There are no #PhoneZombies

Thinking for ourselves about mobile phones and mental health

Amy Pollard and Anna Warhurst

with contributions from Hanaan Ahmed, Luis Alfonso, Molly Bloom, Abilina Camara, Bruna Castanheira, Keira Christou, Olivia Dennis, Sumaya Felic, Tsiona Fernandes-Tadesse, Maddie Gaskell, Suraiya Hall, Georgia Hasalm, Purdie Harris, Max Haslam, Lola Houlton, Precilia Kabunda, Kaway Joof, Luan Perote Versa; Jemima Mbenzu, Somto Mekaowulu, Klaudia Mitiajew, Mohammed Mufti, Hannah Morrison, Plamedy Mvuata, Angel Norena de Oro, Afi Princess Okaidja, Evan Orford-Williams, Tamsin Orford-Williams, Niamh Tucker, Roma Rajani, Daniel Sikora, Dreydon Swaby, Katrina Sylvester and Trenyce Sylvester
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Preface

In March 2019, ten 14 and 15 year olds from Greig City Academy in North London did a week of work experience with the Mental Health Collective. A further twenty-four 14, 15 and 16 year olds from seven other schools met with us for work experience sessions on four Sunday afternoons.

This paper tells the story of how our thinking about mobile phones and mental health developed over the time we spent working together. It reflects the conversations that emerged between ourselves and the young people; our own personal learning; and the data and analysis that young people produced themselves.

Amy Pollard and Anna Warhurst
Executive Summary

The message of this project is that there no #PhoneZombies. We are alive, we are awake and we’re thinking for ourselves. Together, we can decide where we want to go with this technology next.

In March 2019, the Mental Health Collective worked together with 34 young people aged 14, 15 and 16 from North London to explore the relationship between mobile phones and mental health. This report tells the story of how our thinking on this subject developed as team.

Key insights include:

Technology and moral panic has a long history
- Concerns raised in the debate on mobile phones and mental health are similar to concerns that have been raised about technology since the time of Socrates.
- Similar concerns were raised when new technology such as learning to write, the printing press, newspapers, radio, television and video games were first introduced.
- These technologies were powerful arbiters of social change.

Being on your phone is active, not brainless
- Far from being passive or brainless, being ‘on your phone’ involves almost constant decision-making.
- On a platform like Instagram, young people can identify themselves making a decision approximately every 7 seconds - equal to around 500 decisions each hour.
- Young people identify wanting to escape boredom, find stimulation and connect with others as key drivers for the choices they make on their phones.
- Relationships, norms and values are key for framing the decisions and judgements people make.

Being on your phone can help you feel connected
- Far from blocking us from our emotions, phones can help us to feel and express emotions, whether through listening to music or messaging friends.
- Being on your phone means being where people are. It helps you build and maintain your connections and keep up to date.
- The materialistic, judgmental behaviours that exist online reflects what’s going on in real life - the two worlds interconnect.
- Being on your phone gives young people an autonomy they lack in other spaces: feeling judged at school, monitored at home and threatened on the streets.
What we want is simple: to be safe, free and connected

- The online and offline worlds are not separate but are interconnected, and so are the norms and values that govern them.
- Young people are fearful for their lives; they are deeply concerned about the amount of suicides and knife stabbings amongst their age group and in their communities and want it to stop.
- Young people are keenly aware of the social issues and power struggles that impact on their lives, and have clear ideas about what they want the future to look like.

Snapping out of zombie mode

- The concept of a “#PhoneZombie” - someone zoned out on their phone and oblivious to their physical environment, is widely recognised by young people and by people of all ages in the UK.
- Joking that we are all turning into zombies on our phone can provide a language for laughing at ourselves and prompting each other to reconnect face-to-face.

Phones are not the problem - it’s how we use them that matters

- Phones are a necessary part of our lives. It’s difficult to say whether they are controlling us one way or the other because we use them for so many different things.
- The panic around mobile phones has got out of hand. We are making decisions about how we use our mobile phones as they are a tool, but we need to learn how to use them properly and share best practice with each other so we can create a world we want.

