modern digital environments have evolved to support continuous interaction. Features such as notifications, personalised content and autoplay reduce friction and make it easier to move between activities, while continuous feeds and real-time updates ensure that new content is always available. This creates environments with few natural stopping points, reinforcing patterns of continuous engagement such as infinite scrolling.

Such design features play a significant role in shaping patterns of engagement. More than half of respondents (51%) report that notifications influence how often they check their devices, while 40% say autoplay and continuous feeds affect how long they stay engaged. In addition, 69% believe that social media platforms are designed in ways that encourage continued engagement.

Personalisation is a core component of many digital services. Algorithms are used to tailor content, recommendations and interactions to individual users, shaping what people see and how they experience digital environments over time. As a result, digital experiences are not static but continuously adapted in response to user behaviour.

Interest in how these systems operate is also increasing. The majority (69%) want greater transparency around how their personal data is used, while 60% express a desire to better understand how algorithms shape their online experience.

Although many people value personalised content, expectations around visibility and control are evolving. 61% say they would reset their algorithm if given the option, while 57% want more control over the content they see.

AI Advances in areas such as generative artificial intelligence are adding further complexity to digital systems. AI is changing how content is created, presented and consumed. Around two thirds (65%) report difficulty distinguishing what is real and 63% say that encountering misleading or synthetic content has become more common. Interestingly, and likely as a result, 75% of people support clearer labelling of AI use.

What shapes continuous engagement

69%

Social media designed to encourage engagement

51%

Notifications

40%

Autoplay and continuous feeds

Interest in how digital systems operate

69%

Want greater transparency on data use

61%

Would reset algorithms

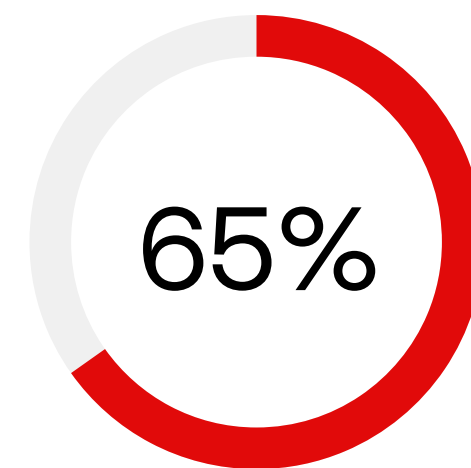
60%

Want to understand algorithms

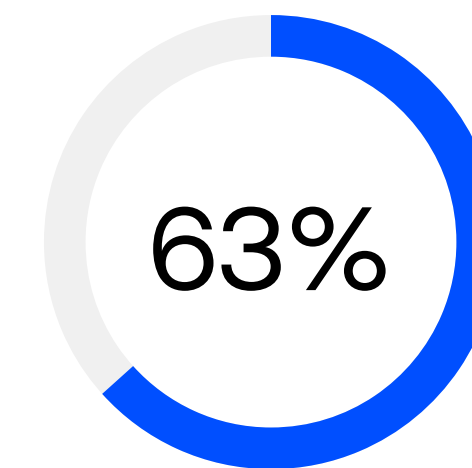
57%

Want more control over content

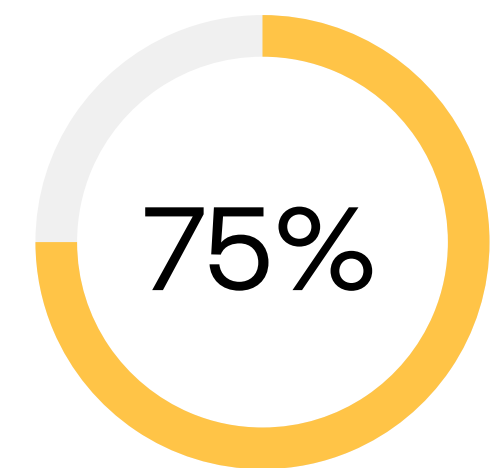
AI is changing how content is created, presented and consumed



Have difficulty distinguishing what is real



Misleading or synthetic content more common



Support clearer labelling of AI use

These changes are also reflected in reported levels of trust and confidence. More than half of participants (59%) say they trust digital platforms less than they previously did, while 51% express concern about being misled. Concerns extend to broader risks associated with digital life, including misinformation (69%), misleading content (64%), and security risks such as scams (43%), identity theft (38%), hacking (36%) and data breaches (34%).

In turn, these perceptions are influencing how people participate in digital spaces. Nearly half (48%) say the risk of abusive or hostile responses online sometimes makes them more hesitant to share their views online, suggesting a shift in how digital platforms are used for communication and expression.

There is a growing expectation for support at the same time. Three quarters (75%) of respondents want more education on how to use digital technology safely, while 32% say they lack confidence in managing platforms and settings. Participants also identify a range of potential solutions, including improved safety tools (42%), content restrictions (39%), clearer labelling of misinformation (37%) and awareness campaigns (32%).

