PROJECT ROCKIT

SHAPING OUR FEEDS

Young People's Experiences of Social Media Algorithms

PROJECT ROCKIT acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we live, work and play, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We also acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Custodians of Country across all of the places where PROJECT ROCKIT work happens.

PROJECT ROCKIT is Australia's youth-driven movement against (cyber)bullying, hate and prejudice. Built on the vision of a world where kindness thrives, we deliver youth-centred programs, events and projects that mobilise young people to lead positive social impact, at school, online, and beyond.

For requests, please write to:
dan@projectrockit.com.au

PROJECT ROCKIT

Acknowledgements

To our lived experience experts

We extend our gratitude to the young people who have contributed their insights and experiences of engaging with social media algorithms. We especially want to acknowledge the young people who identify with lived and living experiences of mental health challenges and recovery, LGBTQIA+, disabilities, neurodiversity, and those who have been carers, families, or supporters.

We also want to acknowledge the members of our National Youth Collective (pictured on following page) who contributed to the report. These include Ayush Dave, Caitlin Blanch, Dominik Mautner, Hansika Prageshan, Jolie Bendl, Joshua Patrick, Konan Masuda, Lamisa Shah, Mannon Verma, Maxine Steel, Michael Comber, Noa Gomberg, Olivia Campbell, Rhea Lincoln, Taihan Rahman, and Theo Ziervogel.

To Meta

We extend our sincere thanks to Meta for backing this project. This partnership reflects Meta's recognition of the need to understand young people's experiences on its platforms. While Meta has provided support, we note that this is an independent project guided by the voices of our National Youth Collective with no editorial oversight from Meta itself.

To our PROJECT ROCKIT team

Finally, we thank the entire PROJECT ROCKIT team for their unwavering support of this project. Our delivery of school programs and initiatives that create powerful, positive impact for young people, is the backbone of our work. From those who book our programs to those who deliver them, this project is a testament to the strength of our grassroots community impact in the Australian education sector. In particular, we thank our Digital Support Coordinator, Amelia Asciutto, for her incredible support of the National Youth Collective and the online engagement of this project. Amelia's dedication to authentically centring the voices of young people has been instrumental in bringing this project to life.
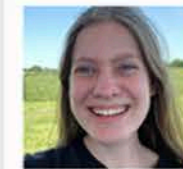
Meet our National Youth Collective

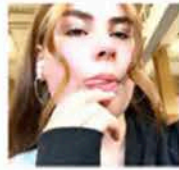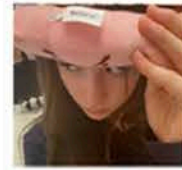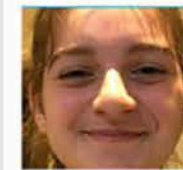|							
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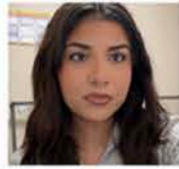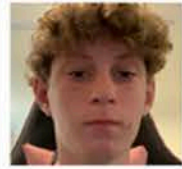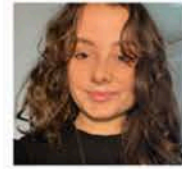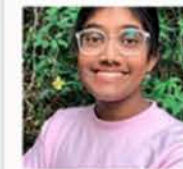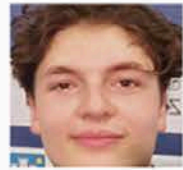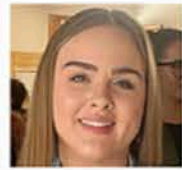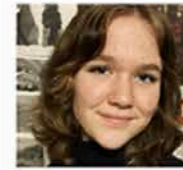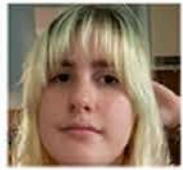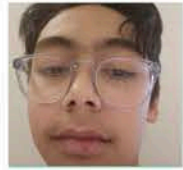
Introduction

Machine learning and algorithms have long shaped the way we experience content on online platforms, from video streaming services to social media and search engines. These algorithms work behind the scenes, using data such as our likes, comments, interactions, relationships, and even demographic factors to serve up content tailored to our individual preferences. While this can enhance our online experience, allowing us to discover new content and connect with like-minded communities, it also raises questions about the potential influence of these algorithms, particularly on young people. Increasingly, conversations are focusing on the nuanced relationship between young people's tech use and their mental health, and the role that algorithms play in shaping these experiences.