Whilst the debate around mobile phones and mental health bears many of the characteristics of a moral panic, it’s not helpful to dismiss these concerns as a hysterical paranoia. The strength of feeling is telling us that we are at a fork in the road. Society is facing an important set of decisions about how technology will shape our future.

The relationship between mobile phones and mental health is not yet determined. It will depend on the choices we make as individuals, in our relationships and as a society.

Young people are making choices already. They are reflective about the debate and have clear ideas about what they want the future to look like. Young people are not passive victims, floating helplessly in a pre-determined direction unless they are ‘saved’ by adults. Decisions about technology need to be made together with young people, in the context of a broader set of choices about how we want to live as a society.

We can think for ourselves. There are no Phone Zombies.
Day 1: Mobile phones, moral panic and a visit to the Royal Society

On our first day together, we introduced the project and discussed what each of us wanted to get out of our time working together.

Then we looked at the state-of-play in terms of the debate on mobile phones and mental health, considering the issues that are being raised and how the agenda is currently being formulated. We discussed how each of us had experienced the public discussion so far. Everyone was familiar with the experience of being told to get off their phone by a parent, friend or loved one - and also with the experience of getting so interested in something on your device that you lose track of time and get disconnected from your surroundings. We were all familiar with the concern around mobile phones and mental health, especially with worries about mental health and social media.

We discussed the sociological concept of “moral panic”, where a feeling of fear spreads among a large number of people that some evil is threatening the well-being of society. In a moral panic, a major social concern gains momentum and a widespread hysteria and paranoia takes hold. Is the concern being raised around mobile phones and mental health a reasonable response to a new public health issue? Or is it a moral panic that has been blown out of proportion? Is the energy and attention currently being given to mobile phones and mental health a useful resource that we need to address a new problem? Or is it a distraction from more important things?

We considered examples from other historical periods when technology was considered to be dangerous:

- In 400 bc, Socrates warned against learning to write saying that would “create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories”.
- In the 16th Century, Swiss Scientist Conrad Gessner highlighted the danger of the growing number of printed books, arguing that the overabundance of information would be “confusing and harmful” to the mind.
- In 18th Century, when newspapers become common, the French statesman Malesherbes raised concerns about getting news from the printed page rather than through word of mouth - arguing that it would socially isolate readers.


In the 1930s, radio was accused of distracting children from reading and diminishing their performance at school through the “compelling excitement of the loudspeaker”.

In the mid-twentieth century, when television became widespread, it was seen as damaging radio, conversation, reading and patterns of family living.

In the late-twentieth century, video games were accused of normalising violence and implicated in teenage gun crimes.

These examples raised interesting questions for us: On the one hand, the concern about mobile phones and mental health seemed to fit squarely within a pattern of concerns around technology. To modern eyes, many of these concerns seem disproportionate and unwarranted. Would the current concern with mobile phones and mental health look similarly unfounded in future years?

However, on the other hand, each of these technologies did have a profound impact on society, influencing our values and significantly shaping the historical vantage point from which we now view them. Given that these technologies played an important part in shaping our current worldview, how possible is it to look at them objectively?

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These were difficult questions, so in the afternoon we went to discuss them with one of the Mental Health Collective’s Fellows, Prof. Sir Simon Wessely. We went on the bus to the Royal Society for Medicine.
Amongst other things, we asked Simon “What do you think is the relationship between technology and mental health?”

He responded: “It’s not for people of my generation to answer that question”

He described how he thought that he would personally have been happier if there had been social media when he was younger, and that he thought that the bullying and status anxiety was equally prevalent in his adolescence but just played out in a different way. He suggested that there were different winners and losers in the current context (some people do better in a social media environment than face-to-face, and vice versa), but stepping back to look at the big picture, he expected that the overall levels of distress more or less come out in the wash.