The findings suggest expectations of digital systems are evolving, with increasing demand for greater transparency, control and support.

Trust and confidence

59%

Trust digital platforms less than they previously did

51%

Concern about being misled

Broader risks associated with digital life

69%

Misinformation

38%

Identity theft

64%

Misleading content

36%

Hacking

43%

Scams

34%

Data breaches

Growing expectation for support

75%

Want more information on how to use digital technology

32%

Lack confidence in managing platforms and settings

Participants identified potential solutions

42%

Improved safety tools

37%

Clearer labelling of misinformation

39%

Content restrictions

32%

Awareness campaigns

The UK's first Digital Intentionality Score

To better understand how people experience digital life today, the research has been used to establish the UK's first Digital Intentionality Score – an aggregated and anonymised measure of digital intentionality at a national level.

Created in partnership with author and digital wellbeing expert Seyi Akiwowo, and drawing on self-reported behaviours and device-level indicators, the score reflects the extent to which activity is intentional and within an individual's control. It combines measures such as time spent on devices, frequency of checking, and behavioural signals like drifting from a task or staying longer than intended, to build a more complete picture of everyday digital experience. As a result, the findings may differ from other measures in this report that focus on individual behaviours or screen time alone.

As of April 2026, the UK's national Digital Intentionality Score stands at 63 out of 100, where 100 represents complete control and 0 indicates little to no control.

This suggests that, for many people, digital behaviour sits in a space between intention and distraction. Use often begins with a clear purpose, but does not always follow a linear path, with attention frequently shifting once people are on their devices.

These behavioural differences are reflected in the Digital Intentionality Score, which varies by age, with over-45s showing more intentional use, while 16 to 34-year-olds are more likely to fall into automatic behaviours.

The score provides a way to quantify something that is often difficult to see: the degree of intentionality people have over their digital lives. Moving beyond screen time alone, it captures not just how much time is spent on devices, but how that time is experienced and with what purpose.

An individual scoring tool has been developed alongside the national score to enable people to assess their own behaviour and compare their results against the national average. This provides a clearer sense of how intentional their use is relative to others, where patterns may differ, and offers tangible advice aligned to individual scores.

Together, the Digital Intentionality Score and individual tool create a foundation for tracking intentional use change over time. They help people to identify areas where they may want to make adjustments and support a more informed and constructive conversation about digital wellbeing in the UK.

Digital Intentionality Score UK

63 out of 100

National Average

53 out of 100

Age: 16 - 24

53 out of 100

Age: 25 - 34

55 out of 100

Age: 35 - 44

63 out of 100

Age: 45 - 54

64 out of 100

Age: 55 - 64

64 out of 100

Age: 65+

A healthier digital future: creating the conditions for control

The findings in this report point to a clear conclusion: improving digital wellbeing is not simply a matter of individual effort, but of creating the right conditions for people to take control of their digital lives.

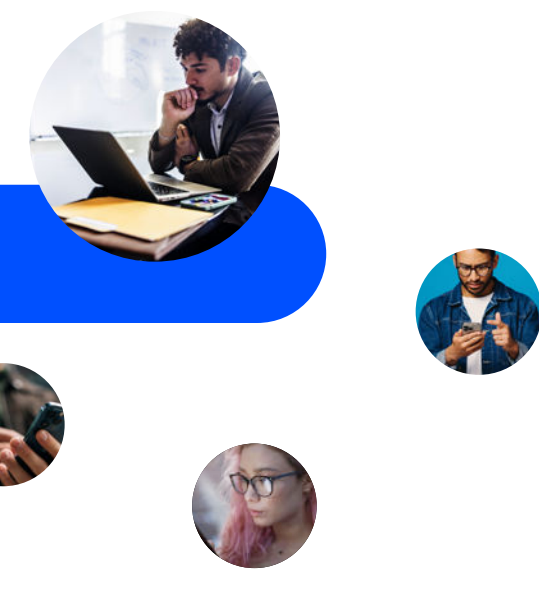
While many people are actively trying to improve their relationship with technology, this effort does not always translate into lasting change. Almost two thirds (65%) of people report having taken steps to adjust how they use their devices, yet many continue to experience negative effects, reflecting a disconnect between intention and outcome.

This points to a broader challenge. As patterns of unintentional use have become more embedded in everyday life, managing digital behaviour has become more complex. People are navigating both their own habits and digital environments designed to keep them engaged.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenge is not a lack of motivation, but a lack of support. Improving digital wellbeing therefore requires a broader, system-wide approach - one that makes it easier for people to pause, understand, and take control. This includes clearer information, more accessible tools, and digital environments that are designed to support healthier patterns of use, alongside greater transparency around how digital experiences are shaped.