When young people talk about "The Algorithm," they are often referring to the complex, data-driven systems that influence what they see, hear, and engage with online.

Social media algorithms are machine learning systems designed to analyse user interactions – such as likes, shares, and comments – to determine which content appears in users' feeds, ultimately influencing their online experiences and engagement. However, the reality is that there are many different algorithms at play, each with the power to impact various aspects of our lives. These algorithms can enhance our access to diverse worldviews, connecting us with content that broadens our understanding of different cultures and perspectives. They also have the potential to affirm our experiences within specific communities, helping us find support and a sense of belonging online. At the same time, algorithms shape how we receive news, form political views, and perceive our identities, subtly influencing what we consider normal, how much time we spend online, and even what we believe is real. The power of algorithms extends to directing our attention, shaping advertising, and reinforcing certain ideologies, making it crucial to support young people's agency and literacy about how these social media algorithms work.

Despite a growing discourse around the impact of algorithms, much of the conversation is driven by popular opinions, concerns, and assumptions, rather than the lived experiences of young people themselves. As a youth-driven organisation committed to creating a world where kindness and respect thrive over bullying, hate, and prejudice, PROJECT ROCKIT is dedicated to elevating young people's voices to ensure that their online experiences are healthy and positive. We believe that young people deserve an online world that supports them to thrive, and that is why we are leading this project. By centring young people's real experiences, we hope to shape the discourse in meaningful and constructive ways, ensuring that educational and awareness efforts – such as those planned for Part 2 of this project – are grounded in real evidence and truly reflective of young people's needs and perspectives.

"EVEN THOUGH THERE ARE NEGATIVE SPACES ON SOCIAL MEDIA, A LOT OF WHOLESOME AND JOYFUL CONTENT STILL EXISTS. I ENJOY READING HOW PEOPLE MET EACH OTHER AFTER A LONG TIME THANKS TO THE INTERNET. IT HAS HELPED ME GET OUT OF MY NEGATIVE HEADSPACE."

– SURVEY RESPONSE

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Approach

To capture the views of young people on social media algorithms and their impact on online experiences, we co-created a 23-question survey with PROJECT ROCKIT's National Youth Collective, a cohort of 32 young people aged 12-20 from across Australia. The survey was disseminated through PROJECT ROCKIT's channels, including partner schools, social media, and educational and organisational networks, ensuring broad reach and diverse participation. The survey included an incentive for respondents, offering the chance to win one of five $100 gift cards.

After the survey collection period closed, survey insights were shared with the National Youth Collective through a series of roundtable discussions, capturing their reflections and observations of the survey results. All participants provided prior written consent to share their views and were remunerated for their time. Their commentary has been preserved in their own words wherever possible.

This consultation project forms Part 1 of a two-part initiative, with Part 2 involving the creation of educational resources by the National Youth Collective to support classroom learning on critical thinking and literacy around social media algorithms.

You can learn more about the National Youth Collective here.

1001 young people aged 12–20 surveyed across Australia

Category	Percentage
Male	47.29%
Female	48.39%
Gender-diverse	3.41%
Prefer not to say	0.9%
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	11%
LGTBQIA+	16%
Disability	9%
Neurodivergence	11%
Culturally & linguistically diverse	17%
Living in a regional/rural setting	16%
Experience of mental health challenges	21%

Survey co-created with the National Youth Collective (NYC)

Survey insights presented to NYC to capture their commentary

Draft report reviewed and edited by NYC

Workshop series with NYC to design messaging based on survey findings

Capture of NYC video via smartphones

Final assets reviewed by NYC

01 Youth co-research project

02 Youth co-creation project

1001 survey responses collected

Survey data analysed

Survey insights & commentary written into draft report

Report finalised

Video producer engaged for creative execution

Producer compiles educational video assets

Final assets launched into schools & online

Charts (left panel)

How well do you understand how social media chooses to show you content?