Fundamentally though, he thought it was our question to explore.

That laid down the challenge for the rest of the week.
Day 2 - Making decisions on our phones

We started our second day together by doing some participant observation - an ethnographic research method which involves both taking part in a social activity and observing it at the same time. Our research question was: “When and why do we make decisions when we are on our phones?”

In pairs, we took it turns to go on our phones and do whatever we would normally want to do. Whenever the person on the phone made a decision, we had to make a note of what the decision was, and why it had been made. One person in the pair was on their phone and the other person was looking over their shoulder to help them notice when they had made a decision and record it. After a while the pairs swapped over.

As the facilitator, I was surprised at how easy the team found this task. Everyone found it fairly easy both to make decisions, and to notice the decisions they were making.

Sometimes there wasn’t much to record - for example if someone decided to watch a Netflix video or stream a Spotify playlist, then it might take a while for them to make a decision to change something. But for most of the pairs, it was possible to identify a significant amount of decision-making, with decisions happening on a second to second, minute to minute basis.

On Instagram, the young people were able to identify themselves making a decision approximately every 7 seconds. That is equal to around 500 decisions each hour.

We completed this task both with the young people from Greig City Academy and those we met on Sundays. This section summarises both data sets.
It was immediately clear that going on our phones was an active thing to do, involving lots of decisions. It was not something mindless, but an activity where multiple conscious choices were being made.

Whilst it was helpful to have a partner with whom you could articulate why you had made a decision, the team did not find it particularly arduous to explain why they had made particular choices.

There were some common themes that guided people’s decision-making. Frequently, the team reported taking a decision because they were bored (eg. “skipped the video 20 secs because I want to get to the point”). Another common theme was curiosity and wanting to know what people were up to. The most frequently reported reasons for making a decision were either selecting through to something interesting or selecting away from something boring.

It was also clear that these decisions were not made in a vacuum, but were embedded in a web of relationships and reciprocity both online and in real life. Team members reported decisions such as:
● Opening Snapchat to message a friend because they had messaged first.
● Pausing video to talk to someone in the room.
● Going on their feed to like comments that had been left on their post.
● Leaving Instagram Live to have another conversation in the room.

Many of the decisions related to judgements about relationships. Different choices were made depending on which relationships people wanted to invest in, the social dynamics between them and what kind of behaviour would be considered rude. Some team members reported, for example, that they were keen to maintain streaks on Snapchat so as not to break reciprocity with particular friends; and to respond to messages so as to maintain and develop important relationships. It was not necessary, however, to explain why you had left an Instagram Live or to say thank you for a follow - indeed, doing so would be “cringe” and suggest that you didn’t know what you were doing.

We drew two conclusions from this:

1. The idea of a “Phone Zombie” - someone mindlessly scrolling in a brain-dead way - is not accurate.

Infact, being on your phone is a very active process which involves almost constant decision-making. These decisions could be easily identified and explained by our team members. On a platform like Instagram, young people could identify themselves taking decisions approximately every 7 seconds - equal to 500 each hour. The choices were often underpinned by wanting to be more stimulated and active (eg. finding things that are interesting; rejecting things that are boring) - rather than wanting to be numb or zoned out.

2. The decisions people make on their phones are framed by social relationships, norms and values.

Team members described how many decisions about how to act online and in real life were underpinned by norms and values around rudeness. For example, it was considered rude to be on your phone and ignore someone talking to you in real life, and also rude to not respond to a message from someone important to you. But it was not rude to leave Instagram Live abruptly. Different things would be rude or not rude depending on the person and your relationship with them.

People’s decisions were also framed by who they felt close to and who they wanted to build closer ties with. If someone appeared to be disconnected from what was going on around them in real life, this might simply be because they are busy connecting with someone else through their phone. Here, it may be less the case that the phone has prevented them being able to pay attention, and more that they have decided to direct their attention elsewhere.
Day 3 - Mobile phones, mental health and a vision for the future

Morning - Mobile phones and our mental health

On the morning of our third day together, the team took it in turns to read aloud from a blog post that Amy had written in summer 2016, describing her experience of mental health difficulties after the Brexit vote. She had been awake at night feeding her baby, and also engaging with colleagues and friends via Twitter about the news. This eventually led to a breakdown.