Expectations of the wider ecosystem are also evolving. Seven in ten people (71%) believe individuals have a responsibility to manage their own habits, while the same proportion say social media companies should do more to support digital wellbeing. More than half (54%) also see telecoms providers as part of the solution, highlighting the need for a collective and co-ordinated approach.

This creates a clear opportunity for the telecoms industry to move beyond enabling access alone towards supporting better digital experiences, helping people to engage with technology in ways that feel more deliberate, balanced and in control. Ultimately, improving digital wellbeing is not about using technology less, but using it with greater awareness, control and confidence.



Who has responsibility for digital wellbeing?

71%

Individuals

71%

Social media companies

58%

Search engines

54%

Telecoms providers

Research scope and methodology

Initial research was conducted in December 2024, when Strand Partners’ specialist research team surveyed 1,004 nationally representative respondents between 18.12.2024 and 20.12.2024. This provided a comprehensive baseline understanding of public perceptions and attitudes towards digital wellbeing and online safety.

This phase was complemented by qualitative research, including six online in-depth interviews with individuals across the UK to explore personal experiences in greater detail, as well as an in-person focus group in Bristol with eight participants to support deeper discussion and collective insight.

Further research was conducted amongst 2,039 respondents almost one year later between 28.11.2025 and 01.12.2025. This research deepened understanding of how people think, feel, and behave in their digital lives beyond standard safety concerns, focusing on digital habits and drivers of wellbeing. It also featured two focus groups.

6,136 individuals were then surveyed between 11.03.2026 and 16.03.2026. This survey included respondents from 16+, to ensure a wider diversity of perspectives were captured. The survey sought to uncover further depth, and insights surrounding the previous surveys and monitor changing patterns over time.

All surveys were representative by age, gender and NUTS 1 region. Strand Partners is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

Methodology for calculating time spent online over a lifetime: VMO2 research found people spend an average of four hours per day on their smartphone, with 36% of time spent on a smartphone unintentionally. This equates to around 1 hour 26 minutes per day. The average child gets their first phone at around age [10–11](#)¹, and [life expectancy](#)² is approximately 88.5 years, meaning people spend around 78 years owning a smartphone. Over time, this adds up to roughly 523 hours per year, or around 41,000 hours across a lifetime – equivalent to about 1,670 days, or 4.7 years spent using their phone unintentionally.

1. Kidscape: Available at: https://coramkidscape.org.uk/article/at-what-age-should-i-give-my-child-a-smartphone/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

2. Office for National Statistics: Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies?os=___&utm_source=chatgpt.com

Digital Intentionality Score

The National Digital Intentionality Score was calculated using polling data from a nationally representative online survey of 6,002 UK smartphone owners aged 16+, conducted between 10.04.2026 and 15.04.2026. The sample was representative by age, gender and NUTS 1 region.

The Score measures how intentional and in control people are in their daily smartphone use. Survey responses to ten survey questions were converted into a points-based score out of 100, with higher scores indicating more intentional smartphone use.

The Score is based on ten survey-derived measures. For each measure, responses were converted into points using a predefined scoring framework designed in partnership with author and digital wellbeing expert, Seyi Akiwowo.



Seyi Akiwowo
Author and digital wellbeing expert

- Unintentional time per day (40 points)
- Consciousness of use (10 points)
- Daily device pick ups (8 points)
- Average session length (7 points)
- Unintentional pick ups (7 points)
- Using phone longer than intended (7 points)
- Feeling in control (7 points)
- Ease / difficulty putting phone down (6 points)
- Phone use happiness (5 points)
- Cause of losing control (3 points)

Behaviours associated with more intentional smartphone use, such as lower unintentional screen time, fewer unintentional pickups, greater awareness of why the phone was being used, stronger feelings of control and greater satisfaction with phone habits, received higher scores. Behaviours associated with less intentional use received lower scores.

The ten component scores were then added together to produce an overall score out of 100. The same scoring approach was applied to the national sample and to age subgroups, allowing comparisons between the UK overall and different age groups.

The role of Virgin Media O2

Virgin Media O2 is at the heart of the UK’s digital ecosystem, connecting millions of customers and those digitally excluded in society to the benefits of the online world.

For more than a decade, we have played an active role in making that digital experience safer and more positive – including as a co-founding member of online safety organisation, Internet Matters, our work to block fraud and scams on our network, and by providing tools that help customers filter and manage their online content.

Building on this commitment, we have adopted an evolved strategy focused on society’s digital wellbeing. Our approach to digital wellbeing is guided by a clear set of principles, rooted in respect for people’s rights, wellbeing and everyday experiences – read our [Digital Wellbeing Manifesto](#).

As part of this new strategy, Virgin Media O2 is funding the establishment of a major new five-year research initiative, The Digital Wellbeing Observatory, with the University of Cambridge. The Observatory will deepen the UK’s understanding of digital wellbeing and support more evidence-based approaches to addressing it.