(Bar chart — y-axis: 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%; x-axis categories: I don't know, Not at all, Not very well, Moderately well, Very well, Extremely well)

When you searched for info on how algorithms work, how easy was it to find?

(Bar chart — y-axis: 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%; x-axis categories: Not at all easy, Not very easy, Moderately easy, Very easy, Extremely easy)

Discovery

Of young people surveyed,

⭐ **89%** report that they understand how social media chooses to show them content 'moderately' to 'extremely' well

🔍 **45%** have searched for info on how social media algorithms work, with a majority finding it moderately easy to find

A majority of young people surveyed self-reported that they understand how social media serves them content moderately to extremely well. However, when asked what they would like to better understand about social media algorithms, a range of questions surfaced that highlight gaps in understanding:
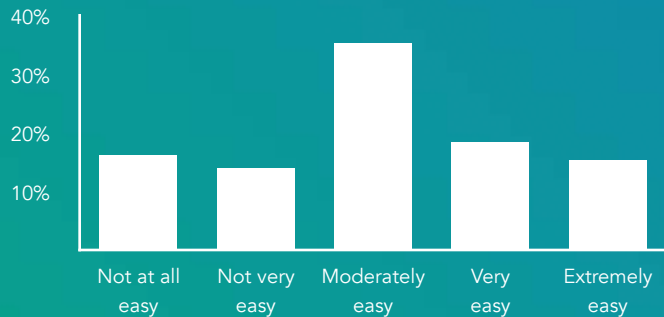
- "How does the algorithm actually work?"
- "Do they take your personal information?"
- "How does it filter out triggering content?"

Speaking to the gaps, one young person suggested, *"most young people feel confident in their knowledge of how algorithms work, but it's likely that they are overconfident in their knowledge, or at least think that they have a better understanding than they actually do."* Another observed, *"there has been a rise of awareness around what content people are shown, this could be due to social media companies now giving the user more options to control what they see."* These insights and observations suggest that while a majority of young people have an intuitive grasp of social media, they are eager to learn more about the mechanics and how to take control of their online experiences.

"EVERYONE ON THE INTERNET WILL HAVE SEEN SOMETHING NEGATIVE, BUT WHETHER THEY CLASSIFY IT AS A NEGATIVE 'IMPACT' WILL DEPEND ON THE PERSON. WHEN I'VE SEEN UNSAVOURY CONTENT I HAVE NEVER, BEFORE THIS, CONSIDERED IT A NEGATIVE IMPACT - IT'S JUST SOMETHING ON THE INTERNET THAT I SCROLL PAST."

– THEO, 15, VIC

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Of the young people we surveyed, a vast majority (86%) reported having experienced positive impacts from social media. Their insights and commentary revealed that social media experiences range from positive to negative, existing along a broad spectrum and often coexisting in the same online spaces. The qualitative responses in this survey highlighted key areas where young people encounter both positive and negative experiences. These include:

Friendship & Connection ✅

"I think it's a wonderful way to connect to other people, I feel like I find so many different groups and people with the same interest and it can make people feel less alone."

Skill Development ✅

"I've learnt lots of things and used it to help my passions, having learnt so much stuff I never could otherwise."

Joy & Fun ✅

"I feel joy at seeing and listening to people who have similar interests to me and it makes me feel like I belong and am connected to a lot of people even though I don't know them."

Advocacy ✅

"I run a campaign called the Freedom Movement for people with eating disorders and because of social media, I have been able to raise more awareness."

News & Information ✅

"Social media is essential for myself to understand the world around me."

Wellbeing ✅

"Some things popped up that helped me – discovering meditation, exercise, sleep habits, study habits, social skills. Since the start of this year my life has greatly improved due to these things the algorithm generated."

Quotes taken from Social Media & Algorithm Experience survey responses

Of young people surveyed,

😎 86%

have experienced positive impacts from social media

😐 14%

have **_not_** experienced positive impacts from social media

While a vast majority of young people had experienced positive impacts of social media, about half reported having experienced negative impacts as well. Their commentary surfaced common experiences related to the usual suspects – over-reliance on their devices, relational aggression and negative wellbeing impacts.