As a group, we discussed the question: “How much did social media play a part in Amy’s breakdown?”

There was wide agreement in the room that social media had exacerbated Amy’s own sense of panic. Seeing colleagues and friends behave so erratically increased her belief that there was real cause for alarm.

All of the group related with the experience Amy described in feeling “unable to stop scrolling” and finding themselves consumed by looking at things on their phones. As L put it “When I start I can’t stop. After, I realise I’ve been on it for two hours.” But there was also a recognition that Amy could have taken decisions to help herself. “You should have taken a break and gone for a walk with your husband or something. It would have helped you to get off social media.” - M.
This led to a discussion about when we are making conscious decisions to use our phones, and when they are sucking us in. This seemed to depend on a few factors; what you were doing, whether your friends were there, and if there was something interesting to look at or read.

Equally, the feelings associated with being on their phones for long periods changed according to the circumstance. For instance, scrolling through memes for hours could induce a sense of guilt, but playing games didn’t always cause the same feeling. “There’s a difference between games and memes. With memes I just forget about the whole world. I feel guilty, you could have used that time more productively. But with games I feel like I have a choice, but the game just hooked me in. It was fun!” - A. Clearly decisions were being actively made all the time, but the amount to which our team felt they had control over them varied according to the situation.

We then talked about the key drivers for why they used their phones. Through this discussion, three main themes stood out:

- **Fear of boredom** - A common theme that emerged throughout all the discussions was the view that boredom was a fearful state to be avoided at all costs - and that it might even lead to madness. “I hate being bored. I like drawing but I am obsessed with my phone. I can stop, but I just don’t want to. Sometimes I do both at the same time, but I’d choose my phone over drawing.” - J

Phones served as a distraction, which was seen to be a necessary and healthy way to cope with emotions. “Humans have to be distracted. If you’re by yourself too much, if you’re on your own with your own thoughts for too long you’ll go crazy” said J.

- **Supporting or stimulating feelings and emotions** - Rather than be alone with your own thoughts and feelings, you could listen to music to stimulate certain emotions and get a release. “If I’m on my own with my own thoughts I listen to music. If something sad happens and I want to feel sad I listen to sad music, then if I feel like dancing and I want to be hype, I listen to hype music. If you want to feel an emotion you just listen to music to force yourself to feel it” - D

Being on your phone allows you to talk openly with friends about your feelings; “Social media can be good as you can release your emotions through it. I don’t feel I can not go on it. You can tell people about how you feel there” said M. “You can meet more people online and make more friends, and it helps you communicate more confidently than in real life” said L.

- **Fear of missing out on something** - Being up to date and knowing what’s happening was essential and for that, you needed to be on your phone. “If you’re not

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4 We completed this task both with the young people from Greig City Academy and those we met on Sundays. This point was asserted numerous times in both groups.
on it then you’re not up to date.” M said. Your phone is where your friends socialise and play, and when you’re not on it, you’re thinking about what you’re not doing; “You could be talking to people and playing games.” - said L. It’s also important to stay up to date with local gang and knife related incidents. Everyone in the group said they checked gang-related news sites daily to find out which gangs were fighting who, and whether they were at risk in their area.

One overarching theme that stood out was the pursuit of connection. Whether it be through messaging friends, keeping up to date, or getting in touch with their own emotions through music, they sought a connection. For better or for worse, phones enabled them to form connections with others, and with themselves. They were a necessary means of avoiding their own troublesome thoughts, of expressing emotions and ultimately protected us from our own inner worlds.

