ISRCTN75400619 https://doi.org/10.1186/ISRCTN75400619

The IRL Trial: A school-based trial to reduce social media use and improve mental health among adolescents

Submission date
09/07/2026

Recruitment status
Not yet recruiting

Registration date
09/07/2026

Overall study status
Ongoing

Last Edited
09/07/2026

Condition category
Mental and Behavioural Disorders

[X] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[X] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
Social media use among children and adolescents has been linked to harms including bullying, sexual risks, and mental health problems. Adolescence is a sensitive period for mental health, with increased risk-taking, ongoing brain development, and the onset of many conditions. Observational studies suggest heavier social media use is associated with more mental health symptoms, but scientific authorities in the UK and US have concluded the average causal effect is unclear. This study is evaluating the effects of an intervention designed to reduce social media media use on mental health among secondary school pupils (academic years 8–10, corresponding to ages 12-15 years). We will explore potential mechanisms underlying these effects.

Who can participate?
Students enrolled in year 8, 9, or 10 (September 2026), corresponding to ages 12-15 years, at participating secondary schools.

What does the study involve?
School year groups (academic years 8–10) will be randomly allocated to either (i) a social media restriction app, limiting use to 1 hour per day between 7am and 9pm, or (ii) a treatment-as-usual control condition where the app tracks screen time but applies no restrictions. The intervention will last 6 weeks. Participants will complete a self-reported questionnaire on topics including mental health, bullying, and sleep at baseline (week 0) and follow-up (week 6). Around 30 participants in the intervention group will also take part in qualitative interviews to share their experiences and explore how reducing social media use may affect mental health.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
Benefits:
1. Possible benefits of the intervention itself (a benefit in terms of mental health).
2. Financial compensation.
Risks:
1. Reduced opportunity for social engagement, support, or fear of missing out due to reduced

use of social media.
2. Bullying due to participants being left out of social events.
3. Distress experienced during quantitative or qualitative data collection.

Where is the study run from?
Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UK)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
September 2026 to May 2027

Who is funding the study?
1. The Wellcome Trust (UK)
2. National Institute for Health Research (UK)

Who is the main contact?
Dr Dan Lewer, borninbradford@bthft.nhs.uk

Contact information

Type(s)
Public, Scientific, Principal investigator

Contact name
Dr Dan Lewer

ORCID ID
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3698-7196

Contact details
Born in Bradford Office
Bradford Institute For Health Research
Bradford Royal Infirmary
Duckworth Lane
Bradford
United Kingdom
BD9 6RJ
+44 (0)1274 274474
borninbradford@bthft.nhs.uk

Type(s)
Principal investigator

Contact name
Prof Amy Orben

ORCID ID
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2937-4183

Contact details
MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit
University of Cambridge

15 Chaucer Road
Cambridge
United Kingdom
CB2 7EF
+44 (0)1223 355294
info@mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk

Additional identifiers

Integrated Research Application System (IRAS)
370130

National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)
205448

Wellcome Trust funding reference number
337689/Z/25/Z

Sponsor's reference number
BTHFT 3191

Study information

Scientific Title
The In Real Life (IRL) Trial: a cluster-randomised controlled trial of a school-based social media reduction intervention versus treatment-as-usual control in secondary school pupils (aged 12–15) in Bradford, UK, and its effects on anxiety (RCADS-25) and secondary outcomes

Acronym
IRL (In Real Life)

Study objectives
1. To estimate the effect of a social media restriction intervention on anxiety (primary outcome) as well as secondary outcomes using a usual-treatment control condition among adolescents in academic years 8, 9, and 10.
2. To explore possible mechanisms underlying the effect of social media restriction.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 21/05/2026, East of England - Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire Research Ethics Committee (2 Redman Place, London, EC20 1JQ, United Kingdom; +44 (0)207 104 8000; cambsandherts.rec@hra.nhs.uk), ref: 26/EE/0127

Primary study design
Interventional

Allocation
Randomized controlled trial

Masking
Blinded (masking used)

Control
Active

Assignment
Parallel

Purpose
Prevention

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Mental health in healthy young people

Interventions
Study design:
This will be a parallel-arm cluster randomised trial in which school year groups will be randomised to two conditions: (1) an intervention involving a smartphone app designed to reduce social media screen time; (2) a treatment-as-usual control state. The primary outcome will be self-reported anxiety, with other outcomes measured by self-report and the app. We will work with 10-12 secondary schools and randomise 30-36 year groups (academic year groups 8-10 only), with baseline measurements taken when participants join the study and follow-up measurements after six weeks.

Intervention arm:
The intervention will be a smartphone app for Android and iOS (iPhone), which will limit participants' use of a pre-defined list of social media and internet browser apps. The app will limit social media through two mechanisms: (i) a daily time 'budget' across all linked social media apps and (ii) a 'curfew' that prevents linked app use during nighttime hours. Based on coproduction with teenagers, we are planning a daily budget of 1 hour and a curfew from 9 pm to 7 am. We will deliver the intervention over 6 weeks.

Control arm:
Participants download the same app but receive no active intervention components and the app is only used for passive data collection.

Randomisation:
School year groups will be randomised in a 1:1 ratio to either the intervention or a treatment-as-usual control condition. Year groups will be randomised within schools, meaning each participating school will have at least one intervention and one control year group.

Qualitative research:
We will also conduct semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of ~30 intervention participants during the final week of the intervention and at 6-month follow-up. In these interviews we will explore participants' experiences and mechanisms by which the intervention may influence mental health outcomes.

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
1. Anxiety measured using the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS-25) anxiety subscale self-report survey at week 0 (baseline) and week 6 (follow-up)

Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Symptoms of depression measured using the Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) depression subscale self-report survey at week 0 (baseline) and week 6 (follow-up)

2. Mental wellbeing measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) self-report survey at week 0 (baseline) and week 6 (follow-up)

Completion date
31/05/2027

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
1. Currently enrolled in a secondary school
2. In academic year 8 - 10
3. Owns a smartphone (or regularly uses a specific smartphone that can be used in the research)
4. Can speak and read English

Healthy volunteers allowed
Yes

Age group
Child

Lower age limit
12 Years

Upper age limit
15 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
0

Key exclusion criteria
No specific exclusion criteria (all school types and young people will be eligible)

Date of first enrolment
07/09/2026

Date of final enrolment

31/03/2027

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Bradford Royal Infirmary
Duckworth Lane
Bradford
England
BD9 6RJ

Sponsor information

Organisation
Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

ROR
https://ror.org/05gekvn04

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name
Wellcome Trust

Alternative Name(s)
Wellcome, WT

Funding Body Type
Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location

United Kingdom

Funder Name
National Institute for Health and Care Research

Alternative Name(s)
National Institute for Health Research, NIHR Research, NIHRresearch, NIHR - National Institute for Health Research, NIHR (The National Institute for Health and Care Research), NIHR

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The full dataset will be securely stored at Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, with access restricted to IT staff and named researchers (the Chief Investigator, or another senior member of staff if the Chief Investigator leaves). Personal identifiers will be deleted at the earliest opportunity. An analysis dataset will be available upon request using the Born In Bradford data request process: https://borninbradford.nhs.uk/our-data/how-to-access-data/. Data sharing will be subject to an approved analysis plan and data sharing agreement.

IPD sharing plan summary
Available on request