Bed Rotting* ⚠️

"Well, I don't even enjoy what I'm watching, but I watch it anyway, as it pulls me in and takes up my time."

"Doomscrolling late into the night and feeling bad about it afterwards."

Inappropriate content ⚠️

"I would want to change the distracting and inappropriate content you get, this would help the usage and making it more personal."

Body Image ⚠️

"I had a really unhealthy body image when seeing many posts about makeup, exercise, dieting and thought I wasn't doing enough."

Rabbit Holes ⚠️

"If caught in a cycle of repetitive and unhealthy social media silos, it can be damaging to thought processes and mental health."

Bullying & Discrimination ⚠️

"I have seen things that are hateful which have affected my mental health – specifically hate towards minority groups, targeting them for things out of their control. It makes me feel unloved and insecure about who I am."

Unhealthy Comparisons ⚠️

"I used to compare my self to others, although I've learnt people can pick the best parts of what they post."

Quotes taken from Social Media & Algorithm Experience survey responses
* 'bed rotting' involves staying in bed for extended periods of time, usually to passively consume content

Of young people surveyed,

😞 52%

have experienced negative impacts from social media

🙂 48%

have **not** experienced negative impacts from social media

"SOCIAL MEDIA IS SUCH AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR LIVES THERE IS NO WAY WE ARE ESCAPING IT. I CAN'T THINK OF HOW I WOULD COMMUNICATE WITH THE PEOPLE I NEED WITHOUT IT. YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM IT. YOU NEED IT."

- LAMISA, 20, NSW

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53%

of young people surveyed reported that they depend on social media in their daily lives

However, young people also broadly reported that they feel that they are **in control** of the content they see online (60%), and **comfortable** with the concept that social media algorithms guide what they see online (67%). Young people acknowledged the role of algorithms in protecting them from harmful content online, observing, *"they help me make sure I don't see inappropriate or offensive things online."* They also shared experiences of being presented with valuable health info: *"Some social media content that comes by teaches me what's good for my skin for my age from professional dermatologists instead of what kids find popular and trendy."*

At the same time, many sought greater control and transparency, commenting, *"I would like more control over the content I see and better transparency about how it's selected"* and *"I hope social media platforms can provide more tools and options, allowing users to have more precise control over their content flow."*

The survey found that 67% of young people had changed their settings or preferences to manage their content, with 34% of them reporting that these changes led to improved content. This highlights that young people are actively seeking greater control over their social media experiences, making proactive choices to shape both the content (*"make it easier to filter and choose your FYP* preferences"*) and functionality (*"give the ability to disable the discovery/reel section"*).

* 'fyp' refers to the For You Page page on TikTok, which is filled with recommended content and videos, '

"I am in control over the content I see online."
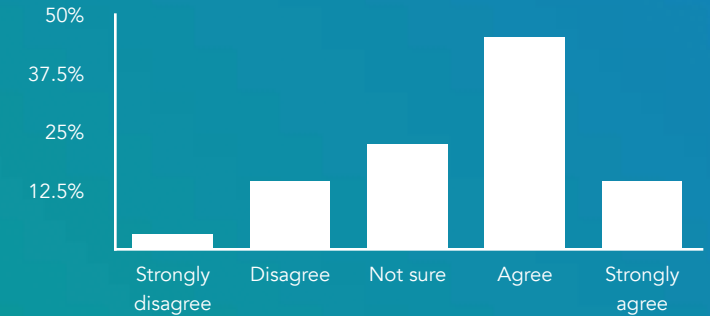
"I'm comfortable with the concept that social media algorithms guide what I see online."
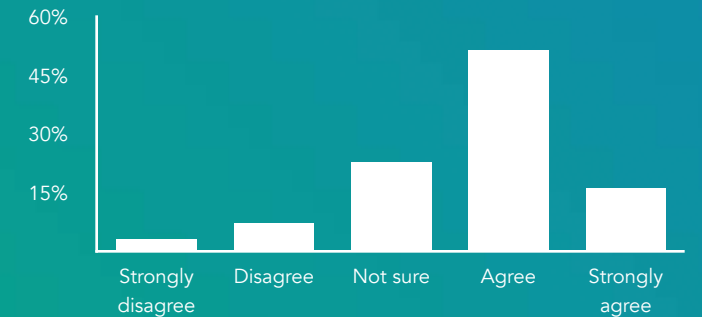
Of the young people surveyed, a majority (79%) had been served content that they enjoyed or found useful on a wide range of topics – car racing, crocheting, gaming, cooking gadgets, meditation practices, politics, new artists, dance tutorials, bushcraft and more. Many expressed that exposure to new content has had a positive impact, reflecting that *"social media helped me become comfortable with my sense of self"* and *"has allowed me to develop my individuality."*