“It helps me with my mental health as it distracts me from myself. Looking at some other people’s petty fights distracts you. Getting involved in other people’s stuff is better than dealing with your own stuff.” - D

There was also a recognition that sometimes your phone could suck you in and make you feel out of control. For J, feeling unable to get off her phone was interrupting her ability to study. “Netflix and Snapchat are the worst, I can never stop myself getting off my phone. Then I have to do everything last minute.” - J

M said he felt guilty after realising how much time he’d spent on it. “You could be using your time more productively, which can make you feel guilty” said M. “You don’t realise that it’s bad until you’re off it. Then you realise that keeping the distraction away, it helps you. But then you get drawn in again and it’s beyond your control.” said L.

There was a strong sense in the group that it was your individual responsibility to get off your phone when you had been on it for too long, but also that it could sometimes feel impossible. There were too many draws, pressures from friends and the temptation was sometimes just too strong:

- “Even when you don’t want to talk to people, you have to, otherwise they will worry - Like when a significant event happens, like if a loved one dies, you might want to not talk to people, but because everyone knows and people worry about you, you have to be on your phone all the time to respond to people.” - M

- “Sometimes I spend the whole day on my console and I forget to go outside. My friend, will text me saying let’s go online, so I’m like yeah and sometimes it’s hard to get wins, so I end up staying on it longer.” - A
When asked what would discourage them from being on their phones, having close relationships was the biggest contributing factor. It was clear that interacting with people on their phones was a way of forming close relationships in real life:

- “When you get married you have someone for company so you wouldn’t need to go on it - it’s about connectedness.” - M said.

- “Social media helps you build friendships and relationships - one of the best people I know I met online. Young people find other young people online going through the same things. Most people (adults) think of the bad people you meet online but most of the time it’s not true.” - D

PM - A Vision for the future

In the afternoon, we discussed the values that govern society today, and what the young people wanted for the future.\(^5\)

The key values were:
- Judgment/ prejudice
- Having money
- Image, the way you look
- Social status is very important and governs how people see you
- Diversity is important
- There is pressure to be successful and achieve
- Negative news
- Sense of belonging through localised culture e.g through music “It’s just like Headie One [Tottenham-based Grime artist] says, your environment is reflected in music and people are products of their environment.” - D

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\(^5\) We completed this task both with the young people from Greig City Academy and those we met on Sundays.
It was interesting to note that in both groups, there was no hard distinction made between the online world and the ‘real world’. Feeling safe in your local neighbourhood was just as important as being able to express yourself freely online. Overall their sentiments and demands were clear: The world they inhabited was full of fear, judgment and injustice, both online and offline. They wanted an end to discrimination, freedom to express themselves, and a safe and unpolluted environment for them to live and grow up in peace.

In order to achieve this, they recognised a need to spread positivity. Many of them remarked on their frustration with irrelevant and negative news which dominated their online feeds and daily news e.g (news about Kim Kardashian). They wanted access to good news from around the world, and opportunities to educate themselves - not always focusing on exams.

There was a huge amount of injustice felt at the lack of opportunities for young people from poorer backgrounds to get a good education. This was accompanied by a strong sense that society was primarily governed by money and social status, and without this you would not get a successful career that you enjoy. Only if our online world had greater equality and freedom would this be reflected in our online world.
Day 4 - #PhoneZombie films

Alongside the research we were doing together, another element of this project was making a series of short films about #PhoneZombies. These formed part of a nationwide April Fools’ joke that the Mental Health Collective was coordinating⁶.

In the films, the team pretended to be people who were zoned out on their phones and then turned into actual zombies. Satirising the more sensational reports about mobile phones and mental health, on April Fools’ day morning, the Mental Health Collective used Instagram and our other social media accounts to pretend that people were turning into #PhoneZombies all over Britain. The joke was that they were coming from north, south, east and west - marching on Buckingham Palace and coming to eat the Queen!

Together we made lots of silly films. We made videos of our phones talking to us, giving us commands and telling us what to do. We made videos of us being so engrossed in our phones

⁶ With this work we co-ordinated the project activities funded through the Big Lottery’s Community Fund with complementary activities supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
that we all bumped into each other. Videos of being zoned out on our phones and walking blindly with no idea about our surroundings. Videos of being chased by a gang of #PhoneZombies. Some of the team even composed a rap about #PhoneZombies coming to eat the Queen and performed it on the back of the 134 bus. We had a premiere of the films on a full size cinema screen at our local Picturehouse, where we also launched this research report.

Together with the stand-up comedian Dave Chawner, we put out an appeal to others around the country, inviting them to make some silly #PhoneZombie movies too. To our great delight, people took part in the joke from all across the UK - from Brighton to Manchester; Merseyside to County Durham; Kent to Caerphilly; Belfast to the Highlands. We even had people taking part from Mexico City! On April Fools Day morning, we released the videos that people had sent in stage by stage - starting from the places furthest away from London and then working their way towards Buckingham Palace. People of all ages took part - from three year olds right the way up to people in retirement.

We found the idea of being a #PhoneZombie was really easy to work with - it was something that a very wide range of people recognised and could impersonate. As well as being silly and fun in itself, we found it became a useful short-hand for the phenomenon of being zoned out on your phone.

Within the team, being able to joke about being a #PhoneZombie became a useful means to draw people’s attention back to the room if they were engrossed in their devices. It became a
language for laughing at ourselves without being unkind or accusatory. As an image that exaggerated the ‘zoned out’ phenomenon, it highlighted nobody was actually a zombie and we could all choose to turn away from our devices and bring our attention to the room.

In this way, the joke of the #PhoneZombies served a serious purpose. It provided a language for becoming aware of ourselves in the moment, and created a good-natured way to prompt people to reconnect with each other face-to-face.
Day 5 - Essays

On our final day together, the team were asked to write essays to summarise their thoughts on the key issues we had been exploring together. This section reproduces an unedited selection of the team’s writing on the question: “Are mobile phones sucking us in? Or are we in control? Or is it a bit of both?”.

Dreydon

From this experience, I can say that humans are in control of how long they stay on devices for a certain time period till the entertainment consumes them. People are not meant to be in isolation or completely doing nothing as this can ruin your brain cells and lead to future mental health problems. Technology is a great way for us humans to distract ourselves and occupies our time.

The problem comes with phones damaging our eyes as we are glued to the screens and also degrees our communication skills as we are blocking out everything that’s happening in the world to type. We are in control. I say that because technology can’t control us by anything. Also technology is for students to study on and also that you can’t just depend on paper you have to depend on technology so you can do research paper and check on your grades to see how you did on your class.

On the other hand, technology controls us. People are zombies on their phones. They don’t pay attention to their surroundings and their survival instinct is completely off. People are so engrossed in their technology they would die for it, and endanger themselves by not paying attention to anything. The limitless part of the information has also gotten people so used to it that they antic if it’s suddenly shut off. As nice as it is, technology is starting to control us.

Technology has become incredibly intelligent and already knows a lot about our internal states.

A computer now can detect our slightest facial micro expressions and be able to tell the difference between a real smile and a fake one. This is only the beginning. I think. And whether we like it or not, we already are sharing parts of our inner lives that’s out of our control. This seems like a problem, because a lot of us like to keep what’s going on inside from what people actually see.

In conclusion I believe that technology does not control us as we are there creators. There’s limitations to what they can do as they are robots and they don’t have feelings or emotions.

Luis

Mobile phone is a good technology which is not lacking from our lives. In my opinion most of the people in control but some people that isn’t confident can get suck in. Today, mobile
Phone has become but there is popular to everybody since it is very convenient. The most advantage of having a mobile phone is you can communicate to your family and your friends no matter what where you are. Moreover, you can relax with mobile phone’s applications, for example, play games, listen to music, or chat with your friends.

People that get suck in can be very dangerous. Using a lot mobile phone can harm your brain, particularly teenager and children who are under 16 years old. In addition, when you use mobile phones while you are driving, you will get an accident.