The fact that over half of the survey respondents reported being served offensive or inappropriate content highlights the need for significant safety improvements for children and young people. They cited themes of violence, self-harm, bigotry, glamorisation of mental ill health, nudity and hate speech. As one person recalled, *"it happened multiple times when looking at stuff and a random video came up that was really offensive to my culture and it made a lot of racist jokes about it – I've seen very inappropriate stuff like this before."* Another described the way that such content can be masked with humour, *"a lot of the content I find is misogynistic or displays people getting hurt – both of these are portrayed in a humourous way."*

While young people reported that online content can negatively impact their wellbeing, they also noted that algorithms sometimes help them find solutions. For example, one person reported that as a result of being online too much, *"I got a shorter attention span,"* but shared that later, *"I found a meditation thing and started meditating, and the panic attacks started to get less stressful and attention span got longer."*

🕛 **56%** of young people surveyed reported that they would like the power to reset their algorithm

With just over half of young people surveyed expressing a desire to 'start fresh' with their social media algorithms, comments revealed how their needs evolve over time. For example, one noted, *"when I was younger I wasn't phased by others 'amazing' lives, but now I feel super lonely."* This variation in perceptions of content as positive or negative speaks to the importance of algorithms delivering content that is both age-appropriate and flexible over time.

🤩 **79%**

have been served content by algorithms that they enjoyed or found useful

😒 **54%**

have been served content by algorithms that they found offensive or inappropriate

"ON MY FEED I RECEIVE UPDATES ABOUT THE US OLYMPICS TEAM, VCE HACKS, CITIZENSHIP FOR THE US, CONCERTS. I DON'T USUALLY GET ANY INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT UNLESS I GO ON AN ILLEGAL WEBSITE. THE TYPE OF PERSON YOU ARE IN REALITY USUALLY DOES IMPACT WHAT YOU WOULD LOOK LIKE ONLINE."

– MANNON, 15, VIC

Reflections and recommendations

As part of our co-research process, the National Youth Collective has actively engaged with the survey data, participated in facilitated discussions, and shared written observations. Their insights have been invaluable in shaping the following takeaways. Together, we have co-authored these reflections, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of young people are at the heart of this report.

We want rich experiences

"Learning about marginalised communities, gaining new perspectives on sociopolitical issues, an ability to learn about myself and my mental health better than I would have on my own, study-related videos that have helped me with my education, educational videos that have helped me learn about the world…" – Survey Response

We want agency

"I have personally seen a rise in creators discussing what the algorithm is and how it works. I've also seen creators explain to users briefly how they can help boost their content by asking the user to "subscribe, follow, comment, share and like," though this explanation of boosting content has been around for a while now." – Ayush, 15, VIC

We want healthy content

"As a young man, it's alarming to witness the rise of misogyny in online spaces… It's easy to get caught up in groupthink or to dismiss harmful comments as 'just jokes,' but these behaviours contribute to a culture that demeans and marginalises women. It's crucial for us, as men, to recognise our role in this and to actively challenge these toxic norms." – Mannon, 15, VIC

We want connection

"I personally I met my best friend of five years online and we have since met up, gone to concerts, hung out. It can be an amazing place when it is used correctly. The internet needs to be a safer environment to foster healthy and positive impacts. This can be done by filtering content, having a better process of vetting ages…" – Theo, 15 VIC

We want rich experiences

The young people who participated in our survey and National Youth Collective reported that social media is deeply embedded in their lives. This isn't necessarily viewed by the cohort as immediately problematic, provided that the experience contributes positively to their wellbeing.

In many cases, this was true, with young people sharing how algorithms have actively shaped their experiences to support the development of skills (*"I learned how to braid my lil sister's hair"*), access to news and information (*"it has allowed me to have a better understanding of what is happening around me (eg. politically)"*), friendship (*"I met most of my friends on there, it helped with my body image, it helped with my mental health"*), fun (*"social media usually makes my day a little bit better because of the random funny content"*), confidence (*"I got support from people for my artwork!"*) and mental health (*"it helps my feeling of self worth – taking advice and bettering myself from it"*).

While a majority valued the role of social media in their lives, they also believed that the experience could be significantly improved. Many participants used the term 'bed rotting' to describe getting trapped in endless scrolling through content that doesn't genuinely interest them. They called for greater variety in their feeds (*"more opportunity to avoid getting stuck in content silos"*), less exposure to negative content (*"no more people dying or similar things"*), and reduced advertising (*"less ads – disguised ads too"*). Sometimes, engaging with content served by social media algorithms led to negative experiences, including bullying. As one participant shared, *"because I watched a video and commented on my thoughts and opinions, I was ridiculed by 'netizens' and experienced a period of online bullying."*

Despite these frustrations, most of the young people we spoke to believe that user-centred improvements to the algorithms shaping their experiences, as well as ongoing upgrades to safety tools could make their time online more positive and enriching.

* *'netizens' refers to people on the internet*

We want agency

The survey data surfaced a desire of young people to have greater control over their social media experience. Those surveyed called for greater ability to manage platform features (*"option to remove infinite scroll"*), shape algorithms proactively rather than passively (*"make it easier to filter and choose your fyp* preferences"*) and limit their own usage (*"social media time limits that CANNOT be overridden until the timer ends"*). At worst, young people reported a lack of agency – *"I've doomscrolled* and wasted lots of time without intentionally doing so."* At best, they reported a sense of elation when recommendation systems work – *"I feel joy at seeing and listening to people who have similar interests to me and it makes me feel like I belong and am connected to a lot of people even though I don't know them."*

A vast majority (89%) of young people self-reported a strong existing understanding of social media algorithms, however, many also asked questions like, *"how does the algorithm actually work?"* This suggests a gap between perceived knowledge and the deeper, technical understanding of these systems that young people are simultaneously yearning for. They wanted to know:

- *"How recommendation systems work"*
- *"How it filters out triggering content and what it allows"*
- *"How I can change algorithms to show uplifting things"*
- *"How your feed is so similar to your mutuals*"*
- *"How people make money off social media (specifically)"*
- *"Why we are still shown things we dislike"*
- *"How different social media platforms give each other info"*
- *"Why some things get so stupidly popular for no reason"*
- *"How to break the scrolling habit"*

These comments (and many others) highlight a common motivation among young people to better understand the algorithm and how social media functions so they can have greater control over their feed, privacy and data.

* 'doomscrolling' is the act of spending an excessive amount of time consuming large quantities of news or other negative content, and 'mutuals' refers to mutual friends or contacts

We want healthy content

Young people spoke extensively about the benefits of being served healthy content bearing joy (*"videos that spread positivity"*), culture (*"being able to connect with my culture by watching content in my other language"*), new interests (*"introducing me to new sports and athletes based on my sports preferences"*) and different ways of thinking (*"gaining new perspectives on sociopolitical issues"*).

They also reported being served negative content relating to body image (*"trying to change the way I look to be considered beautiful"*), unhealthy comparisons (*"feeling self-conscious about never having been in a relationship after seeing all the other people who have been"*), and age-inappropriate material (*"make it more PG, there are kids watching!"*).