Owning a mobile phone in your hand is you can solve many issues and hold most of information around the world. Even though is not good for your health and you have to protect yourself from bad effects of mobile phones if you choose to have one.

Mohammed
Most of our day is us looking at our phone screen. Teenagers are always on their phones watching YouTube videos, messaging friends and scrolling through Instagram. No one can escape technology it’s everywhere. Without phones we can’t do anything. This essay is going to be about if phones suck us in and control us or if us humans control it.

If you look at it, phones don’t really suck us and control us. The reason we use our phones is because we get bored and we have nothing to do. But on the other hand most people should have some sort of work or homework to do. Also people can go outside to the park and not be on their phones all the time.

Secondly we use our phones so we can socialise with friends and meet new people. When people talk with others through the phone it’ll make them feel less lonely. But people might say that you can talk to people outside and not on the phone all the time.

Thirdly phones can really help people in a lot of situations for example if you’re lost then you can use your phone. People might disagree and say that you can ask members of public if you get lost.

In conclusion phones have more advantages in my opinion. It helps with boredom and loneliness. Also helps make new friends. But it can make us less focused and cause lack of concentration.

Angel
In my opinion, phones are not in control because we have a decision to make like for example charging it or turning it on.

Mobile phones have become a necessity for life, and without this thin gadget, many people would feel incomplete. We now use mobile phones in our everyday life as a phone voice.
recorder, diary, alarm, clock watch and for making and confirming appointments dealing with clients etc. Mobile phones are for many, fundamental when organising their lives. Mobile phones are not simply an electronic gadget, and it is difficult to define in one way about the usage of mobile phones.

In conclusion phones do not take control of us because it is a tool and not a lifestyle.

Hanaan

I think that the whole theory of "mobile phones are dangerous" is nonsense, why? Because in the past there have been this theory called "moral panic". Now moral panic is basically an intense feeling of fear over an issue affecting a population and an example of that is that pokemon was thought to be a bad influence on children because it promoted 'psychic abilities'. What I'm trying to say is that maybe phones aren't that out of control maybe we're just making a big deal out of it.

First of all, we all know we can get sucked in our phones i mean like literally sucked in there. Genuinely speaking, haven’t you ever found yourself in a position where all of your attention is focused on that tool you’re using, i mean i did and believe me you feel like in another planet the only thing you can think about is the device you’re on and what you’re doing. Yes sure this doesn’t happen as much but it’s a very unusual occasion.

Like everything, mobile phones have their positives and negatives. Yes i know mobile phones can cause all kinds of mental health issues and they can cause health problems but even such a 'harmful' device as a mobile phone has positives. Some people find it hard to communicate in real life; when they use a device such as a mobile phone it makes it WAY easier for them to communicate since they don’t have to speak face to face. I mean when I speak to someone face to face I don’t know what on earth to say and end up not speaking at all because i just can’t, but when using a device for texting suddenly i can text a whole essay of my opinion on mobile phones.

Last but certainly not least, I figure that people can actually get rid of OR distant themselves from mobile phones and they are able to but they just don’t want to because it’s so entertaining and without it they’ll think they’ll be bored, and that’s why we see young people on their phones 24/7, not because they can’t do anything about it no. Because they don’t want to do anything about it. I know this because it happens everytime i watch something i keep on pressing on the next video and the next and the next not because i can’t help it no, because i just don’t want to help it because i just want to keep on watching this until my phone’s battery is dead or until i fall asleep.

In conclusion, I don’t think that the mobile phones themselves are the problem i think that if we knew how to use them properly then we wouldn’t have all these people complaining about technology and teenagers in this generation. I believe that if we showed the older ones that we
can use mobile phones properly and decently they’d understand that all they’re doing right now is just panicking about something that’s not such a big deal and they’re just making it worse.

Thoughts from the Sunday work experience group
On Sunday 24th March, we brought the same question to the young people who were joining us for work experience on Sunday afternoons. “Are mobile phones sucking us in? Or are we in control? Or is it a bit of both?”