A major theme that emerged is the rise of disturbing and discriminatory content, especially hate speech, sexually explicit material, and extreme violence (*"I've definitely seen some incredibly harsh content relating to current wars happening"*). Some reported seeing content designed to elicit anger, noting, *"sometimes you get recommended content created to induce rage in viewers (rage bait)."* Others suggested that algorithms may normalise racism, sexism, and abuse, commenting, *"you see all this stuff and suddenly it doesn't shock you."* At the same time, young people report that they are encountering more visible advocacy, such as "people supporting others, especially activist groups uplifting people," highlighting a growing presence of both extreme content and efforts to promote inclusion.

Across the board, young people recognised the coexistence of positive and negative content, reaching a consensus that *"it's like we need to find the algorithmic sweet spot."* This observation speaks to an awareness of the complexity of machine technologies, which must navigate the vast amounts of content to both shield users from harmful material while promoting positive, beneficial experiences.

We want connection

The co-research process has highlighted the critical importance of meaningful connections in young people's social media experiences. For the majority of young people, the greatest benefit of social media is that it simply provides them with *"a feeling of connection,"* with algorithms serving the simple goal of *"reducing a lot of useless information."*

Counter to the old saying, 'don't talk to strangers on the internet,' the young people involved in this project highlighted the significant benefits of algorithms connecting them with diverse voices, perspectives, and cultures that they might never have encountered otherwise. As one participant shared, *"I have connected with people that I would have otherwise not spoken to ever."*

Many valued social media for fostering connections with like-minded individuals and communities, as well as maintaining existing friendships formed offline (*"seeing what mates are up to who I haven't seen for ages"*). These platforms have enabled them to engage with content that resonates with their experiences, interests, and identities, cultivating a sense of belonging and understanding. One respondent captured this sentiment, stating, *"I feel like I find so many different groups and people with the same interest and it can make people feel less alone."*

However, there is a challenge in balancing these online connections with real-world interactions. Some young people reported feeling trapped by the endless consumption of meaningless content, which sometimes gets in the way of their everyday relationships and experiences. As one participant put it, *"I spend too much time on there, and therefore other aspects of my life suffer."*

Overall, young people seek social media environments that genuinely enhance their sense of connection, supporting not only their social interactions but also their personal growth and well-being. They envision a digital space where connections are authentic, supportive, and enriching, truly reflecting the value of their relationships.

"ALGORITHMS ARE SO EMBEDDED INTO OUR DEVICES AND THE DEVICES ARE SO EMBEDDED IN OUR LIVES THAT IT IS NOT REALISTIC TO STOP USING THEM... I TRY TO PRACTICE DISCERNMENT AND TRY TO REMEMBER THAT THIS IS SHAPING MY EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD."

– OLIVIA, 17, VIC

Closing comments

At PROJECT ROCKIT, we are in conversation with young people every day. Through our school workshops, our National Youth Collective, and various projects and partnerships, we gain deep insights into the lives of Australian teenagers. As this report shows, they are actively engaged in shaping their world, with digital environments playing a significant role in their experiences. Their perspectives are nuanced and thoughtful, and they seek many of the same things that adults advocating for them strive for. Yet, their voices are rarely heard in public discussions and policy debates that directly affect them.

Too often, conversations about young people are held without them. We hear advocates discussing what young people need, but rarely do we create meaningful opportunities for young people to share their needs and how they want them addressed.

The conversation around youth online safety is often dominated by adult agendas – political motivations, commercial interests, and parental fears. These perspectives can drive the discourse, sometimes bypassing the need for evidence and, more importantly, overlooking the voices of young people themselves. While these concerns are valid, they should not overshadow the perspectives of the very people we aim to protect. When we centre these adult narratives, we risk ignoring the realities young people face in digital spaces, and missing the opportunity to create solutions that reflect their lived experiences.

'Shaping Our Feeds' is the latest project in which we've worked with young people to bring their perspectives into the public sphere. We value and support others who do the same, and we urge those in positions of power – whether in government, corporations, or wider systems – not just to listen but to act on the needs and insights young people have shared.

Our call to action is clear: we must continue to engage young people and build their capacity to lead. Only by elevating their voices and empowering them to shape the future can we create a digital world that truly supports their growth and wellbeing.

– Lucy Thomas, cofounder & CEO, PROJECT ROCKIT