The group talked at length about the different scenarios in which they used their phones. There were different influencing factors for why you used it. Peer pressure was felt to be a big contributing factor, as well as it being a good way to contact and communicate with others. Ultimately though you had control over how you used social media and what you put on it. You didn’t necessarily have control over your emotional reactions e.g reading a negative comment or being disturbed by something you watched, but you were making rational choices as to what you looked and for what reason. Ultimately, it was a bit of both. Sometimes we get consumed by our phones and sometimes we are in control. But at the end of the day it was up to society to change their values and social norms if we were to integrate our phones into our lives in a way that we feel comfortable.
Conclusion

As the essays above demonstrate, young people hold a range of views about the relationship between mobile phones and mental health. There are definite concerns that phones are ‘sucking us in’ - commanding our attention in such a compulsive way that we become zoned out from our surroundings, blocking others out and less able to make deliberate decisions about how to be productive with our time. But the team also identify many positives from being on their phones: Practical benefits; the opportunities for connecting with others; escaping from boredom and helping them cope with some of the difficulties in their lives.

The richness of this discussion makes our key message clear: There are no Phone Zombies. We’re alive, we’re awake and we are thinking for ourselves.

The decisions on what to do about mobile phones and mental health should not just be up to people in Silicon Valley - or to adults alone. The insights of young people are crucial, and should be seen in the context of their whole lives not just their digital engagement. Together, we should decide where we want to go with this technology next.

As the facilitators, it was striking to learn that some of the behaviours we had previously interpreted as rude or threatening were actually borne of a sense of vulnerability. For example, we learnt that for some young people, listening to music with one earpiece whilst also having a face-to-face conversation could be a coping mechanism for dealing with anxiety. We learnt that for some young boys, travelling with their eyes down and hoods up was borne of fear of knife crime and gang territories, rather than an intention to intimidate others.

Rather than being zombified, braindead and unthinking on their phones, our team of young people were making almost constant, active decisions. On a platform like Instagram they were making decisions approximately every 7 seconds - around 500 decisions an hour. They knew why they were making those decisions: To escape boredom, find stimulation, and be connected with others. Their decisions were framed by social relationships, norms and values - choices about who they wanted to build closer ties with and judgements about how to negotiate their social worlds. These choices were shaped by wider structures and issues in their lives as much by the nature of their devices. The phenomenon of sitting ‘zoned out’ behind a digital barrier sits in a context of young people feeling a lack of autonomy in other spaces - judged at school, monitored at home and threatened on the streets.

At a societal level, the discussion about mobile phones and mental health shares many of the characteristics of moral panic. The concerns that this technology is damaging our attention,
eroding social ties and undermining our relationships has echoes of the worries that have accompanied major technological shifts stretching all the way back to the time of Socrates.

But it is not best practice in the mental health world to deal with panic by dismissing it. When we panic as individuals, we are advised to breathe deeply, to focus on our surroundings and to confront our fears. We are advised to be compassionate about where the panic is coming from, and mindful about where we are in the present.

By the same token, when there is widespread anxiety in society it serves us well to be empathetic about where this is coming from. Spending significant parts of our lives ‘on our phones’ represents a major shift of culture and power. There are already winners and losers; losses and gains - and there will be many more. The moral panic around mobile phones and mental health is a warning bell to alert us that we are facing a fork in the road. Key decisions about our future and our society are in the process of being made.

The relationship between mobile phones and mental health is not yet determined. It will depend on the choices we make as individuals, in our relationships and as a society.

But what has become abundantly clear through the course of this project is that young people are making choices already, that they are reflective about the debate and have clear ideas about what they want the future to look like. Young people are not passive victims, floating helplessly in pre-determined direction unless they are ‘saved’ by adults. Decisions about technology need to be made together with young people, in the context of a broader set of choices about how we want to live as a society.

We can think for ourselves. There are no Phone Zombies.